

## “ON HOW E. E. CUMMINGS USES OVERPROTECTION AND VICTIMIZATION STRATEGIES TO SUBVERT PATRIARCHAL TRADITIONS”

M. Teresa González Mínguez  
(Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia)

**Resumen:** Los escritores modernistas adoptaron ciertas estrategias como asociar a las mujeres con prototipos terroríficos, difamándolas en ensayos, memorias y poemas e ignorando sus logros en textos críticos. En medio de la corriente general de autores modernistas, el americano E. E. Cummings escribió una gran variedad de poemas en los cuales venera a su amada. Sin embargo, esta veneración puede ser tan sexista como las palabras más agresivas. Usando el humor y la sátira, Cummings se presenta a sí mismo como protector, consejero, víctima, y reformador de una anticuada cultura patriarcal. El objetivo de este artículo es probar cómo enfatizando la súper-protección y la victimización, Cummings trastoca los roles masculinos y femeninos, critica a los hombres que tratan a las mujeres con desprecio y, a veces, reconoce sus propios prejuicios frente a un tipo particular de mujer. Para demostrarlo, analizaré algunos poemas escritos a lo largo de su carrera tales como “my love is building a building” y “supposing i dreamed this”. Artículos en *Spring. The Journal of the E. E. Cummings Society*, las biografías sobre Cummings de Richard Kennedy y Christopher Sawyer-Lauçanno y otras publicaciones como *Constructing Masculinity* de Maurice Berger o *Debating Masculinity* de Josép Armengol y Ángels Carabí ayudarán a constatar cómo las técnicas revolucionarias de Cummings contribuyen a socavar las bases de la tradición patriarcal y abrir nuevas direcciones en los papeles de hombres y mujeres.

**Palabras clave:** Victimización, súper-protección, papeles de hombres y mujeres, tradiciones patriarcales, nuevos enfoques.

**Abstract:** Modernist writers adopted strategies such as associating women with dreadful prototypes; slandering them in essays, memoirs and poems and ignoring their achievements in critical texts. Among the general flux of modernist authors, the American E. E. Cummings wrote a large variety of poems in which he venerates his lady. However, this veneration can be as chauvinist as the most aggressive words against women. By using humour and satire, Cummings presents himself as a protector, an adviser, a victim and the reformer of an old-fashioned patriarchal culture.

The purpose of this article is to prove how, by emphasizing overprotection and victimization, Cummings subverts male and female roles, criticizes those men who treat women with disdain and, at times, recognizes his own prejudices against a particular kind of women. In order to demonstrate it, I will analyse some poems written throughout his career such as “my love is building a building” or “supposing i dreamed this).” Various articles in *Spring. The Journal of the E. E. Cummings Society*, Richard Kennedy’s and Christopher Sawyer-Lauçanno’s biographies of Cummings as well as other publications such as Maurice Berger’s *Constructing Mas-*

*culinity* or J sep Armengol and  ngels Carab s *Debating Masculinity* will be used to support how Cummings' revolutionary techniques contribute to subvert patriarchal traditions and open new directions in male and female roles.

**Key words:** Victimization, overprotection, male and female roles, patriarchal traditions, new directions.

Modernist writers adopted strategies such as associating women with dreadful prototypes; slandering them in essays, memoirs and poems and ignoring their achievements in critical texts. Among the general flux of modernist authors, the American E. E. Cummings wrote a large variety of poems in which he venerates and overprotects women. I would suggest that veneration and overprotection in Cummings are a grey area because; they could be not only a way to idealize a lady, but a dangerous sign of male superiority, especially at the beginning of his career. By using humour and satire, Cummings presents himself as an over responsible partner, a protector, an adviser, a victim and, unconsciously, as the reformer of an old fashioned patriarchal culture.

