O sweet spontaneous

POEM TEXT

O sweet spontaneous
earth how often have
the
doting

fingers of
prurient philosophers pinched
and
poked

thee
,has the naughty thumb
of science prodded
thy

beauty how
often have religions taken
thee upon their scraggy knees
squeezing and

buffeting thee that thou mightest conceive
gods
(but
true

to the incomparable
couch of death thy
rhythmic
lover

thou answerest

them only with

spring)

SUMMARY

Oh, lovely and surprising earth, how persistently philosophers have investigated you, like lewd men feeling you up. How often science has explored your beauty, as if getting handsy with you. How often religions have seemed to lift you onto their rough laps, forcing themselves on you in hopes that you'll give birth to their gods. But you stay faithful to the rhythms of life and death, as if death were your wonderful lover, and you offer springtime as your only answer to all those human pursuits.

THEMES

NATURE VS. HUMAN BELIEF SYSTEMS

"[O sweet spontaneous]" contrasts human attempts to understand nature—and thereby dominate or conquer it—with the elusive sweetness of nature itself. Through an extended metaphor, the poem's speaker compares philosophy, science, and religion to lecherous men who sexually harass and assault the female "earth." According to the speaker, the earth resists these advances, staying faithful to "death" (her "lover") and birthing "spring" rather than "gods"—or any other result that human belief systems might desire. The poem implies, then, that nature operates according to her own mysterious rhythms rather than conforming to any philosophy or dogma. Moreover, it portrays such human belief systems as aggressive and misguided, implying that true wisdom lies in simple respect for and appreciation of nature.

The poem frames intellectual and spiritual disciplines as an intrusion on nature. Its speaker imagines the earth as a "sweet," beautiful woman and philosophy, science, and religion as "prurient" men pestering her. Like men aggressively "pinch[ing]," "pok[ing]," and "prodd[ing]" a woman's body, the poem suggests, these human disciplines seek to dominate and impose their will on nature.

In the speaker's view, philosophers, scientists, and theologians all conduct supposed intellectual inquiries that are really about asserting their own power. The speaker even accuses religion of figuratively trying to seduce or rape the earth, in hopes that she'll "conceive / gods." In other words, the speaker believes religion imposes a certain worldview on nature, in hopes that nature will fulfill its preconceived ideas and myths. All these disciplines seek to *know* the earth in an intellectual sense, but the poem depicts their search as a creepy, ill-advised attempt to *know* her in the sexual/biblical sense.

The poem imagines nature as fending off these intrusions, however, and remaining faithful only to a life-and-death cycle that eludes human control. According to the speaker, the earth (or nature) stays "true // to the incomparable / couch of death / thy rhythmic / lover." That is, she rebuffs any human attempts to dominate her (*know* her), while adhering to the incredible, indomitable rhythms of life and death.

In fact, the earth "answerest" the intellectuals "only with // spring." Instead of giving them the answers they want (which the poem may be comparing to sexual consent), nature gives them something more "spontaneous" and mysterious: a life-affirming season of growth. This "answer[]," the poem suggests, arises from nature's relationship with death and reminds intellectuals that life and death lie beyond human understanding.

Through language that's both playful and disturbing, the poem casts nature as more powerful, beautiful, and profound than the aggressive human intellect. It rejects—or at least criticizes—rational inquiry and organized religion in favor of more intuitive ways of understanding the earth.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-27

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

O sweet spontaneous
earth how often have
the
doting
fingers

Lines 1-5 introduce the poem's central, anthropomorphic character: the "earth" itself. The speaker addresses the earth through apostrophe, using a lofty-sounding "O" (a version of "Oh" often used in older English poetry to invoke gods, muses, abstractions, and other absent or non-human figures).

The speaker describes the earth as "sweet" and "spontaneous," suggesting that this will be an appreciative nature poem. Over the course of the poem's extended metaphor, it becomes clear that the speaker is in fact comparing earth—or nature—to a sweet, spontaneous, beautiful woman.

As the first stanza transitions into the next, it introduces the image of "fingers" behaving in a "doting" (affectionate) fashion:

O sweet spontaneous
earth how often have
the
doting

fingers [...]

