

# Analysis of E.E. Cummings's Poem "O sweet spontaneous" from an Ecocritical Perspective

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## Abstract

*The principal objective of this article is to explore how the earth is reflected in one of the famous poems of the 19<sup>th</sup> century American poet E.E. Cummings "O sweet spontaneous" published in 1920. This paper seeks to analyze this experimental poem from the ecocritical perspective which deals with the study of man's relationships with this earth along with his perception and conception of her disposition. This paper, which is based on the qualitative descriptive study, considers the earth as sweet and spontaneous. The earth is represented as a generous, gentle and compliant mother, whereas philosophers, scientists and religious figures are represented as active, destructive and notorious forces. This article, which concludes that earth is great and good, is expected to be significant to those who are involved in teaching and learning poems from the ecocritical perspective.*

**Keywords:** Earth, ecocriticism, philosopher, religion, scientist.

## 1. Introduction

It is a very common tendency that poems have been taught to the student by focusing on the thematic aspects. We teach our students to analyze the poems just to draw the themes and ideas by considering the figures of speech employed in the poems or by observing poetic elements that contribute to the themes or meanings in the poems. The writer has realized that analyzing poems from the ecocritical perspective is a new phenomenon in Nepal. This new phenomenon has created curiosity not only in teachers, but also in the students of bachelor and master levels studying English as major subjects for performing ecocritical analyses of poems. It has enhanced our sensibility and sensitivity towards our earth, environment and natural phenomena. It is widely perceived that we are influenced by natural environment and the natural environment is affected by our deeds. Who or which is more affected is a matter of academic discussion and interaction, but it is transparent truth that there is relationship between human beings and natural world.

Ecocritical theories are important because they explore the relationship between human activities and the natural world, particularly in terms of the influence of each upon the other. Ecocriticism, which is also known as "green study", is a rising field of scholarly investigation that considers the relationship that

people have with the earth and its environment. Ecocriticism is the exploration of the connection among literary writings and the physical condition.

“O sweet spontaneous” by E.E. Cummings (Edward Estlin Cummings: 1894-1962) is an experimental poem. It is a striking poem from the stylistic point of view. Its punctuation, word formation, poetic lines and versification are so unique that the poet has made a new experiment of language in creating this poem. This poem employs the incorrect use of punctuation and rejection of the rules of English grammar. This poem which can be reckoned as artistic experimentalism is only for the sophisticated readers. This poem deals with the significance of the earth, which the poet identifies sweet and spontaneous.

The article writer selected this poem for analysis for the following reasons: uniqueness in its form, representation of earth and her compassion, effect of deeds of so-called powerful philosophers, scientists and religious leaders on the people of earth. If they read this article, they will realize how they have destroyed the beauty of the earth and the feeling of universal brotherhood and harmony on the earth. The writer thinks that this is a useful step to analyze poems from the ecocritical perspective to explore our relationship with the mother earth. This article will be significant to the second semester master level students who are studying English as a major subject at the campuses of Tribhuvan University, Nepal.

### **1.1 Objective of the Article**

The primary objective of this article is to explore the reflection of the earth in E.E. Cummings’s poem “O sweet spontaneous”.

## **2. Review of Literature**

Review of literature involves experimental poem, ecocriticism, reflection of the earth in the poem and themes of the poem.

### **2.1 “O sweet spontaneous” as an Experimental Poem**

“O sweet spontaneous” is a unique poem composed by E.E. Cummings, who is an American poet noted for his technical innovation particularly in typography which involves his frequent use of lower case letters when capitals would normally be employed. “Howness” is more prominent than “Whatness” in this poem which does not follow the conventional versification. This poem is really unique and innovative in the use of small letters, punctuation, word formation, stanza formation and diction. This poem offers two major specific graphological features: the consistent use of the non-capital letters with the exception of the first letter “O” actually used as a word, and the use of deep spacing between stanzas. The poem exploits the enjambed (run-on) poetic lines. Some poetic lines have single words; some have two words and so on. These characteristics make it an experimental poem. The poem has an absurd form like the absurdity found in the activities of the mankind or the mankind in an absurd situation. This poem lacks the proper

harmonization of poetic lines just as human beings lack the harmony with the natural world, especially with earth because of the destructive and selfish deeds of human beings. It is a difficult poem to understand. Jack Eames (Feb 24, 2014) states “I like the poem, a bit confusing though”.