My purpose in this article is to prove how, by emphasizing male overprotection and his own victimization, Cummings deconstructs and subverts male and female roles throughout the twentieth century and promotes change. In order to demonstrate it, I will analyse some poems written throughout his career such as “my love is building a building” or “supposing i dreamed this).” Articles in *Spring. The Journal of the E. E. Cummings Society*, Richard Kennedy’s and Christopher Sawyer-Lauçanno’s biographies of Cummings as well as other publications such as Maurice Berger’s *Constructing Masculinity* or Jòsep M. Armengol and Àngels Carabí’s *Debating Masculinty* will be used to support how Cummings’ revolutionary techniques contribute to subvert patriarchal traditions and open new directions in male and female roles.

Unfortunately, some women still look for someone to have authority over them, to tell them what to do and to take all their troubles away; someone who lets them out on leading strings for little adventures but ready to haul them in if things go wrong; someone who sanctions their behaviour and worships them. At present we frown upon an exaggerated idealization and over praise of the female figure, but it is true we all like a touch of chivalry so far from the anti-Romantic perceptions of the twentieth century modernists who express an open hostility towards women, presumably as a consequence of the loosening of the nineteenth century bonds of property and the impact of Freudian theories, which projected such a fear of the female’s irresistible sexual power. Modernist female writers such as Djuna Barnes, Mina Loy, and Marianne Moore were admitted to the “male” category of Modernism by the neglect of important feminine or feminist elements in their works, which, in my view, is not antifeminist at all.

Cummings is a modernist based on the romantic tradition, who opens new directions in the transformation of male and female roles. The influence of his three wives—Elaine Orr, Anne Barton and, especially the last one, Marion Morehouse contributes to the creation of a new man who anticipates the sensitive male of the twenty-first century.

As Efrat Tseëlon elucidates in *The Masque of Femininity* (1995), women’s behaviour has always been regulated by men and their power.<sup>19</sup> Cummings sometimes reverses the roles by using the double-edged weapon of imploring and mini-

---

<sup>19</sup> TSEËLON, E.: *The Masque of Femininity: the Presentation of Woman in Everyday Life*. New Jersey, Sage, 1995.

mizing himself hoping that his lover will push him up later. Employing a satirical tone, he wrote a series of poems in the 1920s which coincided with his separation from his first wife Elaine that I will analyse briefly.<sup>20</sup> Rush Kidder and Guy Rotella indicate that the poem entitled “when god lets my body be” (*Tulips and Chimneys*)

when god lets my body be

From each brave eye shall sprout a tree  
fruit that dangles therefrom

the purple world will dance upon  
Between my lips which did sing

a rose shall beget the spring  
that maidens whom passion wastes

will lay between their little breasts  
My strong fingers beneath the snow

Into strenuous birds shall go  
my love walking in the grass

their wings will touch with her face  
and all the while shall my heart be

With the bulge and nuzzle of the sea

is an attempt to evoke the lady’s pity for the lover’s evanescence and in turn, to win for him her favours.<sup>21</sup> In “my little heart is so wonderfully sorry” (*ETC*),

my little heart is so wonderfully sorry  
lady, to have seen you on its threshold  
smiling, to have experienced the glory

of your slender and bright going, and it is so cold  
(nothing being able to comfort its grief)

---

<sup>20</sup> For all the poems mentioned in this article I used FIRMAGE, George (ed.): *E. E. Cummings. Complete Poems 1904-1962*. New York, Liveright, 1983.

<sup>21</sup> KIDDER, R.: *E. E. Cummings. An Introduction to the Poetry*. New York, Columbia UP, 1979, p. 23.

