

ISSN 0976-8165

The Criterion

An International Journal in English

August 2015 Vol. 6, Issue-4



6th Year of Open Access

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Dr. Vishwanath Bite

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxyimrj.com

A Formalist Study of E. E. Cummings's Poetry

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Abstract:

Russian Formalists focused on artistic forms and techniques on the basis of linguistic studies. Formalists considered a literary work apart from personality, spirits and beliefs of its author and simply as a problem of language. In their opinion, a literary work is a pure form, therefore, in the studying of a literary work the form rather than content is important. They believe that one should not expect to get information from a literary work. In Formalistic point of view, masterpieces are worthy of review mainly due to the prominence of explicit language and use of art. Meanwhile, E. E. Cummings' poetry is a comprehensive example of elegance and miracle of material in speech synthesis, ambiguity, relevance, immediacy, paradox and escape from the norm of phonetic, lexical, syntax and even content. His poetry is among the most appropriate works to investigate formalistic criticism. This paper tries to review two poems from the poet specifically from the formalistic point of view.

Keywords: Formalism, Cummings' poetry, defamiliarization, form, content

Introduction

The main theme of formalist activities are reflected in the text and what they get from the text and other perspectives out of context are of secondary importance. The most common way researchers seek for the study of a literary work is to distinguish similarities and differences between literary and non-literary texts. In other words, they are seeking only to show literary text. Formalists try to use the text itself and nothing else. They do not deny the importance of developing the ways of literary expression. They investigate a literary work separate from its artistic, social, and historical interpretations. In their view, art was always separated from life.

Formalist, contrary to ancient critics whom regarded a literary work as a reflection of its own author's life, claimed that, a literary text has no concern with author. Roland Barthes, as one of the main celebrated theorists in his article "The Death of the Author" states his belief that Stephen Mallarme was undoubtedly the one who proposed that, the replacement of language itself rather than the person who uses the language and not the author, is essential.

According to these critics form is not a means to express the content of a literary work, but it is a factor that motivates the creation of a form. The content is just one of the elements that determine the shape or form and are to be evaluated from this perspective. The way of using language in the formalist point of view is different from using language by other approaches. The artist that has a common language is trying not to be obsessed with conceptual limitations.

The views of formalists are:

1) Departure or deviation from the norm: Formalists believed that standard literary language deviates from literary arts. Less text can be found in each paragraph or even a sentence that somehow escape from the criteria.

2. Exotic and Defamiliarization: An important achievement in the theory of Defamiliarization is pure literature. Art puts obstacles in the way of reader to oblige him to think about the text and art. It is common in the literature to enjoy the use of expression (authorized-metaphor, metaphor-metonymy) and innovative techniques (opacity-ambiguity, pun, paradox, humor, etc.) in different ways.

The most important feature of work-oriented critics is dealing with aspects of the superstructure and construction or interpretation of a work of art. To Formalism, the importance of form, structure, and art is remarkable. The task of the artist is nothing but the creation of the form and function of the form is nothing but creating possibilities and associations. Victor Shklovsky (1893-1984) introduced the concept of defamiliarization in "Art as Technique" (1916):

"And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects unfamiliar, to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object: the object is not important" (11-12).

3. The importance of the word in literature: Formalists believe that literature is only a question of language. It can be said that literary language is one of the languages and should be viewed from the linguistic perspective. They study shape or form of literary work and believe that the study of literary work should be based on the form rather than the content.

4. Difference between literature and reality: Formalists believe that a literary language is an unconventional and unusual way of expressing the truth and they think their analysis of literature and work must be separated from reality, historical events and real life itself and also away from the author's life.

In general, we can say that formalist critics rely on two principles:

1- Deformation in ordinary language,

2- Literary figures that are Defamiliarized.

Cummings is one of the poets and literary artists whose form differs him from others. In most of his works and poems, Cummings's deficient compounds are unique and notable. Such moving and changing features generally caused disintegration in his poetry. He is also considered to be an American poet of the 20th century, who "began the present era of the extensive use of free verse after World War I" (Abrams 129).

