

TED ANKARA COLLEGE FOUNDATION HIGH SCHOOL

ENGLISH B  
EXTENDED ESSAY

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**Research Question:** To what extent do Norman Friedman's and Jenny Penberthy's criticisms apply to E.E. Cummings' poems

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## **Abstract**

Edward Estlin Cummings is one of the most prolific American poets of the 21st century, therefore there are many reviews written regarding his work. Some of these reviews are in favor; nevertheless, like all poets, he has his share of negative criticism as well. The article with the title “E.E. Cummings” on “The Poetry Foundation” displays varied points of view made by numerous critics related to the works of Edward Estlin Cummings including the criticisms of Norman Friedman and Jenny Penberthy.

This extended essay deals with the accuracy of the two criticisms made by the aforementioned critics in terms of the extent that they can be applied to in four of Cummings’ poems. The first section of this research is an introduction to the origin of the research question as well as the research question “To what do Norman Friedman’s and Jenny Penberthy’s criticisms apply to E.E. Cummings’ poems?”. The remaining parts try to justify the reasons for support or refusal of the claims put forth by Norman Friedman and Jenny Penberthy through the analysis of four of Cummings’ poems which are, with their respective analysis order, **“i carry your heart with me”**, **“anyone lived in a pretty how town”**, **“i thank You God for this most amazing”** and **“somewhere i have never travelled gladly beyond”**. Furthermore, the conclusion will put forth the justifiability of the two criticisms and give concluding remarks as to why the criticisms are accurate or irrelevant based on the analysis of each poem.

Word Count: 249

## **I. Introduction**

Being one of the most influential poets of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Edward Estlin Cummings, more widely known as e.e. cummings<sup>1</sup>, gave American literature a new shape and definition with his original style. Born in 1894 as the son of a Harvard professor and a devoted as well as caring housewife, he began his writing career encouraged by his parents at a young age in which early depictions of his unusual style can be observed. Having studied literature at Harvard University, he resumed his writing career while he was captivated during his volunteer years in the Ambulance Corps in France during World War I. His first published novel “The Enormous Room” brought about various critiques upon his way which would be the start of many during his years of productivity.

Furthermore, E.E. Cummings’ poems are believed to be the turning point of classic American poetry into modern poetry because of his visionary ideas on how to alter the traditional poetic structure. Although he applied the usual themes such as love, death or life, his approach to the themes as well his syntax differed from other poets who came earlier. His uncommon use of language, punctuation and orthography combined with his different attitude towards the themes earned him both praise from those who came to appreciate his uniqueness and criticism from reviewers who did not share his mutual desire to disregard the already-existing poetic composition of American poetry.

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<sup>1</sup>: See Appendix 1

Moreover, the commentaries on his works ranged from the content of his poems to his style. The remarks made by Norman Friedman from his book *E.E. Cummings: The Art Of His Poetry* and the editor as well as the critic Jenny Penberthy reading "[Cummings is] in the habit of associating love, as a subject, with the landscape, the seasons, the times of day, and with time and death—as poets have always done in the past." and "Cummings' consistent attitude in all of his work was 'condemning mankind while idealizing the individual'"<sup>2</sup> respectively, can be given as examples for the various types of statements made on E.E. Cummings' works which will compose the guideline for the research question which is to what extent the two criticisms made by Norman Friedman and Jenny Penberthy apply to E.E. Cummings' poems .

In the light of this research question, the poems "i carry your heart with me", "anyone lived in a pretty how town", "i thank You God for this most amazing" and "somewhere i have never travelled, gladly beyond" will be analyzed in order to observe whether the aforementioned criticisms are applicable to these poems.

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<sup>2</sup>: See Appendix 2

## II. i carry your heart with me

One of the most noticeable themes in E.E. Cummings' poems is love. His work "i carry your heart with me" provides visible examples of how Cummings views love in terms of its relation to nature. In his poem "i carry your heart with me", the speaker depicts his feelings of love and devotion towards his significant other through nature and the usage of stylistic devices. The verse "i carry your heart with me (i carry it in/my heart)" signifies the profound sentiments he has for his beloved. Stating that the speaker has his beloved's heart indicates that he possesses something that is unique to her and reflects her innermost deep secrets and feelings. Furthermore, he uses expressions such as "my dear, my darling, my sweet, my true" in which he directly addresses her and states how much she means to him. The second part of the verse shows the speaker's devotion and his mutual sentiment since he, too, carries her heart in his own.

"i am never without it(anywhere  
i go, you go my dear; and whatever is done  
by only me is your doing, darling)"

Taking the above-given verses into consideration, it can be said that the part in parentheses is an explanation as well as a further development of his feelings and it serves the purpose of justifying his actions. The anaphora that can be seen in the verses that start with "i carry.../i am.../i go/ i fear.../i want..." are all conjoined with the statements in parentheses as it can be observed in the verse "i fear /no fate (for you are my fate, my sweet)". Because each bracket is linked with its previous statement, it can be said that the explanations in the brackets complete the meaning given by the speaker just as his beloved completes him. In addition, the verse "i fear" is positioned differently than the other verses on the grounds that the speaker wishes to stress the fact that he is frightened yet by adding "no fate(for you are my fate, my

sweet)” in the next verse, he makes it clear that his fear is in vain because she is with him. Furthermore, in these verses, feelings of pity and sympathy are evoked as a result of the usage of the literary device pathos. The speaker saying “i want” and “i fear” causes the reader to feel pity towards the speaker since he portrays dependence on his beloved. The verses “and it’s you are whatever a moon has always meant/and whatever a sun will always sing is you” are structured parallel and the repetition of the word “always” shows the speaker’s love and devotion for his beloved since it symbolizes eternity. The speaker further strengthens his commitment by making an oxymoron between the sun and the moon which implies that not even contrasts are enough to break them apart and destroy his infinite dedication.

