

II BA ENGLISH
AMERICAN LITERATURE – BEN32
(Prepared by Ponnivalavan P, Assistant Professor, Thiruvalluvar University College of Arts
and Science, Tirupattur)
UNIT I – POETRY

1. Among Crumbling People by E.E.Cummings

Original Text:

**Among Crumbling People
by E E CUMMINGS**

A
mong crum
bling people(a
long ruined streets
hither and)Softly
thither between (tumb
ling)houses(as
the kno
wing spirit prowls, its
nose witness before a dissonance of
rish and foses)
until
(finding one's self
at some distance from the
crooked town)A
harbour fools the sea(
while emanating the triple starred hotel du golf...that notable structure
or ideal edifice... situated or established
.... far from the noise of waters)One's
eye perceives
(as the ego approaches)
Painfully sterilized contours;
Within
which
"ladies and gentlemen"
-under
glass
are: asking!
Each
Oth
er rub!ber q;
:uestions

About the Poet

Edward Estlin Cummings (1894-1962) is a American poet, born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and educated at Harvard. His first book, *The Enormous Room* (1922), an account of his three-month internment in a French detention camp in 1917, won him an immediate international reputation for its brilliant prose and its iconoclastic views, with Dos Passos, Robert Graves, T. E. Lawrence, and V. Larbaud among its earliest admirers. In 1923 appeared *Tulips and Chimneys*, the first of 12 volumes of poetry. Strongly influenced by the English Romantic poets, by Swinburne, and by Pound, and marked by the jazz age, the early poems attracted attention more for their experimental typography and technical skill than for their considerable lyric power; the frankness of his vocabulary and the sharpness of his satire also created some scandal. In *Eimi* (1933), a typographically difficult but enthralling journal of a trip to Russia, he broke in disillusion from his earlier socialist leanings, and thenceforth his work reflected his increasingly reactionary social and political views. His later lyrics, on the other hand, achieved a greater depth and simplicity. His other works include essays, plays, and *Tom* (1935), a satirical ballet based on H. B. Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Cummings opened new perspectives for an entire generation of American and British poets, including Auden and Spender. His *Complete Poems: 1910-1962* was published in 1980.

