

**SEX AND E. E. CUMMINGS:
HUMANIZING THE COMMON MAN**

A Thesis

by

Riley A. Vann

University Undergraduate Fellow, 1988-1989

Texas A&M University

Department of English

APPROVED:

Fellows Advisor: Harry P. Kroitor
Harry P. Kroitor

Honors Director: D. T. Knobel
Dale T. Knobel

Date: 6 April 1989

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I couldn't have done the thesis if it hadn't been for Kathy and all the library gang giving me support. The same goes for Grace and Brinck who allowed me closet space when I needed it. Anyone who put up with the mood swings of a writer deserves credit too (do you hear that Jeff and Jill?). Of course, the biggest thanks go to Hairy P. who kept me excited in the project, sometimes with a carrot and sometimes with a stick. May you always get as much as you give. It would serve you right.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
Acknowledgements	ii
Unit 1: Sex, Cummings, and the Individual:	
The State of the Question.....	1
Unit 2: Cummings and the Individual:	
Uncle Sol and the Common Man.....	10
Unit 3: Cummings and the Sexual:	
The Boys I Mean Are Not Refined.....	22
Unit 4: Sex, Cummings, and the Common Man:	
Conclusion.....	34
Notes	36
Works Consulted	37

I

**SEX, CUMMINGS, AND THE INDIVIDUAL:
THE STATE OF THE QUESTION**

We can never be born enough. We are human beings.

--e. e. cummings

Critically, Cummings has been misjudged. Popularly, Cummings has been misunderstood. And scholastically, Cummings has been slighted. But with the individual, Cummings has scored big. He has been ignored because he's considered a minor poet. He has been misunderstood because he requires energy to read. He has been slighted because his themes are considered unimportant. But he has scored because he speaks a direct, inner language that we understand. He is speaking to us, not as critics, not as part of the reading public, nor as scholars, but as human beings, people being born. Dissolving his title of minor poet will come as critics deal with his other difficulties (such as difficult syntax). Cummings will always take energy to read (why else read him?). His subjects, though, I think have been unjustly attacked and ridiculed.

The two most common themes are individualism (the New England

tradition of Emerson and Thoreau) and sexuality. Sexuality, as a theme, has been for the most part ignored or attacked, harshly in some cases. Yvor Winters, in a review of Cummings' *Collected Poems*, tells us how important Cummings' themes are: "Cummings subject matter is relatively simple: in his serious moods, he writes sentimentally about love, conceived primarily as copulation; in his satirical moments, he makes smutty jokes about it" (521). He continues his attack on Cummings, telling us that his "sentimental sensuality is constantly breaking down into a literary equivalent of obscene exhibitionism" (521).

Of course, not all attacks are that puritanical or vehement, but even Cummings' admirers dismiss the sexuality theme as inconsequential. Most articles written on Cummings ignore the sexual in his work. Even the authors writing about his love poetry, leave out the sexual element and discuss the love only in general terms. Those that do use the terms "sexual" or "sexuality" use them in an abstract manner. They discuss sex so generally that it is no more specific than the term "love." Richard Powers explicates Cummings' "I Will Be" as a sexual poem. His analysis of the sexual goes no further than this labelling, however. Guy Davenport examines the sexual in Cummings' poetry slightly more thoroughly. In his article, "Satyr and Transcendentalist," he talks about the poet's obsession with the sexual contrasted against the background of the New England transcendentalist. The article, however, doesn't show how the sexual works in Cummings' verse. Noam Flinker's article actually has the

word "sexuality" in the title. The article has little to do with the sexuality in Cummings' poetry, however. He instead shows Biblical influences in the poet's work. Reinbert Tabbert wrote about love in his essay, but love remained a very vague concept without a mention of the sexual.

Still, some critics have some useful and revealing things to say about the sexuality in Cummings' poetry. In an essay on Freud and Cummings, Milton Cohen mentions the sexual as a way to show that Cummings was interested in Freud's work. He describes Freud as a "sexual liberator" (593) and discusses "the importance Freud ascribed to sex in explaining both psychological maturation and the conflicts between unconscious wishes and conscious repression" (593). Cohen stops there, however. He points out that Cummings' "poetry increasingly championed the cause of the feeling and loving individual against all mechanical collectivities" (595), but he never discusses how Cummings uses the sexual or if it is used to fight for this cause. Cohen sees Freud's interest in the sexual as part of Freud's theory of the individual. He seems unwilling or unable, however, to make the leap and see Cummings' use of the sexual as also a part of a theory of the individual. He leaves undiscussed the function of sexuality in Cummings' verse.

Irene Fairley does discuss this function in her essay on Cummings' love poems. She sees, in "Cummings' Love Lyrics: Some Notes by a Female Linguist," the sexuality as a way of stereotyping women into two categories: the whore or the innocent girl. Fairley says that Woman is

found either "praised in the courtly love tradition for beauty and frailty" (210) or in "rather insensitive tributes to prostitutes" (211). From this she concludes that rather than individualizing people, he is stereotyping them. Cummings' poetry results in a "polarization of women into two sexual extremes" (212). While the two views--whore and girl-woman--seem to express different points of view, Fairley points out that "they both treat Woman as object" (213). She aligns the sexual in Cummings with sexism.

