

Close reading, poetry

Sillay 1

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“Life’s Not a Paragraph”

Throughout his poetry, E. E. Cummings leads readers deep into a thicket of scrambled words, missing punctuation, and unconventional structure. Within Cummings’s poetic bramble, ambiguity leads the reader through what seems at first a confusing and winding maze. However, this confusion actually transforms into a path that leads the reader to the center of the thicket where Cummings’s message lies: readers should not allow their experience to be limited by reason and rationality. In order to communicate his belief that emotional experience should triumph over reason, Cummings employs odd juxtapositions, outlandish metaphors, and inversions of traditional grammatical structures that reveal the illogic of reason. Indeed, by breaking down such formal boundaries, Cummings’s poems “since feeling is first” and “as freedom is a breakfastfood” suggest that emotion, which provides the compositional fabric for our experience of life, should never be defined or controlled.

In “since feeling is first,” Cummings urges his reader to reject attempts to control emotion, using English grammar as one example of the restrictive conventions present in society. Stating that “since feeling is first/who pays any attention/to the syntax of things” (lines 1-3), Cummings suggests that emotion should not be forced to fit into some preconceived framework or mold. He carries this message throughout the poem by juxtaposing

Name, instructor,
course, date on left
margin

Title centered

Present tense used
to discuss poetry

Foreshadows
discussion of work
to come

Introductory
paragraph ends
with thesis statement

Double-spacing
throughout

Quotation cited
parenthetically

Annotations indicate **MLA-style formatting** or **effective writing**.

images of the abstract and the concrete—images of emotion and of English grammar. Cummings’s word choice enhances his intentionally strange juxtapositions, with the poet using grammatical terms that suggest regulation or confinement. For example, in the line “And death i think is no parenthesis” (16), Cummings uses the idea that parentheses confine the words they surround in order to warn the reader not to let death confine life or emotions.

Transition sentence connects the previous paragraph to this one

The structure of the poem also rejects traditional conventions. Instead of the final stanzas making the main point, Cummings opens his poem with his primary message, that “feeling is first” (1). Again, Cummings shows that emotion rejects order and structure. How can emotion be bottled in sentences and interrupted by commas, colons, and spaces? To Cummings, emotion is a never-ending run-on sentence that should not be diagrammed or dissected.

Quotation introduced effectively

In the third stanza of “since feeling is first,” Cummings states his point outright, noting “my blood approves, /and kisses are a better fate /than wisdom” (7-9). Here, Cummings argues for reveling in the feeling during a fleeting moment such as a kiss. He continues, “the best gesture of my brain is less than /your eyelids’ flutter” (11-12). Cummings wants the reader to focus on a pure emotive response (the flutter of an eyelash)—on the emotional, not the logical—on the meanings of words instead of punctuation and grammar.

Metaphor captures the spirit of Cummings’s point

Cummings’s use of words such as *kisses* and *blood* (8, 7) adds to the focus on the emotional. The ideas behind these words are difficult to confine or restrict to a single definition: kisses mean

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different things to different people, blood flows through the body freely and continually. The words are not expansive or free enough to encompass all that they suggest. Cummings ultimately paints language as more restrictive than the flowing, powerful force of emotion.

The poet's use of two grammatical terms in the last lines, "for life's not a paragraph / And death i think is no parenthesis," warns against attempts to format lives and feelings into conventional and rule-bound segments (15-16). Attempts to control, rather than feel, are rejected throughout "since feeling is first." Emotion should be limitless, free from any restrictions or rules.

While "since feeling is first" argues that emotions should not be controlled or analyzed, "as freedom is a breakfastfood" suggests the difficulty of defining emotion. In this poem, Cummings uses deliberately far-fetched metaphors such as "freedom is a breakfastfood" and "time is a tree" (1, 26). These metaphors seem arbitrary: Cummings is not attempting to make profound statements on time or freedom. Instead, he suggests that freedom and time are subjective, and attempts at narrow definition are ridiculous. Inversions of nature, such as "robins never welcome spring" and "water most encourage flame" (16, 7), underscore emotion's ability to defy reason. These inversions suggest the arbitrariness of "the syntax of things" (3).

Although most of "as freedom is a breakfastfood" defies logic, Cummings shifts the tone at the end to deliver one last metaphor: "but love is the sky" (27). The word *but* separates this definition from the rest of the poem and subtly implies that,

Paragraph reiterates Cummings's claim and sums up his argument

Clear and explicit transition from discussion of first poem

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unlike the metaphors that have come before it, “love is the sky” is an accurate comparison. In order to reach this final conclusion, however, Cummings has taken his readers on a long and often ambiguous journey.

Nevertheless, the confusion has been deliberate. Cummings wants his readers to follow him through the winding path through the thicket because he believes the path of the straight and narrow limits the possibilities of experience. Through the unconventionality of his poetic structures, Cummings urges his readers to question order and tradition. He wants his readers to realize that reason and rationality are always secondary to emotion and that emotional experience is a free-flowing force that should not be constrained. Cummings’s poetry suggests that in order to get at the true essence of something, one must look past the commonsensical definition and not be limited by “the syntax of things.”

Writer returns to
thicket image from
introduction

Works Cited

Cummings, E. E. "as freedom is a breakfastfood." *E. E. Cummings: Complete Poems 1904-1962*, edited by George J. Firmage, Liveright, 1991, p. 511.

---. "since feeling is first." *E. E. Cummings: Complete Poems 1904-1962*, edited by George J. Firmage, Liveright, 1991, p. 291.

Second work by same author uses three hyphens in place of name