Notice how the language unfolds slowly down the page, with short, irregular lines and dramatic enjambments between lines and stanzas. The word "the" is given the weight of its own line—highly unusual, because it's rarely an important word on its own!—as is "doting."

Meanwhile, "fingers" is not only enjambed over into a new line/stanza but also indented, adding extra white space on the page. All these effects make the language seem to dawdle and linger, like "doting // fingers" caressing something or someone. The soft alliteration of "sweet"/"spontaneous" and "how"/"have" makes the lines themselves sound sweet and harmonious. After this pleasant opening, however, the poem is about to take a slightly darker turn.

LINES 5-10

of
prurient philosophers pinched
and
poked
thee
,

Lines 5-10 reveal the owners of those "doting // fingers" in lines 4-5. It turns out these are the fingers of "prurient philosophers," who have persistently "pinched / and / poked" the earth. In describing this situation, the speaker addresses earth with the pronoun "thee" (an old-fashioned version of "you"). What's going on here?

To begin with, "prurient" means "lustful" or "highly/excessively interested in sex." Basically, the speaker is accusing these "philosophers" of taking an excessive, intrusive interest in nature, to the point where they seem to "pinch[]" and "poke[]" the earth like lecherous men grabbing a woman's body.

As the poem goes on, this comparison becomes part of an extended metaphor for the way human belief systems in general—philosophy, science, and religion—treat nature. In the speaker's view, they treat her quite badly! The earlier word "doting" (line 4) turns out to have been ironic: these philosophers are not so much affectionate as aggressive and disrespectful in their attempts to get nature to reveal herself. (Put another way, their attempts to *know* "earth" in the intellectual sense resemble a creepy attempt to *know* her in the biblical, sexual sense.)

It's no accident, then, that the speaker addresses the earth in lofty terms. By invoking her with the ceremonious "O" often directed, in older poetry, toward muses and gods, the speaker signals their high respect for her. The same goes for the "thee"s and "thou"s, which seem to treat the earth with an old-fashioned kind of reverence. Perhaps the poem is implying that *poetry* respects nature in ways that philosophy, etc. don't!

Finally, notice the peculiar, playful enjambment of the comma over the line break and stanza break. Cummings pioneered, and became famous for, this kind of highly non-standard typography. He was a painter as well as a poet, and he used visual razzle-dazzle in ways no poet had before him. Here, the enjambment further isolates "thee," which is already part of a

one-word, one-syllable line. Perhaps this is another way of granting the earth respect—the weight of a whole line—or perhaps it helps suggest the earth's vulnerability as she's pinched and poked.

LINES 10-13

has the naughty thumb
of science prodded
thy
beauty

Lines 10-13 introduce "science" as another discipline that metaphorically pesters nature. Unlike the "philosophers" in the previous lines, science is anthropomorphized: that is, the discipline itself is described as if it has human traits. Like the philosophers, science is portrayed as aggressive and intrusive: a lecherous creep "prodd[ing]" the "beauty" of the earth with his "naughty thumb."

What does this portrayal mean in everyday terms? Like philosophy, science seeks to discover the truth about nature. In order to do so, it conducts experiments on nature. It tests and measures "earth[ly]" phenomena in order to gain a better picture of reality. In the speaker's view, there's something creepy and boundary-violating about this process. There may even be something immoral, although the speaker uses the softer word "naughty."

As a stand-in for the poet, the speaker may believe that it's wiser to *appreciate* and *communicate* earth's "beauty"—the way poets do!—than to perform constant experiments on it. Or the speaker may have concerns about what scientific "prodd[ing]" can lead to (dangerous technologies, for example). Regardless, the poem doesn't turn its doubts into a full-fledged argument, the way "philosophers" might, or reach a firm conclusion, as "science" might. Instead, it expresses doubt in the form of an unsettling image.

