

next to of course god america i

This poem is going to cause a lot of bother, partly because people think it's tough. It's not. It's really simple, and really thought-provoking.

About the form

The poem is a [sonnet](#). Google searches and Yahoo! answers will try to convince you otherwise, but it is a sonnet. If it looks like a sonnet and it feels like a sonnet, it's a sonnet.

So what is a sonnet?

Sonnets were most popular as love poems. That's what will fox some people. This isn't really a love poem. Some people will try and work it round by saying it's a love poem of sorts about America. It isn't. A sonnet isn't always to do with love. They became known in England as a thing to do with love, but they aren't always. Shakespeare, among others, is responsible for this. When Romeo and Juliet first meet, their words form a sonnet. Spenser, Wyatt and others are mainly responsible for our views about the connection between love and sonnets.

First... look at these sonnets:

[Spenser](#)

[Wyatt](#)

[Sidney](#)

[Shakespeare](#)

These look and feel quite different from E. E. cummings! These poems show how the sonnet was used to compare women to angels, ask women to release men from their torture; and, by the final one, Shakespeare, you can see him playing around and mocking these 'false sentiments' which said women had eyes like the sun or walked like an angel. These sonnets are what fox lesser mortals who think this poem can't be a sonnet. Some people who haven't done their research fail to realise that all sonnet means is 'little song' - that's all - and there are just as many about other things as there are love ones. Only, it's the love ones that stand out. That's unfortunate, because it's left some lesser mortals with the view that a sonnet MUST be about love. That's like looking at the pop charts and thinking all music is pop music. Of course, what doesn't get into the top 30 isn't music, right? Classical and Jazz and underground numbers that just don't get mainstream popularity - they're not music as well are they? Wow.

However, sonnets are as much, often, about politics. 100 years after Shakespeare, sonnets were more popularly about other stuff. Yes, there were still love sonnets, like Elizabeth Barratt Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* but there were plenty of other types too. My absolute and utter favourite is [Ozymandias](#) - a poem about power and how time lets us forget even the most cruel tyrant. Other poems that you will need to look at to get a full understanding of *next to*

of course god america i include:

[Anthem for Doomed Youth](#)
[Futility](#)

Both sonnets. Both about war.

So what do sonnets do?

They take the crazy, overwhelming, nonsensical thoughts in your head that swim around causing all manner of distraction, and they pen them into a nice, mathematical, rhythmic, structured shape. Imagine thoughts as a field full of hundreds of cats. A sonnet takes those crazy cats and puts them in a tidy, organised, neat little pen. No craziness. No distraction.

Not only that, sonnets are *really* hard to write. First you need a rhyme scheme - A-B-A-B-C-D-C-D E-F-G-E-F-G in this case. So you need to find words that make sense and rhyme too. Always hard. Then you need to make sure you express it in a regular amount of syllables - often 10. So you have to make all the other words fit in 14 10-syllable lines that rhyme. Then you have to think of the stresses so that words go dee-DUM dee-DUM dee-DUM dee-DUM dee-DUM. So, you can't say 'father' which is FA-ther. Or AM-er-ic-A or even am-ERIC-a because that doesn't fit.

See? Hard.

E. E. Cummings keeps some bits and gets rid of others. He keeps the 14 lines. He breaks it into an octet (8 lines) and a sestet (6 lines) which was traditionally a problem or an argument and a solution or response. He keeps the rhyme scheme, even breaking up 'beautiful' to do so.

But he gets rid of the regular syllables, the bouncy rhythm and the fact that most sonnet lines make sense on their own. And he gets rid of the capitals.

So why?

Personally, I think it's way of bringing a bit of order to his thoughts, writing in a sonnet. It shapes it. It's also a thoughtful poem, like Wilfred Owen's sonnets and Ozymandias. But it's broken up inside. It looks okay to the naked eye, but when you get into it, it's really fragmented and fractured. A bit like his themes of patriotism and war. Hmmm.

And you also need to get the idea that this partly E. E. Cummings' personal style. It's just his thing. You'd have to read more about the man and his thoughts to know why and what's going on, but think of it like his language fingerprint. It's as distinctive to me as a Jackson Pollack painting (think of all those splashes of paint) or a Picasso.

