

# A Study on the Ethics of Reading Cummings' Poetry from the Perspective of Cool/Hot Media Theory: A Case Study of *Me up at does*

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**Abstract:** This paper interprets E.E. Cummings's poem "Me up at does" through the lens of Marshall McLuhan's "Cool/Hot Media" theory. The study argues that the poem, through its "low-definition" forms such as subversive grammar and fragmented typography, successfully constructs itself as a "cool medium" text. This formal characteristic forcibly interrupts the reader's passive reading mode, compelling them to engage in a "participatory reading" that necessitates grammatical reconstruction, image synthesis, and emotional reasoning. The core thesis of this paper is that this unique, form-driven reading mechanism is key to the generation of the poem's ethical force: when readers co-construct the poem's complete scenario and ethical dilemma through their own cognitive efforts, their role shifts from that of a spectator to a "co-author" of meaning and a "complicit participant" in the ethics. Consequently, the poem's final sharp interrogation is internalized as a direct moral self-inquiry due to the reader's deep participation, revealing Cummings's poetic wisdom of using radical form as an ethical apparatus to achieve an embodied moral experience.

**Keywords:** E.E. Cummings; Cool/Hot Media Theory; Participatory Reading; Ethics of Reading; *Me up at does*

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## 1.Introduction

In the constellation of twentieth-century modernist poetry, E.E. Cummings stands out as a star of extremely distinct style, renowned for his radical subversion of traditional grammar, syntax, and typography. His poetry not only challenges the conventional boundaries of the English language but also expands the expressive dimensions of poetic art through its unique "visual poetics." Long-standing academic research on his work has generally followed two relatively clear paths: one focuses on the visual formal experiments of his "picture poems," exploring how the spatial arrangement of words generates meaning; the other is dedicated to interpreting the philosophical reflections and ethical concerns about humanity, nature, and life within his poetry.

Domestic research focusing on the short poem "Me up at does" has formed a multi-dimensional landscape. On the linguistic level, Ma Yuchen (2012), using case grammar to compare the original poem with a rewritten version, pointed out that syntactic deviation enhances semantic tension and interpretive openness. From the dimension of visual poetics, Xu Chunjie and Zhang Xuhong (2009; 2010), employing multimodal analysis, argued that the vertical typography, lexical symmetry, and abnormal capitalization construct a metaphor of "human-mouse eye contact." In the field of stylistics, Ren Liming (2009) and Wei Xuemei et al. (2011) emphasized the "defamiliarization" effect and ecological critical significance of "deviation" techniques like word order and punctuation. However, these studies either discuss form and theme separately or treat form as subordinate to theme, failing to reveal the deep mechanism of form as an "active architecture," let alone address the connection between form and ethical efficacy.

International research on E.E. Cummings's "Me up at does" presents a pattern of multi-dimensional and in-depth development. Linguistically, Cureton (1985a, 1985b) systematically analyzed the abnormal order of pronominal modifiers in the poem and its challenge to traditional syntax, revealing how Cummings creates a unique poetic logic through grammatical deviation. In visual poetics, Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) theory of visual grammar provides an important framework for interpreting the poem. Scholars like Welch (1984) have deeply explored how visual modalities such as the poem's vertical typography and abnormal capitalization (e.g., the contrast between "i" and "You") interact with the text to construct the spatial metaphor of a "dialogue of gazes." From an ecocritical perspective, Kidder (1979) interpreted the mouse's question in the poem as a profound critique of anthropocentrism, while cognitive poetics researcher Hiraga (2005), drawing on reader-response theory, explained

how the poem's "defamiliarization" techniques activate readers' metaphorical thinking and ethical reflection. These studies have not only deepened the understanding of the poem's formal experiments but also revealed the intrinsic connection between its form and ethical concerns, laying a solid foundation for subsequent research.

This paper introduces Marshall McLuhan's "Cool/Hot Media" theory as a methodological lens. Although originating from mass communication studies, this theory's distinction between "high-definition, low-participation" hot media and "low-definition, high-participation" cool media, with its emphasis on the "agency of media form," highly aligns with modernist literary theory's focus on the materiality of language. Selecting "Me up at does" as the core case study, this paper aims to demonstrate that Cummings, through "low-definition" strategies such as grammatical rupture, typographical fragmentation, and informational gaps, constructs the poem as a typical "cool medium" text. This form is not an end in itself but a rhetorical strategy—it forcibly interrupts the reader's passive reading, drives them into "participatory reading," and ultimately transforms the reader from a "bystander" of the ethical dilemma into a "co-author" of meaning and a "complicit participant" in responsibility, thereby facilitating the internal generation of the poem's ethical efficacy. This study not only offers a new perspective for interpreting Cummings's poetry but also seeks to promote methodological dialogue between literary criticism and media studies.

