

## ANALYSIS

*Him* (1926)



e.e. cummings

(1894-1962)

“The most remarkable American experiment in the expressionist drama was E. E. Cummings’ *Him* (1927). The two main characters, Him and Me, are types. Him is an artist-creator; Me is his mistress, an expressionist idealization... They are surrounded, victimized, annoyed, by representatives of modern evils. Him’s great distinction is that he is not successful, ‘hasn’t been favored by fate.’ He is the circus man, the acrobat, the clown: ‘an artist, a man, and a failure.’ The Man in the Mirror is an ideal representation of Him’s bohemian nature; this man, this part of Him, puts on a play of nine scenes, drawn inconsequentially from aspects of the contemporary scene: Prohibition, soap-box oratory, nostrums and patent medicines, the business ‘unlife,’ the censorship...and fascism....

The individual scenes push hard (though often with extreme cleverness) the thesis of man’s need to realize himself in spite of circumstances and his own fear of self-knowledge. The final act represents the positive values identified with Him and Me: their love for each other, her great gift of feeling, the way toward ‘honest’ beauty and passion, the miracle of birth, the beauty of little children. Scene vi presents a great sideshow; Me, holding a newborn baby, shocks the crowd with this vision of life, and it turns away in disgust and terror. She is a freak in the sideshow, but the conclusion of the play is that the freaks are important; they are the elements of life put aside by the crowd. The dominating symbol of the circus acrobat and clown enforces this conclusion: the acrobat describes in his action the grace of movement which is expression in art; the clown is the humorist who gets his laughs because he is absurd and utterly unlike the conventional audience who laughs at him. It is a simple thesis, but it is particularized in brilliant dramatic fragments, which are interrelated in terms of what each adds to the sum of meaning. Perhaps this is the best that can be done with expressionism; at any rate, *Him* succeeds because of, rather than in spite of, its wealth of dramatic variations....

The limitations of this type of drama lie in the very restricted use to which the abstractions can be put. Abstractions require an immense effort of the imagination to give them individuality and a meaning beyond the most generalized kind of cardboard editorial.”

Frederick J. Hoffman  
*The Twenties: American Writing in the Postwar Decade*

“Perhaps the best description of the plot of this surrealistic play is in *him*’s description of himself as ‘the sort of a man who is writing a play about a man who is writing a sort of a play.’ Both as a person and a playwright *him* struggles with the question of reality. He is no more certain of his own identity, even when mirrored, than he is certain of the identity of the world in which he moves. Nor is he certain of the reality of the love of his girlfriend, *me*. At her request, he conjures numerous scenes from the play written by the other *him*, the man in the mirror. These include such varying subjects as an enactment of the ballad of ‘Frankie and Johnnie’; a Fascist outburst led by Mussolini, dressed as Caesar and surrounded by homosexuals; and a Paris café where ladies order men from the menu instead of food. Several of these scenes are as bewilderingly comic as they are extraneous; *him*’s struggle to define reality remains unresolved at the end of the play, although he is able to declare, ‘Time is the because with which some dolls are stuffed.’ The play affords the opportunity for experimental staging, integrated dance and music, and strikingly theatricalized scenic effects.”

Theodore J. Shank, ed.  
*A Digest of 500 Plays: Plot Outlines and Production Notes*  
(Crowell-Collier 1963) 310

“Poetic theater, in today’s world, is a risky business. T. S. Eliot tried it, and before him Auden and Isherwood. But who reads their plays nowadays?... *Him* (1926) has had a certain underground half-life, though few have read it and even fewer have seen one of its rare productions. The main characters are Him, a playwright struggling to give birth to a play, and Me, his girlfriend, birthing their child. Reviewing the book version in 1927, Edmund Wilson wrote, ‘The main action...is evidently an ether dream in the mind of the heroine, and the climax the revelation of the reason for her being under ether.’ As Richard S. Kennedy puts it in his fine biography, *Dreams in the Mirror*, ‘Cummings put a great deal of Elaine [his first wife] into Me,’ but had by 1925 already met Anne Barton, his future second wife. Whereas Elaine was upper-class and gregarious, Anne was lower-class and promiscuous, each of them leaving a husband to marry the poet. Anne, too, is in Me, a quotation from her even serving as epigraph.

The play comprises scenes with the three Fates who talk amusingly surreal nonsense, travestied commercial slogans studding piquant non-sequiturs. Other scenes consist of lengthy conversations between Him and me, sometimes only as voices in the dark. In one scene, an Englishman carrying his unconscious in a trunk on his back is confronted by a detective and a policeman, with dire consequences for peeking into the inside. In another, two ugly American businessmen in a Paris restaurant with their women exchange personalities by swapping masks, presumably in a parody of O’Neill’s *Great God Brown*.