LINES 13-18

how
often have religions taken
thee upon their scraggy knees
squeezing and
buffeting thee that thou mightest conceive
gods

After the deliberately unsettling imagery in the previous stanzas, lines 13-18 become even creepier. According to the speaker, the earth is not only "pinched / and / poked" by philosophy and "prodded" by science, it's all but assaulted by "religions." The poem's extended metaphor suggests that religion, of the three disciplines, tries to dominate nature most aggressively and inappropriately:

[...] how
often have religions taken
thee upon their scraggy knees
squeezing and

buffeting thee that thou mightest conceive
gods

In other words, religions are like men who hoist the beautiful earth onto their laps (which are "scraggy," as in hairy or bony) and aggressively manhandle her, in an effort to seduce or even rape her. Their hope is to impregnate the earth with "gods," which she will then bear forth. This metaphor suggests that, while philosophy and science investigate nature in an intrusive way, religions go a step further, seeking to *impose* their worldview on nature. Perhaps it also suggests that they seek to dominate the earth in a political sense and thereby impose their worldview on *people*. Either way, their "gods" are a preconceived idea that they try to realize through force.

Notice how enjambment pushes the word "buffeting" (meaning *hitting hard*) over the line/stanza break, giving this forceful word extra force. Enjambment also gives "gods" the weight of its own brief line (after the poem's longest line), creating a punchline-like surprise. (Given the context, the reader might expect a word like "children" to come after "conceive.")

LINES 19-24

(but
true
to the incomparable
couch of death thy
rhythmic
lover

After several stanzas in which the earth suffers unwanted, metaphorical "pok[ing]" and "prodd[ing]" from would-be lovers, lines 19-24 describe the "lover" she *does* want. That lover is "death," whose presence adds a dash of allusion to the poem's extended metaphor.

These lines probably allude to the ancient Greek myth of Hades and Persephone, the king and queen of the underworld. In this story, Hades, god of the dead, makes Persephone, a goddess associated with nature and vegetation, his bride in the underworld. Persephone's yearly return to the upper world (earth's surface) was supposed to mark the start of spring.

The poem sketches a similar scenario, in which "earth" stays "true" to "death," her "rhythmic / lover." The phrase "incomparable / couch" might reflect the unique strangeness of having death as one's lover; it also suggests that death is an unparalleled lover. The poem seems to imply, specifically, that death is a more *natural* lover than the cold intellectual disciplines mentioned earlier. Death and the earth belong together, in other words; they're part of the same natural cycle. Their lovemaking is "rhythmic," a word that evokes the yearly rhythms of this cycle: the way the barren/dead season of

winter produces the vibrant season of spring, and so on.

LINES 25-27

thou answerest
them only with
spring)

Lines 25-27 disrupt the one formal feature that has stayed consistent throughout the poem. Whereas the first 24 lines were organized into quatrains (however wild their spacing, line lengths, punctuation, etc.), each of these last three lines is a stanza unto itself. The breaking of the stanza pattern, and the drastic indentations of lines 25 and 27, are final reminders of the earth's "spontane[ity]." They occur as the poem mentions the wildest, most spontaneous season of all: "spring"!

In the poem's extended metaphor, springtime is the earth's "answer[]" to philosophy, science, and religion. The poem imagines these belief systems as pestering nature for affirmation of their beliefs, like men seeking sexual consent (or acquiescence) by coming on way too strong. But earth/nature doesn't give them the answer they want. Instead, she gives them the kind of mysterious, spontaneous, wild beauty that doesn't square with their rigid systems.

Again, the poem may be alluding to the myth of Hades and Persephone, which portrays spring as the result of a nature goddess (Persephone) returning from the dead. Alternatively, the poem might be imagining spring as the *child* of "death" and "earth," in contrast with the "gods" that religions hope to conceive with earth (lines 17-18). Either way, the implication is the same. Instead of philosophical proofs, scientific certainties, or almighty gods, nature answers the quest for absolute truth with a beauty beyond human knowing.

SYMBOLS

SPRING

Spring traditionally symbolizes rebirth and renewal. It's also traditionally associated with youth, beauty, and love. Though it enters this poem only at the very end (lines 25-27), it seems to evoke all these concepts, as well as the natural "sweetness" and "spontane[ity]" mentioned at the poem's start.