Detailed Overview

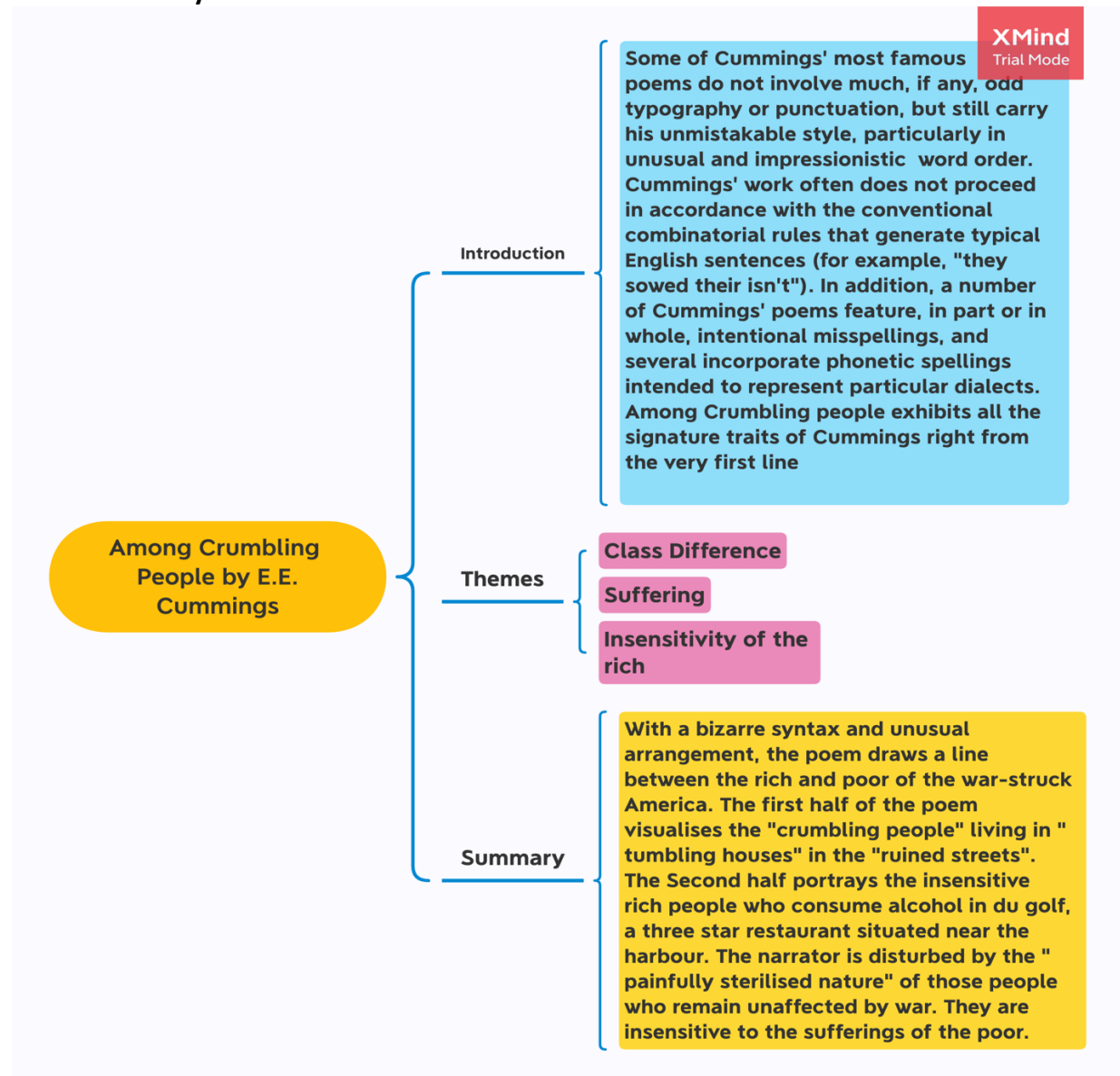
When the poem begins, the narrator is strolling in the streets of America witnessing the sufferings of crumbling people due to the second world war. The fall of American Economy and the great depression had ruined the day to day life. While strolling towards a hotel in the harbour of a sea, the scenes on the way disturbs him. The war had not only caused the loss of their possessions but also the loss of their physique and peace of mind. As the result of the devastating war, they were drawn to streets and lead their life without any shelter. The war victims had incited the poet's human concern. The milieu of the victimised were in a pathetic condition as they were left homeless. The roof of their houses were hanging in the air and they symbolised the hanging lives of the poor. It seemed as though the houses whined and cried towards the rich and the powerful people for their apathetic attitude to the poor. It also denoted apparently that the poor who lived in the house made loud cries due to distress, pain and anguish. Passing through the crooked town, he neared the sea shore and found people at some distance in the harbour. The harbour a symbolic representation of the sheltered place of the rich who seemed to be ignorant of the conditions of the poor.

The rich people fooled the sea and continued to make money . They used the lower class to work for them and as they were sheltered and fortunate never listened to the painful voices of the poor. While the lower class people were in agony for livelihood, the upper class entertained themselves in a triple star hotel of the harbour which Symbolized the luxurious and lavish lives of the rich. The indifferent attitude of the rich displayed the Social Inequality of America. The country of Spain colonised the native Americans who were victimized during the war. They were unemployed and found no means to elevate their lives. But the rich extracted work from them, squandered energy for their own well-being due to which prevailed social disharmony. The lower class were not cared. They were untouchable.

The poet feels that the sympathy of the rich was sterilized. Their unconcern was a sterilized contour turning inhumane to the poor who sought aids and shelter. Their unconcern pains the poet. It raises his ego and emerges as the lower class was brutally victimized. When they were in such a miserable condition, the rich consumed alcohol and

stayed safe in a wealthy hotel. They were amusing themselves perching under a glass house which enabled everyone to witness the happenings of the outside world. Though they could notice the woes of the poor, they just ignored them. They engaged themselves in amorous talks. They asked each other rubber or unworthy questions. Thus the poet emotionally describes the ill effects of the war and the indifferent attitude of the rich towards the poor crumbling people. The upper class just exploited the poor and the labour class did not meet the basic requirements of their survival.

