

Eecummings essay



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E. E. Cummings, who was born in 1894 and died in 1962, wrote many poems with unconventional punctuation and capitalization, and unusual line, word, and even letter placements. Cummings' most difficult form of prose is probably the ideogram; it is extremely short and it combines both visual and aural elements. There may be sounds or characters on the page that cannot be said or cannot carry the same message if pronounced and not read. Four of Cummings' poems - l(a, mortals), ! blac, and swi illustrate the ideogram form quite well. Cummings utilizes unique syntax in these poems in order to convey messages visually as well as verbally. Although one may think of l(a as a poem of sadness and loneliness, Cummings probably did not intend that. This poem is about individuality ; oneness (Kid 200-1). The theme of oneness can be derived from the numerous instances and forms of the number ' 1' throughout the poem. First, ' l(a' contains both the number 1 and the singular indefinite article, ' a'; the second line contains the French singular definite article, ' le'; ' ll' on the fifth line represents two ones; ' one' on the 7th line spells the number out; the 8th line, ' l', isolates the number; and ' iness', the last line, can mean " the state of being l" - that is, individuality - or " oneness", deriving the " one" from the lowercase roman numeral ' i' (200). Cummings could have simplified this poem drastically (" a leaf falls:/loneliness"), and still conveyed the same verbal message, but he has altered the normal syntax in order that each line should show a ' one' and highlight the theme of oneness. In fact, the whole poem is shaped like a ' 1' (200). The shape of the poem can also be seen as the path of a falling leaf; the poem drifts down, flipping and altering pairs of letters like a falling leaf gliding, back and forth, down to the ground. The beginning ' l(a' changes to ' le', and ' af' flips to ' fa'. ' ll' indicates a quick drop of the leaf, which has

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slowed by a longer line, ' one'. Finally, the leaf falls into the pile of fallen leaves on the ground, represented by ' iness'. Cummings has written this poem so perfectly that every part of it conveys the message of oneness and individuality (200). In mortals), Cummings vitalizes a trapeze act on paper. Oddly enough, this poem, too, stresses the idea of individualism, or 'eachness', as it is stated on line four. Lines 2 and 4, ' climbi' and ' begi', both end leaving the letter ' i' exposed. This is a sign that Cummings is trying to emphasize the concept of self-importance (Tri 36). This poem is an amusing one, as it shows the effects of a trapeze act within the arrangement of the words. On line 10, the space in the word ' open ing' indicates the act beginning, and the empty, static moment before it has fully begun. ' of speeds of' and '; meet;', lines 8 and 12 respectively, show a sort of back-and-forth motion, much like that of the motion of a trapeze swinging. Lines 12 through 15 show the final jump off the trapeze, and ' a/n/d' on lines 17 through 19, represent the deserted trapeze, after the acrobats have dismounted. Finally, '(im' on the last line should bring the reader's eyes back to the top of the poem, where he finds ' mortals)'. Placing '(im' at the end of the poem shows that the performers attain a special type of immortality for risking their lives to create a show of beauty, they attain a special type of immortality (36-7). The circularity of the poem causes a feeling of wholeness or completeness, and may represent the Circle of Life, eternal motion (Fri 26). Cummings first tightly written ideogram was ! blac, a very interesting poem. It starts with '!', which seems to be saying that something deserving that exclamation point occurred anterior to the poem, and the poem is trying objectively to describe certain feelings resulting from '!'. " black against white" is an example of such a description in the poem; the clashing colors

create a feeling in sync with '!'. Also, why "(whi)" suggests amusement and wonder, another feeling resulting from '!'. (Weg 145). Cummings had written a letter concerning ! blac to Robert Wenger, author of *The Poetry and Prose of E. E. Cummings* (see Works Cited). In it, he wrote, "for me, this poem means just what it says . . . and the ! which begins the poem is what might be called and emphatic (= very)." This poem is also concerned with the cycle of birth, life, death, and renewal. This is derived from the '.' preceding the last letter. This shows that even though the poem is finished, the circle of life is not, and is ever cycling (Weg 144). Through the poem's shape, ! blac also shows a leaf fluttering to the ground. The lines' spacing synchronizes the speed of the reading with that of the leaf at different points in its fall. With its capital 'l's, 'lrl' also indicates a leaf falling straight down before it hits the ground (147). Reading this poem, one may realize the lone comma on line 12. The poet writes about the sky and a tree, and then a comma intrudes, which makes the reader pause, and realize the new awareness that the comma indicated - that of a falling leaf (145). Lines 1 through 6 are also very important to the poem. Although "black against white" may be referring to the color of the falling leaf in contrast to the bright sky, it is not wrong to assume it means more. As stated above, the poem's theme is the cycle of life, and "black against white" could be indicating life death versus life. It shows that even though a leaf falling may be an indication of death, falling of leaves is an integral part of the whole life cycle of the tree (146). ! blac may seem like a simple mess of words, but in reality is much more complex than that. swi(is another poem of Cummings' ideogram form. The essence of this poem is seeing a bird's swift flight past the sun, and the wonder of this experience. The poem mainly tries to convince the reader of the difference

between conception, what one sees, and perception, what one knows he is seeing (Mar 105). The first line, ' swi(' shows that the object the poet sees is moving so rapidly that before he completely utters his first word, he must describe the object, and that it is passing before another object – the sun. His use of only primary descriptives, such as speed, direction, color, and shape indicates that he is trying to describe the bird as quickly as possible. The way he speaks, in terse syllables that lack syntactical relationship to each other, imitate one who tries to speak before he knows exactly what he wants to say; it is another indication of how quickly the object is moving (106). " a-motion-upo-nmotio-n/Less?", the 6th line, is signifying that although the poet knows that both the objects are moving, one's motion causes the other to seem still (106). The ' d,' at the end of the poem is showing that after the poet has finally named the object he saw, he immediately loses interest and stops, as writing more to further organize his thoughts would be superfluous (106). The contrasting words in this poem are very important. ' against' contrasts with ' across', and signifies a halt. It seems that the poet wants to stop the object in order to describe it. But a stopping of motion would contradict ' swi/ftly', so Cummings decided to refer to the speed average of the two, ' Swi/mming' (106). swi(contains less symbolism than the other poems being analyzed, but it is similar in that the syntax adds greatly to the poem. Cummings' peculiar method of using syntax to convey hidden meaning is extremely effective. The reader does not simply read and forget Cummings' ideas; instead, he must figure out the hidden meaning himself. In doing this, he feels contentment, and thus retains the poem's idea for a more extended period of time. Cummings' ideogram poems are puzzles waiting to be solved.

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