E. E. Cummings

Key to abbreviations in this Lesson Plan

AD-SL Authors In Depth – SILVER LEVEL
Resources Teaching Guides and Customizable Resources
TG Teaching Guide
SAS Student Activity Sheet
GOT Graphic Organizer Transparency

Preview • 1–2 Days

1. With the class, read and discuss the introductory material in AD-SL, pp. 182–183.
2. You may want to distribute and discuss Background on Poetry, Resources, p. 156.
3. Resources Vocabulary: TG, p. 136. Review the following vocabulary words:
   1. keen (kēn) adj. sharp; acute (p. 189)
   2. immortal (im mort’ ’l) adj. not mortal; living forever (p. 190)
   3. awry (a rì‚) adv. not straight; amiss (p. 190)
   4. flays (flàz) v. strips the skin off, as by whipping (p. 190)
   5. supple (sup’ al) adj. easily bent; flexible; lithe (p. 191)
4. Assign “Spring is like a perhaps hand,” “r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r,” “if everything happens that can’t be done,” and “l(a,” AD-SL, pp. 184–188.

Spring is like a perhaps hand, r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r, if everything happens that can’t be done, l(a • 1–2 Days

1. AD-SL Check Your Comprehension questions 1–4, p. 188; optional, Discussion Guide, Resources, p. 162.
SAMPLE ANSWERS
1. Spring is compared to a hand carefully arranging and rearranging things in a window.
2. (a) The subject is a grasshopper. (b) By line 15, the letters of the title are rearranged to spell grasshopper.
3. The poet celebrates two becoming one in love.
4. The shape reflects a leaf falling and coming to rest in the final line, which is longer than the other lines.
2. Resources Poetry: Meter: TG and SAS, pp. 81, 82, and Blank transparency: GOT, p. 187. Have students use the worksheet to scan lines from “if everything happens that can’t be done.”
3. Resources Poetry—Form: Lyric Poetry: TG and SAS, pp. 76, 80. Discuss the differences between traditional forms of uniform lines and stanzas, and modern forms of varying line lengths and stanza lengths. Point out that the form of a poem can be a clue to its content.
4. Resources Paraphrase: TG and SAS, pp. 130, 131, and Two-column Chart: GOT, p. 183. Have students paraphrase any Cummings lines that they would like to clarify.
5. AD-SL Critical Thinking questions 1–4, p. 188.
SAMPLE ANSWERS
1. Cummings emphasizes the slow and hesitant quality of spring, delighting in its appearance gradually in tiny changes. He also emphasizes that spring deliberately changes old things into new things.
2. The game of the poem suggests the playfulness Cummings suggests about the jumping insect. The scrambled letters of the title also appear to be a nonsense word that is fun to try to pronounce.
3. (a) In each stanza, the first parenthetical statement is about books, asserting that nature (flowers, birds, people) is superior to books. The second parenthetical statement is an exclamation celebrating physical movement (running, skipping, flying, leaping) with childlike exuberance. (b) The parentheses emphasize and support the themes of delight in immediate physical reality and the celebration of love itself.
4. Cummings suggests that a single leaf falling is an image of loneliness, of individual death that comes to everything and everyone in nature. At the same time, the poem demonstrates that the leaf, nature, and each individual life are also beautiful.

6. Writing Activity Ask students to write one or two paragraphs summarizing Cummings’s attitude toward nature.
7. Assign “if up’s the word;and a world grows greener,” “what if a much of a which of a wind,” “may my heart always be open to little,” and “the little horse is newlY,” AD-SL, pp. 189–192.

if up’s the word;and a world grows greener, what if a much of a which of a wind, may my heart always be open to little, the little horse is newlY • 1–2 Days

1. AD-SL Check Your Comprehension questions 1–4, p. 193.

SAMPLE ANSWERS
1. The speaker urges us to touch the sky.
2. The single secret will always be man.
3. The speaker wishes for (a) his heart always to be open to little birds who are the secret of living, and (b) his mind to stroll about hungry, fearless, thirsty, and supple.
4. Examples include “the” (line 1), “newlY” (line 1), “Born)he” (line 2), “ness(Of” (line 5), and “is:somE” (line 15).