Moreover, E.E. Cummings is also known for his orthographic style in which he disregards the traditional spelling of the pronoun “I”. The constant repetition of the lower cased “i” is an indication of how the speaker perceives himself: he chooses to remain humble and displays humility in order to remind the reader that self is not as important as it seems. In the poem “i carry your heart with me”, the lower cased “i” emphasizes that his beloved’s presence in his life is significantly more important than his own existence. This realization contradicts with the statement made by Jenny Penberthy due to the fact that in this case, the speaker does not idealize his individuality: he merely perceives himself as unimportant when compared to his beloved.

“here is the deepest secret nobody knows  
(here is the root of the root and the bud of the bud  
and the sky of the sky of a tree called life; which grows  
higher than the soul can hope or mind can hide)  
and this is the wonder that’s keeping the stars apart”

The above-given stanza indicates that the poem depicts elements of nature. The speaker establishes a parallelism between his beloved and a tree by changing the words from “root” to

“bud” and later on to “tree”, indicating that his affection towards his beloved has gradually increased similar to the growth of a plant. Additionally, a visual imagery is created by describing the growth of the tree which adds to the significance of the speaker’s ever-growing love. Moreover, Friedman’s criticism stating that E.E. Cummings practices nature as a subject that is associated with love, is clearly visible in this stanza due to the reason that the “roots, buds and trees” symbolize his growing affection. In addition, since trees are frequently used as a symbol of eternal life, it is possible to assume that the love for the speaker’s significant other will be eternal. Furthermore, the final verse which reads “i carry your heart (i carry it in my heart)” is like the concluding remark on the situation. The form itself is an indication that the final verse is the concluding remark since the first two stanzas are quite extensive and the final verse is merely one line long. In the final verse, the speaker sums up his feelings and the intensity of his love by once again stating that he has her heart in his own.



### III. anyone lived in a pretty how town

The poem “anyone lived in a pretty how town” depicts elements mentioned in Friedman’s criticism concerning love being associated with seasons and the time of day. This poem, which is written in third person singular, the words “anyone”, “no one”, “someone” and “everyone” are repeated multiple times. Even though specific identities are not given in this poem, genders of the aforementioned “anyone” and “no one” are clarified in order to add reality to the storyline. The reason why a specific person is not given is because the poem can be applied to anyone since it is about love on a more general tone.

“anyone lived in a pretty how town  
(with up so floating many bells down)  
spring summer autumn winter  
he sang his didn’t he danced his did”

As it can be seen in the stanza above, this poem also displays the usage of parentheses which serve the purpose of clarifying and further developing the content. In addition, the final verse of the given first stanza indicates his achievements and the regret he doesn’t feel for the deeds the speaker could not accomplish. The positive connotations of the words “sang” and “danced” contribute to the idea of the speaker not experiencing any remorse when he looks back on his life. The third verse of the second poem that reads “they sowed their isn’t and they reaped their same/ sun moon stars rain” signifies the change in time since there is a seasonal change between reaping and sowing. Furthermore, the terms “reaping” and “sowing” might also indicate the gains and rewards of certain events belonging to the women and men mentioned in the stanza, resulting in their personal maturation parallel to the maturation of the harvest in between the time of reaping and sowing. In addition, the change from “spring summer autumn winter” to “sun moon stars rain” shows the deduction from seasons to daily

natural occurrences, specifying that time is in fact changing slowly but that the days that are passing by still contribute to the existence of seasons.

“Children guessed (but only a few  
and down they forgot as up they grew  
autumn winter spring summer)  
that no one loved him more by more”

This stanza is significant as it shows a storyline on which the poem is based: the introduction of “anyone” leading to “no one” falling in love with him and later on them building a life together directly improves the poem’s view on time with its relation to life. On this note, it can be observed that the order of the seasons in the first stanza changing from “spring summer autumn winter” to “autumn winter spring summer” and in the ninth stanza to “summer autumn winter spring” indicates that time goes on and life-changing incidents take place in the meantime. Furthermore, the daily changes in time shifting from “sun moon stars rain” to “stars rain sun moon” and then back to “sun moon stars rain” is a symbol for the circle of life. Cummings uses repetitive structures and anaphora about seasons and daily natural occurrences as well as a storyline to emphasize the passing of time and life being a constant cycle. Moreover, because of the storyline, actions are more important than descriptions which is the reason why verbs such as “lived”, “did”, “guessed”, “grew”, “married”, “died” etc. are frequently used instead of adjectives. Additionally, the structure of the stanzas, consisting of four lines each, add more emphasis to the storyline since there is a certain order in which the incidents can be expressed.