Visual Summary



2. Anecdote of a Jar by Wallace Stevens

Original Text:

Anecdote of a Jar by Wallace Stevens

I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,
And sprawled around, no longer wild.
The jar was round upon the ground
And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere.
The jar was gray and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush,
Like nothing else in Tennessee.

About the Author

Wallace Stevens (1879-1955) is a American poet, born in Pennsylvania and educated at Harvard. He became a lawyer, and from 1916 worked at Hartford, Connecticut, on the legal staff of the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company, where he remained until his death, becoming vice-president in 1934. Meanwhile, he had begun to publish poems in *Poetry* and elsewhere, and his first volume, *Harmonium*, which contains 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird', was published in 1923. This was followed by other collections (including *Ideas of Order*, 1935; *The Man with the Blue Guitar and Other Poems*, 1937; *Notes towards a Supreme Fiction*, 1942; *The Auroras of Autumn*, 1950; *Collected Poems*, 1954) which slowly brought him recognition, but it was not until his last years that his enigmatic, elegant, intellectual, and occasionally startling meditations on order and the imagination, on reality, appearance, and art, gained the high reputation that they now enjoy.

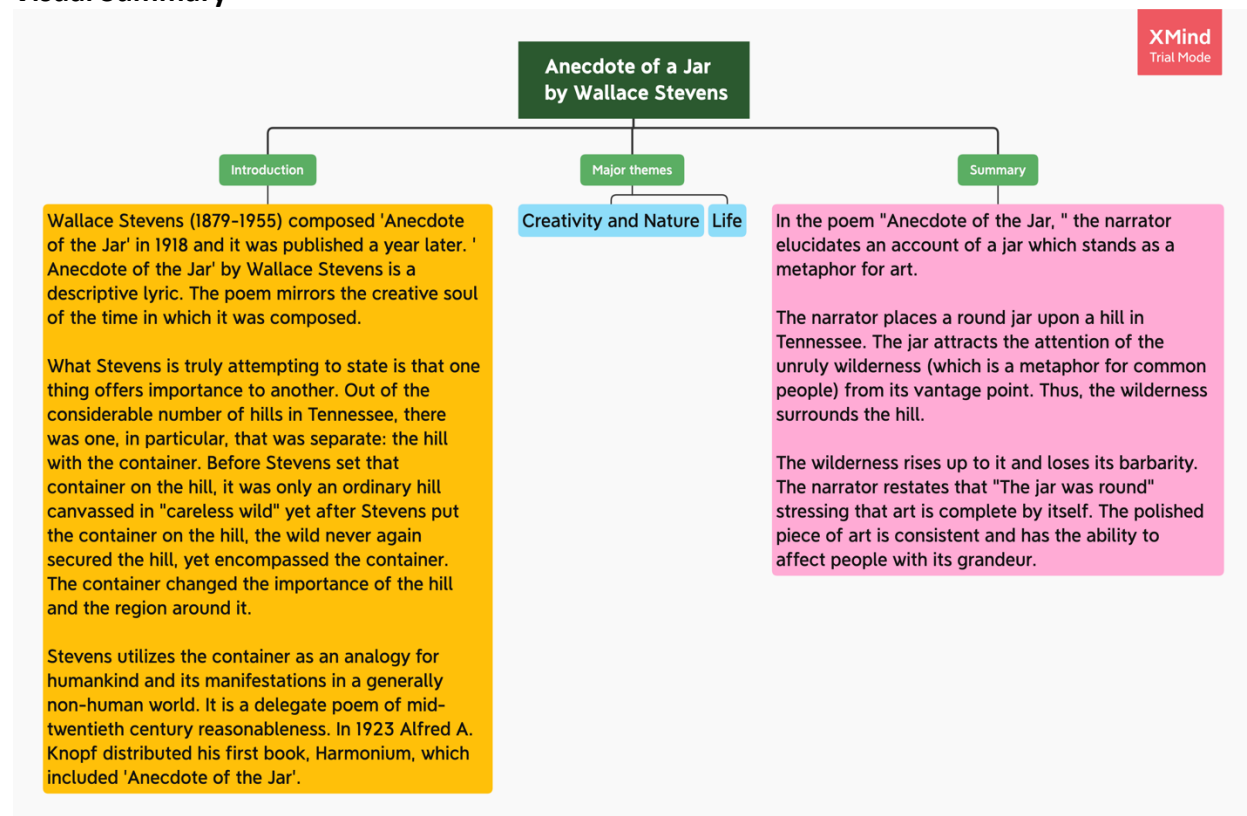
Detailed Overview

Perhaps the most frequently anthologized of Stevens's poems, "Anecdote of the Jar" reflects Stevens's preoccupation with appearances or surfaces. "The world is measured by the eye," he said in one of his many aphoristic comments, and this difficult poem plays with the issues of what the eye measures and how. The poem's interpretation is far from agreed upon, as any identification of the jar.

This poem is famous for its sparseness. The action is summed up in the first line: "I placed a jar in Tennessee." The rest of the poem is concerned with what happens after the jar has been "placed." In the second stanza, the jar "made the slovenly wilderness surround" the hill the jar is on. In the second stanza, the jar causes the wilderness to "sprawl" and become "no longer wild." In the final stanza, the jar takes "dominion everywhere," and does not "give of bird or bush." Whatever the jar is doing, there is a clear progression from cause (placing the jar) to effect (taking dominion everywhere). The jar gets stronger as the poem progresses. In fact, it is "Like nothing else in Tennessee."

The action of the poem is inextricably bound up in what you think the "jar" might mean. There have been many interpretations of the poem, but if we limit ourselves to "summarizing" the action, then, in a basic way, the poem is about displacement and difference. The jar on the hill seems to displace nature, which is made to "surround the hill" and which (in comparison to the roundness of the jar) is "slovenly." In the second stanza, the wilderness is changed, "no longer wild," while the jar "was round upon the ground." Finally, the jar, "gray and bare," takes "dominion everywhere," its man-made roundness replacing nature.

Visual Summary