## **2. McLuhan's Cool/Hot Media Theory**

This article adopts Marshall McLuhan's hot and cool media theory as its core analytical framework, a theory first systematically proposed in his work *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. McLuhan's theoretical paradigm marks a fundamental shift from a "content-centric" to a "form-centric" approach. His famous dictum, "the medium is the message," emphasizes that the technological form, perceptual characteristics, and the informational environment created by a medium shape individual patterns of perception, cognitive habits, and even social structures more profoundly than any specific content it transmits (McLuhan, 1964). Within this paradigm, he introduces the classic distinction between "hot" and "cool" media:

Hot media are characterized by "high definition" and "low participation." "High definition" refers to the medium's capacity to provide information that is extremely rich and detailed, requiring little sensory or cognitive completion from the audience, thereby placing them in a relatively passive and detached state of reception. For instance, radio (high-fidelity sound) and film (rich visual imagery) are considered hot media, as they extend a single sense and bring it to a state of "high saturation" (McLuhan, 1964).

Cool media, in contrast, are defined by "low definition" and "high participation." They provide relatively little information, containing numerous gaps, omissions, or ambiguities, thus compelling the audience to engage deeply, actively mobilizing multiple senses and cognitive faculties to fill these informational voids and complete the final construction of meaning (McLuhan, 1964). Examples such as the telephone, comics (requiring mental completion of sequential action), and early television (with its blurry images due to low scan lines) are typical cool media, demanding that the audience become active participants, even "co-authors," in the communication process.

The key to understanding this theory lies in recognizing that McLuhan's definition of "definition" is a neutral descriptor of a medium's formal characteristics, not a value judgment. The "low definition" of cool media is not a flaw but rather the core mechanism that fosters deep engagement and active creation. As Paul Levinson notes, McLuhan's theory reveals how media forms "predispose perception and interaction in certain ways" for the content they carry (Levinson, 1999). More importantly, applying the hot/cool media theory to the analysis of poetic texts means treating the material form of poetry—including grammar, typography, punctuation, lineation, etc.—as an active "literary medium." When a poem systematically deviates from conventions to reduce its semantic "definition," it constructs itself as a "cool medium" text. This formal strategy resonates with concepts like "gaps" and "negation" in Wolfgang Iser's reader-response theory, collectively inviting and necessitating the reader's commitment to an active, "participatory reading" (Iser, 1978).

Therefore, the theoretical framework established in this section provides a solid foundation for the textual

analysis in the subsequent part. We will demonstrate that the “cool medium” quality of E. E. Cummings’s poetry is not merely an isolated display of technique but the key mechanism generating its ethical efficacy. By creating formal “gaps,” it forces the reader to transform from a bystander into an “experiencer” of the situation and a “co-conspirator” in meaning-making, ultimately internalizing the poem’s ethical questioning into the reader’s own moral interrogation.

### **3. Analysis of the Formal Features of "Me up at does"**

This chapter, as the cornerstone of the paper, will delve into how Cummings, through meticulous formal design in "Me up at does," systematically reduces the text's "definition," thereby constructing the poem as a "cool medium" text requiring deep reader participation. Its formal experiments are mainly manifested at three levels: grammar, typography, and reference, collectively creating rich "blanks" in meaning.

#### **3.1 "Signal Interference" at the Grammatical Level**

The poem's opening line, "Me up at does," immediately constitutes a "systematic destruction" of standard English syntactic rules. It completely violates the basic subject-predicate-object logical sequence, ceasing to be an instantly understandable transparent signal and becoming a puzzle that requires active decoding. This disruptive word order acts like a strong interference artificially introduced into a clear communication channel, directly breaking the reader's automated, habitual reading flow. The reader cannot passively receive meaning but is forced to initiate a cognitive "decoding" program, attempting various grammatical reorganization schemes in their mind. This cognitively effortful process, mandated by grammatical deviation, is the core embodiment of the "high participation" demanded by a "cool medium." It is not an elegant rhetorical variation but a fundamental shift in the mode of communication, forcing the reader to switch from passively "consuming meaning" to actively "solving a puzzle."

#### **3.2 "Gaps and Interaction" at the Typographical Level**

Cummings's experimentation extends beyond word order to the physical typography of the poem. He does not break lines according to semantic units but deliberately cuts a complete image into visual fragments. For instance, the sequence "out of the floor/ quietly Stare/ a poisoned mouse" shatters a potentially coherently expressed image into pieces. The visualblank space created at each line break transforms into a semantic "chasm" in the reader's comprehension process. The reader must mobilize their own imagination and logical reasoning to reassemble these isolated word fragments into a coherent mental scene. This typographical strategy not only creates a unique visual image but is itself a profound formal metaphor—the movement of the reading eye jumping up and down between lines mimics the upward movement of the gaze and the hesitant state of mind upon encountering a shock, thereby physically prolonging and complicating the perceptual process, increasing the difficulty and required duration of comprehension.