ROTELLA, G.: “Nature, Time and Transcendence in Cummings’ Later Poems”. In ROTELLA, G. (ed.): *Critical Essays on E. E. Cummings*. Boston, Mass., G. K. Hall, p. 285.

without you,that it would like i guess to die.  
Also my lady do i feel as if  
perhaps the newly darkening texture of my  
upon nothing a little clumsily closing  
mind will keep always something who has

fallen,who being beautiful is gone  
and suddenly. As if you will point at the evening

“in this particular place,my lover,the moon  
unspeakably slender and bright was”

a love-sick man tells her lover that without her, he would like to die. In “if being mortised with a dream” (*is 5*) he just whispers, suggests and begs her pardon. In “if i have my lady intricate” (*is 5*), he is again pleading for forgiveness. In “you being in love” (*is 5*), Cummings even considers suicide (he used to sleep with a pistol after Elaine’s elopement). “some ask praise of their fellows” (*is 5*)

some ask praise of their fellows  
but i being otherwise  
made composure curves  
and yellows,angles or silences  
to a less erring end)

myself is sculptor of  
your body’s idiom:  
the musician of your wrists;  
the poet who is afraid  
only to mistranslate

a rhythm in your hair,  
(your fingertips  
the way you move)  
The

painter of your voice—  
beyond these elements

remarkably nothing is....therefore,lady  
am i content should any  
by me carven thing provoke  
your gesture possibly or

any painting(for its own

reason)in your lips  
slenderly should create one least smile  
(shyly  
if a poem should lift to  
me the distinct country of your  
eyes, gifted with green twilight)

shows Cummings as an inefficient poet, sculptor, musician and painter. In this poem Cummings adores Elaine's physical beauty and affirms that her smile is more valuable than the recognition he can receive from his friends. Considering these poems as a whole and the effect they could produce in women, we might think that his role of a victim can be translated as that of a dominator because of the idea of self-pity he projects. He certainly describes the physical beauty an infatuated man can see but his lovers are not just a pretty face; they have proper activity and volition. In real life, the apparently frail Elaine did not show any compassion but divorced him and stole away with a famous Irish politician called Frank MacDermott, later departing to Europe with Cummings' baby daughter. But he did not seem to be ashamed of his failure as a father and husband. It was later, when he began an extensive round of psychoanalysis with Dr Fritz Wittels from December 1928 to February 1929 that he could see his rebellion against accepting responsibility for his own actions was costing him physically. As he wrote in his notes:

I have never grown up  
assumed the responsibilities of a man  
I prefer to have a mistress because it won't hurt ne so  
much  
when I lose her (as a wife)  
Self-pity=comfort<sup>22</sup>

It should be noted that Cummings castigated himself but redeemed his negative love experience by transforming his failure into art. From that moment on, everybody around Cummings started to overrate him and thanks to the whimsical Elaine, he got the social and literary recognition that he expected; his work was even noticed abroad. Thus, neither Elaine nor Cummings seem to have lost a thing.

Perhaps because of the upsurge of the revolutionary flappers, the 1920s were a time in which men felt compelled to provide more protection to keep a patriarchal model of masculinity. Christopher Sawyer-Lauçanno, Cummings' last biographer, notes that young Cummings did entertain a boring poor rich girl Elaine but was not very supportive of her, or even of little practical help. They were not bound

---

<sup>22</sup> SAWYER-LAUÇANNO, C.:. *E. E. Cummings. A Biography*. Naperville, Illinois, Sourcebooks, p. 322.

to each other by economic necessity –Elaine was extremely wealthy– but Cummings felt a strain of over responsibility he could not cope with. After his divorce from Elaine, in 1929 Cummings married a good time woman, the fashion model Anne Barton. In Sawyer’s words, “meeting Anne made Cummings feel more like a man” and then “he decided to assume the responsibilities of a man”<sup>23</sup>. However, it was Anne who reversed the roles as if overprotecting him. She was able to provide both insight and consolation for Cummings and free him from his own self-absorption. After obtaining economic profit from her husband, Anne turned into a harpy and also deserted him marrying a famous rich surgeon. During their (at times) unfortunate marriage, Cummings lived one of the most creative periods in his career. For a second time, both parts got their share of the pie.