It is hard to view much of this as Me’s fantasies; rather, Cummings seems to have accumulated fantasies of his own as they randomly occurred to him. Take the one where four caricatured Fairies (homosexuals) are confronted by a burlesque Mussolini. Or another, involving a sexy Negress carrying a boy doll, with a black chorus singing a version of ‘Frankie and Johnnie,’ as Cummings spells Johnny in one of his frequent misspellings, some deliberate, some probably not. Or the long final section, in which the Doctor (Me’s gynecologist recurring in several, sometimes ominous roles) is a circus barker, introducing a number of grotesque freaks with grandiloquent fustian.

As Kennedy writes, Cummings put a great deal of himself into Him, but at this point ‘neither his personal nor his creative life were [sic] significantly under control for him to be able to unify the fascinating assembly of parts’ in what ‘remains a conglomeration of brilliant insights, will-o’-the-wisp digressions, moving poetic speeches, tiresome verbal nonsense, provocative ideas.’ There are telling elements. There is much looking into the mirror (a frequent theme also in the poems); the rage against Puritanism (the sexy black Frankie chasing away the censor in the audience who rises in protest of her brandishing Johnnie’s cut off ‘best part’ at the spectators); and various surrealist or expressionist devices. Thus there is a backdrop with holes for the heads of doctor and patient, sometimes filled by the Doctor and Me; thus, too, the room with Him and Me revolves from scene to scene with each time a different wall becoming the invisible fourth. Or take Him’s insistence that not he but The Other, lurking in the mirror, is writing the play we are witnessing.

Many scenes, though, are perfect non sequiturs. So Act One, Scene Three sees a Soap Box Orator, played by the Doctor, delivering a four-page monologue, mostly about a dread disease called Cinderella, before an ever-increasing, then ever-decreasing number of mute onlookers. Surely this is Absurdism *avant la lettre*. Or take for example the three recurring Fates, knitting female figures with their back to the audience, who open the play. *First*: We called out hippopotamus It's Toasted. *Second*: I wish my husband didn't object to them. *Third*: Of course it's a bother to clean the cage every day. *Second*: O I wouldn't mind doing that. *First*: Be sure to get one that can sing. *Third*: Don't they all sing? *First*: O dear no. Some of them just whistle.'

Soon the Doctor arrives with Him, whom he introduces as Mr. Anybody to those he calls the Weird Sisters: Miss Stop, Miss Look, and Miss Listen. Then he adds, "'Anybody' is just his nomb D. ploom you know. My friend is strictly incog.' To which Him replies, 'My real name, ladies, is Everyman, Marquis de la Poussiere.' Presently Him and Me are conversing, with her declaring that she doesn't care about anything, to which Him, sitting on the onstage table, responds: 'Whereas this is what's untrue. Anything everything nothing and something were looking for eels in a tree, when along came sleep pushing a wheelbarrow full of green mice. *Me* (to herself): I thought so.... *Him*: I however thought that it was the taller of the two umbrellas who lit a match when they found themselves in the main street of Hocuspocus side by each riding elephants made of candy.'

Not all is quite as bizarre as that. As Edmund Wilson wrote in a 1927 letter, 'It is a mess, but the best parts of it are wonderful.' That idea is developed in his review of the book version. He censures the author's self-indulgence, 'He seems to understand everything, but does not systematize his flood of impressions.... This play is the shimmering scaturience of an intelligence and sensibility of the very first distinction—but a drama deficient in dramatic logic.' We get 'capital conception...with a strange lack of instinct for climax.' There is, however, much that is good, but it is 'in the scenes between the lovers that...genius principally appears. They are, to my mind, more successful than anything in his poetry.'

So much in 1927. But I find it curiously echoed, as late as 1954, by Randall Jarrell reviewing Cummings's poetry: 'There is so much love—love infinite and eternal, love in the movie moonlight, after the pop champagne—that one values all the more the real love affair in Cummings's play *Him*.' Perhaps Cummings's friend John Dos Passos summarized it best: 'His mind was essentially extemporaneous.' So much extemporaneity is hard to stage, or sell to a large public. *The Theatre of E. E. Cummings* lists several productions, mostly marginal, in small, out-of-the-way theaters or at universities. I do, however, remember a 1948 production at the Provincetown Playhouse that I thoroughly enjoyed. It brings to mind Marianne Moore's comment: 'Some of it seems to me as imaginative and expert as anything of his...and some of it to the contrary'."

John Simon  
"The Theatre of E. E. Cummings"  
*The New Criterion*  
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Michael Hollister (2016)