in Just-

POEM TEXT

in Just-
spring when the world is mud-
luscious the little
lame balloonman

whistles far and wee

and eddieandbill come
running from marbles and
piracies and it's
spring

when the world is puddle-wonderful

the queer
old balloonman whistles
far and wee
and bettyandisbel come dancing

from hop-scotch and jump-rope and

it's
spring
and

the

goat-footed

balloonMan whistles
far
and
wee

SUMMARY

In the very earliest part of spring, when the world is luxuriously, deliciously muddy, a tiny little old balloon seller whistles a high, piercing whistle.

His whistle calls the little boys away from their games of marbles or pirates—and springtime has come.

The whole wet, puddly springtime world feels delightful.

The strange old balloon seller whistles his high, piercing whistle—and the little girls skip away from their games of hopscotch and jump-rope to follow him.

Springtime has come—and once more, the strange balloon seller, with his goat-like feet, whistles his high piercing whistle.

THEMES

THE THRILLS OF SPRING

Spring, this poem suggests, is a lively, delicious, and powerful time of year. The poem describes the very beginning of spring, when the world feels "mud-luscious" (deliciously muddy) and ready to burst back into life. There's plenty of exuberant energy here, but also a hint of ancient power. The mysterious, satyr-like "little old balloonman" who wanders "whistl[ing]" through the springtime landscape suggests that spring isn't just thrilling because it's a time of new beginnings, but because it connects people to the old, endless, cyclical rhythms of nature.

Early spring, the poem suggests, is full of potential and childlike exuberance, and it turns the whole world into a playground. The "mud" and "puddle[s]" left behind after the snow melts don't feel sloppy, but "luscious" (or delectable) and "wonderful." All that fertile mud and water is not just rich in itself but also promises that fresh flowers and grass are about to spring out of the earth. The glorious muddy landscape of early spring is thus perfect for children: kids like the poem's "eddieandbill" and "bettyandisbel" are enjoying the symbolic springtime of their lives.

Spring isn't just thrilling because it's full of innocent new life, however, but also because it's full of timeless power. The poem's spring landscape isn't only populated by children: it's also the domain of a strange old "balloonman" whose whistle makes the children jump up and follow him as if he were the Pied Piper.

Described as "goat-footed" and "queer" (or strange), this "balloonman" *could* just be a peculiar old street vendor who turns up every spring, another marker of the season (and maybe a dark hint that the childlike young year always gets old eventually). But with his goaty feet and his tempting whistle, he also feels a lot like a satyr, an ancient nature spirit calling the children to wild springtime exuberance. His presence reminds readers that spring isn't just exciting because it feels new, but because it's full of timeless energy: spring has been getting people excited for as long as there have been people!

The thrill of spring, the poem thus suggests, comes from the

feeling that even as the world bursts with new life and new energy, it's also dancing to an old and mysterious tune.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24

CHILDHOOD INNOCENCE, TEMPTATION, AND SEXUALITY

Children, this poem suggests, don't stay innocent forever. Even as the poem's children enjoy the metaphorical springtime of their lives playing "marbles" and "jump-rope," the poem's mysterious, twisted little "balloonman" tempts them away from their games with his "whistle." Described as "goat-footed," he sounds a lot like a mythological satyr, a lustful Greek forest spirit, here to bring the boys and girls together for the first time. Even the wide-eyed "spring" of childhood, the poem suggests, isn't without its hints of adult pleasures to come.

The poem suggests that childhood is often imagined as a time of pure potential: an innocent "springtime" of life. The poem's "puddle-wonderful" landscape, "mud-luscious" with melted snow and fertile earth, suggests the very beginning of life, when everything is *about* to grow and everything feels new and exciting. Gleefully playing "marbles" and "hop-scotch," the poem's little kids, "bettyandisbel" and "eddieandbill," are the picture of carefree innocence, simply enjoying the beginnings of their lives.