2. **Resources** Poetry: Meter: SAS, p. 82, and Blank transparency: GOT, p. 187. Have students identify the meter of “what if a much of a which of a wind.” Notice that a poem’s meter is often a combination of different types of poetic feet.


4. **Resources** Question and Clarify: TG and SAS, pp. 134, 135, and Three-column Chart: GOT, p. 180. Encourage students to question what Cummings says and how he says it. Help students be specific with their questions and understand that careful framing of questions will help them answer questions.


6. **AD-SL** Critical Thinking questions 1–4, p. 193.

**SAMPLE ANSWERS**

1. The paradoxes include rich beggars, poor misers, the wisdom of the laziest creature, knowledge that tries to kill wisdom, and dull eyes that are keen.

2. In line 1, Cummings repeats the onomatopoeic /hw/ sound of wh to suggest the blowing wind. In line 9, he repeats the long e sound to suggest the sharp flaying sound of the wind. In line 17, he repeats the initial /d/ and final /m/ sounds to suggest a beating drum or pounding violence at the end of the world.

3. The contrasts are youth’s openness to nature with old age’s inability to recognize revelations; youth’s fearless mental adventuring with old age’s desire to be “right”; youth’s refusal to be useful and its willingness to risk failure with old age’s desire for success.

4. The theme is a celebration of pure sensation, perception of the world as a newborn experiences it, combined with immense confidence in the mother or the “someone” who provides quiet comfort and protection.

7. **Writing Activity** Have students write a brief essay evaluating Cummings’s assertion in “may my heart always be open to little” that “whatever they sing is better than to know.” Students should analyze the statement and evaluate it against specific criteria, such as clarity, reasonableness, and practicality.

8. **Assign** Idea Bank activities, AD-SL, pp. 194–195. Make individual assignments from among the activities or let students choose their own.

**Pulling It All Together • 1–2 Days**

1. **Idea Bank Activities** Collect and evaluate the written assignments. Have students participate in the panel discussion or make their musical presentations for the class.

2. **Review for and administer test.**

**ANSWERS TO TEST**

**A. Thinking About the Works of E. E. Cummings**

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1. b 2. c 3. d 4. b 5. a
6. b 7. a 8. a 9. d 10. b
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**B. Recognizing Literary Elements and Techniques**

11. **Meter** is the rhythmical pattern of a poem.

12. **Rhythm** is the beat or pulse that results from the repetition of certain combinations of stressed and unstressed syllables.

13. **Sample response:** The songs of birds are more beautiful than the scientific explanations of nature that are found in books.

14. **Sample responses:**
   - Repetition: blow hope to terror; blow seeing to blind
   - Alliteration: what if a dawn of a doom of a dream
   - Onomatopoeia: what if a keen of a lean wind flays

15. **Lyric poetry** expresses the observations and feelings of a single speaker.

**C. Essay Questions**

16. **Easy** Cummings believes that everyone should live life with tremendous exuberance, energy, and delight. Everyone should try to “touch the sky,” be open to “the secrets of living,” and experience the “deep rush through amazing day.” Cummings also feels that love is the essential part of living, and everyone should love himself or herself, other people, and the natural world. Life should be lived with a “leap,” exclaiming “we’re alive.”

17. **Average** In “what if a much of a which of a wind,” the poet imagines the end of the world, a tremendous catastrophe that brings the universe to an end. The sun and stars are destroyed and the universe is split. Even under such circumstances, the poet still values the human race. People will still be the greatest secret of the universe. Even when all of life ends, human life will still have been the greatest accomplishment of the universe.

18. **Challenging** In some poems, Cummings abandoned traditional line and stanza lengths, punctuation, capitalization, syntax, or spelling. He tried to inject a new look and sound into language, so that each poem would be an act of discovery for both writer and reader. Sometimes his experiments are effective, especially when the form conveys meaning, as in “r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r” and “I[a.]” Sometimes his experiments can be arbitrary and irritating, as in “the little horse is newlY,” because the capital letters and line breaks seem not to be connected to any specific meaning.