Jarrell claimed in *The Third Book of Criticism* that "Cummings has ever made avant-garde, experimental poems so attractive to the general and the special reader. In 1962 when he died, he

could hold the prominent position in 20th century poetry”(Jarrell334). John Logan in “The Organ Grinder and Cockatto:an introduction to E.E.Cummings, called him as "one of the greatest lyric poets in our language.” (Logan39-43). Stanley Edgar Hyman wrote in "Standards: A Chronicle of Books for Our Time": "Cummings has written at least a dozen poems that seem to me matchless.Three are among the great love poems of our time or any time”(Hyman120).

Fairly`s study of Cummings "ungrammar" provides a fresh approach to the poet`s use of poetic language and form.Kennedy`s 1994 volume for Twayne series is a critical study of the poetry and prose with only minimal biographical detail. It is addressed,as the reface notes to the general reader,especially the college student who is interested in Modern poetry. As such, it is general introduction which attempts to highlight Cummings growth as an artist,the uneven success of his linguistic experiments and some of his contribution to Modern Verse.Kennedy includes a variety of poems from different periods in the Cummings career to give the reader a sense of how this artist often tumbled,but at times achieve a unique quality which has had a lasting impact on 20th century literature (Hawkins 169).

Cummings`s poetry is systematic such that individual elements are interconnected with a thin silk thread of words and meaning and so intertwined that a totally unique and fascinatingmiraculous carpet is revealed in front of the virtuoso audience.

Edward Cummings is the poet of his time that in the light of modernism used his own style for the sake ofthe style itself, so it made him to be considered beyond his contemporaryartists, as a post-modern poet. He declared that art is like a prism, breaking the light of objective reality into its hidden grandeur.

Poetry tends to differ from other literary works by its sound and its use of language.

The focus of this paper is on the studying of “a” and “in time of daffodils” from formalistic point of view. These poems have the potential for considering the deviation from ordinary language and defamiliarization and use of literary devises consisting symbolism which leads the reader to the intended content.

Discussion

Cummings in one of his works proposes a strange suggestion to theaudience. However, acceptingsuch a literal interpretationis away from the logic.In fact, the definition of what is in his mindas an audience deals with a figure who is discoverer or decoder to explore the mysteries and complexities of the poems.

He wantsto involve the audience, either by a word or even a phoneme, then tries to convey a concept. Cummings believes that poetry is alive when it is read or is thought about.And just at the moment that the viewer/readerachieves final and ultimate meaning of the work, poetry takes him from it to a new experience. In other words, suspension in a textual analysis is the end that Cummings expectsfrom the audience of his poems.And the purpose of "involvement" means to achieve the same meaning.Although the meaning is transferred through only one of the alphabet letters.

Cummings has a poem called "a". The full text of this poem written in English is in the vertical form whose words are sometimes unintelligible or meaningless and dismissed from their positions. For example, the word loneliness comes in four lines and only three parts of it in the English language are meaningful including «one», «I» and «a» as a prefix for making the noun.

The original text of poetry is:

1 (a
le
af
fa
ll
(S
one
l
iness

The pale impression that this poem has on the audience starts from the first moment when he comes up with lyrics to decode words and finally passes to take the content. After crossing from the literal meaning of the words, the main conflict begins. The relationship between form and meaning of this work is strange. There is no key for typing 1 in the time of writing so the small letter l is used in the English language, which is ultimately called a number as well as the letter l. Also l in language is reminiscent of the pronoun "I". The number of times that 'l' or '1' is seen in the poem is four, and in the fifth row "l-l" can be read as one-one and inspire the meaning of loneliness at the time of reading.

Cummings's intentional use of this arrangement on the setting of the pronouns "I" and other words, to get away from the concept of the word "loneliness" reveals the relationship between form and content. Also the spacing deliberately typed in the middle of words and the use of punctuation, such as parentheses in this work is significant.

Cummings's brackets shows the fall of a leaf, so that he carefully lays out circular letters and quiet sound in English, told a rotary motion, rotation and continuous falling leaves which are slowly on the surface of the Earth revolved around the fall of leaves and again the other leave during this process.

