
**THE THEME OF INDIVIDUALS AND MOST PEOPLE IN
E.E. CUMMINGS – A STUDY**

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K.K.LAKSHMI*Ph.D., CB-DEC-2014-0267)**Research Scholar, Bharathiyar University, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India*

**"The poems to come are for you and for me
and for are not for mostpeople" (sic)**

[C P, p. 461]

Cummings wrote about many themes but in all his poems he celebrated the individual. Individualism and the preservation of the individual' identity were his major concern in his poems. He saw life as a battleground between individuals who had not lost their identity represented in his vocabulary by the pronouns I and you on the one hand and the people, who had lost their identity by conforming to the oppressive weight of restrictive society: Cummings used the term mostpeople to designate these people. The two words are fused together to imitate the way in which they are spoken: The term as used in the reprimand, "Most people would not approve of your conduct", does not point to any particular authority who would reprove the conduct of the person. According to the poet, mostpeople are without an identity and as a result have lost their individuality. Cummings writes:

"The poems to come are for you and for me
and are not for mostpeople --- it's no
use trying to pretend that mostpeople
and ourselves are alike. Mostpeople
have less in common with ourselves than
the square root of minus one . You and I-
-are human beings; mostpeople are snobs. ...¹

Hence, Cummings saw the American people either as warm humane individualists or as mostpeople who had succumbed to the desire for materialistic progress, which in turn makes them conform to a mechanical life devoid of spirituality and the higher values of life The term people includes children and adults as far as the themes of

Cummings' poems are concerned for Cummings believed that children are naturally individualistic until they acquire adult notions.

A short nine-line poem which has children as its theme is a good example of the manner in which Cummings presents children:

"Tumbling-hair
 picker of buttercups
 violets
 dandelions
 And the big bullying daisies
 through the field wonderful
 with eyes a little sorry
 Another comes
 also picking flowers"

[C P, p.26]

The poem in a compact symmetrical composition which places the legend of Cerus, her daughter Proserpine and the abduction of the latter by Pluto the king of the nether world in bilateral symmetry with the modern context.

The poem is about a little girl with "tumbling hair" running here and there and picking flowers according to the dictates of her heart and not according to her intellect. She does not attach greater or less value to particular flowers: She finds all the flowers to be "wonderful": The poem captures the innocence of the child. This innocence of the child in combination with her love for all the flowers — without any discrimination --- makes her an individualist in Cummings' eyes.

In the seventh and eighth line, the poet introduces an element of ambiguity. Are the child's eyes a little sorry, because she is Proserpine of the Greek myth, which is suggested or is she sorry because her innocence has ended with growth? One wonders whether the poet is suggesting that adulthood itself violates the innocence of the child. The ambiguity can be solved only if the of "Another" in the eighth line is known. Kidder states, that the word "Another" in the poem could refer to "the poet, a former lover, time, death, another or the same "Tumbling-hair child grown older.² A plausible explanation is. That even while watching, the poet imagines what she will be like a few years later:

Another poem which has children as its theme is "in Just-". It is a beautiful, well crafted poem:

" in Just-
 spring when the world is mud-
 luscious the little
 I ame balloonman
 whistles far and wee
 and eddle and bill come

running from marbles and
 piracies and it's
 spring
 when the world is puddle-wonderful
 the queer
 old balloonman whistles far and wae
 and bettyandisbel come dancing
 from hop-sotch and jump-rope and
 it's
 spring
 and
 the
 goat-footed
 balloonman whistles
 far
 and
 wee'

[C P, p. 24.]

The season is spring and the children who are in the spring time of their lives race towards the balloon man, whose whistle sounds in the distance: As they abandon the games that they have been playing and rush towards the balloon man, the moist spring kissed earth on which they run and the puddles of water through which they gleefully splash their way is captured by the poet and brought to the reader through the hyphenated words mud-luscious and puddle-wonderful: The deviation from the vertical alignment after the eighteenth line is a visual representation of the little lame balloon man: The fusion of the names of the children-eddieandbill and bettyandisbel-is a typographical attempt to imitate the way in which the children refer to each other and also to suggest that they are inseparable companions. In the poem the poet presents the thrill of life that was being experienced by the children. When the incident took places.

However, the poem is not merely a description. The children follow the dictates of their little hearts, when they rush towards the balloons, which are of insignificant material value. They are individualists, because they are not bothered about value like some of their materialistic parents. What is more, they live in harmony with nature and enjoy contact with her, as is evident from the pleasure that they derive from running on the soft, moist earth and from splashing through the puddles. Cummings also uses the little lame balloon man to superimpose the image of Pan, the God of Spring/ on the scene to suggest the spirit, excitement and freshness of spring* The poet seems to suggest: that all men and women are individualists in childhood, which is the spring time of human existence and become materialistic only in later life.

