



## Iconicity in Cummings's Poetry

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### ABSTRACT:

*Edward Estill Cummings (1895-1962) is known for his leaving off the conventional techniques and structures to a high means of poetic expressions. He, radically, experimented with form, punctuation, spelling, and syntax; abandoning traditional techniques and structures to create a new, highly idiosyncratic means of poetic expressions. One of the important reasons is the mixing of the traditional structure and the literal meanings of many of the neos he uses. However the aim of this paper is to explain the relation or the correspondence between the forms in Cummings' poems and the meaning behind these forms. The study tackles two of Cummings' poems: "my father moved through dooms of loves" and "anyone lived in a pretty how town".*

**Key Words: Iconicity, Stylistics, Poetic Expressions, Neos, Literal Meaning.**

### Iconicity: Definition:

Simply speaking, iconicity is the relationship, similarity or correspondence between form and meaning. The word iconicity is a derivation from '*icon*' which means an image indicating an idea or thing in the actual life (Fischer; 1997:65). However, there are types of iconicity: imagic iconicity which is a structural device in natural language that deals with the correspondence between the order of the parts of speech in a sentence and the theme or message they portray (Pietrandrea and Russo).

Diagrammatic iconicity involves structural and semantic iconicity. Structural iconicity includes iconicity in syntax that means the grammatical relations within the units of the sentence which could be a particular means of inflectional change of words, auxiliary words and word order; whereas the former exists in signed language to express meaning which are related to the movement of the body.

### E.E. Cummings' Poetics:

The main difficulty in Cummings' poetry is to understand the lexical meaning in his poems for beneath this profusion, the strange usage of words, there are profound meanings. Understanding the meaning in Cummings' poems depends on the relationship between what he does, his techniques and means, and his attitude towards life, the modern life. His poems are confusing due to his use of capitalization, punctuation and the words order within the lines of verse. For Cummings this technique has a thematic function. However, arriving at this stage of comprehending Cummings' poems needs a thoughtful stylistic analysis of more objective assets.

### Stylistics: Definition:

"Stylistics is the study of literary discourse from a linguistic orientation and it is distinguished from literary criticism and linguistics in that it links the two and has no autonomous domain of its own" (Widdowson, H.G.:1975). The poet's style, tersely, is part that stylistics examines. Its impact on the meaning of the poem

is examined thoroughly. Accordingly, stylistics studies grammar, lexicon, semantics and phonology. More to the point, stylistics deals with the poet's linguistic choices at a given poems. It gathers between linguistics and literary criticism at once. The main aim is to clarify the aesthetic features produced by the poet's creativity, such as tone and attitude.

### **"My father moved through dooms of love"**

"my father moved through dooms of love" (1940) is an elegy in which Cummings commemoates the life of his father, Edward Cummings as minister, university professor and a poet. The speaker in the poem is the poet himself. He directly, addresses the reader making a model of his father. The poem is outwardly simple but inwardly suggests profound meanings that require close reading. Cummings plays with capitalization, punctuation, spacing, and with semantic and phonological elements that still make the poem readable, yet obscure in its meaning. The poem is a substitutive power of a man's life in which love causes a telling recoming. A way from being "doomed" to love too much, the moral of the poem is to instruct the world saving itself (Bloom; 2005:74). The poem, as Robert E.M. put it is "a sixteen-stanza piece that has seventeen stanza". (Maurer;2005:94):

*my father moved through dooms of love through sames of am through haves of give,  
singing each morning out of each night my father moved through depths of height(C.P.:520)*

The first stanza suggests the theme, constructs the meter and the tone of the poem. The most important thing in that the opening stanza introduces is a type of poetic reductions fulfilled by the combination of the contrasts and the making of new nouns from different parts of speech. Cummings uses "dooms of love", "haves of fives", and "depths of height" to express his own individuality. He describes his father's character in a very informative way through few words. In other word, Cummings changes the words which he emphasized finding out new meanings of each poetic shorthand created by the combination of the opposites. Clever reader is able to understand the meaning of being doomed to love and the feeling of the social responsibility to love too much. In addition to perceive a man who experienced all the qualities of an idealist in an irresponsible world? However, Cummings himself named this technique of the pairings of the opposites "knowing around"(Overland; 2003:74).

The point of departure in the poem is purely personal. Cummings tributes his father, never the less the poem goes beyond the personal.Cummings techniques of pairings the opposites, words of contrasting connotations in this poem love connotes the elevating of Man above his destiny. The meaning lies in the close reading of such contrasting connotations. They are contrasted substitutive. In each of these pairs there is a reference to an ideal against which the lower doing of people is set off. The first stanza does not describe the world of Edward Cummings's, the father, but the world in which he "moved through. It is referred to in the poem as "most people". It is a world of the doomed love where existence is decided by the repetition of movement. Where holdings are held on to not only being felt through sharing them with people.