## 2.2 Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism is a rapidly emerging field of literary study that considers the relationship between the human beings and the environment. Environmental critics explore how nature and the natural world are imagined through literary texts. Fenn (2015) asserts that “ecocriticism is a rapidly changing theoretical approach, which is different from the traditional approach to literature”. According to Love (2003), ecocriticism focuses on the “inter connections between the material world and human culture, specifically the cultural artifacts language and literature” (p. 196). Frederick (2007) assumes ecocriticism “to give human beings a better understanding of nature” (p. 134). Johnson (2009) mentions “over the last three decades, it has emerged as a field of literary study that addresses how human relate to nonhuman nature or environment in literature” (pp.7-12). Ecocriticism explored the literary representation of natural world and environmental concerns. Kerridge (2006) asserts that “texts are evaluated in terms of their environmentally harmful or helpful effects” ( p. 530).

Ecocriticism is the study of literature and the environment from an interdisciplinary point of view, where literature scholars analyze texts that illustrate environmental concerns and examine the various ways literature treats the subject of nature. Ecocriticism is a term used for the observation and study of the relationship between the literature and the earth’s environment. It takes an interdisciplinary point of view by analysing the works of authors, researchers, and poets in the context of environmental issues and nature. : Ecocriticism is an emergent research field that, according to Heise (2008), “has evolved in literary criticism and cultural studies since the early 1990s” (p.8). Clark (2011) talks about the space of ecocriticism as a “crucial, exciting but sometimes bewildering intersection of issues”(p.150).

Ecocriticism is the study of representations of nature in literary works and of the relationship between literature and the environment. Ecocriticism as an academic discipline began in earnest in the 1990s, although its roots go back to the late 1970s. Because it is a new area of study, scholars are still engaged in defining the scope and aims of the subject. Glotfelty and Fromm (1996) in *The Ecocriticism Reader* define ecocriticism as:

The study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender- conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of its texts, eco criticism takes an earth centered approach to literary studies. (Glotfelty and Fromm xviii)

### 2.3 Reflection of the Earth in the Poem

Earth is the planet we live on, the third of eight planets in our solar system and the only known place in the universe to support life. This poem can be considered as an eulogy for the earth. In this poem the speaker expresses his sense of admiration for the earth which he calls sweet and spontaneous. On the other hand, fingers of philosophers, thumb of science and religions are taken as destructive and disreputable forces.

O sweet spontaneous

earth how often have (1-2)



Figure 1: The Mother Earth in her Natural State

The poet considers the earth sweet and spontaneous. She is sweet, because she does not harm anybody. She is spontaneous, because she is dynamic and natural. She persistently moves on her way without pause and lassitude. The poet may intend to utter that people living on the earth should have sweet manner and spontaneity in their good deeds.

the

doting

fingers of

prurient philosophers pinched

and

poked

thee (3-9)



Figure 2: War in the Name of Philosophy

The poet mentions that emotive fingers of erotic philosophers have pinched and poked her. Wikipedia (2019) defines a philosopher as “an intellectual who has contributed in one or more branches of philosophy such as aesthetics, ethics, epistemology, logics, social theory and political philosophy”. Such intellectuals have become selfish and notorious. They do not do what they say. Political leaders follow certain philosophy and live in illusion that their philosophy is better than others. They make war to win the opponents either persons or parties. People are divided into different sects of philosophy resulting in war and destruction of lives, properties and beauty of nature. They turn the mother earth into a site of bomb blasting and make hole to hide and attack. They have pinched and poked (jabbed and hurt) the earth.

has the naughty thumb

of science prodded

thy

beauty how (10-13)



Figure 3: Destruction of Purity and Beauty of the Earth

The mischievous thumb (work) of science has scratched and damaged her fair beauty and sheer purity in the name of development. Wikipedia (2019) considers a scientist as “someone who



conducts scientific research to advance knowledge in an area of interest”. The site of the scientists’ experiments is the earth. Establishment of factories, new plants, experiment of bomb blasting, experiment of rockets etc. have destroyed the beauty of the earth and her surroundings. We are deprived of observing brilliant blue sky and smiling moon, twinkling stars and shining sun due to pollution created by factories, industries, planes, chimneys etc.

often have religions taken  
 thee upon their scraggy knees  
 squeezing and  
 buffeting thee that thou mightest conceive  
 gods (14-18)



Figure 4: War in the Name of Religions

Wikipedia (2019) mentions religion as “a cultural system of designated behaviors and practices, morals, worldviews, texts, sanctified places, prophecies, ethics or organizations that relate humanity to supernatural, transcendental or spiritual elements”. Similarly, Oxford Dictionary defines religion “as the belief in and worship of a superhuman controlling power, especially a personal God or gods”.