In this poem, Cummings appears to have presented an experience from his own childhood, for his sister Elizabeth Quaely, recollects that the balloon man with his basket of balloons was always associated with spring in their childhood. She also gives a list of games that she played as a child. The list includes hop-scotch and jump-rope, which appear to be games, which were played by girls in her time and have been mentioned in the poem.³ Regarding the same poem Egbert S. Oliver writes, that the poem jolts the reader into sufficient alertness to experience the fact that Spring". When the world is mud-luscious, takes even the conventional adult to the edge of experiencing childhood again.⁴ The same author also states that the poet creates movement or liveliness in the poem through precision and gives beauty and imaginative lift to the sensuous grasp of life by means of the phrasing.⁵ It will be noticed that in the two poems on children which been analysed in this chapter, Cummings presents children as individualists.

Cummings' best known poem on individualism is:

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

[C P, p. 515]

Eve Triem states that in this poem, "Cummings very effectively worked the personal into a universal application⁶. The clue to the identity of anyone and no one lies in the fourth line of the poem which informs us that anyone is a particular person and a man.

The term is not a reference to an indefinite person. In the same way the fourteenth line informs us that noone is a woman. To create these identities which combine the indefinite quality of the two indefinite pronouns with the particular identity of two persons, Cummings uses the device known as functional. shift, which has been mentioned earlier in this chapter w According to Wegner:

"The poem demonstrates Cummings' ability to give an abstract word concrete significance. He does this by placing the word in a syntax that allows it to retain its abstract meaning and at the same time take on a definite function:For example in the opening line the indefinite pronoun anyone and the adverb how function in this dual capacity ... "7

The poem is divided into nine sections of four lines each:

The first section introduces us to an individualist who lives in a pretty town where mostpeople are concerned about how they live. Since the individualist does not bother about how he lives or in other words does not conform to the regulations and decorum followed by mostpeople he is not considered to be some one of substance. He is just anyone in the judgement of the townsfolk/ who not only do not care for him but do not

care for anybody else either because, they are busy conforming to the conventions of the town. Anyone on the other hand responded joyfully both to his successes — his did — and to his failures — his didn't — and led a life that was in harmony with nature/ which is suggested by the names of the seasons. Barry Marks remarks that the accepted life as it was given to him.⁸ As the poem proceeds further the individualist is presented in greater contrast to the other people# who lead their lives in total conformity with the conventions of society.

The second section reveals the convention ridden attitude of the townsfolk, who neither care for the hero nor for anyone else- They merely behave in a routine fashion. Which the poet suggests through the words sowed and reaped. He also suggests that these routine functions are sterile by using the words isn't's and same.

About this section, Wegner writes:

“Posed against the embracing love of “anyone”
And “noone” are the routine existences of
“:Women and men”, the “someones” and “every-
Ones” and “busy folk”. Anyone’s resoibse ti
life was singing and dancing --- positive ex-
pressions of exhuberance and joy, but the
activities of “women and men” were sowing
and reaping ---functional and routine
behavior: ironically what these people
sow and reap is negative sterility – their
“isn'ts”. . . .”⁹

In the third section, we are told that noone loved anyone and only a few children in the town guessed the goodness of the love between the two. The children's evaluation of their love assumes significance, when we realize that Cummings does not say whether they ever ever marry. However what is more important according Barry Marks, is the fact that they 'love life and each other.¹⁰ Their love is the love of two individualists. The poem does not tell us whether the lovers marry at all. Hence the statement that only a few children were able to guess the goodness of their love assumes significance, particularly as even these children “are apt to to forget to remember” that their love is good/ when they grow up for reasons/ which only “the snow can begin to explain”. The implication appears, to be that children are individualists and are therefore able to recognize the goodness of the love between anyone and noone but lose this capacity as they grow into adults because they are conditioned by society to conform to the norms of social acceptability. Barry Marks writes, that these

Children had the sensitivity to recognize anyone and noones love but lost their special sensitivity as they grew older and forgot that they had known love.¹¹

The fourth section tells us of the deep love that anyone and noone bore for each other. She shared his joys and sorrows and anyone's any was all to her, because she shared his life so completely. Robert Wegner states that their responses to the manifestations of life ("tree by leaf bird by snow") have always been positive and so they will find in death a continuation of the spiritual harmony that they show while alive.¹²

The fifth and sixth sections of the poem the reader learns more about the other people who live in the town. Among these people, all those who had achieved the status of being someone in the town got married to girls who who like everyone else got married to the someones or men who were successful in the materialistic sense of the word. The poet seems to suggest that among mostpeople even marriage was based on conformity to socially acceptable values and materialism instead of being based on love as in the case of the individualists anyone and no- one. Mostpeople "laughed their cryings" and "did their dance" or in the words of Wegner, they responded "with caution, circumspection and doubts to life."¹³ The sixth section reemphasises this idea and we are told that they could not learn to live in harmony with the universe which is represented by the stars, rain and moon in the section.

