

Foregrounding of Deviations, Contrasts, and Irregularities in E. E. Cummings's "Anyone Lived In A Pretty How Town"

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Abstract

Communication is an important function of language. Sometimes, it stands out because of the novelty of ideas, and sometimes by the uniqueness of style. In art and literature, style dominates meanings. E. E. Cummings's poem is the master of paradoxes. This paper is going to unentangle his puzzles in his poem "anyone lived in a pretty how town". This poem is full of paradoxes. The poet has made seemingly weird grammatical collocations. Apparently vague, ungrammatical, and illogical modifiers foreground the themes of the poem. This paper describes how by virtue of his style, Cummings makes rational of the irrational, compatible of the incompatible, plausible of the implausible, acceptable of the unacceptable, and meaningful of the absurd. The method used to analyses his style consist of (1) highlighting his use of parallelism and deviations, (2) interpreting his lines in the light of his main theme i.e., disregard for individuality, (3) interpreting structure of the lines in accordance with the possible semantic sense. The outcome of the study is that meanings do not come exclusively from words; context, both situational and textual, also contribute to meanings. Sometimes, context manipulates both lexis and meanings. This paper highlights how contrasts, incompatibilities and absurdities may foreground meanings.

Keywords: Deviations, Contracts, Irregularities.

Introduction

The meaning system of human languages relies much upon contrasts and oppositions. Light finds its meanings from its contrast with darkness, health from illness, silence from noise, truth from lies, stability from weakness, piety from sin, and so forth. Following the lead, literary artists make subtle contrasts between words that give pleasure and/or a new understanding. "You have delighted us long enough" is a famous ironic line in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. 'Delighted' and 'long enough' make a hilarious combination (esp. for those who know the context of these lines). We see 'long enough' inverts the meaning of 'delighted'. In addition to amusing the reader, it also teaches them how one may sound decently rude.

Thus, we came to know that part of meaning comes from text, and part from context (textual, situational, social). In the poem under discussion, the poet twists the meaning of the lexis by manipulating the co-text and situations. Thus, he invents shocking contrasts which foreground the main theme, line after line, and stanza after stanza.

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E. E. Cumming is famous for his puzzles. This paper aims to decipher the function of deviations, irregularities, and contrasts in the poem “*anyone lived in a pretty how town*”. In the coming section, we will see how contrasts are usually used for the purpose of foregrounding; how many figures of speech are used in the manner of contrast. The text of the poem is as follows.

Anyone lived in a pretty how town (1940)
anyone lived in a pretty how town
(with up so floating many bells down)
spring summer autumn winter
he sang his didn't he danced his did.
Women and men (both little and small)
cared for anyone not at all
they sowed their isn't they reaped their same
sun moon stars rain
children guessed (but only a few
and down they forgot as up they grew
autumn winter spring summer)
that noone loved him more by more
when by now and tree by leaf
she laughed his joy she cried his grief
bird by snow and stir by still
anyone's any was all to her
someones married their everyones
laughed their cryings and did their dance
(sleep wake hope and then) they
said their nevers they slept their dream
stars rain sun moon
(and only the snow can begin to explain
how children are apt to forget to remember
with up so floating many bells down)
one day anyone died i guess
(and noone stooped to kiss his face)
busy folk buried them side by side
little by little and was by was
all by all and deep by deep
and more by more they dream their sleep
noone and anyone earth by april
wish by spirit and if by yes.
Women and men (both dong and ding)
summer autumn winter spring
reaped their sowing and went their came
sun moon stars and rain

Before we analyze the impact of deviations and contrasts, we should first know what deviations and contrasts are, and how they play a role in foregrounding. In the analysis section we will see how Cumming's use of deviations and contrasts is different from traditional use.

Deviations and Parallelism

Ideas in literary works are foregrounded with the help of two techniques. One is deviation and the other is parallelism. The poem under discussion stands out by the unusual application of the former technique. The latter is completely overshadowed by the former. Moreover, some work is already available on the use of parallelism in the poem under discussion. Li has written a comprehensive note on E. E. Cummings' general use of deviations. This paper is going to focus on the types of Deviations used in E. E. Cumming's poem "anyone lived in a pretty how town".

Deviation is a "term used to describe any pronunciation, word, or sentence structure which does not conform to a norm". Leech described various types of deviation including *lexical deviation*, *morphological deviation*, *syntactic deviation*, *semantic deviation*, *graphological deviation*, *phonological deviation*, *historical deviation*, *dialectal deviation* etc. But those relevant with this paper are lexical, morphological, syntactic, semantic and graphological deviations. So, we are going to see them in some detail.

