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Cummings and Williams Compared: Spring The poem by E. E. Cummings " O Sweet Spontaneous" and that by William Carlos Williams " The Widow's Lament in Springtime" each approach the notion of spring as both a portent of living beings to come and a reminder of things and people past. Though their respective styles and claims vary, both Cummings and Williams see spring as being dually connected to the earth and to humankind.

The subject and symbol of the primaver season has ever been a common theme in literature, prose and poetry alike. Spring conjures up an image of birth, re-birth, renewal, cycles, temporal endlessness, and spatial change. It is the time when the tired frost of winter begins to give way to the solar prowess of the summer months. Many a poet and writer have used it as a metaphorical device for their works. As a symbol of rebirth, spring can affect a joyous sense of elation. Conversely, no birth or rebirth can occur without first something, person, or epoch dying, disappearing, or withering into desuetude. Modern psychology, in the context of patient and cultural interpretation, has assigned to spring this dichotomous quality of bringing in the new and hastening away the old. The work of Carl Jung is particularly applicable in this instance. His analysis of the mother-maiden archetype comprehended spring as one of the many symbols of this primeval human mental construction.

To this category belongs the goddess, especially the Mother of God, the Virgin, and Sophia [wisdom]...[This] archetype is often associated with things and places standing for fertility and fruitfulness: the cornucopia, a ploughed field, a garden....[Its] evil symbols are the witch, the dragon, the grave, the sarcophagus, deep water, death, nightmares, and bogies. (81-82)

Of this Janus-type archetype, Williams is consumed by the maternal side and <https://assignbuster.com/selected-poems-by-william-carlos-williams-pp-2009-2017selected-poems-by-ee-cummings-pp-2173-2179/>

Cummings by its daughterly one.

For Williams, the image of the widow, or the aged wife and mother, stresses the cyclical and temporal aspect of the Jungian conception of spring. The “new grass” and the “masses of flowers” remind the narrator of when she lived happily with her now deceased husband. They resurrect memories of having a family and loving one another (Williams 1998). They had once lived happily together. Rather than symbolizing birth and things anew, the widow is troubled by her spouse’s absence. Instead she bemoans the “[red] cherry branches” for “the grief in my heart is stronger than they / for though they were my joy / formerly, today I notice them / and turn away forgetting.” The pain endures. Yet Williams, after underscoring the widow’s sorrows, draws attention to her son who “told [her of the] white flowers” (Williams 1998). The son clearly represents the new father/husband. In true Jungian fashion, the synecdoche of spring is central, with the father, son, and mother all forming constituent symbolic parts.

Though still employing spring as an archetype, Cummings uses it at once as a cultural commentary and a metaphorical device. He writes of the “earth” being [poked and prodded by prurient philosophers]. A nearly sexual connotation imposes itself as Cummings rhetorically asks how often has “the naughty thumb of science prodded thy beauty...how often have religions taken thee upon their scraggy knees squeezing and buffeting thee that thou mightiest conceive gods” (Cummings 1998). He thus criticizes man’s two great creations since he left nature: organized religion and science. Science is willing to destroy, pollute, and pillage the earth in order to study it.

Religion expects it to yield deities. Both miss the essential truth of it. The use of the earth as the poem’s motif aptly relates to Jung’s maiden-mother
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archetype. The earth is one of this archetype's manifestations (soil, gardens, plant growth). Though they cannot "see" it, Cummings' narrator replies to both the priest's incantations and the scientist's search for knowledge by exhorting the earth: "thou answerest them only with spring" (Cummings 1998). Spring, or life, is the answer to all questions. Thus life makes death palpable for those willing to accept it.

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