

E. E. CUMMINGS AND THE MODERN MAN: ON HOW THE CONCEPT OF MASCULINITY EVOLVES IN HIS POETRY*

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Very little has been written about masculinity in the writings of E. E. Cummings, a poet whose work is heavily based on his concept of American manhood and the masculine. The purpose of this article is to share a few thoughts on the models of masculinity adopted by Cummings throughout his life while highlighting how he anticipates models that appeared in the last years of the twentieth and the beginning of the twentieth-first centuries. In order to demonstrate this, I will explore some of his poems from the perspective of gender. In them we can appreciate how, through his analysis of people and events, Cummings' progressive ideas favour the elimination of old-fashioned masculine models, celebrating feelings and a connection with nature.

Keywords: *Masculinity, conventional male roles, dynamic balance, nature, creative man.*

Se ha escrito muy poco sobre masculinidad en las obras de E. E. Cummings, un poeta cuya trayectoria ha estado basada en su concepto del hombre americano y lo masculino. La finalidad de este artículo es exponer unas ideas básicas sobre los diferentes modelos de masculinidad que Cummings adoptó durante su vida y resaltar como anticipa modelos de masculinidad que aparecieron en los últimos años del siglo veinte y principios del siglo veintiuno. Para demostrarlo, analizaré algunos de sus poemas desde una perspectiva de género. En ellos podemos apreciar como a través de personas y hechos, Cummings favorece la eliminación de anticuados modelos masculinos celebrando los sentimientos y la conexión con la naturaleza.

Palabras clave: *Masculinidad, papeles masculinos convencionales, equilibrio dinámico, naturaleza, hombre creativo.*

Gender Studies are concerned with the representation, rights and status of women and men. Under the umbrella of “gender” we can place two subfields: Feminism and Masculinity Studies. “Gender” typically refers to the social process of dividing up people and social practices along the lines of sexed identities. As Christine Beasley notes, “The gendering of social practices may be found, for example, in contemporary Western societies, in a strong association between men and public life and women and domestic life, even though men and women occupy both spaces” (2005: 11).¹

As many feminist writers have pointed out, Western thinking has been dominated by an unexamined focus on men. Masculinity Studies began in earnest in the 1970s with the rise of “Men’s Liberation”. As Robert Connell notes in *Resources for Feminist Research* (2001), only since the mid-1980s has there been an upsurge of interest in this subfield. Moreover, the first Australian National Men’s Health Conference was not held until August 1995, twenty years after the Australian Women’s movement launched its first national forum on Women’s Health. Masculinity issues are also only just beginning to find a place in international forums. For instance, in 1997 UNESCO sponsored a conference on masculinity, violence and peacemaking.

Masculinity Studies is a form of Gender Studies scholarship which focuses upon critical studies of masculinity. Most Masculinity Studies texts tend to describe gender as a hierarchical relationship that involves men’s dominance of both women and other men.² The main goal of Masculinity Studies, which became popular in the 1980s, is to demonstrate that cultural conventions of gender have conditioned both women’s and men’s behaviour. This notion of gender symmetry enabled a view of both men and women as equally oppressed by sexist society, although Masculinity Studies appear to be rather more positive towards the socially privileged category of masculinity than towards thinking along the lines of Feminism and Sexuality. As the social roles of women have changed, so have the roles of men and this is reflected in literature. A gender-based class of literary criticism now demands a

further exploration of masculinity not only in literature; although they are still emerging, in the last years of the twentieth century new specialized publications for men came out and some critics revitalized Masculinity Studies.

Perhaps because of the assumption that “Poetry is by no means gendered male” (Goodman 1996: 47), very little has been written about masculinity in the writings of E. E. Cummings, a poet whose work is heavily based on American manhood and the masculine as well as issues of changing male roles. He presents conventional male roles as obsolete and, throughout his works, he comes to a relatively balanced view of the male and female worlds of experience. The purpose of this paper is to share a few thoughts on Cummings’ constructs of masculinity and on how, in the course of his life, these change into those of a man concerned with nature and female sensibilities. In order to demonstrate how Cummings anticipates models of masculinity, I will analyse some of his poems from the perspective of gender, that is, with a concern for gender issues that affects the reading and writing of the texts.

In a 1955 letter to Norman Friedman, Cummings writes that the masculine is superficial and the feminine is profound. The poet explains that this is so, because the male lover merely thinks of flowers, while the female lover feels them. Cummings died in 1962 but through his poems we can appreciate how he has remained ahead of his time, since he persuasively provokes us to reconsider feminine values, those supposedly less important things. In the 1990s Barbara Ehrenreich points out that in much of our western culture masculinity has meant freedom, motion, and adventure, while women stood for entrapment, stasis, and “civilization” (1995: 268). As time went by, Cummings increasingly expressed a necessary balance between the male and the female by eliminating drastic distinctions between men’s and women’s issues.