More specifically, the poem cites spring as the earth's "answer[]" to philosophy, science, and religion—a triumphant retort that seems to mock and frustrate all these human endeavors. In this context, spring represents everything those belief systems *can't grasp* about nature, including its beauty, romance, and vitality. For all their aggressive attempts to dominate the "earth," the poem implies, these strict disciplines are ultimately overmatched by earth's spontaneous power. Like dirty old men harassing a beautiful young woman, they can be a nuisance, but they look feeble and foolish in the end.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 25-27:** "thou answerest / them only with / spring)"

POETIC DEVICES

EXTENDED METAPHOR

The whole poem consists of an extended metaphor, which incorporates personification, anthropomorphism, and symbolism. (For more on the first two, see the Personification entry in this section. For more on the last one, see the Symbols section.)

Throughout the poem, the speaker compares the earth to a beautiful woman fending off the aggressive advances of philosophy, science, and religion. Though the genders of these personified "characters" are never stated, they are strongly implied, especially in the passage about "religions" (lines 14-18). These lines seem to accuse religion of assaulting the earth, figuratively speaking, in hopes of impregnating her with "gods." Basically, they accuse religion of trying to subjugate the world.

In general, the poem portrays philosophy, science, and religion as overly aggressive, male-dominated pursuits. They are human disciplines that claim to be learning about nature, but (the poem implies) actually want to *control* nature. Like lecherous men pestering a woman, they persistently engage with her but don't respect her. As a result, she never truly reveals herself to them.

Meanwhile, earth/nature stays faithful to her preferred "lover," "death," with whom she produces "spring" after the lifeless season of winter. Here, spring seems to represent the kind of beauty and vitality that philosophers, scientists, and theologians can't master (at least according to the poet, who may believe that poets can!). It also reminds these intellectuals that the human intellect can't control life and death. In fact, "earth" and "death" have power over human beings, not the other way around.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-27

APOSTROPHE

The poem is spoken as an apostrophe to the "earth," which the speaker imagines as a beautiful woman. (In other words, the poem personifies, or anthropomorphizes, the earth—perhaps in a generalized allusion to the earth-goddesses and nature-goddesses of ancient cultures.) The speaker invokes this figure

with a classic "O":

> O sweet spontaneous
> earth [...]

"O" is a kind of poetry cliché: a familiar, old-fashioned way of beginning an apostrophe. English-language poets used it straightforwardly and unironically through the end of the 19th century. As Modernists like Cummings began modernizing poetic diction in the early 20th century, it came to be seen as archaic—so Cummings is probably using it in a playful spirit here.

However, that doesn't mean he's being purely ironic. Like the poem's "thee"s and "thou"s, the "O" signals a genuine reverence for the earth, which shines through the poem's irreverent language and imagery. In many ways, Cummings's worldview resembles that of the British Romantics—those nature-loving 1800s poets who used "O"s, "thee"s, and thou"s without batting an eye. (For a famous example, see Percy Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind.") By adopting similar language and devices, even in fun, this poem carries their ideas forward into a new century.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-27

ENJAMBMENT

The poem is heavily, erratically enjambed. Cummings's innovative use of typography—non-standard capitalization, punctuation, indentation, etc.—ensured that his poems had a unique *look* on the page as well as a unique sound. Here, the weird, wild enjambments contribute to the visual fun, along with the pacing and meaning of the poem.

Look at the first 10 lines, for example:

> O sweet spontaneous
> earth how often have
> the
> doting
>
> fingers of
> prurient philosophers pinched
> and
> poked
>
> thee
> ,has the naughty thumb [...]

These frequent, unexpected line breaks help highlight several key words. One is "spontaneous" (which is central to the poem's characterization of nature/earth); another is "prurient" (a word that ironically casts the quiet, respectable, intellectual profession of philosophy as something intrusive, perverse, and salacious). The line breaks also highlight "pinched" and "poked," adding extra emphasis to these aggressive, alliterative words.

But the enjambments also highlight words that wouldn't normally get any emphasis at all, including "the" and "and." In fact, both of these words get the weight of their own line! These effects drastically slow the pace of the language, forcing the reader to linger over even the smallest word—much as the philosophers' "doting // fingers" supposedly linger over "earth." In other words, enjambment makes the language *uncomfortably* slow, as if to convey "earth's" long, uncomfortable ordeal.