Fairley's examination of Cummings is flawed. Her choice of examples contains a bias which helps make her case, but if we look at a larger sampling her attack is myopic. First, by classifying his poems only as love poetry and prostitute poetry, she has eliminated practically all characters other than prostitutes and lovers. Moreover, her description of Cummings' typical lover as frail, beautiful and part of the courtly tradition is a false one I think. His typical lover is very sexual and that doesn't fit in with the courtly tradition in verse. In his poem, "the boys i mean are not refined" (427)¹ he describes "girls who bite and buck" and who "masturbate with dynamite." These women hardly sound frail. Undeniably, Cummings does speak of frailty but it is a frailty that he ascribes to people in general and not just women. He sees himself in "somewhere i have never travelled, gladly beyond" (366) just as fragile as any of his lovers (who, by the way are seldom specifically labelled female). And no one could be as vulnerable (and yet as strong) as "Uncle Sol" (239).

When Fairley attacks some of the poems as "insensitive tributes to

prostitutes," she is misreading these poems. Most of these poems are satires and attack not just the prostitutes, but also the men who prey upon them and the society that would allow this dehumanization. For example, in the sonnet, "twentyseven bums give a prostitute the once" (150), Cummings targets the male attitude as central to the satire. Other examples include "curtains part)" (232), "Jimmie's got a goil" (235), and "5/derbies-with-men-in-them-smoke Helmar" (200).

The only characters that Fairley examines are the lover and the prostitute. By limiting her sample that way, she fails to consider those numerous Cummings' characters which do not fit into either of her categories. In "annie died the other day" (794), a victim of incest is described in one of Cummings' most sensitive poems. In "the Cambridge ladies who live in furnished souls" (20) the women are characterized by their anti-sexuality. Annie and the Cambridge ladies don't fit into either of Fairley's categories and yet are important figures in Cummings' pantheon. It is a pantheon of individuals.

Those individuals are not there accidentally. In his six nonlectures at Harvard, Cummings describes his poetry as "the eternal fight of selfhood against mobism" (50). In fact, he goes so far as to equate this fight with "the immortal battle of beauty against ugliness" (50). An introduction to *New Poems* continues this line of thought. "The poems to come are for you and for me and are not for mostpeople You and I are human beings; mostpeople are snobs" (461). In his verse, we find "you and me" and

not "mostpeople."

Critics have picked up on this emphasis in his work. Barbara Watson, in "The Danger of Security: E. E. Cummings' Revolt Against the Future," sees a trend: "Throughout his work, Cummings has fought the intellectualizing, devitalizing and neutering of emotion, which were paving the way for mass societies based on a standard unit, not of one man, but one unit which is the sum-of-the-group divided by the total number" (520). Cummings, Watson says, tries "to explain how any human being becomes himself" (524). Cohen says of Cummings that "his poetry increasingly championed the feeling and loving individual against all mechanical collectivities" (595).

An interest in the individual of Cummings' verse takes up most of the critical space afforded him by his critics. This important criticism will serve as my starting point in unit 2 for developing the concept of the individual in Cummings' poetry.

While some of the critics talk of the sexual and the individual, none make any credible connection between the sexuality of Cummings' poetry and his interest in the individual. Milton Cohen comes closest when he describes Freud's use of the sexual as an individualizing process. I think Cummings does the same. In his poems, he creates many characters and he satirizes the ones that are a "peopleshaped toomany-ness" as are the speaker in "next to of course god america i" (268) and "Mr. Vinal" (230), and he particularizes the ones that are "human beings" as are Uncle Sol

and Buffalo Bill (30).

Many times, this particularizing, this rehumanization into the common man² is achieved by Cummings through the sexuality of his characters. Annie is perhaps the best example of this defining process. She has her place beside various lovers, prostitutes, adulterers. In today's news, Annie's pain is masked by the broad phrase "child abuse"; never is it referred to as incest. The people are not always or even often heroic, but they are individuals.

Individuals, but with a twist. If each person were a completely isolated individual, then such a basic thing as common language would be impossible. We would be unable to communicate because there would be no ideas or experiences in common that we could share, being isolated individuals.

But we aren't totally isolated individuals. Instead, we all share several aspects and experiences of life. Death is one--we are all going to die. One aspect of life everyone shares and to which Cummings constantly returns in his poetry is sex. Love, of course, but more importantly, the actual act of sexual intercourse centerstages much of his verse. Cummings' treatment of sex is more explicit, more real, than we usually find. This realism makes the characters performing the act less fictional creations and more real individuals. But what moves them from the level of the individual to that of the common man is the sex, the act which, whether for procreation or recreation, is so universal that we all share it.

"Common," then, doesn't imply merely the ordinary or mundane or prosaic. It implies that which we all share. Through the sexual, Cummings is creating not merely fictional characters, but representative individuals.

They are much like Samuel Johnson saw Shakespeare's characters. In "The Preface to Shakespeare," Johnson says that Shakespeare's power comes from "just representations of general nature" (561) and this allows the playwright to create characters that are "the genuine progeny of common humanity, such as the world will always supply, and observation will always find" (561). For Johnson, other writers create characters that are individuals; Shakespeare can create a character that is "commonly a species" (561).