After their divorce, friends introduced him to the beautiful energetic deeply feminine creative model and photographer Marion Morehouse, who remained his wife until his death in 1962. Perhaps due to the pale shelter that an immature Cummings offered to his first two wives, Cummings watched Marion over all the time. This behaviour had a lot to do with his father Reverend Edward Cummings. Cummings and his father were basically different in temperament, but he could not avoid the influential presence of an imposing and authoritarian man described by Richard Kennedy as “informal and kindly but forcefully masculine in manner”<sup>24</sup>. Although Cummings did not have good relationships with his father (Cummings’ mother Rebecca simply adored her husband), he unconsciously imitated his way and tried to overprotect his wives, although, most times, he turned traitor on himself.

Thirty years separate “my love is building a building” (*Tulips and Chimneys*) and “supposing i dreamed this” (*is 5*) from “now all the fingers of this tree(darling)have” (*Xai□e*) and sonnet 89 in *95 Poems*. Although in the last two an older Cummings still seems to treat his lover as the tiny young girl of the 1920s, he clearly establishes a universe of mutuality between lovers. In “my love is building a building”

my love is building a building  
 around you, a frail slippery  
 house, a strong fragile house  
 (beginning at the singular beginning

of your smile)a skilful uncouth  
 prison, a precise clumsy  
 prison(building that and this into Thus,  
 around of the reckless magic of your mouth)

<sup>23</sup> SAWYER-LAUÇANNO, C.: *E. E. Cummings. A Biography. Op.cit.*, p. 284-322.

<sup>24</sup> KENNEDY, R.: *Dreams in the Mirror. A Biography of E. E. Cummings*. New York, Liveright, 1980, p. 9.



our then shall be some darkness during which  
fingers are without hands; i have no  
you: and all trees are (any more than each  
leafless) its silent in forevering snow

—but never fear (my own, my beautiful  
my blossoming) for also then's until

who gives Marion a multipurpose parasol: To protect and to walk in the air breathing him. Marion was a patient but also a commanding and domineering woman who made Cummings recover his self-confidence after his divorces. With her, making use of what David Leverenz calls “individualistic masculinity” (57), Cummings portrayed new gender relationships by approximating the male individual to the earth and feminine sensibilities<sup>27</sup>. As George Yúdice rightly notes, when women entered the workforce and the public sphere, men became more “feminine” and cultivated domesticity and feelings<sup>28</sup>.

Throughout his career, the writer progressively becomes less and less interested in male traditional roles. With a dash of irony, he dismantles old patriarchal models, targets against predatory men who characterize women in terms of automotive fantasy, and contributes to modernize constructs of masculinity. He was conscious of the fact that because of the new social roles assigned to women throughout the twentieth century, there was a diminishing sense that women need protection. But my final question is, “is Cummings as sexist as his contemporary modernist fellows are said to be?” I don't think so. He is a verbally expressive true blue New Englander who celebrates every individual in a mocking and humorous tone; he proposes the unity of the male and female souls as well as sharing life and experiences together from an optimistic perspective. No doubt, his deviant grammar and typographical tricks contribute to that. If, on occasions, he sounds sexist is because he is sincere enough to write, as Alys Rho Yablon remarks, about “his reaction to women rather than about the women themselves”<sup>29</sup>.

---

<sup>27</sup> LEVERENZ, D.: “Men in Fiction”. In ARMENGOL, J. y CARABÍ, Á. (eds.): *Debating Masculinity*. Harriman, Tennessee, Men's Studies Press, 2008, p. 57.

<sup>28</sup> YÚDICE, G.: “What's a Straight White Man to Do?” . In BERGER, M. et al (eds.): *Constructing Masculinity*. New York, Routledge, 1995, p. 272.

<sup>29</sup> YABLON, A. R.: “‘Myself is sculptor of /your body's idiom’: Representations of Women in Cummings' Love Poetry”, *op.cit.*, p. 42.