The poem has many lexical oddities as the case in most of Cummings' poems. There is a wide use of words in a way larger than their traditional use such as

"am","haves","gives","where","here","which","why","pure","where","new","beyond","must" and "shall". A key way to understand this is through Cummings' eyes. That is to find out what he favours and disfavours so as to conceive these words that he coined. These lines are an instance of what has been said:

*and should some why completely weep my father's fingers brought her sleep:  
vainly no smallest voice might cry for he could feel the mountains grow. (C.P.:520)*

A simple words such as **why** in a straightforward context like this draws the readers' consideration to its use instantly. For in the linguistic term, this word is shocking. It's a amazing influence results from not only its

being used as a noun since this reason does not fit with the word ***why*** which function in this ***why*** as in "get to the why" or "there is a terrible why". However, it is instantly clear that like these substantive senses of the word does not work in the poet's couplet. To understand the meaning of the word, the reader must depend on his own knowledge, he can find out the attainability of new interpretation. ***Why*** does not have such a difficult meaning, since it is used in the context of an easy to understand dramatic situation. The second line is an indication that ***why*** is "substantive antecedent of the pronoun and that it can therefore be assumed to represent some feminine noun of a general character, such as girl or woman"(Overland, 2005:74).

However, in case of using ***girl*** or ***woman*** instead of ***why***, the first line will lose its startling effect, as the case in many of Cummings meanings that is very gated largely from the nature of the word ***why*** more than its use in context. In terms of its interrogative usage ***why*** is an antecedent of an unanswered question and needs no searching for answers.

If these interrogative questions and the unanswered question fit together well with the dramatic situation which is called into play in the couplet/ a girl weeping and given peace through sleep/ then this means that the girl is mentally startled. She does not have an answer in her mind; she is perplexed. So that the poem is in need to extensions to have a clear meaning which is no doubt what the poet want to convey. A meaning that needs more than one example to be fully, illustrated .Babette Deutsch comments on these words in Cummings' poetry saying:

*Cummings's later poems make words as abstract as "am," "if", "because," do duty for seemingly more solid nouns. By this very process, however, he restores life to dying concepts."Am" implies being at its most responsive, "if" generally means the creeping timidity (ibid:74)*

This technique is employed by the writers whose subject matter of their work is taken from the Gospel. They showed how their works are taken from the Gospel. They showed the way of the existence of the way of existence of love the deeds of only one man. Accordingly, there are two usages of ***love*** in the poem, at the opening and ending lines. Critics say that the poem is a commentary on Cummings own life. They base their assumption on some biographical notes within the poem. Cummings expresses a profound esteem for his father. Being independently confirmative and affectionately rebellious, Cummings is proved to be motivated by his father's advice there was a correspondence between Cummings and his father in the period between Cummings graduation and his father's death.

The letters in the poem have a tone similar to Cummings's previous works such as his "Harvard non-lecture" in 1953.In this work Cumming's use an elevating tone that is he dealt with his father in a highly prestigious way. He sheds lights on his father's first skills" a crack shot a famous fly- fisherman"(Bloom; 2005: 91). Then he talks about his father's talents as a professor. Cumming notes that his father's image is a god-like one / my father's voice was so magnificent that he was called on to impersonate God speaking from Bacon Hill/(ibid:91).He means the image of his father in both the poem and the lecture. To understand whether or not the father's image as a real-life modal or as an American folk hero is more down to earth than to their originals is best decided by biographical indications.

Definitely the poet reflects himself. That is, he describes the way he feels things and his own habits of mind which resulted from his father's influence. Cummings brings into action qualities of his father. He wants to express his own mental set and his own heritage of feeling. The clear confusion is due to the poet's insistence to convey an immediate and spontaneous impression in the poem. Cummings expresses a profound respect for his father. Being independently confirmative and affectionately rebellious Cummings is proved to be motivated by his father's advice:

*and nothing quite so least as truth i say though hate were why men breathe  
because my Father lived his soul love is the whole and more than all(C.P.:521)*

*"anyone lived in a pretty how town"*

"anyone lived in a pretty how town"(1940) portrays the life of people in an unknown town. The setting of the poem is in unknown town. However, Cumming tackles a modern problem which is the loss and lack of identity. In the town, the resident, anyone, is posed against the pretty how town. The nameless character "anyone" suggests anonymous main people who live in the town and it also stands for all people. This shows that "anyone" is simple and dull. People are utterly preoccupied in their daily lives, though every person seems involved with another one, the bulky part of them do not care about their resident who are like them. They are no one and any one at the same time. No specific importance to each other on any social criterion. The " how" suggests that the town people ask how and why about things from an incapacity for simultaneity and the intuitive grasp "any one" and "no one" live and die in a landscape of changing seasons, without love or interest on life.

