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Use of Lowercase in the Poems of Cummings and Bear

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Abstract

This paper explores the politics of using lowercase in the selected poems, “who are you little i?” by E. E. Cummings and “Grandmother” by Ray Young Bear. They have violated the grammar rules and used only lowercase in their poems but there is politics in doing so. Cummings' poems show a particular quirk of syntax. It is linguistically a structural newness to the readers. He presents a kind of new style of writing poetry with its unconventional use of capitalization. For Bear, this is symbolic in that the lowercase means the Mesquaki tribe in North America. They have been discriminated against by the ruling-class Americans. Bear's poem is the voice of the North Americans who are demanding equal rights and identity. This practice is still going on in America though constitutionally it has been amended. So, this paper aims to enhance the sociopolitical condition of those North Americans who are still working class and whose rights have not been granted yet. Cummings recalls his childhood which is full of truth and the source of knowledge for grown-up people. Remembering the childhood moments connected to nature that always inspires people. Both Cummings and Bear have a politics of new style in poetic discourse and want to show America's sociopolitical condition. Cummings has the politics of defamiliarization which is a new style. This attracts the readers as his poetic structure is uncommon. The study adopts document analysis methods to analyse lower cases in the poems.

Keywords: defamiliarization, discrimination, idiosyncratic syntax, lowercase, sociopolitics, symbolic

Introduction

This paper explores the politics of using lowercase in the poems, “who are you little i?” by E. E. Cummings and “Grandmother” by Ray Young Bear. Both Cummings and Bear seem to have violated the grammar rules and used only the lowercase in their poems but there is politics in doing so. Cummings showed a particular idiosyncrasy of syntax. It is a structural newness to the readers so that they can memorize his poems. He intends to defamiliarize the style. He presented a new style of writing poetry with its unconventional use of capitalization changing the structure as “structuralism challenges

the culturist conception of ideology” (Decherney and Sender n. p.). Using the capital and small letters according to grammar rules is the culturalist conception of ideology. Violating the grammar rule in poetry is not a new trend. Dylan Thomas also violated a grammar rule in his poem “Break, Break, Break”. The line, ‘This Bread I Break’ is an odd structure. No grammar either structural or traditional excuses the ‘object+ subject-verb’ pattern. But this structure strikes the reader’s mind because of defamiliarization. Structural defamiliarization also makes the poetry sweet. This is what Cummings and Bear have done. Ray Young Bear seems to state that the symbolic presentation of lower cases misrepresents the North Americans.

For Bear, the lowercase symbolises the Native Americans, the Mesquaki tribe, in North America. The North Americans are the lowercase before ruling-class Americans in America. Bear seems to claim that the American Constitution has not addressed them practically yet. The ruling class Americans discriminated against and dominated North Americans as backward and uncivilized barbaric citizens. So, the lowercase is the metaphorical representation of Native Americans. Bear’s poem is the voice of the misrepresentation of North Americans. The North Americans’ condition does not seem to be above the working-class farmers. Bear’s grandmother is the representative figure of North Americans whose horizon is narrow. Her geography is narrow as it is from her house to the farm, and from the farm to her house. The major concern of this paper is to enhance the sociopolitical condition of North Americans. Bear seems to enhance the structural newness to the entire scenario of the politics of America. So does Cummings indirectly. The poems of Bear were about the North Americans’ identity crisis.

Bear raised the sociopolitical issue, whereas Cummings used a new style in poetry writing. Cummings’s use of lowercase means the creativity of the child is more effective than the grown-ups. This is an imagist trend of poetry as English poetry in the mid-twenties, ushered by Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, and E. E. Cummings marks diversity, experimentation, and innovations with idiosyncratic syntactic composition. This trend was specifically characterized as an imagist movement which was a significant breakaway from the early conventions, mostly attuned to metrical structure, and figurative, and rhetorical expressions. The poetic diction for the age meant only things but not the ideas suffused in vibrant imagery clustered with unique typological and graphic lines. Moreover, descriptive imagery in quizzical expressions, lapped with sardonic remarks defamiliarizes many poems. Defamiliarizing either by using lowercase or violating grammar rules by placing the words separately and squeezing them together can attract the readers’ minds. Furthermore, the poetic descriptions are coined with fastidious allusions as if they are put together with

juxtapositions. That is, there is a blend of micro to macro, seen to unseen, abstract to fact or concrete, perceptive to non-perceptive. At the same time, the stylistic distortions, puzzling words, and unfamiliar breaks of stanzas and lines perpetuate verbal rhapsody that was taking vogue with astonishing poetic surge. This movement created a radical transformation in the prevailing trend of poetic writing. Many of the poets of this trend blatantly expressed that poetry is nothing but the mere expressions of language in which things are beautifully and honestly described.