Have a look at some other examples:

[Buffalo Bill's Defunct](#) (one of my personal favourites)

[Pity this busy monster manunkind](#)

And a sonnet for you from the man himself: [it is at moments](#)

So... it IS important he writes in a sonnet. He does it in other places. It's not an accident. There's no significance to the *shape* of the poem.

About the language

The thing about this poem is that you really need to know about intertextuality. This is a long word that means 'connections between other texts'. It works like hyperlinks. You read a phrase and it links to another thing in your mind. If your mind were a web page, the poem would have hyperlinks on loads of it.

A bit like this:

"next to of course god america i
love you [land of the pilgrims](#)' and so forth oh
[say can you see by the dawn's early](#) my
country tis of centuries come and go
and are no more what of it we should worry
in every language even deafanddumb
thy sons acclaim your glorious name by gorrry
by jingo by gee by gosh by gum
why talk of beauty what could be more beaut-
iful than these heroic happy dead
who rushed like lions to the roaring slaughter
they did not stop to think they died instead
[then shall the voice of liberty be mute?"](#)

He spoke. And drank rapidly a glass of water

Let's take each bit at a time:

“next to of course god america

First, we've got this patriotic statement about how America takes its place next to God. Like it's God's own country. Ironical that a country set up on secular lines (non-religious and tolerant of all religions) should be so much about God. Think about that dollar bill with its 'In God We Trust' statement. It reminds me of the phrase 'God's own country' - which lots of countries like to use

to refer to themselves - it's as if saying your country is blessed by God and all the others are rubbish.

Second, we've got speech marks. These are somebody else's words - not e. e. cummings' words. Remember that, and think about who is speaking them.

Third, we've got irregular capitals. None for 'Next' which 'should' (according to modern rules) have one, as the beginning of a sentence. What does this mean? Is it **not** the beginning of the sentence? Have we come in on something - like we've missed the first bit? It *could* also have one as the beginning of the line - most poems did before the First World War. Then no capital for God. My RE teacher would have gone mental. God always needs a capital. To take away his capital is to take away your respect. If you give Him a small 'g' like god, then it's some other god, like some pagan god. Not a specific God. It's like my name. Emma. I have a capital because I'm a special noun. These days, with the internet, capitals are much less frequent. We use small 'i's (although Word corrects them for you!) and we are much less bothered about capitals. God needs a capital. Why take it off him? Is it being disrespectful? And then he doesn't capitalise 'America' either. Are they just not important to him? Are as equal as other words? Is it just an E. E. Cummings' 'thing'? It's up to you. The noticeable thing is just that: it's noticeable.

i love you land of the pilgrims and so forth

Then, the word 'i' which 'belongs' on the next line in terms of sense. Why put it here? You stumble over it. It jars. It's unpredictable. It's almost drunken. He finishes with 'and so forth' - like he can't be bothered to add any more of these patriotic words? Or like he doesn't need to say any more of them because we know them all already? Land of the pilgrims is an often-used phrase in patriotic poems - but we're reminded the pilgrims and 'New' America were built on existing native American lands, that communities and tribes were destroyed and that the pilgrims ended up with a lot of blood on their hands.

oh say can you see by the dawn's early

This bit comes from *The Star-Spangled Banner* - the American national anthem. It goes with the other three fragments as the beginning of a kind of patchwork of bits and pieces of patriotic phrases. In English I might write:

God save our gracious rule Britannia and all that
Long live our noble land of hope and glory
rule the waves

And kind of stitch up these bits and pieces into a blob of patriotic fragments.

So why take all these bits and pieces that echo something else? I think, to me, it just makes it all sound fragmented and hollow.

Here, it's worth thinking about patriotism. This is the kind of sentiment that stirs people, that makes them proud to belong, that makes them feel inspired. It's why they play national anthems at sports events. You are doing it for your country. It makes me think of the very famous recruiting poster of [Lord Kitchener saying 'YOUR COUNTRY NEEDS YOU'](#) and of some of the poems that inspired men to sign up and fight. It's the same kind of talk that inspires not only patriotism in war, but also acts of terrorism. It is as ancient as civilisations. 2,000 years ago, the Romans talked of '[dulce et decorum est pro patria mori](#)' - it is a sweet and proper thing to die for your country. Of course, the Romans, the British, Uncle Sam - every country has a poster like this to inspire you to die to protect your country.

my country is of centuries come and go and are no more

What we've got here is a reminder that America, 'his' country, is timeless, even if people, civilisations, come and go.