#### **3.3 "Subject Ambiguity" at the Referential Level**

The poem begins abruptly with the objective case "Me," while delaying the appearance of the subject and action. This "Me," placed in a focal position yet unidentified, acts like a blank ID card, throwing the reader into an uncertain subject position at the very first moment of reading. The ambiguity and delay of reference prevent the reader from quickly establishing a stable observational perspective to understand the scene. This "subject ambiguity" strategy, creating tension with the later-appearing "a poisoned mouse" as the agent of action, jointly produces a sense of suspended perspective. The reader feels both like the "Me" being stared at and like a third party observing the scene. This unstable, wavering identity greatly enhances the text's internal tension and interpretive uncertainty. It prevents the reader from easily identifying completely with any single perspective, thereby forcing a more critical examination of the entire situation.

In summary, through coordinated operations at the grammatical, typographical, and referential levels, Cummings successfully crafts his poetry into a textual field of "low-definition" information. These formal strategies

are not arbitrary games but a set of precise rhetorical devices whose common purpose is to create "blanks" in meaning, thereby forcibly interrupting the reader's passive reception mode and stimulating their active, deep participation, laying the formal foundation for the ultimate realization of the poem's ethical efficacy.

#### **4. Analysis of the Ethical Efficacy Generation Mechanism in "Me up at does"**

The reason E. E. Cummings's "Me up at does" functions as a quintessential "cool medium" text lies in the poet's deliberate formal strategies, which systematically reduce informational "definition" and create the structural conditions for deep reader participation. This "low definition" is not a failure of expression but the core mechanism generating the poem's efficacy.

First, at the grammatical and typographical levels, Cummings creates cognitive resistance and semantic gaps through "signal interference" and "spatial blanks." The syntactical deviation actively disrupts habitual reading patterns, forcing the reader to transition from a passive "consumer" of meaning to an active "reconstructor." Simultaneously, the poem's typography intensifies this "cool" character. Cummings avoids breaking lines according to semantic units, instead fragmenting a complete image like "out of the floor / quietly Stare / a poisoned mouse." The blank space at each line break becomes a gap readers must bridge, while the vertical layout and staggered lines mimic an upward gaze and a fragmented cognitive process, prolonging perception and demanding the synthesis of disparate word-fragments into a coherent mental scene.

Furthermore, these formal gaps directly drive the reader's participatory mechanism, enabling a cognitive leap from "syntactic decoding" to "situational experience" and finally to "ethical reflection." When the reader successfully reconstructs the inverted syntax into "A poisoned mouse... stares up at me," they are no longer a bystander but are deeply implicated in the constructed scenario of the "human-mouse gaze." The scene built through their own cognitive effort creates a more profound experience than direct statement. As visual grammar theory suggests, the vertical layout and the symmetrical placement of "Me" and "You" form a clear "demand" image, compelling the reader to occupy the dual roles of "the one stared at by the mouse" and "the witness observing the scene." This perspectival oscillation fosters an embodied understanding of the poem's power dynamics.

Ultimately, this highly participatory reading mode leads to the internalization of the reader's role, transforming them from a "co-author of meaning" into a "complicit sharer of ethical responsibility." The mouse's subsequent, more direct accusation ("what have i done that You wouldn't have") contrasts sharply with the human narrator's initial incoherence. Having invested their own rationality and emotion in filling the poem's gaps, the reader develops deeper empathy for the exposed eco-ethical dilemma—the hypocrisy and arrogance of anthropocentrism—and a stronger sense of personal responsibility. Thus, Cummings's formal experimentation is revealed as sophisticated rhetorical design, where the "cool medium" properties serve as an effective pathway for its ethical summons.

#### **5. Conclusion**

This study offers an innovative interpretation of E. E. Cummings's "Me up at does" by introducing McLuhan's hot/cool media theory. The research demonstrates that the poem is far from a mere linguistic experiment; rather, it is a meticulously constructed "cool medium" text characterized by its "low definition" formal features. Systematic deviations and gaps in grammar, typography, and reference effectively disrupt the reader's passive reception mode, compelling them to engage in active, "participatory reading."

The poem's syntactic fragmentation (e.g., the anomalous word order in "Me up at does") and the visual gaps in its typography collectively create informational uncertainty. These formal "blanks" are not flaws in expression but a sophisticated rhetorical design. This structure forces readers, in the process of decoding the aberrant syntax and filling the visual voids, to transition from being passive observers to active co-authors of meaning. Ultimately, this highly participatory mode of reading, compelled by the poem's formal strategies, ensures that its embedded eco-ethical critique is not perceived as an external sermon but emerges as an inevitable conclusion born from the reader's own cognitive activity, thereby significantly enhancing its ethical efficacy. This study provides a

"form-ethics" perspective for interpreting modernist experimental poetry, confirming the broad potential for dialogue between literary criticism and media theory. Future research could further explore the new manifestations of a "cool medium" poetics in the digital media age.

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