The oddest enjambment comes in lines 9-10, as Cummings throws standard lineation, spacing, and punctuation completely out the window. He enjambs the *comma* over the line break, followed immediately by the word "has" (with no spacing in between). This effect further isolates the word "thee"—it doesn't even have punctuation to share its line with!—perhaps suggesting how "thee," or earth, is the lonely object of the philosophers' obsessive focus. But these typographical pranks also have a simpler purpose: they're funny! They add to the poem's wild spontaneity, which aligns with its praise of the "spontaneous" earth.

The enjambments remain dramatic right through the end of the poem (line 27), as "spring)" gets not only its own line but its own heavily indented stanza. It's as if Cummings is taking enjambment as far as it can go, in order to place maximum emphasis on the power and glory of springtime.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "spontaneous / earth"
- **Lines 2-3:** "have / the"
- **Lines 4-5:** "doting / fingers"
- **Lines 5-6:** "of / prurient"
- **Lines 6-7:** "pinched / and"
- **Lines 8-9:** "poked / thee"
- **Line 10:** ",has"
- **Lines 10-11:** "thumb / of"
- **Lines 11-12:** "prodded / thy"
- **Line 13:** " beauty"
- **Lines 13-14:** "how / often"
- **Lines 14-15:** "taken / thee"
- **Lines 15-16:** "knees / squeezing"
- **Lines 16-17:** "and / buffeting"
- **Lines 17-18:** "conceive / gods"
- **Lines 19-20:** "(but / true"
- **Line 21:** "to"
- **Lines 21-22:** "incomparable / couch"
- **Lines 22-23:** "thy / rhythmic"
- **Lines 24-25:** "lover / thou"
- **Lines 25-26:** "answerest / them"

- **Lines 26-27:** "with / spring)"

ALLITERATION

The poem is peppered with plenty of playful, yet pointed alliteration. The title and first line, for example, are alliterative: "O sweet spontaneous." This soft /s/ sibilance gives the line itself a pleasing, "sweet" sound.

However, most of the poem's alliteration isn't quite so pleasing. Take the second stanza, for example:

> fingers of
> prurient philosophers pinched
> and
> poked

Here, the combination of fricative /f/ sounds ("fingers"/"philosophers") and plosive /p/ sounds ("prurient"/"pinched"/"poked," plus "prodded" in line 11) gives the language a harsh, emphatic quality. It's as if the repeated consonants themselves are insistently jabbing and "pok[ing]" the reader.

More harsh alliteration occurs in lines 15-17, as the speaker describes what "religions" have done to "earth":

> [...] taken
> thee upon their scraggy knees
> squeezing and
>
> buffeting thee that thou mightest conceive [...]

These repeated /th/ and /sk/ sounds are hard and cacophonous, mimicking the repetitious, unpleasant "buffeting" the earth has to put up with. (To "buffet" something is to strike it repeatedly. Here, it refers to the aggressive advances of handsy men, as part of a metaphor for religions' pursuit of dominance over the earth.) Assonance also contributes to the effect, as a series of insistent /ee/ sounds ("thee"/"knees"/"squeezing"/"thee"/"conceive") adds further cacophony.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "sweet spontaneous"
- **Line 2:** "how," "have"
- **Line 5:** "fingers"
- **Line 6:** "prurient," "philosophers," "pinched"
- **Line 8:** "poked"
- **Line 13:** "how"
- **Line 14:** "have"
- **Line 15:** "thee," "their," "scraggy"
- **Line 16:** "squeezing"

- **Line 17:** "thee that thou"

ANTHROPOMORPHISM

The poem imagines "earth," "science," "religions," and "death" as anthropomorphic characters in a sort of miniature myth or moral tale.

Specifically, it casts earth as a "beaut[iful]," feminized character being sexually harassed—"prodded," "squeez[ed]," etc.—by "science" and "religions." (It also describes "philosophers" harassing the earth, but this is not anthropomorphism, as it would be if philos*ophy*—an abstraction—were assigned similar human traits and actions.) In contrast with the harassers, "death" is earth's "lover," to whom she remains faithful. It's possible, though not certain, that even the "spring" here is anthropomorphic: it might be what earth "conceive[s]"—like a mother conceiving a child—instead of "gods."

