E E Cummings

Though frequently written e e cummings, the poet himself expressed a wish that the capitalisation (or not) of his name shouldn’t be an issue. I’ve decided to use conventional capitalisation simply because it helps the reader.

Because and although...

I’ve been reading and-re-reading Cummings’ selected poems (1923-1958) for years and years. I guess I can only really understand one in three but even the ones I can’t get still make me smile. Unlike many poets of his time, he isn’t trying to impress us with his knowledge or cleverness.

He can be tender and joyful (as in his many love poems); angry or sad (as in poems about politics or certain aspects of humanity) and, of course, quite often enjoys appearing quite off the wall.

I like Cummings  
because… who else could make ‘Etcetera’ the centre and focus of a poem?  
because… he may choose to rhyme ‘I’ll match youse’ with ‘statues’  
because he makes us ask, ‘Is this a poem?’  But if it isn’t a poem, what is it? – we sure don’t have a name for it.  
   
Of others, we will say, ‘This is a joke’ (like the one about Uncle Sol). Did Cummings start that genre of poetry?  It’s now well established (see McGough and Hegley, for example, but not Larkin or Hughes).  The shorter poems in this genre owe something to Japanese haiku, the last lines of which can often act as a gentle punch-line.

Others are extended metaphors. ‘She being brand new’ is a good example, though you may not want to delve too deeply into an analysis with your fourteen year olds…

The other things about Cummings’ writing we notice straight away are his layout, his punctuation and the ways he plays with word order. He also takes liberties with spelling when he feels like it.  For someone like me who spends a lot of time being picky about language, this is a breath of fresh air.

Ideas for students' writing

1. Try experimenting with word order as Cummings does.

Start with a comparison, e.g. your eyes are as blue as cornflowers in the July sun.

One move might be: Your blue as cornflowers in the july sun eyes…

And then: Your (as cornflowers in julysun) blue eyes

Or: Your (as julysuncornflower) blueeyes.

Try it yourself before inviting students into this strange and rather disorienting experience.  Some will love it and some may run back to the safety of a nice well- ordered sentence.

2. As we’ve started doing in the example above, try missing out some spaces between words to see the effect.

3. Spell some phrases az they sownd and dare to put a comma some,where you don’t usual)ly find it

4. Try dropping odd words into unexyouknowspected places and see what differ(inamanner)ent  
of spee  
king  
it makes

5. Look out for words you can use as nouns, e.g.‘Yes is a pleasant country’ and ‘Such a forever is love’s any now…’  Using forever as a noun makes it fresh. (Lennon and McCartney did the same thing with ‘I believe in yesterday.’)

‘True lovers in each happening of their hearts  
live longer than all which & every who’

This kind of thing is common in speech. We talk of ‘whys and wherefores’ and ‘ifs and buts’ and ‘might have beens’.

Which words might you suggest for making into nouns?  Can, cannot, like, would, better, worse, every, pretty, heavy…  will give them something to struggle with – and will reveal things about language and how we use it, twist it and take it for granted. (‘He gave his all / But not his every’)

6. Nouns can be verbs. Try nouns such as April, December, Saturday…  ‘Let’s Saturday night our hair’; ‘She decembered his advances’; ‘Her smiles were all july’.

(Without realising, I came close to plagiarising Cummings, who writes ‘but if a look should april me…’ )

7.  Stop unexpectedly.  Cummings writes:

love is a deeper season  
than reason;  
my sweet one  
(and april’s where we’re)

Starting points

You might like to give students some starters – just to see what happens.

A.  
So how feel you  
Little no how  
With a never no what  
With a never no how?

B.  
Saint Dad was in the (super)market  
when to his, (andour) inexpressible  
Sir Prize  
he won a neverthoughof going/but/if it’sfree  
trip to the HappyAnimalZoo

So,

C.  
in the school of hard nots  
was a me&u  
where (or when or with)

And finally

Now we are used to txts we can develop our own Cummings-nesses:

ee wld v luvd ur txt msgs  
Cos ur so clvr  
With words+signs

But he’d

                Putem  
NEware  
                                                           On th page cos  
                               Ee dint KR

     Remember, though:

         U still need to have something to say. E E Cummings had plenty to say.

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