Johnson's comments on Shakespeare's characters also apply to Cummings' characters. The common man of Cummings is the "genuine progeny of common humanity" of which Johnson talks. In the poet's verse, "dominic depaola" (680), who drives a "icecoalwood truck," "Hassan" (198), a coffeehouse owner who's dying, and the poet's father who has "moved through dooms of love" (520) is each a character who is species specific enough to be a common man.

The particularizing and rebroadening function of the sexuality is the added dimension that this thesis shall concentrate on, using support from his poems. In Unit 2, I will examine the attention critics have given to the individual in Cummings' verse. The unit will build upon this criticism to

show how Cummings creates not just individuals, but representative individuals. In a third unit, I will define the term "sexuality" and show that Cummings' treatment of sex is more explicit than usually found. Unit 3 will then scrutinize the connection between his common man and sexuality; it will also show that Cummings' characters are more than literary creations, but species specific examples of humanity. Unit 4 will sum up the conclusions which can be drawn from this examination of the common man and the sexuality in Cummings' verse

II

**CUMMINGS AND THE INDIVIDUAL:
UNCLE SOL AND THE COMMON MAN**

nobody loses all the time

Throughout his work--plays, poetry, essays, short stories, novels, and a ballet--Cummings places great importance upon the individual. Various characters in Cummings' poems celebrate the individual: "Olaf glad and big" (339), Buffalo Bill (60), and "my Uncle Sol" (239) are chief among these.

These three characters, however, do not have their individualism due to infallibility. As are many of the people in Cummings' poetry, they are individuals not because they succeed, not because they achieve, but because they continue to try even in defeat. This existential layer Cummings has added to the individual, leads to his common man. How he faces adversity makes him unique, an individual. What makes him common is that we share this adversity; it is common to us all. Many of Cummings' characters are, as Johnson points out about Shakespeare's characters, "the genuine progeny of common humanity" (561) and this is because they are "just representations of general nature" (561).

Olaf, Buffalo Bill, and Uncle Sol are all three common men. Olaf, "a conscientious object-or" to war, faces first torture and then murder. That is

no victory. Even knowing this, he responds first with "I will not kiss your fucking flag" and then with "there is some shit I will not eat." Defiance in the face of defeat. But this is a defeat--being forced to do something we don't agree with--we've all faced, just maybe in less significant ways. The strong language of the poem ("shit," "fuck," and "yellowsonofabitch") help particularize Olaf into an individual. His situation, though, is one with which we are all familiar. His situation rebroadens him into a representative individual.

Buffalo Bill, even when he realizes his own mortality, continues to "break onetwothreefourfive pigeonsjustlikethat." Defiance in the face of defeat. A defeat which is everyone's eventual end--death. Cummings' careful crafting of the poem--running words together and unusual line breakage--build upon Buffalo Bill's identity to create an unforgettable individual. But his situation, death, is so universal, that he is species specific enough to represent us all.

Uncle Sol is one of the most significant common men Cummings created. The man "was a born failure." Knowing this, he continues to try. He fails as a farmer, so he tries a chicken farm. He fails as a chicken farmer, so he tries as a skunk farmer. When he fails as a skunk farmer, he died and finds success as "a worm farm." Defiance in the face of defeat--an economic and then physical defeat. The visual rhetoric of the poem helps make Uncle Sol an individual. The last full stanza mimics Uncle Sol's descent into the grave and the last line resembles his interred body:

i remember we all cried like the Missouri
 when my Uncle Sol's coffin lurched because
 somebody pressed a button
 (and down went
 my Uncle
 Sol

and started a worm farm)

Cummings' visual rhetoric help particularize Uncle Sol into an individual, but his failures helps rebroaden him into a species specific representative of common human experiences.

The critics have fully discussed Cummings' interest in the individual, and its role in his work. Even Gertrude Stein, in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, defends Cummings to Hemingway as "the natural heir of the New England tradition with its aridity and its sterility, but also with its individuality" (268). Critics in more conventional formats have also discussed this facet of Cummings' poetry.

Van Wyck Brooks and Otto L. Bettmann, in their discussion on Cummings in *Our Literary Heritage*, describe his satire: "Behind his mockery lay a sense of the infinite worth of the individual, coerced and constrained and menaced by a standardized world" (233). Kenneth Burke has an opposing opinion in his review of *No Thanks*. Whereas Brooks and Bettmann see Cummings' interest in the individual as the saving grace of his satire, Burke thinks that "his satiric gift is crippled by his exaggerated individualism, which a jumble of integrity and pig-headedness has prompted him to intensify in opposition to the [then] current collectivist

emphases" (176).

Burke was right on one point at least. Cummings is opposed to the "current collectivist emphases." This is seen in *Eimi*. Troy Williams, in his review of the book, describes it in terms of "Mr. Cummings's fierce individualism" (413). He says that Cummings resists the "current" collectivism because "as a poet he is opposed to all dogma" (413). An anonymous reviewer of the book in *Time* describes *Eimi* as "a manifesto of the rights of man-as-artist, man-as-individual" (52).

But his interest in individualism is not limited to this book. Granville Hicks sees his interest on a very personal level. When critiquing a biography of Cummings, he describes the poet: "we see him ever as an individual, liking and respecting other individuals, but hating the masses as masses" (14). David Burns views Cummings' work in *i: six nonlectures* in much the same way. In his review, Burns says that the nonlectures should be of interest to "all who concern themselves with the place of the individual in a mass society" (306). Charles J. Rolo's review of the same work led to his observation that Cummings' poetry expresses "a credo of intense individualism" (95).