“when by now and tree by leaf  
she laughed his joy she cried his grief  
bird by snow and stir by still  
anyone’s any was all to her”

Moreover, the fourth stanza is noteworthy for the portrayal of time with regards to the usage of nature. The expression “tree by leaf” is a further deduction which stands for the time that “no one” and “anyone” have progressively grown closer to each other and shared more details about their lives. In addition, with the verse “someones married their everyones”, the speaker wishes to put the spotlight on nature, therefore he leaves out any specific details regarding the people as they are merely ideas for him and not the focus. Furthermore, the verses “one day anyone died I guess (and no one stooped to kiss his face)/ busy folk buried them side by side” shows the development of the storyline and the years that have passed by which resulted in their death. As it was said by Norman Friedman, E.E. Cummings uses death as an element to strengthen the bond between lovers and increase the intensity of their relationship by adding physical contact, thus being “anyone” and “no one” kissing.

“all by all and deep by deep  
and more by more they dream their sleep  
noone and anyone earth by april  
wish by spirit and if by yes.”

Furthermore, the above-given stanza depicts their eternal rest together as they dream their sleep which symbolizes their death. Stating that “no one and anyone are earth by april” indicates that they will become one with nature as their bodies slowly fade away.

#### **IV. i thank You God for this most amazing**

In this poem, the aforementioned orthography is also applied in which Cummings uplifts God by capitalizing his name and referring to him as “You” whereas he remains insignificant compared to him with the statement of the lowercased “i”. This, too contradicts with Jenny Penberthy’s view on Cummings’ individualism. If Cummings were to elevate himself as an individual, he would not have depicted himself as less important through the lower cased “I” when compared with the capitalized “You” and “God”. Moreover, the verses

“for the leaping greenly spirits of trees  
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything  
which is natural which is infinite which is yes”

form a visual imagery which aims to help the reader to picture the beauty of nature that the speaker so seems to cherish and love. In addition, the diction adds to the visual imagery where the poet enhances the narration by using descriptive adjectives such as “leaping greenly spirits” and “blue true dream” which further improve the expression as opposed to the poem “anyone lived in a pretty how town” where the storyline, therefore verbs, are significantly more important than descriptions. As Norman Friedman had observed, also in this poem Cummings uses nature and landscapes with the help of visual imagery to strengthen his expression while declaring his love towards life. Moreover, in this poem there are assonances in “leaping greenly spirits of trees” and “blue true dream of sky” where the sounds “ea” “ee” and “ue” which serve purpose of elongating the words similar to growth of the leaping trees and the infinity of the sky which is mentioned in the last verse of the poem “which is natural which is infinite which is yes”.

“(i who have died am alive again today,  
and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth  
day of life and of love and wings: and of the gay  
great happening illimitably earth)”

Friedman’s statement reading “associating love...with time and death..” can be clearly seen in the above-mentioned stanza. The previously stated beauty of nature and the “day” has made the speaker come alive when compared to his prior outlook on life which is portrayed as having been dead. The second and third verses emphasize a new beginning and joy by stating that it is in fact “the sun’s birthday; this is the birth/ day of life and of love and wings”. With the sun being the center of the universe and the primary life source to all living creatures, it can be said that the “birth day of life” is a metaphor for the sun. The liberation the speaker feels after having come alive due to the beauty of the nature and the birth day of the sun is directly reflected on the part “of wings”. The speaker himself feels free like a bird hence him being liberated and without boundaries.

“how should tasting touching hearing seeing  
breathing any--lifted from the no  
of all nothing--human merely being  
doubt unimaginable You?”

Moreover, this stanza is further significant in terms of the statement based Jenny Penberthy’s idea of “mankind and individual”. “Human merely being” is in this stanza portrayed as an earthly creature bound to his five senses and not capable of becoming more than what is beyond the reach of his own perception. He degrades humanity by saying “merely” which serves the purpose of belittling the capabilities of what an individual can accomplish and is worth. While the speaker is demeaning individuals, he, on the other hand, is praising “You” thus meaning God by stating that a common existence such as a human being cannot doubt or

reach the standards of God Almighty. This hierarchy, seen through the eyes of the speaker, contradicts with Jenny Penberthy's acceptance that E.E. Cummings puts individuals above everything else and praises them.

## V. somewhere i have never travelled, gladly beyond

The final poem also contains elements that are characteristics of an E.E. Cummings poem with regards to its orthography, style and content's usage of nature while depicting love. The first two lines that read "somewhere i have never travelled, gladly beyond / any experience, your eyes have their silence" are evident for the speaker's journey that he was glad to have made. With the second verse it can be understood that the journey that he has been through is not a physical one but rather one that derives from the deep connection he establishes by looking into the eyes of his significant other.

