

## Context: E. E. Cummings and 'next to of course god america i'

### E. E. Cummings (1894–1962)

Edward Estlin Cummings was born on 14 October 1894 in Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA to liberal, educated parents. He became popularly known as ee cummings (or e. e. cummings) usually written in lower case – although it is now thought he preferred the use of capitals. An influential and highly regarded American poet, he was also a very prolific writer, publishing nearly 2900 poems, two autobiographical novels, four plays and several essays in his lifetime.

During World War One, Cummings enlisted in the Norton-Harjes Ambulance Corps, based in Paris, a place he loved. In 1917, Cummings and a friend were mistakenly arrested on suspicion of espionage, having openly expressed anti-war views and spoken of a lack of hatred for the Germans. They were released after three and a half months in an internment camp after the intervention of Cummings' well connected father. He returned to the USA where he was drafted into the army until November 1918. Cummings' first book *The Enormous Room* recounted his experiences of internment, and immediately gained him an international reputation.

After the war, he divided his life between houses in rural Connecticut and New York's artistic enclave, Greenwich Village, with frequent visits to Paris. He also travelled extensively throughout Europe, meeting poets and artists including Pablo Picasso, whose work he particularly admired.

Initially influenced by modernist and imagist poets such as Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell, Cummings' poetry can often appear avant-garde. He also later experimented with surrealism and Dadaism in his work. However, he was also inspired by the English Romantic poets and used traditional forms including the sonnet. His work is permeated with themes of love, death and nature and many have a satirical edge, including 'next to of course god america i'.

Cummings experimented with form, punctuation, spelling and sentence structure, often abandoning traditional techniques to create a radical, idiosyncratic style. Nevertheless, the simplicity of his language, his playful style and attention to the subjects of war and sex gained him great popularity as a poet.

## **'next to of course god america i'**

'next to of course god america i' is a satirical poem. The absence of punctuation and capitalisation allows the reader to engage with the poem's ambiguity – what does the speaker actually intend with his words? It is interesting that he chooses to capitalise the pronoun 'He' as if placing the speaker in a place of superiority or distance. He initially appears to glorify America, although this is also ambiguous as he tempers this with phrases such as 'and so forth'. His oxymoronic description of the soldiers as 'heroic happy dead' also leaves the reader feeling ambivalent. In many ways one can view this as a very modern poem, with many of the criticisms Cummings levels at his country being as relevant today as they were in the 1920s.

### **Bibliography**

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