This individualism also appears in the poet's verse. John Finch, in a comparison between Cummings and Marianne Moore, explains this interest in historical terms: for social life in the 1930's, "opposing camps are being formed which may roughly be labelled as collectivistic and individualistic. The unit of thought in one of these camps is the social

group; that in the other is the man alone" (122). This choice was easy for them; Finch says, "both Marianne Moore and E. E. Cummings chose some time ago the lonely way of the individualist as their path into poetry" (122). But Cummings is not just interested in his own individuality. According to Finch, the poet is an "impassioned advocate for the man alone" (124); he's also concerned with the individuality of others.

Similar observations are made by other critics, such as Lloyd Frankenberg. In a section of his book *Pleasure Dome* devoted to Cummings, he says that "the poems of E. E. Cummings celebrate individuals. . . . To this central conception everything in his work is addressed" (159). Carrying this theme to an even further extreme, Frankenberg describes the poet's "hatred" for mass society (160). Finally, he gives individualism such an important role that he says that "Cummings' poetry is a series of definitions of the individual" (160).

Cummings would probably balk at the use of Frankenberg's term "definitions," but he would agree with the intense interest in the individual that its parent phrase implies. Cummings in his own writings points to this interest often. In *i: six nonlectures*, he sees his poetry as progressing further "the eternal fight of selfhood against mobism" (50). At the end of this work, Cummings says that he is an artist because he is "neither some soulless and heartless ultrapredatory infra-animal nor any un-understandingly knowing and believing and thinking automation, but a naturally and miraculously whole human being--a feelingly illimitable

individual" (111). He continues his definition of the individual in his "Introduction" to his miscalled *Collected Poems*. In it, he sets up an opposition between "you and I" and "mostpeople." He points out that "you and I are human beings; mostpeople are snobs." It ends up that "mostpeople" are "an undream of anaesthetized impersons." His poetry is not for mostpeople.

But Cummings' interest in the individual goes beyond just an interest in the individuality of the poet or even the reader; it is an interest which concerns itself even with the literary characters. In his "Introduction" to *Krazy Kat*, Cummings celebrates not creator George Herriman's individuality, nor the reader's individuality, but the individuality of the character Krazy Kat. He says, "love is illimitable; and a lot of people spend their limited lives trying to prevent anything illimitable from happening to them. Krazy, however, is not a lot of people, Krazy is herself. Krazy is illimitable--she loves" (12). It is the literary creation that Cummings celebrates as the individual. He gives us the grand picture of the comic strip world of "Krazy Kat": "The meteoric burlesk melodrama of democracy is a struggle between society (Offissa Pupp) and the individual (Ignatz Mouse) over an ideal (our heroine)--a struggle from which, again and again, emerges one stupendous fact: namely, that the ideal of democracy fulfills herself only if, and whenever, society fails to suppress the individual" (15-16). So, the audience and artist must not only be comprised of individuals, but the works themselves must celebrate

individuals. But individuals which have experiences which we all can share.

The question now becomes whether or not Cummings considers it important for his own poems to contain individuals. Lloyd Frankenberg's comments lead us to believe that he does. He says that Cummings' poems are "themselves extensions of personal speech" (182). This interest in dialect is a real one in Cummings' verse as can be seen in "when you rang at Dick Mid's Place" (73), "little ladies more" (120), "Jimmie's got a goil" (235), and "ygUDuh" (547). Whether in English or in French (as in "little ladies more"), or any language, Cummings often has the characters in his poems speaking, and he makes their language as realistic as possible. In fact, many of the poems are themselves nothing but half a dialogue or a monologue by a character Cummings has created.

Bernard Benstock interprets the poet's interest in the individual in a dramatic light. He sees Cummings as having "an interest in expressing himself as a dramatist, in creating characters and situations for the stage" (104). Even in his prose, the poet has shown an interest in the individual. *The Enormous Room*, Benstock points out, "is rather unique as an almost plotless prose work primarily devoted to fascinating character sketches" (104). But the dramatist in Cummings also comes out in his poetry. This interest is a motif which he carries through most of his career as a poet. Benstock says that "throughout the ten volumes of poetry published between 1923 and 1950 a keen sense of the dramatic has been apparent, particularly

in the characterizations he has created. These 'people' seem to provide a strong basis of reality in what is usually considered rather difficult poetry" (104). In fact, he thinks that these characters are the key to much of the poet's verse: "throughout Cummings' poems events are sketched with . . . austerity; only the characters are developed, for it is the people of Cummings' life-drama who are significant" (112). To this end, Cummings often just plucks a real person from life and inserts him or her into a poem, such as Warren Harding (336), Picasso (195), or Louis Untermeyer (551).

But, these are people made into characters; Cummings is even better known for making characters into people. When he creates characters, he is careful to people his world not as a utopia, but as a microcosm. By placing them in a microcosm, Cummings can create characters which are, in Johnson's words, "the genuine progeny of common humanity" (561). Benstock sees that Cummings' "range of characterization covers a wide gamut, for on his stage the poet allows many types of heroes and villains" (112). This range is necessary for Cummings to create characters that are "just representations of general nature" (561). Benstock goes on to describe these "heroes" as "a myriad collection of unknown people characterized by their individuality and refusal to be herded into a mass" (122). But more importantly, these characters are often placed in situations which are shared by us all and so fit the motif of the "common man."