what of it

This is the first question the poem raises. So what?

we should worry in every language even deafanddumb

What's he saying to us here? We **should** worry - we should discuss this? It's kind of a jumbled thought at first, but it's something we should do. Worry. Worry about what? Worry about our country? Worry about war? Worry about patriotism?

thy sons acclaim your glorious name

Here, we've got a bit that's almost like a prayer or a hymn, loosely based on Psalm 8. Who is 'you'? You is the formal of 'thee'. It's like vous in French, or usted or ustedes in Spanish. It's formal. But who is he addressing? God? America? Who are we acclaiming the name of? And why mix up thy and your? One thing is for sure, E. E. Cummings did it on purpose. Just as an aside, the poet wrote some poems in a narrative to God, saying 'thy' and using the informal form for him.

The bits that come after might give us more of a clue who he's addressing this to.

By gorry by jingo by gee by gosh by gum

All of these are old-fashioned oaths. In the past, people didn't like to say 'For God's Sake' as it was swearing an oath - a sin forbidden by the ten commandments: "Thy shall not take the Lord's name in vain" - and so unless you were swearing for serious, like in court, that your words were honest and truthful, then you used a kind of semi-swear. Bejeesus is a great Irish example. It means, obviously, By Jesus. We use 'For Pete's sake' - for the sake of St. Peter - and loads of others. Even 'bloody' means 'by our lady' - an oath for the Virgin Mary. This tells me these are oaths directed to God. And then perhaps 'you' in the previous line is God? Is this directed to God? Who knows? I think this part is, though. An oath makes something sacred. A promise. An oath is agreeing to do something (or not do it!) with God as your witness. A vow is a promise or agreement with God. What is the poet making an oath about? And if they aren't saying 'By God' and using other euphemisms instead, do they mean it?

why talk of beauty

This is the second question - not marked with a question mark. Beauty is often raised in patriotic language. Think of 'America the Beautiful' - then he goes on to say

what could be more beaut/iful than these heroic happy dead

Wow. Talk about a rhetorical question! Some would say that seeing the corpses of heroes is a beautiful thing, because they died for their country and nothing is more noble than that. Some would say that nothing is more ugly and horrifying. Which do you think the poet meant? Is he going for the beauty of a valiant and noble death, like these poems:

[The Soldier](#) - Rupert Brooke. It doesn't get more sentimentally patriotic about heroic war dead than this.

[In Flanders Field](#) - John McCrae - another unashamedly sentimental poem about how noble it is to die for your country.

[For the Fallen](#) - a beautiful, tragic poem which epitomises so many of those patriotic views about a noble death, 'fallen in the cause of the free'

Or is he going for the horror of war, making an irony of the 'heroic happy dead' like Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon?

[Dulce et Decorum est](#) - it doesn't get any less beautiful than the man being 'flung' in a cart and hearing 'the blood come gargling from his froth-corrupted lungs'. This is not a noble death. It's a violent, hideous, tortured death: ignoble, forgotten, nightmarish.

What's E. E. Cummings saying? Are they really 'most beautiful', these 'heroic happy dead'? If not, why do you think that?

And why the break in beautiful? Is it just to make it fit into the rhyme scheme, or because beauty itself is now broken? Hmmm.

who rushed like lions to the roaring slaughter

Lambs to the slaughter is the usual expression here. So why 'lions'? Firstly, because lions are a noble beast. They're the king of the animal world. Lion King. Loads of countries have lions as an emblem. England does. Three Lions is about as patriotic as you can get. Think about 'Three Lions on their shirt' - a very popular football song about national pride and competing for England. Loads of countries have a lion as their emblem or a symbol on their emblem, from the Czech Republic to Sri Lanka. The soldiers are like lions - proud, good at fighting, the kings, noble, valiant, rather than lambs - defenceless, innocent victims. I don't know about you, but there seems to be something a little more sad about lions rushing to the slaughter, rather than lambs. It seems even more tragic that these most noble creatures would be sacrificed.

they did not stop to think they died instead

This seems a little reminiscent of Tennyson's [*Charge of the Light Brigade*](#).

"Their's not to make reply,
Their's not to reason why,
Their's but to do and die:"

Perhaps it's the lack of thinking that drives them to their death. Maybe, like the six hundred who rode into the valley of death in *Charge of the Light Brigade* they did not think, just sacrificed themselves.

then shall the voice of liberty be mute?"