About this same section, Barry Marks states:

"Bells ring. Day turns to night and back to day again. The weather changes, the seasons revolve. Children become adults. And that is the story"¹⁴

The seventh and eighth sections of the poem tell us that anyone and noone died eventually, but unlike most- people, they were not afraid of death. Since they were individualists, they understood that death was only a continuation of the natural process. According to Wegner, death was only "a continuation of that spiritual harmony they knew tfiile alive —* wish by spirit Barry writes:

"Because "anyone" and "noone" glide with
the current, even death is a creative
event. They are able to grow and finally
blossom. They have lived fully when alive;
in death they become "was by was" and the
sleep is for them, ultimate fulfillment.
They move into the present tense ("they
dream their sleep") as nobody else in the poem ever does...."¹⁵

The implication is that anyone and noone transcend to a higher plane.

The ninth and last section reiterates the idea that the everyones or the mostpeople of the town did not profit by the example of anyone and noone. Barry Marks points out. that their lives are "as empty and meaningless as the mechanical ding dong of the clock which rules their lives". This poem gives us an insight into Cummings* concept of individualism. Eve Triem states:

"In the second to the last stanza the poet states the triumph of the individual way of life, as the lovers go hand in hand into eternity"¹⁶

Cummings is aware of the loss of individuality in the modern world and the consequent loss of vital activity on the part of man, who has found refuge in the apparent security of materialism and scientific progress. He uses this idea as the theme of his very popular and much anthologized poem "Buffalo Bill", Some manuscript pages# which give us an insight into the origin of the poem were discovered in 1976 in the 'Cummings Collection' in Harvard's Houghton Library.¹⁷ A xeroxed copy of a page, which was reproduced in the Harvard Library Bulletin has been appended to this dissertation as Appendix I. The poem in its final form is as follows:

"Buffalo Bill's
defunct
who used to
ride a watersraooth-silver
stallion
and break one twothreeer our five pigeonsjustlikethat
Jesus
he was a handsome man
and what i want to know is how do you like your blueeyed boy Mister Death"

[CP, p.60]

Buffalo Bill or William F Cody was an expert marksman, who could shoot five pigeons one after the other while at full gallop on his horse. He was a famous figure in American folklore. Cummings presents him as an example of an individualist, who chose to ignore the convention of following the materialistic path and chose instead to the dictates of his heart and become a sharp shooter and showman. The theme of this poem also highlights the fact the achievements that are credited to him are really the memory of the events as they happened,.

The original poem was written by Cummings on sheets of paper bearing the letter head of P P Collier & Son, New York. According to Kidder the date of the manuscript "coincides roughly with the date of William F Cody's death on 10th January 1917.¹⁸ The New York newspaper The Sun published an article on Cody with "Buffalo Bill Dead" as the headline.¹⁹ The first line of the original poem contains only an apostrophe s in addition to the words in the headline,¹⁹ Bill's act consisted of shooting pigeons "tossed by a Comanche brave" as he rode his horse before cheering crowds.²¹ The reader finds this information crafted into the third# fourth, fifth and sixth lines, which present Cody's act happeningly to remind us that an individualist lives each moment of his fully. .

The word Jesus could merely be an exclamation of wonder. However, Kidder informs us that it is centrally located to make it possible for the reader to think that Cummings is

telling him that most people usually reduce heroic deeds to circus stunts like those of Bill and have extended this habit to Jesus and reduced Him "to a spiritual sharp shooter. He explains that the terms blue-eyed/ handsome and clever, which are used by the enmasse to express admiration are cliches/ which Mister Death takes for Cummings believe^ that only the truly alive can escape destruction.²⁰ Cummings himself stated in a letter to his father about the poem, that his intention was "to wake up some (Stoopid) th power people,²¹ His contention seems to be that 'most people simplify things thereby missing the vital essence of life.

One of Cummings' popular poems, which is also prescribed for graduate students has as its theme the conventional behaviour of the ladies in the university town of Cambridge, which is the city part of Boston in which the Harvard University is situated. The poem is given below:

"The Cambridge ladies who live in furnished souls
 Are unbeautiful and have comfortable minds
 (also, with the shurch's protestant blessings
 Daughters, unscented shapeless spirited)
 They believe in Christ and Longfellow, both dead,
 are invariably interested in so many things-
 at the present writing one still finds ,
 delighted fingers Knitting for the is it Poles:
 perhaps While permanent faces coyly bandy
 scandal of Mrs N and professor D
 ... the Cambridge ladies do not care, above
 Cambridge if sometimes in its box of
 sky 'lavender and cornerless, the
 moon rattles like a fragment of angry candy

[An Anthology of American Literature 1890-1965, p.508]

The poem presents before the reader the drab, uneventful lives of the ladies living in the university town. They lead correct lives, which conform to the rules of the Protestant Church and as a result of this lack individuality. Cummings expresses this lack of individuality in the ladies through the word unbeautiful, which is different from being ugly. Cummings is pointing out that both beauty and ugliness confer individuality to the person so described but unbeautiful does not do so. They have comfortable souls because they conform to what most people consider to be correct according to religion and acceptable to most people. The implication is that the ladies "believe in Christ and Longfellow (the American poet)" only because most people believe in them. This statement is confirmed by the lower case c for Christ and the last two words in the line both dead.