Within this framework, the poem also attributes human qualities to the philosophers' "doting // fingers" and to science's "naughty thumb." These phrases involve a cross between personification and synecdoche, as the characteristics of a part of the body are ascribed to the whole.

The big picture is that the poem accuses science and religion of interfering with, and unsuccessfully trying to dominate, earth/nature. By contrast, death and nature are intimately involved with each other (you can't have life, seasons, etc. without also having death). The poem's anthropomorphism thus becomes part of an extended metaphor.

It may also draw inspiration from older stories. The union between "earth" and "death," for example, probably alludes to the ancient Greek myth of Hades and Persephone, in which Hades (the god of death and the underworld) abducts and marries Persephone (a goddess of nature, fertility, and spring).

Where Anthropomorphism appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 3-5
- Lines 10-24

VOCABULARY

Doting (Line 4) - Consistently or insistently affectionate (here with a negative connotation, implying "handsy").

Prurient (Line 6) - Overly interested in sex; lascivious.

Thee (Line 9) - An old-fashioned form of "you" (used as an object pronoun).

Thy (Line 12) - An old-fashioned form of "your."

Scraggy (Line 15) - Hairy and rough, or scrawny and bony.

Buffeting (Line 17) - Hitting; striking with force. Here used to describe aggressive touching, fondling, etc.

That thou mightest (Line 17) - An old-fashioned way of saying "in order that you might" or "so that you would."

True (Line 20) - Here meaning faithful in a sexual/romantic sense.

Incomparable (Line 21) - Beyond comparison; incredible. ("The incomparable / couch of death" metaphorically suggests that death, as a "lover," is incredible in bed.)

Thou answerest (Line 25) - An old-fashioned way of saying "you answer."

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem is written in free verse and features some of Cummings's signature typographical quirks, including "incorrect" or dropped punctuation, bizarre line breaks (e.g., the enjambment of the comma in lines 9-10), and erratic indentation. The line lengths vary wildly as well; many lines contain just one syllable (line 3, for example), while others contain as many as ten (line 17).

These effects were groundbreaking in the 1920s, when Cummings began publishing, and they became part of the larger wave of poetic experimentation associated with the modernist movement. (See the Context section of this guide for more.)

Unlike Cummings's wildest poems, this one does have a fairly regular stanza pattern. The first 24 lines of the poem are organized into six quatrains—however strangely lineated and indented they may be. Even this pattern breaks down, however, as each of the last three lines is a stanza unto itself. (Each is indented differently as well.) Overall, the poem's freewheeling form mirrors the "spontaneous" quality of its subject matter: "earth" and "spring."

METER

The poem is written in free verse, so it doesn't have a meter. In fact, aside from its quatrains (which end after line 24), the poem avoids any sort of pattern at all. Its frequent enjambments and erratic line lengths give it a wild, unpredictable flow. By following its own intuitive rhythms and constantly surprising the reader, the poem's form mimics the kind of "spontane[ity]" it celebrates in the "earth." In fact, Cummings celebrated the natural, intuitive, and spontaneous throughout his career, so he returned to these kinds of effects often.

RHYME SCHEME

As a free verse poem, "[O sweet spontaneous]" has no rhyme scheme. In fact, it contains no end rhyme at all. It rebels against the kind of rigid, systematic thinking embodied by "philosophers," "science," and "religions," so it naturally avoids any kind of rigid scheme itself! Instead, it remains as wild and chaotic as "spring."

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is never identified, but they do have a distinctive voice. Their mischievous, yet unsettling humor is characteristic of E. E. Cummings's poems, so they're probably a stand-in for the poet himself. However, Cummings doesn't normally use the kind of archaic, high-poetic language featured here: "O," "thee," "thy," etc.

Thee/thy/thou pronouns dropped out of conversational English (in most dialects) centuries ago, and they haven't been a regular feature of English poetry since the 1800s. The apostrophic "O" is also associated with pre-20th century poetry. By using these words in the 1920s, Cummings may have been calling back to the language and attitudes of the Romantic poets, who had dominated British poetry during the previous century. (Many American poets of the 1800s, including Walt Whitman, used them also.)

In other words, the speaker's high-flown language may be a playful homage to the Romantics, who shared Cummings's love of nature and distrust of organized belief systems.