Methodology

The study employs document analysis and survey methods for the analysis of the poems composed by Cummings and Bear. This is qualitative research in nature. The researcher collected the necessary materials from the libraries and the websites to know about literature. To find the required information, keywords like lowercase, equal rights, identity crisis, discrimination, and new style were used. This is a kind of combination of both explanatory and exploratory research. This paper examines the politics of using the lowercase in the poems by the poets as a new style. Bear represents the North Americans as a lowercase that they are marginalized and that they have not been treated equally. This poem raises the voice of the identity crisis. There are two poems as primary data for the research but there are several secondary data collected from different sources like journal articles, e-books, and print books. This is slightly empirical research, too.

Review of Literature

For the literature, mainly, I have reviewed Ray Young Bear's "Grandmother" and *Manifestation Wolverine: The Collected Poetry of Ray Young Bear*, E. E. Cummings's "who are you little I?" and *Etcetera the Unpublished Poems* as the primary data. Further, I have also reviewed Iain Landles's "An Analysis of Two Poems by E.E. Cummings", Katlin Mondello's "E. E. Cummings and the Politics of Small Scale Aesthetics", Marcello Paganini and Kier Elam's "The Case of Cummings", Roi Tartakovsky and Etienne Terblanche's "E. E. Cummings's Parentheses: Punctuation as Poetic Device". These poems, essays and books represent the imagist movement. Only one type of structure of writing is monotonous for which this movement sparks the situation and vibes the peculiarity and idiosyncrasy of syntax as a new style which attracts the readers. Through the use of lowercase, Bear and Cummings led the imagist movement though there is not much difference in terms of issues the other writers raise.

Against this backdrop, Cummings's other poem entitled "Buffalo Bill's" can be analyzed as the most representative poetic piece, reflecting the entire trend of the imagist movement.

like, 'Jesus' and 'he' in an unsystematic manner symbolize the scattered mentality of the modern people. So, there is a contrast of willingness to live together and separately as the poem's structure indicates. Anyway, there is beauty in contrast. This also suggests that many people have been living smoothly as their relations are good, whereas most people who do not have good relations have been living separately. This is what the poem's structure seems to reflect and how the sociopolitical strata are projected.

Discussion and Results

Every writer follows the grammar strictly while composing either a poem or writing an essay. But some authors violate the grammar rules knowingly and the beauty they create is awesome. This is what Bear and Cummings do in their poems. They have different purposes and politics of using the lowercase. Generally, this is found in poetry but not in essays, novels, plays or stories. This paper concerns why the use of lowercase in the poems, "who are you little i?" by E. E. Cummings' and "Grandmother" by Ray Young Bear. They have knowingly done this to make the peculiar style to the readers and satirize the realities through these strategies. After all, Cummings has the interest of attracting the audience not by violating the clause pattern but by violating the punctuation, using the lowercase in his poem, "who are you little i? In this poem, the speaker is talking to a little child of five or six who is looking out the window in the dusk and it is a beautiful scene of nature. He seems to have been enjoying the beauty of nature though s/he may not know that beauty has the power of attraction. Landles opines, "[t]he childish awakening from a state of innocence to knowledge is not detected by all critics" (33). Every child's knowledge comes from a state of innocence. Cummings seems to say that there is no difference between lowercase, a child and innocence but the society is only in favour of conventional use of capitalization. Similarly, the importance of lowercase and child cannot be undervalued. This represents the process of development of the human mind. The child symbolizes innocence and innocence might be the source of knowledge. Cummings presents the poem like this:

who are you, little i
 (five or six years old)
 peering from some high
 window; at the gold
 of November sunset. (lines 1-5)

In these lines of the poem, all the words are lowercases which indicate the little innocent child. He is looking out a high window at the sunset. Cummings claims "that

children are usually more spontaneously creative than grown-ups” (37). The child observed the sunset and that impacted his/her mind. This helps him/her create something unpredictably new ideas that benefit the masses. The creativity of the child is unquestionable in comparison to adults. This scene may not make an age-old man of eighty at the same rate. Cummings seems to claim that children are more curious and excited as well as creative and productive than grown-ups. His poems composed in lowercase show a particular quirk of syntax. It is his unusual structure which attracts the readers’ attention. Whereas, for Bear, this is symbolic in that the lowercase means the Native Americans, the Mesquaki tribe, in North America, not a child though like an ignored child. The Mesquaki tribe has been discriminated against and deprived by the ruling-class Americans.