The examples of the common man are plentiful in Cummings' poetry. In "plato told" (553), there is such an example, even though he remains unnamed throughout the poem:

plato told
 him:he couldn't
 believe it(jesus
 told him;he
 wouldn't believe
 it)lao
 tsze
 certainly told
 him,and general
 (yes
 mam)
 sherman;
 and even
 (believe it
 or
 not)you
 told him:i told
 him;we told him
 (he didn't believe it,no
 sir)it took
 a nipponized bit of
 the old sixth
 avenue
 el;in the top of his head:to tell
 him

Cummings develops "him" into an individual through the distorted line breaks and the repeated pattern of X "told him." What "we told him" and what he refuses to believe is that we are all mortal. It takes death

this child is being denied a childhood which is a common human experience. By intensifying our awareness of childhood, he is species specific enough to represent a common human experience.

But these portraits can be found throughout Cummings' poetry. In "mr youse needn't be so spry" (247), Cummings creates a character who talks of intellectual art critics:

mr youse needn't be so spry
concernin questions arty

each has his tastes but as for i
i likes a certain party

gimme the he-man's solid bliss
for youse ideas i'll match youse

a pretty girl who naked is
is worth a million statues

The speaker of this poem is made into an individual by Cummings' use of dialect ("youse" and "gimme"). He is made more concrete because we can here his voice. The character stands for Cummings' ideals of the individual because he doesn't try to force his views upon the art critics. He only asks for a chance to explain his point of view. He understands that this is merely his opinion and others have their own opinions ("each has his tastes but as for i"). He doesn't understand the intellectual concepts of the apparently educated "mr" to whom he is speaking. Even with his disadvantage of lack of schooling (as apparent from his dialect), he tries to interact with this intellectual; not just confront, but interact ("for youse

ideas i'll match youse"). Whether we can agree on aesthetics or not, art is a part of human existence. In developing a theory of art, however rudimentary ("a pretty girl who naked is/ is worth a million statues"), the persona of this poem is rebroadened enough to be representative of common aspects of humanity.

Cummings' verse is full of similar "commen men," ranging from the well known to the totally fictional: from Ernest Hemingway who becomes "lil Oinis" (409) and Dwight D. Eisenhower who becomes "generalissimo e" (636) to "Marj" (228) a prostitute who has a "rolypoly/ voice squatting on a mountain of gum" and "niggers" (426) who are "not Jes alive But/ So alive." The individual is an important part of his poetry. Understanding how Cummings transforms these unforgettable individuals into characters representative of common human qualities is an essential step in understanding his poetry.

III

CUMMINGS AND THE SEXUAL: THE BOYS I MEAN ARE NOT REFINED

When we grimly go to bed
with these legs she begins to heave and twine
about me, and to kiss my face and head.

Cummings' sexual poetry is different from other sexual poetry because it does away with the euphemisms for sex that most poets use. His sexual verse instead describes the act of sexual intercourse in very explicit terms. The frankness of his sexual language separates him from other poets who write of sexuality and separates his sexual characters from those of others. The frankness of the sexual language particularizes Cummings' characters, but the sexuality of the poem puts the characters into situations which are common to us all. The sexuality humanizes the particularized individuals into species specific representatives taking part in aspects of life which are familiar to us all.

One example of a poem which Cummings frames in explicit language is "the boys i mean are not refined" (427):

the boys i mean are not refined
they go with girls who buck and bite
they do not give a fuck for luck
they hump them thirteen times a night

one hangs a hat upon her tit
 one carves a cross in her behind
 they do not give a shit for wit
 the boys i mean are not refined

they come with girls who bite and buck
 who cannot read and cannot write
 who laugh like they would fall apart
 and masturbate with dynamite

the boys i mean are not refined
 they cannot chat of that and this
 they do not give a fart for art
 they kill like you would take a piss

they speak whatever's on their mind
 they do whatever's in their pants
 the boys i mean are not refined
 they shake the mountains when they dance

Cummings' use of such words as "fuck," "tit," and "hump" shows the explicitness he brings to sexual poetry. This poem is not, however, an example of Cummings' sexism as many have claimed. It is not a poem celebrating men's domination over women ("one carves a cross in her behind") nor women's inherent inferiority (they "cannot read and cannot write"). It is instead an indictment of the speaker persona and his hypocrisy. The persona shows disdain for the activities of "the boys" (they "are not refined"). The speaker, though, through the language Cummings gives him, shows not the coarseness of "the boys" but his own. The persona, trying to speak for the "refined," uses very unrefined language. In his attack, Cummings has the speaker shows exactly how "refined" he really is.

Cummings leaves "the boys" undeveloped and concentrates on making

the persona into an individual. He does this primarily through the sexual language he gives the speaker. Cummings creates a character of some complexity by having him condemn others for being unrefined ("the boys i mean are not refined"), and giving him language which shows us that he himself is unrefined ("they do not give a shit for wit"). The explicit sexual language in this poem particularizes the narrator into an individual. But the sexual, being a shared attribute among us all, helps move the narrator from the individual to the representative individual which is the common man.