However, Cummings lived a long period in an ordinary town where he poetizes the negative and positive aspects in his life. Cummings has a unique grammatical style in a way that allows the reader to conceive "pretty how" as "how pretty". The word "pretty" could be considered as an adverb and interpreted as "**rather** modifying the adjective **how**"(Macksoud; 1968:73).This way changes the tone of the whole poem and opens the door for many readings. Thematically, this reading gives the sense of universality to town suggesting the routines of people's lives. Thus, this way is similar to describe a town in which the inhabitant's main concern is the industry of oil as oil town or cattle town in a town where people are preoccupied with cattle keeping. So, " how town" could be a town in which peoples' main concern is the ask the question "How?"in a way similar to the meaning of experience "know-how"(ibid:73). In the first stanza, Cummings experiments with some technical devices. He uses the pronoun" anyone" and there is also an effective use of phrases as in the phrase "a pretty how town". This suggests the meaning of unlovely thing for the changes the normal order of the words which is "how pretty a town". In the second line there is another syntactical disorder "with up so floating many bells down". Cummings does not use punctuation. He employs four words "spring summer autumn winter" without using punctuation marks to refer to the passing of time. The last line in this stanza is a recursive one. It echoes the opening line and anyone who/sang his didn't him danced his did:

*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 (C.P.:515)*

Cummings structural strategy in this poem depends on the phonological, morphological and syntactic characteristics of some recursive lines repeating the same grammatical structures of these lines. He uses the same stressed structures; the unattached patterns are nouns and adverbs and they function adjectively or adverbially. Identifying each one of them, adverbial and the adjectival patterns, is by noticing the simple combination or continuous addition, using "by" and "to" with the adverbial and "after" and " and" with the adjectival patterns. on-recursive patterns are identified by the complementary pulsating and the use of" and" only (B. Lord; 1966:96).

In term of phonology, there are different types of rhythm the poet employs them to demonstrate complex mental impressive effects. The most prominent pattern is the succession of the seasons which is expressed by the unpunctuated list of their names "summer autumn winter spring". Their abstract names are a combined with nature to express the specific season on the human feeling. The reader or listener finds it difficult in reading name such as" sun-summer; moon-autumn; stars-winter; rain-spring". Their lining up in the poem corresponds to the reader's knowledge and longings (Steinmann; 1978:1):

*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) (C.P.:515)*

The regularity of the natural rhythm is interrupted by the human emotional reading to summer, winter, autumn and spring. Winter, for, instance is a metaphor for death in that it is a long and a dull period.

Cumming responds to this impression by indicating to it in some words like "snow", "died", "buried", "was by was", "deep by deep". Cummings' movement from single words like "snow", 'died" to phrase such as "deep by deep" stands for the rhythm of the life movement:

*One day anyone died I guess the (and no one stooped to kiss his face)  
Busy folk buried them side by side Little by little and was by was (C.P:515)*

However, the strategy of nameness is changed as the poem progresses. Cummings no longer uses similar elements but combines opposites one, for example "earth by april" .Erath represents death and "april" stands for spring. After referring to spring the poem shifts strongly to summer moving forward to autumn through juxtaposing "reaping-sowing" and "went their came". Yet Cummings insistently depends on "summer" and "sun" at first and "rain" in the last. Thus, the full cycle of life is opened with spring in the opening stanza and is concluded by two lines at the end:

*women and men(both dong and ding) summer autumn winter spring  
reaped their sowing and went their came sun moon stars rain C.P.:515)*

Semantically, he games with the parts of speech. He uses some verbs to be, verbs to do, demonstratives and interrogatories as nouns. He uses modes of "was", "is" , "did" and "am" and changes their parts of speech converting them into abstractions. Their meanings become ethically and ontologically problematic for modern poets. Cumming found himself obliged to risk with them. He avoided using some words he dislikes due to the changes in his personal life. Cummings married twice. This led to many different ideas that much of them were new for him and he had to clarify to the people. So he had to invent this means of using language as a new and instrumental way of conveying his themes in poetry. The purpose of using parentheses is to give psychological dimension to the principal affairs of the people in the town rather than describing the town itself. The expressions within the parentheses throughout the poem conveys the psychological state of the people of the town. In the second stanza the parentheses portray the feeling of women and men, in third stanza the parentheses reveal the inner selves of the children and of someone and every one in stanza five and in stanza six the use of the parentheses help expressing the children's minds and in the seventh stanza anyone's one state of mind and in the ninth stanza Cummings goes back again to express the feeling of women and men. Thus the parentheses strengthen the meaning inside the narrative text and carry on the psychological reactions (Macksud ; 1968).

Finally, the meaning in Cummings's poems could be found in the correspondence between the techniques he uses and his vision of life. Being a modern poet, Cummings brought modernism into his poetry. He is interested in poetic experimentation. He has his own different style which differs from that of Ezra Pound ( 1885-1972 ) and T.S. Eliot(1888-1965 ) and William Butler Yeats( 1865-1939 ). Cummings breaks with the words order of the sentence using neos in strange modes of expressing and inventing new parts of speech. He avoids using the words that he detests or dislikes. He used strange language rather than a commonplace one experimenting with syntax, semantics and phonology. This is related to his vision and attitude towards life. He wants to express his own instant overflow of feeling concerning his attitude of life.

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