Cummings seems to say that children are innocent but they are highly enthusiastic. The enthusiasm of a child is unquestionable. The enthusiastic persons are creative as well as visionary. Similarly, Bear says that the Mesquaki tribe, who has been ignored and neglected, are more innovative and hard-working than ruling-class Americans. The importance of manual workers cannot be ignored or neglected.

This paper analyzes the socio-political context in that many imagist poets: E. E. Cummings, William Carlos Williams, and Ezra Pound are not merely the precursors of the imagist movements, as experimental aesthetics of the time, but are also the campaigners who try to break away from the esthetic concept prevailing in their times. Their epoch-making poetic writings, unique and stylistically rich, also projected social and cultural issues of the time. The poets seem to have been trying to make reactions against the capitalistic and affluent class, thereby advocating justice, equal rights and opportunities for all in the societies. Their outrageous remarks in contemporary societies thus seem to be reflected in their poetries. Many societies were under hardships and difficulties for the survival and necessities of life after two great wars. This is what their poetries seem to suggest.

Except for Cummings’s little child and Bear’s the Mesquaki tribe, their poetries also symbolize the deteriorated condition of Japan and Germany after the Great War. Thus, using lowercase represents this reality as many powerful countries became powerless, lowercase or perhaps a child. The use of lowercase symbolizes that many towering countries fell, socially, financially, morally, politically, culturally and many such –llys. This reality can also be read in the use of lowercase (child and Mesquaki tribe). The USSR-like country almost collapsed and so did Japan. To symbolize these realities, the poets seem to have indicated the fall through the lowercase in their poetries. Poetry is beyond the prediction of the general human mind. Harry Blamires states that [p]oetry’s true function is ‘the winning of the mind from wickedness to

virtue' (56). The poetic language can convince even wicked-minded persons and they can turn into virtue. So, the poetry has that power. Similarly, Bear has the hope of turning the Mesquaki tribe into a better condition by changing the minds of the ruling class.

Against this backdrop, it can be easily deduced that these poets, most prominently E. E. Cummings and Ray Young Bear, seem to be concerned with socio-political issues. Several of their writings reflect that. For this purpose, it takes an account of E. E. Cummings's poetry and how it is embedded with a socio-political dimension. Tartakovsky states, "Cummings derived his style from the earlier phases of Modernism of the 1910s, with a particular emphasis on the Imagist movement" (217). His poetry manifests stylistic distortions with a particular emphasis on the Imagist movement. He uses idiosyncratic structures that look quite quaint as if he is playful. However, this is not the case because he is greatly dismayed by the conflicting wars and their wounds in human lives. Besides, he is also not happy with the progress society makes in the names of rights and democratic institutions, for all these rights and institutions are just on paper and they have not made any drastic transformation in the societies. Poetically, his lines reflect the social and cultural chaos of the society. Since his poetic lines are short and long, human beings, in society, are divided in the same spirit of value distortion and lack of equality, trust, and confidence. There is a big gap in human beings in terms of class, wealth, social upbringing, and values. Cummings reflects this reality in his poem "Buffalo Bill's". Using a single word in one line like "stallion" and "Jesus" suggests the sociopolitical condition of modern society that man is alienated from his fellow beings. Cummings is quite critical of the progress society has made. After the havoc of the First World War, society did not have its usual pace and it was the most volatile time in human history. There were several rising conflicts created by class and social and political consciousness. The conflict between right and left, rich and poor, affluent and less affluent, capitalistic and non-capitalistic modes shadowed humanitarian and universal values. Furthermore, the glory and national pride, to some extent, brought hostility in their minds.