Cummings' use of the sexual to project basic human qualities can be followed not only in his published poetry, but also in his published letters. In many, Cummings includes limericks which suggest an interest which should be studied. At the end of a letter to R. Stewart Mitchell, Cummings post scripted:

There was a young lady named Bundy
 who was fucked by a Belgium on Sunday
 on Tuesday a Uhlan
 to her twat put his tool in.
 (SIC TRANSIT GLORIA MUNDI) (61)

Cummings carefully creates rhymes to fit the Latin phrase. He manipulates the usual Latin word order, moving the verb from the end of the sentence where he knows it should be. This manipulation allows Cummings to achieve the rhyme Bundy/ Sunday/ MUNDI and so force his theme of sexuality upon the limerick. Cummings has taken such care in crafting this poem, reminiscent of Jonathan Swift's

scatological verse, that we should not just dismiss it as a playful dirty limerick. Especially, since the Latin admonition, which Cummings sets apart with parentheses and capital letters, is so serious: "thus passes the glory of the world." In the context of the poem though, a looser but perhaps more accurate translation would be: "the vital part of life is transitory."

Several other letters also have limericks. In a letter to Sir Solly Zuckerman, Cummings writes a limerick about auto-eroticism:

give our sadists carte blanche in atomics
 let our massochists flaunt economics
 --if I understand Freud
 noone need be annoyed
 while our narcissists stick to their comics (146)

This limerick, beyond the humor, mentions important themes. With the language, Cummings brings an acerbic edge to the humor as he speaks of pain-inflicting atomic warfare ("give our sadists carte blanche in atomics") and the self-inflicted pain of economics. It also hints at his important interest in Freud and his interest in mass culture ("massochists"). The reference to auto-eroticism ("our narcissists stick to their comics") and the sexual parallels he implies between it and the actions of atomic "sadists" and the economic "massochists" is a biting condemnation of these groups. The narcissism categorizes the "sadists" and "massochists" for the reader. The sexual aspects of life here provide a common standard by which Cummings wants us to judge the groups.

These limericks are more than just humorous ephemera; they are

thoughts of mortality but instead by a celebration of sexuality. Both methods, however, are forms of seduction and so by implication, Cummings' poem is a *carpe diem* poem. The other way in which this poem deviates from the tradition is in its explicitness. Instead of the euphemisms most *carpe diem* poets use, Cummings describes *soixante-neuf* oral sex ("between my/ amused legs") in some detail. Cummings is able to be more explicit since he places the poem in a morning-after setting. The narrator is describing in frank detail what has happened rather than what he hopes will happen. This explicit sexuality particularizes the speaker. Cummings' poem makes us see that sex is a part of life common to us all, that the persona's experiences are experiences which all humans share. Cummings wrote many *carpe diem* poems with the explicit-image motif. One such is "my love/ thy hair is one kingdom" (29):

thy legs are the trees of dreaming
whose fruit is the very eatage of forgetfulness

The poem "listen/ beloved/ i dreamed" (30) also is a *carpe diem* poem which celebrates sexuality:

listen
beloved i dreamed
.....
i picked you
as an apple is picked by the little peasants for their girls

Other examples include "it is funny, you will be dead some day." (153), "Thy fingers make early flowers of/ all things" (13), and "the poem her belly marched through me as" (135) (which describes the narrator's ejaculation).

But while Barry Marks admits that "Cummings celebrated the lusty and the uninhibited" (68), he thinks the poet is doing it for a more specific purpose: the sexual poems "reflect his study of the way in which sexual experience illuminates modern American life" (67). To this end, Cummings has written several urban poems--poems about life in the big city (New York City, Paris, Boston). Among these are the many prostitutes and brothels and sexual affairs. One of the best of the prostitute poems:

twentyseven bums give a prostitute the once
-over. fiftythree (and one would see if it could)

eyes say the breasts look very good:
firmlysquirmy with a slight jounce,

thirteen pants have a hunch

admit in threedimensional distress
these hips were made for Horizontal Business
(set on big legs nice to pinch

assiduously which justgraze
each other). As the lady lazily struts
(her
thickish flesh superior to the genuine daze
of unmarketable excitation,

whose careless movements carefully scatter

pink propaganda of annihilation (150)

Cummings' uses sexually explicit language to describe a prostitute. In describing her breasts and legs and the effect that she has on the bums (erections), he goes into great detail. Rather than use the euphemisms so rampant in most love poetry, he says directly that "these hips were made for Horizontal Business." The language of the poem, the frankness of the

descriptions of the woman's sexuality, make her an individual. His other "prostitute" poems use the same explicit motif as a defining characteristic of the character. One of these is "sh estiff/ ystrut sal" (445), a graphic description of a stripper doing her act. Another, "'kitty'. sixteen, 5'1", white, prostitute." (74), is a description of a prostitute who is a representative individual:

The babybreasted broad "kitty" twice eight

 whose least amazing smile is the most great
 common divisor of unequal souls.

And "in making Marjorie god hurried" (148), creates an unflattering image of a prostitute in which Cummings describes that "for two/ dollars i fill her hips with boys and girls."