Lexical Deviation

Leech (1969) has defined lexical deviation as the process of "invention of new words" or 'neologism' / nɪˈvɒlədʒɪz(ə)m /. Leech has not drawn a clear line between lexical deviation and morphological deviation. For our convenience, we will restrict lexical deviation to 'nonce formation / nɒns fɔːˈmeɪʃn /' and 'category change'. Nonce formation by affixation will be seen as the process of morphological deviation.

Nonce are words 'created for one occasion', though once used in poetry, they, often, become currency. Nonce words include figurative innovations, fictional innovations, brand names, etc. Their examples are:

Figurative innovations: Skyscrapers,

Fictional innovations: Pandemonium, Godzilla, Yahoos, Houyhnhnms Ozymandias,

Brand names: Xerox, McDonalds, Apple, Blackberry etc.

Changing category means changing grammatical function of a word, like making a noun of a verb and vice versa. See the examples in the following lines of *The Wreck of Deutschland* by Gerard Manely Hopkins.

- And storms *bugle* his fame
- Let him *easter* in us
- The just man *justices*
- The *achieve* of, the master of the thing

Leech (1969, p. 43)

E. E. Cummings's outstanding quality is playing with words by changing their syntactic category. We find many instances in the poem under discussion. The poet makes a remarkable combination of the changed categories with the figurative and fictional innovations.

Morphological Deviation

Unusual inflections, derivations and blends are termed as morphological deviation or morphological productivity. See the following blends:

<i>Menunaire</i>	<i>menu</i> and <i>millionaire</i>	'those who prefer to order only from value menus'
<i>Locavore</i>	<i>local</i> and <i>herbi-/carnivore</i>	'someone who likes to eat locally produced food'
<i>Carbage</i>	<i>car</i> and <i>garbage</i>	'the trash that accumulates in one's car'
<i>Blodgebrity</i>	<i>blog</i> and <i>celebrity</i>	'a famous blogger'
<i>Gorno</i>	<i>gore</i> and <i>porno</i>	'extremely violent movie'

Exergaming exercise and gaming ‘activity combining exercise and gaming’.
(Lieber, 2009, p. 70)

Leech (1969, p. 43) has cited an interesting example of the productive use of inflections and derivations “*the widow-making unchilding unfathering deeps* (ocean)” [*The Wreck of the Deutschland*].

Syntactic Deviation

Shuffling the slots of syntactic categories is a familiar practice in poetry. Information packaging (Halliday, 2004) or changing the SVO is a part of routine language use, too. For example, in the sentence *here comes the winner of the lottery* the AVS (Adv, Verb, Subj.) structure is employed. But syntactic deviation changes the phrase structure and manipulates the word properties. Leech (1969) terms them as *surface structure deviations* and *deep structure deviations*. The former are also called *hyperbaton*. Their example is *he me saw*. The common examples of deep structure deviations are *He died an easy death*, and *She smiled a cute smile* etc. In the last two instances, intransitive verbs are transformed into transitive verbs. Apart from these familiar examples, we come across such structures that manipulate the sequence of verb, indirect object, direct object (V, IO, DO). IO is either dropped or added, in violation of rules.

Leech (1969) and Short (2013) point out another type of syntactic deviation, i.e., violating *selection restrictions* or introducing a new collocation. Such deviations are also called *mistaken selections*. For instance, see the famous examples cited by Leech (1969): ‘*two years ago*’, ‘*two cigarettes ago*’, ‘*two coats ago*’, ‘*two wives ago*’, ‘*two griefs ago*’ (Leech 1969). Though the above collocations, except for the first one, may not be familiar to the users of English language, yet not unacceptable. This technique is not new. Not only in poetry, but also in everyday language, such collocations are used to create comic effects and to highlight special situations. We will find many instances of such combinations in the above poem.

Graphical Deviation

Intended deviation from the rules of punctuation. There are plenty of them in Cummings’s poems. He, rather, used to write his name in lower case and without any period after abbreviations as *e e cummings*. In another example of graphological deviation, personified ideas are written with capital initial letter.

Semantic Deviation

Semantic deviation usually refers to the use of figures of speech. And there are dozens of them. Here we will describe only those that highlight contrasts. They are *antithesis*, *epigram*, *paradox*, *oxymoron*, *irony*, *euphemism*, *litotes* etc.

Figures of Contrast and Opposition

Antithesis / æn·'tɪ·θɪ·sɪs /

Antithesis is “a figure of speech involving a seeming contradiction of ideas, words, clauses, or sentences within a balanced grammatical structure. Parallelism of expressions serves to emphasize opposition of ideas.” For example, *Man proposes, God disposes. Too black for heaven, and yet too white for hell* (*The Hind and Panther* by John Dryden) (antithesis, n.d.).