There is another facet of Cummings' poetry to justify the social and political issues of society. In his poetry, we find he is using all the small letters without capitalizing the letters that were required. The hierarchy between uppercase and lowercase symbolizes the hierarchy between humans. Cummings and Bear seem to suggest that the ruling class should address the pain of lowercase- the working class people. The use of lowercase in poems is a rhetorical device through which both poets dream of equality in society. A classless society or hierarchy-less society is what the common people want. The authors are always in favour of the common people's betterment and their happiness. This is what the sociopolitical change is. Moreover, Katlin Mondello specifically states:

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Cummings' deliberate choice of small-scale participation in the political spirit of the counter-culture sparked the modernist desire to overturn previously held ideas and beliefs. This revolutionary consciousness created a climate ripe for change in values such as valorization of the small. In the realm of science, developments in the study of germs, cells, atoms, and even phonology near the turn of the century helped to reconceptualize the small as a powerful and important building block. (36)

We also see another dimension of E. E. Cummings' poetry which is commented as masculine pride in his poetry because all his groups were masculine friends who took part in the movement. The lowercase may mean the germs, cells, atoms, and even phonology but their power value, which is beyond human expectation, cannot be neglected or undervalued. Therefore, all the lowercase figures are not negligible ones. The atomic power is unpredictable. This, too, can be analyzed as his rhetorical strategy. He never believed in a society which can be divided into gender and class consciousness. However, many of the poems of this trend seem to be connected with social and cultural issues of the time. For this campaign, they engaged in the movement of fraternity as the revolutionaries who could not feel easy with the times. They wanted to raise their voices because all wars and conflicts are the result of wrong notions of human sentimentality and idolizing power:

Cummings' pacifism in a century full of devastating wars resulted in poems that eagerly attempt to confront and redefine masculinity. His poems battled the conventions which classified pacifism as not masculine. While his later poetry often presents a construct of the man of the sixties. Many of his earlier poems present the desolation and isolation of modern man while criticizing conventional male roles as outdated and ineffective. (Paginini 155)

Cummings makes it clear that there are incredible impacts of war in poems that eagerly attempt to confront and redefine masculinity. Because of the great wars, masculine Japan came down a few days after the destruction of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. His poems have battled against the conventions which have classified nonviolence. The poet criticizes the conventional male roles that are obsolete. His earlier poems present the sadness and alienated obligation maybe because of over use of machines. His poems also seem to symbolize establishing an egalitarian society. The conventional male roles have discriminated against other non-males. These messages can also be disseminated to the masses from his poems. Therefore, both Cummings and Bear advocate in favour of an egalitarian society.

Conclusion

This research paper was carried out to explore the politics of using lowercase in the selected poems, “who are you little i?” by E. E. Cummings and “Grandmother” by Ray Young Bear. Why these poets violated the grammar rules by using the lowercase in their poems have politics in doing so. Cummings wanted to show a particular idiosyncrasy of syntax as a structural newness to the readers so that his poetry has long-lasting impacts and can be sustained in the gyre of English literature. He presented a new style of writing poetry with its unconventional use of capitalization. For Bear, the lowercase is symbolic of the Native Americans, the Mesquaki tribe, in North America. The ruling class Americans have discriminated against and deprived them and their identities have been in crisis. Bear states that lower cases misrepresent the North Americans. His poem raised the voice of the North Americans for equal rights and identity. The poem seems to appeal to the real presence of North Americans without question. They are still treated as other citizens rather than Americans in practice although the Constitution seems to define equal rights. The North Americans’ lives are languishing as they are almost working-class people. Their grip at the government level or in the administration is negligible despite their number and capabilities. The purpose of this paper was to enhance the sociopolitical condition of those North Americans who are fighting for their rights and identities and make readers know about a new style of using lowercase in poetry.

On the other hand, Cummings clarifies that masculinity and conventional capitalization have nothing to do with it. According to him, atoms, germs, cells and phonology can never be ignored in case of their minimality, their works are beyond human expectation. The lowercase symbolizes the minimal value of Japan, Germany and the USSR after the Great Wars. The permanency of lowercase is unquestionable. So, it is foolish to dominate the lowercase or lower-class people. This is an ongoing process and problem sociopolitical scenario of the present world. This study recommends that one should not take pride in capitalization. After a certain time, it turns into lowercase in no time. The lowercase is the base and it should never be neglected and undervalued. Originally, this was a qualitative research. The study adopted the document analysis and general survey methods for the discussion and it explored the usage of lowercase in the given poems minutely.

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