SETTING

The poem's setting is the "earth" itself. The speaker criticizes philosophers, scientists, and religious types for using and abusing the earth in pursuit of their various agendas. Rather than the conquest they seek, the earth offers them only "spring," whose power and beauty seem to elude them all. (The speaker imagines "earth" and "death" conceiving the season, like a baby, during a coupling on death's "couch." Of course, this location is completely metaphorical!)

And so, while the setting is never presented in detail, "[O sweet spontaneous]" ends up being a springtime poem—one of several in Cummings's collection *Tulips and Chimneys*.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

E. E. Cummings lived from 1894-1962 and was one of the most distinctive voices in 20th-century American poetry. The tradition that his name should be written without capital letters (stylized "e e cummings") reflects his experimentation with the visual possibilities of language.

"[O sweet spontaneous]" appears in *Tulips and Chimneys* (1923), Cummings's first book of poetry. The collection's playful innovations established him as an important modernist: one of a group of early 20th-century poets who championed free verse and pushed the boundaries of traditional poetic forms. His unusual punctuation, indentations, and enjambments drew on his training as a visual artist and shaped the style for which he eventually became famous. His thematic interest in love and nature also shows the influence of 19th-century Romantic poets, such as William Wordsworth and John Keats. In its elevation of nature and "spontane[ity]" over reason and organized religion, "[O sweet spontaneous]" mirrors some classic Romantic ideas.

At once experimental and traditional, Cummings's work met with suspicion from both more conventional and more subversive writers. But he was ready for the challenge. In a short essay offering advice to young poets, he remarked that being a poet means "to be nobody-but-yourself"—and that to do so "in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else—means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight; and never stop fighting."

By the end of Cummings's life, he was widely read and acclaimed. His honors included prestigious fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the Academy of American Poets.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Cummings published *Tulips and Chimneys* in 1923, during a hopeful, "spring[y]" period of world history. World War I (1914-1918), in which he'd served as a volunteer ambulance driver, had recently ended, and many hoped and believed that such widespread bloodshed was over for good.

The so-called Great War, which began in Europe and slowly spread around the globe, killed millions of people, most of them heartbreakingly young soldiers. When the war finally ended in 1918, the world entered a confused period marked by both mourning and giddy exuberance. The influenza pandemic of 1918-1920, which killed tens of millions worldwide, further destabilized societies during this period. When the "Roaring Twenties" kicked into gear, youth culture became an important force, as the young people who'd survived war and disease partied their cares away.

This decade was marked by a rejection of old values, including "philosoph[ies]" that the younger generation felt had only caused destruction. Skepticism of organized "religions" increased in many cultures, accelerating a Western trend toward secularization that had begun in the late 19th century. At the same time, many thinkers protested the use of "science" and technology for violent or destructive purposes (e.g., weapons of war). Experimental, avant-garde art found its way into the mainstream, as artists moved away from traditional forms and embraced newer movements like surrealism and jazz. Cummings's poetry was just one example of this explosion of creativity.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Tulips and Chimneys — Read the poem in its original context, as part of the collection Tulips and Chimneys (1923). (https://archive.org/details/tulips-and-chimneys/page/74/mode/2up)
- An Introduction to Cummings — Read the Poetry Foundation's introduction to the poet's work. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/90442/ee-cummings-101)
- Modernism 101 — An introduction to the literary/arts movement with which Cummings is closely associated. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/152025/an-introduction-to-modernism)
- Cummings's Advice to Students — Listen to a short talk about poetry and self-expression, delivered by the poet himself. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iYfhsFpMdg4)
- The Poet as Painter — An introduction to Cummings's work as a visual artist. (https://www.themarginalian.org/2017/10/05/e-e-cummings-painting/)
- The Poet's Life and Work — Read a biography of Cummings at Poets.org. (https://poets.org/poet/e-e-cummings)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER E. E. CUMMINGS POEMS

- anyone lived in a pretty how town
- i carry your heart with me(i carry it in
- in Just-
- next to of course god america i
- since feeling is first
- somewhere i have never travelled,gladly beyond

HOW TO CITE

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CHICAGO MANUAL

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