Epigram / 'ɛ·pɪ·græm /

Epigram is “a short, polished, pithy saying, usually in verse, often with a satiric or paradoxical twist at the end”. For example, see Oscar Wilde’s line: *I can resist everything except temptation.* (epigram, n.d.).

Paradox / 'pæ·rə·dɒks /

Paradox is a “statement that appears self-contradictory but actually has basis in truth” (paradox, n. d.). For example, see Oscar Wilde’s following line:

- Fight fire with fire
- Less is more
- You have to have money to make money
- The beginning of the end

Oxymoron / ,ɒk·sɪ·'mɔː·rɒn /

Oxymoron is “a stylistic device combining contradictory words to form a new semantic entity”. See the following examples, *Sorrowful joy*; *deafening silence*; *living dead* etc. The oxymoron makes literary language more meaningful and intensifies its emotional impact by disclosing the unity of opposites and of life’s seeming contradictions (Oxymoron, n. d).

Irony / 'aɪ·rə·ni /

Irony is a sort of ‘mock decency’. The speaker makes use of favorable words to mean the opposite of it. For example, Chips said, “*Mr. Lloyd George, I am nearly old enough to remember you as a young man and I confess that you seem to me to have improved a great deal*” (Hilton, 2012, p. 35) *It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife....*(Austen, 2003, p. 17).

Euphemism / 'juː·fi·mɪ·z(ə)m /

Euphemism means downplaying an unpleasant situation, by eschewing its bitterness. For example, see the following euphemistic expressions for the unpleasant ones.

<i>To sleep with</i>	for	<i>have sexual intercourse with;</i>
<i>departed</i>	for	<i>dead;</i>
<i>relieve oneself</i>	for	<i>urinate.</i>

Euphemism. (n.d.)

Litotes / 'lɪt·ə·tiːz / is a “figure of speech in which a statement is made by indicating the negative of its opposite, e.g., *not many* to mean *a few* (litotes, n. d.).

The figures described above are the traditional figure of contrast in English literature. But Cummings has hardly used any one of them. He brings forth contrast in a novel and quite unexpected way. Mostly he relies on deviations. This paper aims at deciphering the function of deviations, irregularities and contrasts in the poem under discussion.

The method of analysis of this poem will consist of comparison of the plane summary with the poetic lines. What is missing in the paraphrased lines, and what embellishes the poetic lines will be pointed out. As we have already pointed out, our main emphasis will be on the contrastive techniques because the mystery of this poem is folded in its deviations. Parallel structures contribute very little to the total significance of the poem.

We have already read the poem, now we try to redraft it in prose form.

1. An unnoticed man ('anyone') lived in a conventions-controlled town (*a pretty how town*). People's behaviours were as mechanical and predicable as those of the many bells in the town that swung up and down (when they chimed). The wheel of time kept spinning through 'spring summer autumn winter'. Like a normal human being, Anyone crooned to lament his failures, and jiggled to celebrate his achievements.
2. Women and men living in that town were all people of small minds. Anyone's individuality and originality remained unnoticed to them. Devoid of individuality, they bartered their stereotyped conventional thoughts (*their isn't*) with one another. Circumstances appeared in different shades like sunny days, moonlit nights, dark starry nights, rainy days, but their typecast minds did not change.
3. Only a few children sensed his loneliness, but they too, like their elders, *forgot* him as they grew up. Anyone's youth coincided with the autumn stage of the cycle of time because no woman (*noone*) loved him. His loneliness increased with the passage of time.
4. As a tree grows leaf after leaf, *now* passed into *when*, second by second. But he found no lady (*noone*) who could share his joys and his griefs, and who could appreciate his individuality (*his any*) from the rest of the people as clearly as (*bird by snow and stir by still*) and love him mostly because of *it*.
5. All the other men ('someones') of the town espoused the women (*everones*) living there. Convention ridden people did not know how to address their feelings even. They *laughed* when it was time to be worried (*their cryings*), they busied (*did*) themselves when it was time to celebrate (*dance*). They spent their days and nights in good hopes saying their unanswered prayers (*nevers*) until the time came when both they and their dreams went into an eternal silence.
6. Having seen different colours of life like starry nights, rainy days, sunny days, and moonlit nights, people, finally, experience coldness of death (*snow*). Death *explains* why children's minds, eventually, discard remembrances and become indifferent to others like the mechanical chiming of the bells that swung up and down.
7. Facing people's indifference, Anyone, too, died at last, I suppose. No one was there to give him a farewell kiss. Mechanical (busy) people of the town buried Anyone along with his loneliness (*noone*). Anyone was laid in grave and time went by (*was by was*).
8. All to themselves, in the depth of grave, Anyon and his loneliness slumbered in eternal rest, but their dream (of the acknowledgment of his individuality) lived on and was ultimately fulfilled in April (springtime, suitable time), just as wishes sprout from passion ('spirit'), their realization (*yes*) is subject to the suitability of time (*if*).
9. Addicted to their dullness, women, and men, as mechanical as the chime of the bells, were doomed to sowing and reaping their monotony (*went their came*) in every season (*summer autumn winter spring*) and in all circumstances (*sun moon stars rain*).