In the twentieth-century men became progressively more unsure of their identities. Willis Whiteshell notes that many of these feelings of inadequacy and discontent can be attributed to the lack of male role models and mentors in twentieth-century industrial society (2003: 151). All began with the Industrial Revolution which, as Robert Bly observes, damaged the father-son bond as, in its need for office

and factory workers, industrialization pulled fathers away from their sons and, moreover, placed the sons in schools where teachers were mostly women (1990: 19). Critics such as Peter Murphy (1994) argue that any traditional masculine roles are destructive. In the same vein, Neil Lyndon (1993) says that the father is effectively redundant and talks of his elimination. David Blenkenhorn (1995) coins the term “fatherless America” to refer to what he perceives as a nation of children growing up bereft of fathers around the home. However, Anne Phillips (1999) points to the negative psychological impact of absentee fathers and refers to the period of economic growth and material well-being after the First and Second World Wars that provoked fathers to sacrifice their sons to an image-based, shallow and commercial world. Despite their wartime heroics, fathers often seemed spectral and strangely disconnected from the family body. Cummings rejects the commercial masculinity that invaded America in the 1950s, those male models with an excessive desire to earn and spend money. His hatred of businessmen with their power-look suits, ties and accessories is reflected in “yes but even” (*95 Poems*, 1958), a poem that disparages the image of those executives who waste their time discussing “parity” in a Paris hotel ignoring “God’s sunlight” that illuminates the city. No doubt, a father or a father-figure plays an essential role in combating feelings of isolation in young men and helps them to be confident in their manhood. As Susan Faludi writes, “[The father is] a human bridge connecting the boy to an adult life of public engagement and responsibility” (1999: 302). In fact, the new masculinists in the United States argue that boys “are more susceptible to adolescent criminality without a paternal role model to emulate” (Beynon 2002: 129).

The Jungian therapist James Hollis writes in his book *Under Saturn’s Shadow: the Wounding and Healing of Men* that Cummings is one of the few sons of his era who is able to bless his father, Reverend Edward Cummings (1994: 99), a Harvard professor of Sociology and a Unitarian minister in Boston who acted as the head of one of those happy, patriarchal families typical of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Nevertheless, the recognition of the importance of his father in his life took him a long time. Most of his life Cummings was opposed to the tacit set of values that his father represented. Whiteshell notes that his refusal to follow the normal patriarchal structure in the use of capital letters is one of the many reflections of

“his own self-image and feelings about his father and traditional male roles” (2003: 150). In his biography of Cummings, Richard Kennedy describes Cummings’ father as “a sensitive intellectual, a striver, a leader, a fighter” who was “informal and kindly but forcefully masculine in manner” (1980: 9). A sensitive intellectual, Reverend Cummings possessed a physically imposing figure with an authoritative voice. Cummings did not inherit his father’s physical build and showed few tendencies towards aggression. Because of this basic difference in temperament, there was more conflict than usual when the boy reached his teens. Cummings felt he was different from his father and that “he needed to protect that difference” (Friedman 1984: 262) because it interfered with his individuality and growth as an artist. So he rebelled against his father’s rigid morals as he struggled to find his own independent identity. In fact, his early poetry follows a moralizing tradition, while his later teenage work echoes the themes of more modern writers such as Ezra Pound, thus defying his Unitarian upbringing. Nonetheless, Reverend Cummings proved an effective father and role model for Cummings as a boy being, as a minister, in contact with his children more than most fathers were. In a way, he was also a progressive intellectual, as he wrote and published articles on labour issues and social problems of the industrial revolution (a fashionable topic of masculinity today). He provided an example of power and success in the way he managed his household, his religious congregation and especially when, as the Secretary of the World Peace Foundation, he released Cummings from a French concentration camp during WWI. As an orator he loved to use wordplay in his sermons to such an extent that their titles seem similar to the themes of some of Cummings’ poems. When Cummings was a teenager, he was offended by his father’s continued use of the nickname “Chub” from cherub, making him develop a view of himself as smaller and less proud than his father, which contributed, as Kennedy puts it, to the choice of lower case “i” as his poetic identity (1980: 110). It is also said that Cummings took the small “i” from Sam Ward, the barely literate Yankee handy man at Joy Farm, the poet’s summer residence in New Hampshire, who never capitalized it in his letters.³ “He stood like a father to me”, Cummings says when he died in 1942 (Kennedy 1994: 116). In a twelve-stanza poem entitled “rain or hail” (*IxI*, 1944) he reveals how much of a model the old man had been for his own way of looking at life:

rain or hail
 sam done
 the best he kin
 till they digged his hole

:sam was a man

stout as a bridge
 rugged as a bear
 slickerrn a weasel
 how be you

(sun or snow)

gone into what
 like all them kings
 you read about
 and on him sings

In *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the Modern Man* (1999) Faludi explains that old style masculinity was rooted in the politics and community of a social system. Cummings attended Harvard University from 1911 to 1916 living in a largely male society in which his primary and deepest relationships were with other young men. This movement away from family life helped him find his own voice as a writer. His friends were his confidantes, companions and even his inspiration. There he met graduate assistant Dory Miller, who became one of his mentors and “would act as a father-surrogate during the next dozen years” (Kennedy 1980: 54). In Christopher Sawyer-Lauçanno’s words, he was an ideal older brother eager to teach his sibling (2004: 48). Miller changed his life by introducing him to Keats’ poetry. His lifelong friend Sibley Watson –Cummings’ future sponsor– made him acquainted with the French Symbolists and became “a substitute for his family during his middle and later years” (Friedman 1984: 263). Foster Damon –his teacher– showed Cummings the poetry of Ezra Pound. With this new model of masculinity –that of the creative man who partially abandons traditional masculine values– he moved away from his father and tried to find his own poetic place in Modernism, a literary movement often characterized by the exclusion of women from its project. In my view,

Cummings' father—his childhood idol— and the pre-war period, a world too violent and destructive for Cummings to live in.⁵

Cummings' constructs of masculinity continued to evolve throughout his writing career. In “the boys I mean are not refined” (*No Thanks*, 1935) he parodies male behaviour in pre-war times by harshly criticizing the brutal and idiotic camaraderie of men who cannot face failure or humiliation in any shape or form. In this poem Cummings also seems to combat the assumption that “boys don't cry” and denigrates the figure of the dangerous, antisocial young men operating outside civilized society and their macho values:

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

Therefore, he is aware of the fact that these young men, presumably of a lower class, are the most vulnerable members of a society which uses them as scapegoats. In the final stanza Cummings clearly reveals a certain amount of admiration for the boys' behaviour, for the assumption that “violence is fundamental to ‘being a real man’” (Beynon 2002: 133) as well as for the way in which this young, macho masculinity runs wild:

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

“[T]he boys i mean are not refined” predicts the idea of the New American Macho, a popular general trend in post-war American men's writing particularly visible in the “School of Virility” of Ernest Hemingway and Norman Mailer, both of whom perpetuated the glorification of an anachronistic show of traditional manliness. Berthold Schoene-Harwood comments that the figure of the New American Macho is also reflected in post-war Britain's Angry Young Men, who appear unable to accommodate and adjust to historical change (2000: 85-86).

Although the most dramatic shift in Cummings' concept of masculinity occurs in *Xaipe* (1950), he had revealed earlier signs of this change in "my father moved through dooms of love" (*50 Poems*, 1940). The poem eclipses his brief complimentary poem to his overindulgent mother, Rebecca, entitled "if there are any heavens my mother will (all by herself) have" (*Viva*, 1931). "[M]y father moved" proves that Cummings did not actually succeed in freeing himself from Reverend Cummings' influence. In the poem Cummings shows great respect, love and admiration for his father, humbling himself as a "forgetful" son who would "squirm" under his father's stare. Its first stanzas represent "active reconciliation with his father" (Terblanche 2007: 42) and glorify the links to nature which his father instilled in him together with "a story of creation that parallels Genesis while overturning *The Waste Land*" (Kidder 1979: 149). Assembling a number of words echoing the first six lines of Eliot's poem ("forgetful", "stir", "april", "roots", "unburied" and "sleeping"), Cummings reverses the thrust of Eliot's despair and restores April to its more traditional place:

my father moves 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.

this motionless forgetful where
turned at his glance to shining here;
that if(so timid air is firm)
under his eyes would stir and squirm

newly as from unburied which
floats the first who,his april touch
drove sleeping selves to swarm their fates
woke dreamers to their ghostly roots

According to Etienne Terblanche, the poem portrays a more positive construct of masculinity— a dynamic balance of superficial and profound aspects, or traditionally male and female qualities, that makes the father's love a complete and active one (2007: 43):

and nothing quite so least as truth
–i say though hate were why men brea the–
because my father lived his soul
love is the whole and more than all

Cummings' early pacifism, exemplified by his decision to enlist in World War I as an ambulance driver rather than a soldier, prefigured, as Willis Whiteshell states, "some attitudes of American men of the sixties" (2003: 154). When Cummings toured several prominent American universities in the late fifties reading his later poems, he promoted a construction of masculinity in tune with nature, his feminine side, and pacifism. Like the Beatnicks, he called for a revolution in consciousness. As we can see in *No Thanks* and after, the philosophy of his poetry develops gradually through a spiritual experience of nature. "[C]onceive a man, should he have everything" (*No Thanks*, 1935) defines the ideal man, what he is not and what he is. He is attuned to nature's stability ("mountains for friends") and mutability ("bedfellows for moons"). This holistic acceptance allows the ideal man an insight into "nature's chronic cycle that orders and unites time" (Rotella 1984: 289) letting him enter a transcendental world of timelessness and life renewed. In "this man's heart" (*95 Poems*, 1958) Cummings identifies with a snowflake and its unpredictability. Composed a decade earlier, the writer prepares a male model for the late 1960s, that of the pantheistic man who finds peace through nature.