Wiktionary.org (2019) defines a religious leader as “someone who is recognized by a religious body as having some authority within that body”. Unfortunately, the religions leaders in the name of their religions have taken her upon their filthy and thin knees squeezing (pressing) and buffeting (pushing) her several times to fulfill their selfishness. They have made sons and daughters of the mother earth fight against each other resulting in destruction, death and shedding blood on her lap. Despite all these destructive nature of human beings, the mother earth is so generous and so good that that she might conceive (give birth to) gods. Here “gods” means “good sons”. In spite of our notorious deeds, she is still optimistic and creative.

(but  
 true  
 to the incomparable  
 couch of death thy  
 rhythmic  
 lover  
     thou answerest  
 them only with  
     spring) (19-27)



Figure 5: Spring Season

The earth gives the mankind the spring which is her rhythmic lover. The speaker considers spring as an incomparable coach of death. It is an incomparable (excellent) coach (seat) of death because the death again gets its birth and enjoys a new life from there. The Mother earth is so creative and so powerful that she answers the mankind only with spring which is a season of newness, hopefulness, creativity, fertility, peace and beauty despite the evil and destructive deeds of the mankind.

#### 2.4 Themes of the Poem

In the poem "O Sweet Spontaneous", the poet speaks of his love for the earth mother which is sweet and spontaneous. Despite our ingratitude, she answers us only with spring. This suggests that the main theme of the poem is "Eulogy for the Earth" or "The Greatness of the Earth" or "The Goodness of the Earth" etc.

"Fingers of prurient philosophers pinched and poked", "the naughty thumb of science prodded thy beauty" and "religions..... Scraggy knees ....buffeting" suggest that the plural forms of philosophy, science and religions have destroyed the beauty and purity of the earth and have divided the mankind into

diverse groups of factions. We can state that the theme of the poem is “Disdain of Humanity” or “the Vanity of Mankind”, or “Destructive and Dividing Nature of Mankind” etc. Such leading personalities in the diverse fields seem to use their lecherous fingers to destroy the earth’s sanctuary.

When we focus on the action verbs “pinched”, “poked”, “prodded”, “squeezing” and “buffeting”, these verbs suggest the sexual imagery: the mother earth as a creator or producer, whereas the mankind as an exploiter. We can reckon the earth with femininity and the mankind with masculinity. It is the “Adverse Effect of Masculinity on Femininity” that can be another principal theme of the poem. Charlie (Jan20, 2015) views this poem to “perfectly describe what happens today. Scientists kill species to see how they work and people try to unravel the earth, but never take part in its beauty”.

### 3. Conclusion

In the poem “O sweet spontaneous”, the earth is represented as a central entity. The earth is considered to be sweet and spontaneous. The poem reveals that the earth is influenced by human beings. Her beauty and purity is polluted by the selfish and destructive deeds of philosophers, scientists and religious leaders. Therefore, the earth is represented as a peaceful, gentle, spontaneous, sweet and serene entity, whereas philosophers, scientists and religious leaders are represented as destructive, selfish and notorious forces causing chaos, disharmony, anarchy, and hostility on the serene and loving lap of the mother earth by splitting human beings into different ideologies, sects and principles.

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### Appendix

**Poem: O sweet spontaneous**  
**By: E.E. cummings (1894-1962)**

O sweet spontaneous  
earth how often have  
the  
doting

fingers of  
prurient philosophers pinched  
and  
poked

thee  
, has the naughty thumb  
of science prodded  
thy

beauty how  
often have religions taken  
thee upon their scraggy knees  
squeezing and

buffeting thee that thou mightest conceive  
gods  
(but  
true

to the incomparable  
couch of death thy  
rhythmic  
lover

thou answerest

them only with  
spring)