"your slightest look will easily uncloset me  
though i have closed myself as fingers,  
you open always petal by petal myself as Spring opens  
(touching skilfully, mysteriously) her first rose"

Furthermore, the given stanza also contributes to the journey he has made by looking into her eyes since he mentions himself surrendering at her "slightest look" and uncloset, meaning he becomes transparent. Norman Friedman's claim that E.E. Cummings uses landscapes and elements of nature when he writes about love is seen in the third verse where the speaker is comparing himself to the first rose of spring in the sense he is gradually becoming more transparent and without secrets as he begins to open up to his lover similar to the opening up of a rose at the beginning of spring. Moreover, the personification between "Spring" and "her first rose" indicates that Spring is given a female identity because of the fragility of the flowers it bears similar to the fragility of a woman. Additionally, the verse "the power of your intense fragility" refers to the speaker's beloved being a flower. In addition, the word "Spring" is the only upper cased word in the poem which is significant. Since spring stands for a woman, the speaker capitalizing the first letter shows that he values women and cherishes his relationship he has with them more than his own being. Similar to the case in "i

carry your heart with me”, the speaker remains humble concerning his own being and he honors his relationship with his beloved since she is the one who made him who he is. Before their relationship, he describes himself as “[having] closed [himself] as fingers” thus being an introvert whereas after her appearance into his life, he opens up like a flower and becomes a more extrovert and sharing person. This is further evidence that Jenny Penberthy’s statement is in fact not true regarding the idealizing and uplifting of the individual. In addition, the verses “suddenly, / as when the heart of this flower imagines /the snow carefully everywhere descending” have an example of personification and metaphor. The speaker is indicating that the flower has a heart which means that it is able to show emotion. Moreover, the second meaning that can be understood is that he identifies himself as a flower which stands for purity and beauty. By imagining that the snow slowly descends means that “whiteness” and purity is taking over and covering up any trails that were made beforehand. This situation indicates that their lives before having met each other is no longer relevant to their identities and they are the only factors that make up their true beings as well as their future.

“(i do not know what it is about you that closes  
and opens;only something in me understands  
the voice of your eyes is deeper than all roses)  
nobody,not even the rain,has such small hands”

Moreover, the first two verses of the aforementioned stanza state that the speaker’s beloved opens and closes, reminiscent of a flower as it had been mentioned earlier with her fragility. There is a passage between two senses in verse three which evokes the sense that the speaker and his beloved share an intimate relationship that is so close that they are able to communicate without needing to speak which is the main reason for the speaker’s journey and travel mentioned in the first stanza of the poem. Comparing her eyes to be deeper than all



roses in fact shows that their commitment is deeper than the symbol for love, lust and romance which is the rose.

## **VI. Conclusion**

While investigating the research question, I noticed that some of the statements made by critics were valid whereas some were irrelevant. As I further analyzed the poems of Edward Estlin Cummings, I realized that nature primarily plays a vast role in his poems. He expresses his feelings such as love, joy for life and fear of death through imageries and references to nature to strengthen the expression.

The criticism made by Norman Friedman stating that "[Cummings is] in the habit of associating love, as a subject, with the landscape, the seasons, the times of day, and with time and death—as poets have always done in the past." is, in fact true. The four poems analyzed clearly indicate that Cummings does associate love with elements of nature. In the first poem, Cummings depicts components of nature in order to show a parallelism between the growing love the speaker feels towards his beloved. In the second poem, Cummings uses the times of day and the seasons to show the gradual improvement of a love story whereas in the third poem he makes imageries of nature to show his love for life and nature. Lastly, in the final poem Cummings makes comparisons with the landscape during spring and his beloved in order to show the fresh new beginning the speaker has with his beloved.

The criticism made by Jenny Penberthy reading "Cummings' consistent attitude in all of his work was 'condemning mankind while idealizing the individual'" though the usage of the lower cased "I", has, according to my analysis, turned out to be false. In all of his poems, Cummings uses the lower case to be humble and in order to show humility. He, therefore, does not idealize himself, thus the individual as well. The lowercase spelling of the pronoun "I" combined with him addressing God as "You God" shows his belief of a much higher divine authority than himself. While he values love and his lover and states that his love is

only complete when she is with him, it is not possible to say that Cummings perceives himself as an upper power since he relies and depends on others to maintain a fulfilling life.

In conclusion, depending on the in depth analysis of the format, texture and the content of the four poems, the analysis indicates that Norman Friedman's ideas are quite applicable while Jenny Penberthy's are mostly irrelevant.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1:

Edward Estlin Cummings frequently used lower case letters in his poems which resulted in some authors, publishers and critics seeing it fit to write the poet's name in lowercase letters in honor of his works. It has been a widely-debated issue whether Edward Estlin Cummings wrote his name in a non-capital form as well. According to the article "Not 'e.e. cummings'" by Norman Friedman, there were disputes brought about the correct spelling of Cummings' name throughout the press. With the concluding remarks by Cummings' wife, Edward Estlin Cummings himself wrote his name with capital letters, including in his signature. Thus, the common manner of addressing including capital letters is, in fact, not correct and can only be regarded as a nickname given by the members of the press.