But all that childhood energy, the poem subtly implies, isn't just playful. The mud-puddly springtime landscape is also the domain of a strange old "balloonman" whose whistle lures the children away from their games. The way he's described makes him sound more than a little like a debauched old satyr, a "goatfooted" Greek forest spirit devoted to wild pleasure. Old as the hills, he seems closer to a mischievous deity than a human being: he tempts the children to follow him as if he were the Pied Piper. Significantly, he calls first the boys, then the girls, suggesting that he's here to bring them together—perhaps to get them to pay attention to each other for the first time!

The "spring" of childhood, this poem thus suggests, isn't just about the beauty of innocent new life, but about the ancient power of sexuality, which blossoms right beneath the blossoming trees. Sex and new life, after all, go hand in hand.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

in Just-
spring when the world is mud-
luscious the little
lame balloonman
whistles far and wee

"in Just-" begins with a beginning: the very first days of spring, when the snow has melted but the flowers haven't come out yet. This free verse poem uses not just its sounds, but its shape on the page to describe what that feels like.

Take a look at the enjambments and spacing in the poem's first few lines, for instance:

- The break right in the middle of the compound word "Just-spring" invites readers to stretch that "just" out: it's *juuuuust* spring, just the very tippy-top of the season.
- Then, a big space in the middle of the line (between "spring" and "when") creates a calm pause, as if the poem itself is pausing to look around at the springtime landscape.
- Another enjambment draws out the "mud" of "mud-luscious," making all that glorious squelchy mess sound even more delicious.

And even as the poem plays these visual tricks, the thick /uh/ assonance of "mud-luscious" means readers can almost *feel* the rich, lumpy mud. In just a few words, the poem has evoked both the spring itself and the pure pleasure of taking a big lungful of scented, earthy air as the ground finally peeks out from beneath the snow.

Unlike a lot of poems set in the springtime, this one won't look at the full-blown season of daffodils and cherry blossoms. This isn't a blooming landscape, but one *about* to bloom: it's full of messy, muddy, delectable potential.

And it's also the home of a peculiar figure. It's exactly at this brand-new time of year, the poem goes on, that a limping, whistling old balloon seller comes out. He's another sign of the season, like the mud puddles. But he also seems like something more than that.

Take another look at the language describing his whistle: the words "far and wee" play on the idiom "far and wide": when this old fellow whistles, the sound seems to travel everywhere. (Perhaps he himself wanders far afield, too!) And the onomatopoeic word "wee" lets readers *hear* that whistle. Besides sounding like a whistle noise itself, the word "wee" means "little."

The balloonman's whistle, in other words, is just a teeny-tiny, high, thin little sound—but it seems to travel everywhere,

almost magically. Keep an eye out for this balloonman: it won't be the last time he appears.

LINES 6-9

and eddieandbill come
running from marbles and
piracies and it's
spring

The "wee" whistle of the balloonman has an immediate effect on the other people enjoying this springtime world: the children. As soon as the balloonman whistles, the little boys, "eddieandbill," drop their games, hop right up, and run to follow him.

The way the poem runs the boys' names together into one word might remind readers that spring is often symbolically linked to childhood (in the same way that people think of winter as a time when the year is old and dying). "eddieandbill" together sound more like the *idea* of little boys than like separate little boys; the phrasing here suggests that there will always be an "eddieandbill" playing "marbles" whenever springtime rolls back around again.

That sense gets even stronger when these lines conclude:

and eddieandbill come
running from marbles and
piracies and it's
spring

Spring, these lines suggest, is the *time* when the world is full of glorious mud, the balloonman whistles, and the boys come running: all of these things are part of a big, reliable pattern. Spring is about youthful pleasure, potential, and exuberance—but those *new* pleasures are also *old*. They've been turning up as long as spring has.

There's plenty of delight and satisfaction in this image of kids hopping up to run giddily after a balloon seller. But perhaps there's something a little odd going on here, too. The balloonman's far-carrying whistle makes him seem almost like a Pied Piper here, able to summon children with an enchanted tune.

LINE 10

when the world is puddle-wonderful

In this line, the poem begins a pattern of weaving parallelism that will carry all through the rest of the poem. It starts with this strong moment of anaphora:

when the world is puddle-wonderful

Readers will recognize that phrasing from just a few lines ago, when the world was "mud-luscious." Again, the poem uses a vivid, made-up compound word—and again, it focuses on all the squishy, messy delight of early springtime. It even uses the same flavor of assonance again: listen to those /uh/ sounds in "puddle-wonderful."