Every poem, and especially the present one, can be interpreted variously. The above outline is the authors' understanding of the poem. Having read the summary of the contents, now we are required to see what else the poem carries that can't be translated into a paraphrase. Have a look at the data given below.

1. Graphological Deviations

i. Lower case:

Pronouns *anyone*; *noone*, but used as proper nouns, have their first letters in lower case. The first letters of almost thirty-four lines of the poem are in lower case.

ii. **Missing period:**

The whole poem has only two full stops. One in line 4 and the other in line 32.

2. **Lexical Deviation**

i. **Substitution of nouns with pronouns:**

Pronouns *anyone; noone; anyone's any; someones; everones* are used as nouns.

ii. **Transformation of nouns into verb:**

In *earth by April*, *earth* is used a verb

iii. **Transformation of verb into noun:**

In *he sang his didn't, sowed their isn't, was by was* auxiliaries are used as nouns, meaning 'failure', 'stereotyped beings', and 'moment by moment' respectively.

In *went their came*, *went* is used as transitive verb, and *came* is used as a noun, meaning 'return'.

3. **Deep structure syntactic deviations**

i. **Transforming intransitive verbs into transitive verbs:**

he danced his did; she laughed his joy she cried his grief; laughed their cryings; they slept their dream; dream their sleep;

ii. **Violation of selection restrictions:**

he sang his didn't; sowed their isn't; their same; when by now; anyone's any; went their came;

iii. **Violation of the structure of modifying phrases:**

a pretty how town; with up so floating many bells down; and down they forgot as up they grew;

4. **Irregularities**

i. **Redundancy:** *both little and small; more by more;*

ii. **Absurdity:** *he sang his didn't; sowed their isn't; noone stooped to kiss his face;*

iii. **Vague Lines:** *spring summer autumn winter; autumn winter spring summer; summer autumn winter spring; sun moon stars rain; stars rain sun moon; sun moon stars rain; when by now and tree by leaf; and only the snow can begin to explain; wish by spirit and if by yes;*

5. **Contrasts**

i. **Paring of the opposites:** *went their came;*

ii. **Reversed collocation:** *a pretty how town; with up so floating many bells down; and down they forgot as up they grew;*

iii. **Substitution of the existent with the non-existent:** *he sang his didn't; sowed their isn't; that noone loved him; said their nevers; and noone stooped to kiss his face; busy folk buried them side by side; both dong and ding;*

So, here is the chart of apparent deviations, irregularities, and contrasts in the poem under discussion. Now we have organized our data into two parts: (1) a paraphrase summary, and (2) a list of items flouting linguistic norms. The summary describes the message which the poet probably wants to communicate. The motivated defiance of the language rules and conventions of communication shapes the individualistic features of his style. But do they serve any more purpose? To answer this question, we are required to know answers to a few more questions.

Are these deviations, irregularities, and contrasts meaningful?

Can the same meanings be conveyed with the help of other words, too?

Does this communication technique contribute anything to the poem?

To answer the first question, we say the deviations, irregularities, and contrasts used in the poem under discussion are meaningful, but their meanings are indirect. They can be determined only in the context. They exist like blanks in the middle of their co-text. Hints from the context establish their meanings. This is the instance of foregrounding of cohesion (Leech, 2013).

Can the same meanings be conveyed with the help of other words, too? No. These unusual structures and combinations have many connotations. They may be interpreted in many ways. Probably every reader will arrive at a different meaning. The above summary describes the writers' understanding of the poem. Other readers may disagree with this.

Conclusion

Flexibility of meaning, and their indirectness enhance the force of impact. In the above poem, the apparently non-sensical expressions work like a paradox. The readers' sense of achievement in deciphering the meanings and establishing order out of chaos gives them pleasure. These expressions are not coined to evoke any aesthetic sense. They rather stir the feelings of solitude, meaninglessness, and wastefulness. A gloomy message can't be foregrounded with pleasant images. Only dull and vague language suits to describe dullness and vagueness of life.

Now in the light of the above discussion, we infer that meanings exist in a fluid state. They are never fixed. They depend on the context for their completion. Cummings places words in shocking environments. In the first reading, his combinations look bizarre. But when one focuses better, words seem to acquire different meanings. Using intended deviations, irregularities, and contrasts, he introduces grammatical paradoxes and changes the lexical information of words. His technique of presenting his message in puzzles and using unexpected lexis for this purpose are the hallmarks of his style.

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