### Appendix 2:

"Among the most innovative of twentieth-century poets," according to Jenny Penberthy in the Dictionary of Literary Biography, E. E. Cummings experimented with poetic form and language to create a distinct personal style. A Cummings poem is spare and precise, employing a few key words eccentrically placed on the page. Some of these words were invented by Cummings, often by combining two common words into a new synthesis. He also revised grammatical and linguistic rules to suit his own purposes, using such words as "if," "am," and "because" as nouns, for example, or assigning his own private meanings to words. Despite their nontraditional form, Cummings' poems came to be popular with many readers. "No one else," Randall Jarrell claimed in his *The Third Book of Criticism*, "has ever made avant-garde, experimental poems so attractive to the general and the special reader." By the time of his death in 1962 Cummings held a prominent position in twentieth-century poetry. John Logan in *Modern American Poetry: Essays in Criticism* called him "one of the greatest lyric poets in our language." Stanley Edgar Hyman wrote in *Standards: A Chronicle of Books for Our Time*: "Cummings has written at least a dozen poems that seem to me matchless. Three are among the great love poems of our time or any time." Malcolm Cowley admitted in the *Yale Review* that Cummings "suffers from comparison with those [poets] who built on a larger scale—Eliot, Aiken, Crane, Auden among others—but still he is unsurpassed in his special field, one of the masters."

Cummings decided to become a poet when he was still a child. Between the ages of eight and twenty-two, he wrote a poem a day, exploring many traditional poetic forms. By the time he was in Harvard in 1916, modern poetry had caught his interest. He began to write avant-garde poems in which conventional punctuation and syntax were ignored in favor of a dynamic use of language. Cummings also experimented with poems as visual objects on the page. These early efforts were included in *Eight Harvard Poets*, a collection of poems by members of the Harvard Poetry Society.

After graduating from Harvard, Cummings spent a month working for a mail order book dealer. He left the job because of the tedium. In April of 1917, with the First World War

raging in Europe and the United States not yet involved, he volunteered for the Norton-Harjes Ambulance Service in France. Ambulance work was a popular choice with those who, like Cummings, considered themselves to be pacifists. He was soon stationed on the French-German border with fellow American William Slater Brown, and the two young men became fast friends. To relieve the boredom of their assignment, they inserted veiled and provocative comments into their letters back home, trying to outwit and baffle the French censors. They also befriended soldiers in nearby units. Such activities led in September of 1917 to their being held on suspicion of treason and sent to an internment camp in Normandy for questioning. Cummings and Brown were housed in a large, one-room holding area along with other suspicious foreigners. Only outraged protests from his father finally secured Cummings' release in December of 1917; Brown was not released until April of the following year. In July of 1918, with the United States entering the war, Cummings was drafted into the U.S. Army and spent some six months at a training camp in Massachusetts.

Upon leaving the army in January of 1919, Cummings resumed his affair with Elaine Thayer, the wife of his friend Schofield Thayer. Thayer knew and approved of the relationship. In December of 1919 Elaine gave birth to Cummings' daughter, Nancy, and Thayer gave the child his name. Cummings was not to marry Elaine until 1924, after she and Thayer divorced. He adopted Nancy at this time; she was not to know that Cummings was her real father until 1948. This first marriage did not last long. Two months after their wedding, Elaine left for Europe to settle her late sister's estate. She met another man during the Atlantic crossing and fell in love with him. She divorced Cummings in 1925.

The early twenties were an extremely productive time for Cummings. In 1922 he published his first book, *The Enormous Room*, a fictionalized account of his French captivity. Critical reaction was overwhelmingly positive, although Cummings' account of his imprisonment was oddly cheerful in tone and freewheeling in style. He depicted his internment camp stay as a period of inner growth. As David E. Smith wrote in *Twentieth Century Literature*, *The Enormous Room's* emphasis "is upon what the initiate has learned from his journey. In this instance, the maimed hero can never again regard the outer world (i.e., 'civilization') without irony. But the spiritual lesson he learned from his sojourn with a community of brothers will be repeated in his subsequent writings both as an ironical dismissal of the values of his contemporary world, and as a sensitive, almost mystical celebration of the quality of Christian love." John Dos Passos, in a review of the book for *Dial*, claimed that "in a style infinitely swift and crisply flexible, an individual not ashamed of his loves and hates, great or trivial, has expressed a bit of the underside of History with indelible vividness." Writing of the book in 1938, John Peale Bishop claimed in the *Southern Review*: "*The Enormous Room* has the effect of making all but a very few comparable books that came out of the War look shoddy and worn."

Cummings' first collection of poems, *Tulips and Chimneys*, appeared in 1923. His eccentric use of grammar and punctuation are evident in the volume, though many of the poems are written in conventional language. "The language of *Tulips and Chimneys*, ... like the imagery, the verse forms, the subject matter, and the thought, is sometimes good, sometimes bad," wrote Robert E. Maurer in the *Bucknell Review*. "But the book is so obviously the work of a talented young man who is striking off in new directions, groping for original and yet precise

expression, experimenting in public, that it seems uncharitable to dwell too long on its shortcomings."

The original manuscript for *Tulips and Chimneys* was cut down by the publisher. These deleted poems were published in 1925 as *&*, so titled because Cummings wanted the original book to be titled *Tulips & Chimneys* but was overruled. Another collection quickly followed: *XLI Poems*, also in 1925. In a review of *XLI Poems* for *Nation*, Mark Van Doren defined Cummings as a poet with "a richly sensuous mind; his verse is distinguished by fluidity and weight; he is equipped to range lustily and long among the major passions." At the end of 1925 *Dial* magazine chose Cummings for their annual award of \$2,000, a sum equalling a full year's income for the writer. The following year a new collection, *Is 5*, was published, for which Cummings wrote an introduction meant to explain his approach to poetry. In the introduction he argued forcefully for poetry as a "process" rather than a "product."