Natural surroundings are believed to be essential for men to find peace and serenity, allowing for self-examination. Cummings believes in the ability of man to change and to return to the peace of pre-industrial farm life through a spiritual link to nature. In *1x1* he writes "old mr ly" dedicated to his Joy Farm neighbour Mr Lyman, a healthy country man who exemplifies an extremely good-hearted philosophy that seems to take nature as the great teacher of morals. But it is "i thank you God for most this amazing/day" (*Xaipe*, 1950) that represents a hymn to God as well as a new poetic voice which foreshadows the 1990s and the beginning of the twenty-first century with their ecologized white man so popular in eco-action films such as Steven Seagal's *On Deadly Ground* (1994) or *Fire Down Below* (1997) or former US Vice-president Al Gore's environmental discourse. With its

outdoor setting, resonant of healthy, open air activity, this poem shows a nostalgia for the appeal of a lost gentlemanly masculinity which is all too willing to express emotions:

i thank You God for most this amazing
day:for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true drem of sky;and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday;this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings:and of the gay
great happening illimitable earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any—lifted from the no
of all nothing—human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

Cummings' third wife Marion Morehouse, a beautiful, energetic creative model and photographer, so different from his first and second wives, helped him to recover his self-confidence after his two previous divorces. His respect for her Catholic faith encouraged him to look back to his father and his own childhood faith, Unitarianism. Mysterious, patient, but also commanding and domineering, she inspired Cummings to eliminate the dysfunctional men of such poems as "between the breasts" (*Tulips and Chimneys*) and to portray men favouring new gender relationships by approximating the male individual to the earth and to the whole universe of the feminine. In the poem "but also dying" published in his posthumous book *73 Poems* in 1963, Cummings explores a new construct of masculinity, that of a couple who find a sense of peace and equality and experience life and emotions together:

but also dying

(as well as
to cry and sing,
my love
and wonder)is something

you have and i
've been
doing as long as to
(yes)forget

Gender distinctions are not as drastic as in earlier poems such as “since feeling is first” or “some ask praise of their fellows” (*is* 5, 1926) in which women are just assertive presences whose beauty is highlighted by an infatuated lover. Now he concentrates on how men shape and care for loving and meaningful relationships: “you” and “i” become “we” in the last line.

Whiteshell affirms that “how men define themselves depends almost entirely on their roles” (2003: 166). Through his work, Cummings made great achievements in changing and to modernizing constructs of masculinity. In his poetry he shows his own psychological development from his childhood and teen years marked by his father’s dominance, through the rejection of masculine commercialism and brutality to a more modern connection with the natural world and the universe of the feminine. By bravely attacking conventional male roles as obsolete and criticizing the tough guys of his early poems, he evolves a positive construction of masculinity which forms and nurtures loving and meaningful relationships between men and women through a spiritual connection with nature. In the course of his life Cummings demolishes the obsolete structure that does not allow men and women to grow into a mutually supportive community. No doubt, he was an indispensable ally in the creation of a new order. By liberating his own masculinity, Cummings was able to find peace and confidence in himself.

NOTES:

- ¹ Berthold Schoene-Harwood asserts that gender is marked by indeterminacy. Neither masculinity nor femininity exists naturally; both are created *ex nihilo* to meet and ironically to necessitate certain systemic requirements in connection with the societal distribution and organization of power (2000:10).
- ² In Harry Brod's *The Making of Masculinities: The New Men's Studies* (1987) men are reinstated at the centre of the picture seeing men and women as separate identity groupings in a bipolar hierarchy.
- ³ Cummings often signed his name with capitals in letters and contracts.
- ⁴ Publications such as *MHM*, *GQ* and *FHM* encourage their male readers to mock traditional masculinity and propose more egalitarian and compassionate images of men in Western discourses.
- ⁵ As Charles Norman notes, "[in 1935] when Cummings went to Bennington College in Vermont to give a reading, the entire audience of girls rose as he mounted the platform and chanted 'Buffalo Bill's/defunct' in unison" (1964: 6).

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