Cummings doesn't use the explicit sexuality for the "prostitute" poems only. He uses explicit sexual language in his other poems as well. Another topic Cummings likes to discuss is adultery, or promiscuity in general. One example is "may i feel said he" (399):

may i feel said he
 (i'll squeal said she
 just once said he)
 it's fun said she

(may i touch said he
 how much said she
 a lot said he)
 why not said she

(let's go said he
 not too far said she
 what's too far said he
 where you are said she)

may i stay said he
 (which way said she
 like this said he
 if you kiss said she

may i move said he
 is it love said she)
 if you're willing said he
 (but you're killing said she

but it's life said he
 but your wife said she
 now said he)
 ow said she

(tiptop said he
 don't stop said she
 oh no said he)
 go slow said she

(cccome? said he
 ummm said she)
 you're divine!said he
 (you are Mine said she)

This poem cannot be dismissed as mere coarse humor. Cummings has taken such care with the crafting of the poem that a reader cannot dismiss this poem. The humor is undeniably there. The sing-song rhythm, the repetitive rhyme, and the sexual tension between the two lovers help create the comic tone of the piece. But this is only a device which allows the impact of the last line more power. Cummings also gives the last line more impact by giving it the only uppercase letter of the entire poem.

Cummings also takes care with his use of the parentheses. He does not randomly disperse them throughout the poem. The parentheses move,

from enclosing part of one stanza and increase until they bridge from stanza to stanza in the middle of the poem. They then shorten until they fit again into one stanza. Each parenthetical set contains both "he" and "she" talking except the last which encloses the last line. This is another way in which the last line is set apart.

The care with which Cummings has crafted this poem shows that the humor of the poem is a means to an end and not the end in itself. The humor and the careful craft of the verse create the two individuals of the poem. Another reason that the characters become distinct individuals is that the entire poem is dialogue. We actually hear the voices of the people. They don't have names but Cummings' manipulation of the sexual language creates individuals. But these individuals are engaging in an extramarital affair ("but your wife said she") and the sexuality this entails is an aspect of existence which we all understand. The dialogue and craftsmanship of the poetry allow Cummings to create two individuals, but the sexuality of the situation, presented in such explicit terms ("cccome"), allows him to create two common human beings. They can be representative individuals when they are put into situations which represent shared aspects of human experience.

But not all abusive sexual relationships are between consenting adults; many times one person intentionally takes gratification at the expense of the other person. One example of this is rape. One viciously gratifies himself by physically forcing the other person to have sexual intercourse.

Another example of this is incest. In "annie died the other day" (794), Cummings addresses this issue:

annie died the other day
 never was there such a lay--
 whom,among her dollies,dad
 first("don't tell your mother")had;
 making annie slightly mad
 but very wonderful in bed
 --saints and satyrs,go your way
 youths and maidens:let us pray

This is a portrait of a girl who is the victim of incest ("among,her dollies,dad/ first . . . had"). Annie is made an individual to us by the careful crafting of the poem with regular meter and structured rhyme of A ABBBBA A. Cummings also helps Annie become an individual with the frank sexual language he describes incest with. Instead of using the euphemisms which we usually find in sexual poetry, Cummings describes the act of incest with explicit detail and its effect upon Annie. But Annie is more to us than an individual. Through her situation, incest, she represents us all by portraying a situation which affects us all, a situation with which we are all familiar. Incest is a problem which touches us all even though some might argue that they aren't victims of incest and they don't know anybody who is. It is a crime which is very seldom reported and, when it is, it is often masked under the term of "child abuse." Incest is more wide spread than we would like to believe³. As a victim of a crime which we try to ignore, she is representative in that she is in a situation

which is common to us all.

Cummings' crafting of the poem and his graphic language describing the sexual act of incest particularize Annie into an individual. Her situation, however, and the sexuality of her situation rebroaden her and make her a representative individual because she is experiencing an aspect of life with which we are all familiar.

The sexual in much of Cummings' poetry has this rebroadening effect upon the individuals in the sexual verse. It is a way for Cummings to take a particularized individual, a portrait, and through the character's sexualized situation, make him representative of common, shared human qualities. This use of the sexual allows Cummings' literary creations to transcend a poem and become species specific examples of humanity.

IV

SEX, CUMMINGS, AND THE COMMON MAN:

CONCLUSION

(so easily one in another hides;
yet man can, being all, escape from none)

There are two motifs in Cummings' poetry on which critics have especially remarked: sexuality and individuality. They have seen Cummings as a *carpe diem* poet (Marks 68) and "a kind of metropolitan Thoreau" (Fraser [265]). I have shown that both of these views are somewhat limited.

Cummings' love poetry fits into the *carpe diem* tradition only by implication. Such Cummings poems as "granted the all/ saving our young kiss only" (373) and "god gloats upon Her stunning flesh. Upon" (77) in which Cummings describes "the shovings and lovings of Her tongue" show how his verse differs from traditional *carpe diem* poetry (such as Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress"): Cummings' poetry does not rely upon an awareness of our mortality as a lure. Cummings instead uses a celebration of the sexual as a way to seduce his love.

Another way in which Cummings' verse differs from traditional love poetry is in its explicit sexual language. He avoids the euphemisms which

we find so often in love poetry and instead uses frank language to describe sexuality.