It was with these collections of the 1920s that Cummings established his reputation as an avant-garde poet conducting daring experiments with language. Speaking of these language experiments, M. L. Rosenthal wrote in *The Modern Poets: A Critical Introduction*: "The chief effect of Cummings' jugglery with syntax, grammar, and diction was to blow open otherwise trite and bathetic motifs through a dynamic rediscovery of the energies sealed up in conventional usage.... He succeeded masterfully in splitting the atom of the cute commonplace." "Cummings," Richard P. Blackmur wrote in *The Double Agent: Essays in Craft and Elucidation*, "has a fine talent for using familiar, even almost dead words, in such a context as to make them suddenly impervious to every ordinary sense; they become unable to speak, but with a great air of being bursting with something very important and precise to say." Bethany K. Dumas wrote in her *E. E. Cummings: A Remembrance of Miracles* that "more important than the specific devices used by Cummings is the use to which he puts the devices. That is a complex matter; irregular spacing ... allows both amplification and retardation. Further, spacing of key words allows puns which would otherwise be impossible. Some devices, such as the use of lowercase letters at the beginnings of lines ... allow a kind of distortion that often re-enforces that of the syntax.... All these devices have the effect of jarring the reader, of forcing him to examine experience with fresh eyes." S. I. Hayakawa also remarked on this quality in Cummings' poetry. "No modern poet to my knowledge," Hayakawa wrote in *Poetry*, "has such a clear, childlike perception as E. E. Cummings—a way of coming smack against things with unaffected delight and wonder. This candor ... results in breath-takingly clean vision." Norman Friedman explained in his *E. E. Cummings: The Growth of a Writer* that Cummings' innovations "are best understood as various ways of stripping the film of familiarity from language in order to strip the film of familiarity from the world. Transform the word, he seems to have felt, and you are on the way to transforming the world."

Other critics focused on the subjects of Cummings' poetry. Though his poetic language was uniquely his own, Cummings' poems were unusual because they unabashedly focused on such traditional and somewhat passe poetic themes as love, childhood, and flowers. What Cummings did with such subjects, according to Stephen E. Whicher in *Twelve American Poets*, was, "by verbal ingenuity, without the irony with which another modern poet would treat such a topic, create a sophisticated modern facsimile of the 'naive' lyricism of Campion

or Blake." This resulted in what Whicher termed "the renewal of the cliché." Penberthy detected in Cummings a "nineteenth-century romantic reverence for natural order over man-made order, for intuition and imagination over routine-grounded perception. His exalted vision of life and love is served well by his linguistic agility. He was an unabashed lyricist, a modern cavalier love poet. But alongside his lyrical celebrations of nature, love, and the imagination are his satirical denunciations of tawdry, defiling, flat-footed, urban and political life—open terrain for invective and verbal inventiveness."

This satirical aspect to Cummings' work drew both praise and criticism. His attacks on the mass mind, conventional patterns of thought, and society's restrictions on free expression, were born of his strong commitment to the individual. In the "nonlectures" he delivered at Harvard University Cummings explained his position: "So far as I am concerned, poetry and every other art was, is, and forever will be strictly and distinctly a question of individuality." **As Penberthy noted, Cummings' consistent attitude in all of his work was "condemning mankind while idealizing the individual."** "Cummings' lifelong belief," Bernard Dekle stated in Profiles of Modern American Authors, "was a simple faith in the miracle of man's individuality. Much of his literary effort was directed against what he considered the principal enemies of this individuality—mass thought, group conformity, and commercialism." For this reason, Cummings satirized what he called "mostpeople," that is, the herd mentality found in modern society. "At heart," Logan explained, "the quarrels of Cummings are a resistance to the small minds of every kind, political, scientific, philosophical, and literary, who insist on limiting the real and the true to what they think they know or can respond to. As a preventive to this kind of limitation, Cummings is directly opposed to letting us rest in what we believe we know; and this is the key to the rhetorical function of his famous language."

Cummings was also ranked among the best love poets of his time. "Love always was ... Cummings' chief subject of interest," Friedman wrote in his *E. E. Cummings: The Art of His Poetry*. "The traditional lyric situation, representing the lover speaking of love to his lady, has been given in our time a special flavor and emphasis by Cummings. Not only the lover and his lady, but love itself—its quality, its value, its feel, its meaning—is a subject of continuing concern to our speaker." Love was, in Cummings' poems, equated to such other concepts as joy and growth, a relationship which "had its source," wrote Robert E. Wegner in *The Poetry and Prose of E. E. Cummings*, "in Cummings' experience as a child; he grew up in an aura of love.... Love is the propelling force behind a great body of his poetry." **Friedman noted that Cummings was "in the habit of associating love, as a subject, with the landscape, the seasons, the times of day, and with time and death—as poets have always done in the past."**