This rhetorical question is the only one of the questions in this poem with a question mark. Why do you think that is? Is it just that it emphasises the question, making it the most important, the only one with the question mark? It's also marked with the final speech marks, marking the end of the character's speech. It leaves with a triple-whammy of a question. A question, a question mark, the end of his speech, leaving us time to think. In fact, it's a quadruple-whammy, because there's a line break after it. It gives us time to think. Nobody thinks about the space in poems - the silence between the lines, but this is one big silence. It gives us time to really think about the answer. It picks up on a great American icon, the [*Liberty Bell*](#). This bell is a symbol of battle against tyranny (in this case, England's tyranny of America) and says on it: "Proclaim LIBERTY throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof." - the whole point of it is that it is a clamour against tyranny, against imprisonment - the sound of freedom. If you google 'voice of liberty' you'll see hundreds of pro-American, deeply patriotic websites. Newspapers call

themselves 'the voice of liberty' and freedom of speech is one of the most deeply and firmly held views of a 'democratic' nation. The whole question is really thought-provoking.

Does it mean:

- the voice of liberty will be mute because it won't need to be heard anymore (after all the wars are over) because liberty will rule?
- the voice of liberty will be mute because all the soldiers will be dead and there will be no-one left to hear the message?
- we ignore the voice of liberty because it doesn't sit well with war - should war always be the precursor to liberty? Is the only way to get freedom to fight for it?
- the sound will be muted out of respect for the dead?

The whole question is really thoughtful - if Liberty were a person, say the Statue of Liberty brought to life - what would mean that it was silenced? The Statue of Liberty is a really great image to think about here. When would her flame stop burning? What would silence her?

Only two things: when everyone is free, or everyone is dead. Think about the opening shots of post-apocalypse America - it always ends with a shot of the Statue of Liberty half submerged. In the original *Planet of the Apes*, the men realise that the 'planet' they have landed on is in fact Earth when they see the hand of the Statue of Liberty on the beach, half-submerged. It's a real symbol of the end of America. And, as Americans might have us believe - and who's to say - the end of America is the end of the world as we know it. Not only that, but the guy who designed the Statue of Liberty also did a good line in lion statues to symbolise the triumph of nobility and truth. To top all that off, the German forces tried to destroy the Statue during the First World War and when the Americans joined the war in 1917, the Liberty Bond was set up - basically, you bought a bond and helped the war. The Statue of Liberty was widely used to inspire a feeling of patriotism and belonging - think of all the immigrants who arrived at Ellis Island and saw Lady Liberty watching over them - it's such a powerful image. What we're asked to think here is: why would such a voice be mute?

He spoke. And drank rapidly a glass of water.

This 'He spoke'. It's got capitals (well, it does come after the '?' of the previous line) and it comes after a gap. The gap, the capitals, the full stop after 'spoke' all make this a little stand-alone phrase for us to concentrate on. So why? Why does he want us to think about this phrase so much?

I think, to me, it reminds me a little of Genesis. God's 'speaking' has a magical effect. He speaks and it makes stuff happen. "God said, 'let there be light' and there was light." It's God's voice that makes this magic happen. So why might I think this voice is God? I think it's the capitals. I know it's at the beginning of a sentence, but that doesn't stop E. E. Cummings. When you play hard and fast with the rules of capital letters, when you use one, it's weird. It's noticeable. The

only He we capitalise is God.

Of course, it could just be a random semi-patriotic speaker who doesn't believe what he's saying, or does. It could be E. E. Cummings himself. But wouldn't it be profound if this was God himself ranting about war and patriotism?

What about the last bit? People ignore this. Is he drinking because he's nervous? Tongue-tied? When do we get dry throats? When we've been talking a lot or when we're nervous. I just think, especially with 'rapidly' that there's something nervous about this gesture, like when exam candidates take a huge swig of water before giving an oral response, or just after. Plus, it gives us time to think. Nothing is finished. Nothing is resolved.

Overall

The things that stand out to me are:

- the sonnet form
- the way it uses fragments of patriotic poems and songs and lines
- the fact it's about war and how hollow patriotism is as a reason to die
- the lions going to the slaughter
- who the speaker is, and what he really means.
- the intertextuality and links, linguistic echoes of other texts