As the critical views on sexuality in Cummings' poetry are incomplete, so are the critical views on the individuals we find there. Cummings creates individuals by carefully crafting the poems. Through dialect, tortured syntax, and singular line breaks Cummings' characters become individuals.

But he places these individuals in situations which we share. Such universal aspects of life as death and art make the individuals species specific enough to be representative of common human qualities. Sex is one shared aspect of life to which Cummings returns again and again in order to rebroaden and rehumanize his individuals into what Samuel Johnson calls "the genuine progeny of common humanity" (561). As "just representations of general nature" (561), these representative individuals create a "common man" motif which runs throughout Cummings' verse.

NOTES

¹ All of the poems referred to in this thesis are from E. E. Cummings' *Complete Poems 1913-1962* (New York: Harcourt, 1968). Page numbers for specific poems are included parenthetically in the text. Any poems not from *Complete Poems* are referenced within the text.

² The use of the term "common man" in no way reflects a sexism inherent in Cummings' verse. Many characters that fit under this category are, in fact, female: "annie" (794), "Marj" (228), or the unnamed prostitute in "raise the shade" (109). The term is reluctantly used as an alternative to the more accurate but also more cumbersome term, "common person."

³ In *The Best Kept Secret: Sexual Abuse of Children* (Englewood Cliff, NJ: Prentice, 1980), Florence Rush reports that "incest effects over 10 percent of all American families" (3). Incest is hardly an uncommon or inconsequential problem.

WORKS CONSULTED

- Anon. "Manifesto." *Time* 17 April 1933: 51-52.
- Benstock, Bernard. "All the World a Stage: The Elements of Drama in the Poetry of E. E. Cummings." *Studies in American Literature*. Ed. Waldo McNeir and Leo B. Levy. Humanities Series 8. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1960. 104-131.
- Brooks, Van Wyck and Otto L. Bettmann. *Our Literary Heritage: A Pictorial History of the Writer in America*. New York: Dutton, 1956.
- Burke, Kenneth. Review of *No Thanks*. *The Southern Review* 1.1 (1935): 176-77.
- Burns, David. "First Person Singular." *The Yale Review* 43 (1953): 306-08.
- Cohen, Milton A. "Cummings and Freud." *American Literature*. 55 (1983): 591-610.
- Cummings, E. E. Introduction. *Krazy Kat*. By George Herriman. Ed. Joseph Green and Rex Chessman. New York: Grosset, 1969. 10-16.
- Cummings, E. E. *Selected Letters of E. E. Cummings*. Ed. F. W. Dupe and George Stade. New York: Harcourt, 1969.
- Davenport, Guy. "Satyr and Transcendentalist." *Parnassus*. 8.2 (1980): 42-50.
- Dumas, Bethany K. *E. E. Cummings: A Remembrance of Miracles*. New York: Barnes, 1974.
- Fairley, Irene R. "Cummings' Love Lyrics: Some Notes by a Female Linguist." *Journal of Modern Literature*. 7.1-2 (1979): 205-18.
- Finch, John. "Two Spokesmen for the Man Alone." *Sewanee Review* 44.1 (1936): 122-25.
- Flinker, Noam. "Biblical Sexuality as Literary Convention: The Song of Songs in E. E. Cummings' 'Orientale.'" *Papers on Language and Literature*. 16 (1980): 184-200.

- Frankenberg, Lloyd. *Pleasure Dome: On Reading Modern Poetry*. Boston: Houghton; Cambridge: Riverside, 1949.
- Fraser, G. S. "The Aesthete and the Sensationalist." *Partisan Review*. 22.2 (1955): [265]-272.
- Friedman, Norman. *e. e. cummings: The Growth of a Writer*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1964.
- Hicks, Granville. "The Intransigent E. E. Cummings." *Saturday Review* 22 Nov. 1958: 14.
- Johnson, Samuel. "The Preface to Shakespeare." *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature: The Restoration and the Eighteenth Century*. Ed. Martin Price. New York: Oxford UP, 1973. 561-568.
- Kidder, Rushworth M. *E. E. Cummings: An Introduction to the Poetry*. Columbia Introductions to Twentieth-Century American Poetry 9. Gen. ed. John Unterecker. New York: Columbia UP, 1979.
- Marks, Barry A. *E. E. Cummings*. Twayne's United States Author Series 46. New York: Twayne, 1964.
- Nardi, Marcia. "Unaccustomed Realism." *New York Herald-Tribune Books*. 14 June 1925: 4.
- Powers, Richard Gid. "Cummings' 'I Will Be.'" *The Explicator*. 28.6 (February), Item 54.
- Rolo, Charles J. Review of *i: six nonlectures*. *The Atlantic* 192 (1953): 95.
- Stein, Gertrude. *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. New York: Harcourt, 1933.
- Tabbert, Reinbert. "A Project on Love Poetry." *Anglistik and Englischunterricht*. 26 (1985): 25-43.
- Troy, William. "Cummings's Non-land of Un-." *The Nation* 136 (1933): 413.
- Watson, Barbara. "The Danger of Security: E. E. Cummings' Revolt Against the Future." *The Kenyon Review*. 18 (1956): 519-37.

Wegner, Robert E. *The Poetry and Prose of E. E. Cummings*. New York: Harcourt, 1965.

Winters, Yvor. Review of *Collected Poems*. *American Literature*. 10 (1939): 520-22.