Cummings' early love poems were frankly erotic and were meant to shock the Puritanical sensibilities of the 1920s. Penberthy noted that the poet's first wife, Elaine, inspired "scores of Cummings' best erotic poems." But, as Wegner wrote, "In time he came to see love and the dignity of the human being as inseparable." Maurer also commented on this change in Cummings' outlook; there was, Maurer wrote, a "fundamental change of attitude which manifested itself in his growing reverence and dedication to lasting love." Hyatt H. Waggoner, writing in *American Poets from the Puritans to the Present*, noted that "the love poems are generally, after the 1920s, religious in tone and implication, and the religious poems very often take off from the clue provided by a pair of lovers, so that often the two



subjects are hardly, if at all, separable." Rushworth M. Kidder also noted this development in the love poems, and he traced the evolution of Cummings' thoughts on the subject. Writing in his *E. E. Cummings: An Introduction to the Poetry*, Kidder reported that in the early poems, love is depicted as "an echo of popularly romantic notions, and it grows in early volumes to a sometimes amorphous phenomenon seasoned by a not entirely unselfish lust. By [his] last poems, however, it has come to be a purified and radiant idea, unentangled with flesh and worlds, the agent of the highest transcendence. It is not far, as poem after poem has hinted, from the Christian conception of love as God." Waggoner concluded that Cummings "wrote some of the finest celebrations of sexual love and of the religious experience of awe and natural piety produced in our century, precisely at a time when it was most unfashionable to write such poems."

In addition to his poetry, Cummings was also known for his play, *Him*, and for the travel diary, *Eimi*. *Him* consisted of a sequence of skits drawing from burlesque, the circus, and the avant-garde, and jumping quickly from tragedy to grotesque comedy. The male character is named *Him*; the female character is *Me*. "The play begins," Harold Clurman wrote in *Nation*, "as a series of feverish images of a girl undergoing anaesthesia during an abortion. She is 'me,' who thinks of her lover as 'him.'" In the program to the play, staged at the Provincetown Playhouse, Cummings provided a warning to the audience: "Relax and give the play a chance to strut its stuff—relax, stop wondering what it's all 'about'—like many strange and familiar things, *Life* included, this Play isn't 'about,' it simply is. Don't try to enjoy it, let it try to enjoy you. DON'T TRY TO UNDERSTAND IT, LET IT TRY TO UNDERSTAND YOU." Clurman believed that "the play's purest element is contained in duos of love. They are the most sensitive and touching in American playwriting. Their intimacy and passion, conveyed in an odd exquisiteness of writing, are implied rather than declared. We realize that no matter how much 'him' wishes to express his closeness to 'me,' he is frustrated not only by the fullness of his feeling but by his inability to credit his emotion in a world as obscenely chaotic as the one in which he is lost."

In 1931 Cummings traveled to the Soviet Union. Like many other writers and artists of the time, he was hopeful that the communist revolution had created a better society. After a short time in the country, however, it became clear to Cummings that the Soviet Union was a dictatorship in which the individual was severely regimented by the state. His diary of the visit, in which he bitterly attacked the Soviet regime for its dehumanizing policies, was published in 1933 as *Eimi*, the Greek word for "I am." In it, he described the Soviet Union as an "uncircus of noncreatures." Lenin's tomb, in which the late dictator's preserved body is on display, especially revolted Cummings and inspired him to create the most impassioned writing in the book. "The style which Cummings began in poetry," Bishop wrote, "reaches its most complete development in the prose of *Eimi*. Indeed, one might almost say that, without knowing it, Cummings had been acquiring a certain skill over the years, in order that, when occasion arose, he might set down in words the full horror of Lenin's tomb." In tracing the course of his thirty-five day trip through the Soviet Union, Cummings made frequent allusion to Dante's *Inferno* and its story of a descent into Hell, equating the two journeys. It is only after crossing back into Europe at book's end that "it is once more possible for [Cummings] to assume the full responsibility of being a man....," Bishop wrote. "Now he knows there is but one freedom..., the freedom of the will, responsive and responsible, and that from it all other freedoms take their course." Kidder called *Eimi* "a report of the grim inhumanities of the

Soviet system, of repression, apathy, priggishness, kitsch, and enervating suspicion." For some time after publication of *Eimi*, Kidder reported, Cummings had a difficult time getting his poetry published. The overwhelmingly left-wing publishers of the time refused to accept his work. Cummings had to resort to self-publishing several volumes of his work during the later 1930s.

In 1952, Cummings was invited to give the Charles Eliot Norton lectures in poetry at Harvard University. His lectures, later published as *i: six nonlectures*, were highly personal accounts of his life and work, "autobiographical rambles," as Penberthy described them. The first two lectures reminisce about his childhood and parents; the third lecture tells of his schooldays at Harvard, his years in New York, and his stay in Paris during the 1920s. The last three lectures present his own ideas about writing. In his conclusion to the lecture series Cummings summed up his thoughts with these words, quoting his own poetry where appropriate: "I am someone who proudly and humbly affirms that love is the mystery-of-mysteries, and that nothing measurable matters 'a very good God damn'; that 'an artist, a man, a failure' is no mere whenfully accreting mechanism, but a givingly eternal complexity—neither some soulless and heartless ultrapredatory infra-animal nor any understandingly knowing and believing and thinking automaton, but a naturally and miraculously whole human being—a feelingly illimitable individual; whose only happiness is to transcend himself, whose every agony is to grow."