Infographic created using the Trial Version of XMind

3. Mirror by Sylvia Plath

Original Text:

Mirror

by SYLVIA PLATH

I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.
Whatever I see I swallow immediately
Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike.
I am not cruel, only truthful,
The eye of a little god, four-cornered.
Most of the time I meditate on the opposite wall.
It is pink, with speckles. I have looked at it so long
I think it is part of my heart. But it flickers.
Faces and darkness separate us over and over.

Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me,
Searching my reaches for what she really is.
Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon.
I see her back, and reflect it faithfully.
She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands.
I am important to her. She comes and goes.
Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness.
In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman
Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish.

About the Poet

Sylvia Plath is a poet and novelist, born in Boston, Massachusetts, the daughter of a German immigrant professor and entomologist, who died when she was 8. She was educated at Smith College, Massachusetts, and Newnham College, Cambridge. She married Ted Hughes in 1956. After teaching for a while in America, she and Hughes returned to England in 1959, where they lived in London before moving to Devon in 1961. Her first volume of poetry, *The Colossus*, appeared in 1960, and in 1963 her only novel *The Bell Jar*. Less than a month after its publication, in the coldest February for many years, she committed suicide in London. In 1965 appeared her best-known collection, *Ariel*, which established her reputation with its courageous and controlled treatment of extreme and painful states of mind. Much of her symbolism was deeply rooted in actuality; the poems on bee-keeping ('The Bee Meeting', 'The Arrival of the Bee Box', etc.) are based on her own attempts to keep bees in Devon, and other poems—'Elm', 'Letter in November', 'The Moon and the Yew Tree'—describe the physical surroundings of the house and the views from it. Other poems refer directly to her own experiences: 'Lady Lazarus' is based on her two previous suicide attempts, 'Daddy' on the early loss of her father, 'Tulips' on a week spent in hospital undergoing an appendectomy: in the first of these two she uses powerful imagery drawn from the Holocaust, though she was not herself Jewish. Other posthumous volumes include *Crossing the Water* and *Winter Trees* (both 1971); *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* (1977, collected prose pieces); and *Collected Poems* (1981, with an introduction by T. Hughes). A volume of letters, *Letters Home*, edited by her mother, A. S. Plath, with a commentary, appeared in 1975. Although her best-

known poems deal with illness, suffering, and death, others (particularly those addressed to her two children, such as 'Morning Song' and 'You're') are exhilarating, tender, and affectionate, and her tone is frequently witty as well as disturbing. There is a biography, *Bitter Fame*, by the poet Anne Stevenson (1989), written with the approval of the Plath estate.

