LING 324: A love story about quantifiers

How do quantifiers differ from proper names?

by e. e. cummings

anyone lived in a pretty how town
(with up so floating many bells down)
spring summer autumn winter
he sang his didn't he danced his did.

Women and men (both little and small)
cared for anyone not at all
they sowed their isn't they reaped their same
sun moon stars rain

children guessed (but only a few
and down they forgot as up they grew
autumn winter spring summer)
that noone loved him more by more

when by now and tree by leaf
she laughed his joy she cried his grief
bird by snow and stir by still
anyone's any was all to her

someones married their everyones
laughed their cryings and did their dance
(sleep wake hope and then)they
said their nevers they slept their dream

stars rain sun moon
(and only the snow can begin to explain
how children are apt to forget to remember
with up so floating many bells down)

one day anyone died i guess
(and noone stooped to kiss his face)
busy folk buried them side by side
little by little and was by was

all by all and deep by deep
and more by more they dream their sleep
noone and anyone earth by april
wish by spirit and if by yes.

Women and men (both dong and ding)
summer autumn winter spring
reaped their sowing and went their came
sun moon stars rain

Modern poetry comes in many flavours. Anything can be considered a proper poem, and poets are free to write in many differing styles about an infinite variety of subjects. However, that freedom comes with responsibility. Modern poets must make certain that their readers are not abandoned by the poem’s form or content. Poetry can be abstract, but it is never allowed to be sloppy. The sheer amount of poetry written this century offers readers many alternatives, and poets must be as vigilant as ever not to alienate readers. Being able to experiment in form while remaining accessible is one of the more difficult balancing acts that modern poets can perform, and when they accomplish a synthesis between form and expression, readers recognize the poem’s success.

One Modern poet who is quite successful in this synthesis is E.E. Cummings, who may be considered one of the most experimental poets of the century. Cummings’s manipulation of syntax and grammar is extraordinary, and rarely serves to alienate the reader because Cummings pays careful attention to how words function in language. He may use what is commonly considered a “verb” as a proper noun, or may make an adjective a conjunction, but usually the meaning behind the words, and the poem, is quite clear.

He rarely titled his poems, but critics have gotten around this by referring to Cummings’s poems by their first lines. “anyone lived in a pretty how town” is an archetype of Cummings’ work, and its analysis is an excellent starting point into discovering how language and grammar function in Cummings’s poetry.

The plot of “anyone lived in a pretty how town” is simple, but it is in the subtle language choices that this poem succeeds. The story begins with “anyone,” which can be considered a proper noun for a specific person here. The term “pretty how town” is analogous with the phrase “pretty soft rug” where “how” is an adjective, and “pretty” is a degree modifier of that adjective. Anyone is a man who is loathed by the “Women and men,” or the “someones” and “everyones,” of the town, because he is different than they are. Only the children of the town could recognize the love of “Anyone” and “Noone,” but even they begin to fear and despise Anyone’s individuality as “down they forgot as up they grew.” Anyone and Noone are buried side by side, as the townspeople carry on in their mechanized fashion, having learned nothing from Anyone and Noone.

Cummings does not pretend to be ignorant of the ordinary meanings of the words he uses, and instead plays with the confluence of his own invented grammar with standard English usage. He uses “Anyone” as a proper noun, but is aware that this person isn’t just anyone, and describes his relationship with Noone by playing with the use of “Anyone,” writing that “anyone’s any was all to her.” Cummings shows us that Noone appreciates Anyone’s individuality through this line. His “any” is contrasting with the “some” or “every” of the rest of the town, and it is in this linguistic particularity that Cummings is able to give Anyone a uniqueness. Cummings gives Anyone and Noone an emotional authenticity that the rest of the town don’t share, by showing how Anyone “sang his didn’t he danced his did” and how Noone “laughed his joy she cried his grief” which contrasts greatly with the confusion of the someones and everyones, who “laughed their cryings and did their dance.”

Rhythmically, the poem can be considered to be written in free verse, although there is a certain regularity in the stanzas that refer to Anyone and Noone that does not exist in the stanzas that
feature the Someones and Everyones.

The poem lives solely in the past tense until the point at which Anyone and Noone are buried, and then it switches to the present tense for a single stanza, as they “dream their sleep,” in the afterlife, which if eternal continues even now, in any foreseeable ‘present’.

Cummings handles the passing of time in the poem in three different, yet equally effective ways. The most obvious temporal element in the poem is the use of the seasons, and Cummings inverts the order of the seasons as the poem progresses. The first stanza, which introduces Anyone, presents the seasons in their expected order, “spring summer autumn winter”. The third stanza, which mentions the children of the town, changes the order slightly with “autumn winter spring summer,” but still keeps things moving in a linear, expected order. The final stanza about the “Women and men” orders the seasons “summer autumn winter spring” and suggests movement through time by keeping the circular order consistent but rearranging which season comes first.

The second manner of suggesting passing time is through the natural phenomena of the “sun moon stars rain,” which is used in the second paragraph that talks about the “Women and men.” These are re-ordered when the children begin to forget to cherish individuality, by saying “stars rain sun moon,” but after Anyone and Noone have died, and the children have grown up to become “Women and men” themselves, the order of the natural phenomena have returned to their original state of “sun moon stars rain.”

The third, and slightly confusing passage of time in the poem is the repetition of “with up so floating many bells down” which seems to suggest different symbolic tolling in both instances. In the first stanza, the bells seem to be heralding Anyone’s entrance. In the sixth stanza, the bells seem to be tolling both the end of the children’s innocence and acceptance, as well as Anyone’s death. As the bells only appear after the mention of Anyone, and just before Anyone’s death, it seems significant to associate the bells with Anyone.

Capitalization is an important element in Cummings’s grammar. Rather than capitalize the first word of every sentence, or every proper name, Cummings seems to have an entirely different use for capitalization in a poem. There are only two instances of capitalization in “anyone lived in a pretty how town.” Both instances follow the only two full stops in the poem and capitalize “Women and men”.

The rhythm of the poem is simple and sing-songy. The complex grammar is effective in conveying the meaning of the words, but in attempting to translate the poem to “standard” English, much would be lost. The fourth line, for example, would make little sense if rewritten with normal grammar. “he sang his didn’t he danced his did” has a beauty to it that can’t be altered without altering the meaning of the line. One could say “he sang when he failed, he danced when he succeeded” to imply that Anyone possessed a certain joie de vivre in every aspect of life, but that’s not exactly what the line is saying.

One aspect of Cummings’s style that “anyone lived in a pretty how town” doesn’t exemplify is the use of typography and layout. This poem is rather conventional in its layout, and is not representative of Cummings’s visual art influence of his written words.

Cummings’s work is daunting for a reader who wants poetry to conform to certain grammatical standards, but for those who are willing to stretch the limit of acceptability of words in English, Cummings’s work is refreshing and invites us to examine how words function in both communication and art.