Critics of Cummings' work were divided into two camps as to the importance of his career. His detractors called his failure to develop as a writer a major weakness; Cummings' work changed little from the 1920s to the 1950s. Others saw him as merely clever but with little lasting value beyond a few technical innovations. Still others questioned the ideas in his poetry, or seeming lack of them. George Stade in the *New York Times Book Review* claimed that "intellectually speaking, Cummings was a case of arrested development. He was a brilliant 20-year-old, but he remained merely precocious to the end of his life. That may be one source of his appeal." James G. Southworth, writing in *Some Modern American Poets*, argued that Cummings "is too much out of the stream of life for his work to have significance." Southworth went on to say that "the reader must not mistake Mr. Cummings for an intellectual poet."

But Cummings' supporters acclaimed his achievement. In a 1959 essay reprinted in his collection *Babel to Byzantium*, James Dickey proclaimed: "I think that Cummings is a daringly original poet, with more vitality and more sheer, uncompromising talent than any other living American writer." Although admitting that Cummings' work was not faultless, Dickey stated that he felt "ashamed and even a little guilty in picking out flaws" in the poems, a process he likened to calling attention to "the aesthetic defects in a rose. It is better to say what must finally be said about Cummings: that he has helped to give life to the language." In similar terms, Rosenthal explained that "Cummings's great forte is the manipulation of traditional forms and attitudes in an original way. In his best work he has the swift sureness of ear and idiom of a Catullus, and the same way of bringing together a racy colloquialism and the richer tones of high poetic style." Maurer believed that Cummings' best work exhibited "a new and delightful sense of linguistic invention, precise and vigorous." Penberthy concluded that "Cummings's achievement deserves acclaim. He established the poem as a visual object

... ; he revealed, by his x-ray probings, the faceted possibilities of the single word; and like such prose writers as Vladimir Nabokov and Tom Stoppard, he promoted sheer playfulness with language. Despite a growing abundance of second-rate imitations, his poems continue to amuse, delight, and provoke."

## Poems:

### 1: i carry your heart with me

i carry your heart with me(i carry it in  
my heart)i am never without it(anywhere  
i go you go,my dear;and whatever is done  
by only me is your doing,my darling)  
i fear  
no fate(for you are my fate,my sweet)i want  
no world(for beautiful you are my world,my true)  
and it's you are whatever a moon has always meant  
and whatever a sun will always sing is you

here is the deepest secret nobody knows  
(here is the root of the root and the bud of the bud  
and the sky of the sky of a tree called life;which grows  
higher than soul can hope or mind can hide)  
and this is the wonder that's keeping the stars apart

i carry your heart(i carry it in my heart)

## **2: anyone lived in a pretty how town**

anyone lived in a pretty how town  
(with up so floating many bells down)  
spring summer autumn winter  
he sang his didn't he danced his did.

Women and men(both little and small)  
cared for anyone not at all  
they sowed their isn't they reaped their same  
sun moon stars rain

children guessed(but only a few  
and down they forgot as up they grew  
autumn winter spring summer)  
that noone loved him more by more

when by now and tree by leaf  
she laughed his joy she cried his grief  
bird by snow and stir by still  
anyone's any was all to her

someones married their everyones  
laughed their cryings and did their dance  
(sleep wake hope and then)they  
said their nevers they slept their dream

stars rain sun moon  
(and only the snow can begin to explain  
how children are apt to forget to remember  
with up so floating many bells down)

one day anyone died i guess  
(and noone stooped to kiss his face)  
busy folk buried them side by side  
little by little and was by was

all by all and deep by deep  
and more by more they dream their sleep  
noone and anyone earth by april  
wish by spirit and if by yes.

Women and men(both dong and ding)  
summer autumn winter spring  
reaped their sowing and went their came  
sun moon stars rain

### **3: i thank You God for this most amazing**

i thank You God for most this amazing  
day:for the leaping greenly spirits of trees  
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything  
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,  
and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth  
day of life and of love and wings: and of the gay  
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing  
breathing any--lifted from the no  
of all nothing--human merely being  
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and  
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

#### **4: somewhere i have never travelled gladly beyond**

somewhere i have never travelled,gladly beyond  
any experience,your eyes have their silence:  
in your most frail gesture are things which enclose me,  
or which i cannot touch because they are too near

your slightest look easily will unclose me  
though i have closed myself as fingers,  
you open always petal by petal myself as Spring opens  
(touching skilfully,mysteriously)her first rose

or if your wish be to close me, i and  
my life will shut very beautifully ,suddenly,  
as when the heart of this flower imagines  
the snow carefully everywhere descending;

nothing which we are to perceive in this world equals  
the power of your intense fragility:whose texture  
compels me with the color of its countries,  
rendering death and forever with each breathing

(i do not know what it is about you that closes  
and opens;only something in me understands  
the voice of your eyes is deeper than all roses)  
nobody,not even the rain,has such small hands