Detailed Overview

Written in free verse – 'Mirror' is unrhymed and has a largely irregular metre, with the line lengths varying a little from line to line – this is a poem, bordering on dramatic monologue, in which a mirror speaks to us, addressing the reader in a matter-of-fact tone, reflecting the flatness of its surface and its inability to do anything other than reflect back to us what it 'sees'. In summary, the mirror tells us that it has 'no preconceptions': it is 'exact', with the implication that it simply shows us what it 'sees'. This is not some hall of mirrors at a fairground, which deliberately distorts faces and body shapes: whatever we see when we look in the mirror is what the mirror was accurately and faithfully 'swallowed'. It transmits whatever it receives. The mirror doesn't care for us, either way: neither like nor dislike colours its reflections. It is 'not cruel, only truthful'.

Towards the end of this first stanza, Plath starts to give us slightly more detail about how the mirror spends its days: with nothing to do all day and night but remain there, mounted on the wall, all it can do is look at the opposite wall (which is pink, with speckles: suggesting the blemished or imperfect skin of a person?) until it becomes 'a part of my heart'. After all, the mirror has 'swallowed' up whatever it sees, including that pink wall.

But then, in that second stanza, we get a sudden development: 'Now I am a lake', Plath's mirror tells us. Like some sort of shape-shifter, the literal glass mirror now becomes a figurative mirror: the surface of still water, reflecting the face of a woman bent over it. She is searching 'for what she really is'. After she has gazed into the mirror of the lake, she turns to the moon and the candle, those 'liars'. Why they are liars is not clear: the moon's light is borrowed from the sun, of course, and, in effect, it is a sort of 'mirror' of the sun in that it reflects the sunlight at night. The candle is false because it is light that has to be generated through the burning of tallow. The lake's surface, however, reflects the woman 'faithfully'.

But the mirror of the lake is not there merely to give back the woman's image: it 'sees' her. 'I see her back' is wonderfully ambiguous: although primarily it means that the lake sees the back of the woman as she turns to the moon or those candles, it also conveys the idea of reciprocity, with the lake looking *back* at the woman. Plath ends 'Mirror' with a terrifying vision of ageing, with each day showing less of the 'young girl' the woman was, and more and more of the 'old woman' she is turning into. Plath, who was greatly influenced by Robert Graves's *The White Goddess*, knew about the triple-nature of the goddess in Graves's book. The goddess is a young maiden or virgin, then a pregnant and fertile mother, and finally, an old hag. We see the transition of this woman here, with the moon – that key symbol for the white goddess – looming in the background, behind her.

Sylvia Plath wrote 'Mirror' on 23 October 1961. At the time, she was writing a poem a day: a product of a creative writing class (led by Robert Lowell, who helped her to develop her personal and 'confessional' style, at Boston in the late 1950s), Plath would overcome writer's block/colygraphia by sitting down and writing a poem on a different theme or

subject, if she had nothing more inspiring to write about. The day before she wrote 'Mirror', for instance, she had written '**The Moon and the Yew Tree**', the subject of which was suggested by her husband **Ted Hughes** (the moon and yew tree could be seen outside of Plath's bedroom window at their house in Devon). 'Mirror' can be readily analysed as a poem, if not quite written to order, then written to a particular theme. The day before, she had written about whatever was outside of her window; on this day, she had written about something found in every hallway of every house in the country.

Plath was not the first person to write a poem in which a mirror speaks to us. Arguably, an old Anglo-Saxon riddle, which reads simply 'I saw a woman sit alone', invites the solution 'mirror'. In the last analysis, 'Mirror' is a nice reflection (as it were) of the ways we 'see' ourselves, and how women are encouraged to observe their own appearance within the surface of the 'mirror'. Self-image, and the slow but inevitable slide into old age and the loss of youthful looks, are, like that moon, lurking in the background.

Visual Summary