This form of the writing of this poetry and the way he was trying to convey not only means a unique layout, also means to lead and implement a picture. Cummings has been active in the field of painting technique too, and gets the vertical spacing between letters and poems which come from cubism painting style. He is the creator of a work of art in its current analysis of the image or object.

In his analysis of the primary to finally pieces reach to the back of the structure It is because we understand Cummings's poems (as he wanted), their poems also allow us to re-look at the pieces and rebuild the world of poetry.

Consider another poem by him called "in time of daffodils":

in time of daffodils(who know
the goal of living is to grow)
forgetting why, remember how
in time of lilacs who proclaim
the aim of waking is to dream,
remember so(forgetting seem)
in time of roses(who amaze
our now and here with paradise)
forgetting if, remember yes
in time of all sweet things beyond
whatever mind may comprehend,
remember seek(forgetting find)
and in a mystery to be
(when time from time shall set us free)
forgetting me, remember me

In this poem at first sight the theme of the poem is forgotten memories. Yet in the poetry, the psychoanalytic approach points out that any attempt to forget a memory in the mind would be a reassertion of its presence. It seems that the human mind is always aware of their acts in contrary to the ego.

Cummings also thinks that man is emphasizing the search for more. It may be hard to remember where he may lose his favorite (what he tries to achieve).

He uses inner sense of poetry to underscore that the poet's memories as a humanitarian symbol can create words of poetry for eternal life, without indulging in poetry and it will continue. But there are multiple attitudes in the poetry, deep structures and deep meanings.

Cummings's poem titled "in time of daffodil" was written by a poet whose superficial attitude cannot ignore the smallest components of his language. This means that any word or any particular point in Cummings's poem has its special place and concept inspired to the audience.

Breaking not only the norm, but the basic structure of language and writing, or even the concept of language is the distinguishing feature of Cummings's language.

"At the time of her flowers", flowers are symbol of the main pillars. These flowers are symbols of innocence and beauty of nature too and reveal the ultimate goal of man's creation. Poet clings to the trappings of a beautiful and innocent symbol of nature and with verbal and conceptual game suggests the notifying of deep feelings that not only are the psychological and sociological concepts, but expresses deep and philosophical themes.

In the "in time of daffodils" her flowers are symbols of perfection and being aware that the ultimate goal is growth and glory. This indicates upward evolution of life towards harmony and perfection and nature as its symbol.

In the poet's idea this goal emphasizes that the audience will forget how to live and can open ways for human perfection and lead him to take steps toward excellence. This poet also points to the days of childhood and the process of human development cycle. He also considered flower as a symbol for knowledge and knows that the goal of all waking is a dream that entails a more realistic sense of awakening. Cummings says that this means we should be awake till our dreams come true. In order to achieve this true dream, one should put aside 'seem' that is a symbol of appearance and superficial attraction of life. Red roses are symbols of absolute beauty in our universe with their own spirituality. This symbol of beauty and perfection surprises the reader.

Cummings wants his audience to implicate the paradoxical concepts of beauty in his poetry. He did not use the rules of English writing such as capitalization for the first letters of words and also tries to confuse his readers by using sentences which are combined with each other. This is a method as one of the styles of the poet to defamiliarize the familiar concepts and also indicate differences between literary language and real language. All of the main principals of formalism in the poetry of Cummings show that his poetry is a sample of Formalism.

Conclusion

Formalist theorists have given great importance to aesthetic issues of a literary work, and by introducing inherent features of literature they are seeking for a clear definition of it which fits logically in the analysis of literary works. Such a reason keeps the dynamism of this certain kind of criticism as an acceptable approach.

Cummings's poem is among the best examples of this type of review, which by applying the due criteria, hundreds of artistic and elegant points regarding poems can be accessed.

Cummings's poem is supposed to represent the internal functionality for formalist criticism. His poetry, as seen is consistent with the new structure and at the same time all the elements are gathered around one theme. The poet has a coherent structure with exact notes so that it is almost impossible to take some components apart from others.

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