

**Cummings' "Cambridge ladies" Sonnet:
Typography and Literary Parody of
Hawthorne's "Letter A"**

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the Cam | bridge la | dies who | live in | furnished [] souls
are un | beauti | ful and have | comforta | ble minds
(also,with | the church's | protestant | blessings
daughters, | unscent | ed shape | less spi | rited)
they believe | in Christ | and Long | fellow, | both dead,
are inva | riably | interested| in so| many things—
at the pre | sent wri | ting one | still finds
delight | ed fing | ers knit | ting for the | is it Poles?
perhaps. | While per | manent | faces | coyly | bandy
scandal | of Mrs. | N and | Profes | sor D
...the Cam | bridge la | dies do | not care, | above
Cambridge | if some | times in | its box | of
sky la | vender | and cor | nerless,the
moon rat | tles like | a frag | ment of | angry | candy (CP 115)

—E. E. Cummings

Cummings' "the Cambridge Ladies who live in furnished souls" is a modern sonnet better understood as a literary parody exposing the repressiveness of the New England genteel society. At first sight, the incongruous melding of the Cambridge daughters' devotion to the church and charities with their coy, unwavering interest in the sexual scandal of "Mrs. N and Professor D" (line 10) communicates the concealed reality of irrepressible passion. On a second reading, a possible allusion to Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* emerges in the parodic sonnet's unorthodox typographical rendering.

Partially resembling a Petrarchan sonnet in its 4-4-3-3 pattern, the single-stanza poem visually reveals quite uneven rhythmic structuring. The irregular metric lines are mixed with iambs, anapests, dactyls, trochees, pyrrhics, and spondees whether they are scanned metrically or rhythmically, creating what Harvey Gross and Robert McDowell would characterize "as an interplay of meter and rhythm [producing] a prosodic texture of opposing movement and feeling" (45). For example, the first hendecasyllabic line can be scanned as one iamb, two spondees, two trochees, and a limped

half-foot (an emphasis perhaps on lack of individuality for living in the “furnished souls”). The line can also be scanned as rhythmical phrases, with the last word in the final phrase, “furnished souls,” unstressed—yielding what Richard Cureton would characterize as “one stress per phrase” (249). This scansion offers a meaningful rhythmic texturing through which Cummings suggests that “furnished souls” are *unalive*. Also, through the inverted (mirroring) rhyme scheme (abcdcdba efggfe), the sonnet again draws attention to its visual opposites. The presence of lower-case letters where the capitals ought to be in the beginning of each line, with capitals used only for proper names, titles, and initials (Cambridge, Christ, Longfellow, Poles, Mrs. N, and Professor D), creates another disparity. The reader is compelled to apperception, to consciously noticing the altered punctuation in typography.

The first and only period calls attention to a Miltonic break in line 9 even though the octet does not conclude in the middle of this line. For example, Milton’s “On the Late Massacre in Piemont” extends the octet to the middle of the ninth line: “Slain by the bloody Piemontese that roll’d / Mother with infant down the rocks. Their moans” (lines 8-9). The beginning of line 9 in “the Cambridge ladies” both semantically completes and extends line 8, which ends with a question mark rather than a period. The placement of “perhaps,” followed by a period in the next line, thus connotes not only a Miltonic break, but also isomorphically alludes to a puritanical “perhaps” embedded like parentheses in the Cambridge ladies’ minds. The minimal punctuation—five commas strategically placed between words in lines 3-5 and lines 11 and 13 without conventional spacing for short pauses—gives the sonnet a sense of closeness within the lines and openness in most of the run-over lines. (Except for a comma in line 5, a long dash in line 6, and a question mark in line 8, none of the punctuation marks acts as a complete pause.) In formal contrast to the “furnished souls,” the enjambed lines flowing to the lower-case beginning of the next line typographically reinforces a lack of poetic decorum.

And it is through the playful typography that Cummings’ parody of Hawthorne’s concealed letter A—“imprinted in the flesh” of Dimmesdale and symbolizing both passion and judgment—surfaces (Hawthorne 174). The typography of the sonnet takes the reader back to the visual capitals with their expected significance, especially in Cummings’ juxtaposition of Cambridge’s genteel religious and aesthetic reality (Christ and Longfellow) with the scandalous affair of Mrs. N and Professor D. The former, a mar-

ried New England Christian, commits adultery with Professor D, a scholar who would have also been steeped in Christ and Longfellow. While we have no way of knowing who (if anyone) Cummings had in mind for the identity of “N” and “D,” the typographical hint of ND-in-adultery almost compels the reader to perceive an absent letter A among the three capitals: [A]ND. The letter A (adultery) is implied yet simultaneously concealed. Although we cannot be absolutely sure that Cummings has Hawthorne’s letter A or an allusion to Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale’s scandal in mind, the absent letter A in the affair between N and D suggests a literary parody of *The Scarlet Letter*, as well as indicating the continuing presence of a repressive New England that “at the present writing” comfortably ignores the moon (lines 7, 12-14). By emphasizing how a fascination with scandal undercuts the New England tradition and social mores that furnish the Cambridge ladies’ “comfortable minds” (line 2), Cummings renders the paradox between fact and truth visible through typography. This widely anthologized and celebrated satirical sonnet on “the Cambridge ladies” ingeniously and visually enfolds one layer of its meaning beneath the surface of the poem in its typography.¹

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Note

1. Thanks to Michael Webster for his note explicating some meanings of the ampersand (see the next article). This informative reading prompted me to re-examine Cummings’ reference to “Mrs. N” and “Professor D” in the “Cambridge ladies” sonnet, leading to a discovery of a possible literary parody of a suppressed “letter A” echoing the repressive Puritanism in Hawthorne’s novel *The Scarlet Letter*.

Works Cited

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