The ladies appear to be interested in many things and participate in social work, because it is socially acceptable to do so but do not even know whom they are knitting

for, What is worse they talk about scandals involving other individuals like Mrs N and professor D. luring their, unladylike conversation their permanent faces do not betray its revolting nature. Taking into consideration the fact that they live in a university area one does not expect such behaviour from them. In the last four lines of the poem, the poet points out that they do not live in harmony with nature. Their lives and activities are as meaningless as those of the people among whom anyone and noone lived. Cummings has used the meaningless lives of most people as the theme of this poem.

Cummings considered the individualist to be democratic. He was against any form of regimentation that poses a threat to individualism this distaste for regimentation forms the theme of his poem "kumrads die because they're told)". The poem is given below:

"kumrads die because they're told)
 kumrads die before they're old
 (kumrads aren't afraid to die
 kumrads don't
 and kumrads won't
 believe in life)and death knows whie
 (all good kumrads you can tell
 by their altruistic smell
 raoscow pipes good kumrads dance)
 kumrads enjoy
 s freud knows whoy
 the hope that you may mess your pance
 every kumrad is a bit
 of quite unmitigated hate
 (travelling in a futile groove
 god knows why)
 and so do i
 (because they are afraid to love").

[C P, p. 413]

The poem can be paraphrased as follows; "Because they are afraid to love comrades die because they are told (and) comrades die before they are old/ because comrades are not afraid to die, (But only) death knows why comrades don't and comrades won't believe in life. You can tell all good comrades by their altruistic smell. Comrades dance (to the tunes that) Moscow pipes. (But only) S (Sigmund) Freud knows why comrades enjoy the hope that you may mess your pants. Every comrade is a bit of quite unmitigated hate, (who is) travelling in a futile groove-only God knows why and so do I."

Charles Norman quotes the first six lines of this poem as an example of Cummings' portrayal of unpeople.²⁵ The poet conveys the meaningless nature of the regimented

life of communists using several devices. First/ the poem has three stanzas of six lines each, as in conventional poetry suggesting that the poem is about people whose lives (dance) conform to Moscow's rules (piping). Even the syllabic arrangement suggests the uniform marching of soldiers. The reader cannot help noticing the repetition of the word comrade/ which like the words why and pants are spelt to give the reader an idea of the way in which a Russian would pronounce them. The lives of the comrades lack meaning for there is no place for love in their lives, though they claim to be politically altruistic. However/ Cummings was not against Communism as a political philosophy for he criticised the French Police-in an earlier poem-for breaking up a Communist demonstration in Paris,²⁶ in both the poems Cummings' concern was for the threat to individualism, Cummings divides people into two categories, they are individualists or mostpeople/ who are some- referred to as unpeople. These two categories include both children and adults. Cummings through his poems on individualism that children are individualists/ who as a result of adult influence become mostpeople as they grow up.

From the six poems analysed in this chapter/ we realize that Cummings' individualist is not selfish or mean but has spiritual humility and is not interested in the materialistic pursuits of life. Individualists like anyone and noone respond positively to life both in joy and in sorrow and fill each living moment with actions dictated by their hearts and not convention, like the girl with the tumbling hair or the children running after the balloon man. Buffalo Bill like anyone and noone is a person who has preserved childhood individuality even after becoming an adult. Love governs the hearts of individualists and helps them to transcend to a higher plane in which death is only a continuation of the spiritual harmony with the cyclic forces of the universe that they experience while they are alive. While the individualist is concerned with the truth of real experiences here and now, Cummings' mostpeople or unpeople are concerned with conforming to accepted values. For the Cambridge ladies, even faith in religion is a matter of conforming to values prescribed by society and not a vital spiritual experience. Yet despite their wish to conform, their lives are dry, devoid of love and meaningless contradictions of the very values that they wish to conform to.

The Cambridge ladies try to live as prescribed by religion but cannot help indulging in mali malicious gossip. The altruistic kumrads desire others "to mess their pance" and they "dance to the tunes that Moscow pipes." *The essence of Cummings' individualism can be found in one of his own poems:*

"seeker of truth
follow no path all paths lead
where
truth is here" _

[C P p.775.]

The individualist does not restrict himself to any conventional path in his search for truth. Truth lies in the here and now.

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