All these stylistic repetitions fit right in with what the previous lines suggested about the delights of spring. Part of the fun of the season, the poem's cyclical phrasing hints, is that it always rolls around again, reliably making the world feel new and fresh.

And the fact that this idea gets a line all to itself also suggests that spring is so delicious it's hard to take in all at once. It's as if the poem becomes a person standing outside, saying, "yes, the world feels luscious"—then taking a few deep breaths and looking around and saying, "it's *wonderful*!" The extra space around the line makes it feel as if the poem needs to pause to marvel at how lovely everything feels.

The word "wonderful" itself helps with that impression, too. Think how different this line would feel if the speaker had said the world was "puddle-lovely": it would still sound good, but it wouldn't have the *wonder* in it. This line suggests that the spring feels, not just pleasant, but faintly miraculous.

LINES 11-17

the queer
old balloonman whistles
far and wee
and bettyandisbel come dancing
from hop-scotch and jump-rope and
it's
spring

The poem doesn't pause to marvel for long. Instead, it repeats itself again—with a slight difference. Listen to the parallelism as the balloonman puts in his second appearance:

the queer
old balloonman whistles

The last time the balloonman turned up, he was the "little / lame balloonman"; now, he's "queer" (or peculiar) and "old" instead. Again, he seems like an odd match for the springtime world: he's old where the world feels young, and a little uncanny, a little "queer." By now, readers get the sense that there's something a touch mysterious about this guy.

That strangeness feels even clearer when the poem repeats itself yet again:

and bettyandisbel come dancing
from hop-scotch and jump-rope and
it's
spring

This time, it's the girls, "bettyandisbel," who skip away to follow the balloonman's whistle. And once again, this strange ritual of following the balloonman seems to be as much a part of what makes it spring as playing "hop-scotch" through the puddles.

While the poem repeats its phrasings, it does quite different things with the arrangement of words on the page. When "eddieandbill" ran after the balloonman, they did it in one tight four-line passage; "bettyandisbel" get more space, to the point that the words "it's" and "spring" each have a line of their own.

The way the words are put together here invite readers to take just a little more time, to linger over these repetitions—not just to roll through them at exactly the same pace that they read a similar passage before. The poem's structure says, *slow down, pay attention: something interesting is going on here.*

LINES 18-24

and
the
goat-footed
balloonMan whistles
far
and
wee

If readers were in any doubt that there was something a little "queer" about the balloonman who haunts this short poem, a final repetition makes the point crystal clear. Here the balloonman is again, still whistling his strange whistle. But now he's not just "little" and "lame," "queer" and "old." He's also "goat-footed"—and he becomes, not a "balloonman," but a "balloonMan."

Those goaty feet, and the emphasis on the balloonman's masculinity, suddenly give this odd, twinkly little figure the spirit of a satyr: a goat-legged forest spirit from Greek mythology, known for throwing drunken parties in the woods. Satyrs were notoriously lustful and debauched, and they represented fertility.

Perhaps, then, this balloonman has more to offer the children than balloons. After all, his whistle calls first the boys, then the girls: maybe he's bringing them together for the first time. Spring isn't all innocent childlike potential, this delicate allusion suggests. If it's a time of new life, it's also a time of fertility—which involves *losing* one's sexual innocence!

But all those ideas come from just one word and one capitalization; they're subtle, running just beneath the surface of the poem. All readers can really say, as the poem comes to an end, is that this springtime world is joyful and innocent—but also thrills with just a hint of delicious danger.

And look at what happens on the page: as that last whistle stretches out slowly over three lines, readers get the sense that the balloonman's whistle might be the sound of spring itself, spreading "far" out over the whole world, calling everyone to "come dancing."

SYMBOLS

THE BALLOONMAN

The "little / lame balloonman" is a symbol of temptation, maturity, time, and (perhaps) sexuality.

On the one hand, this balloonman, with his limp and his "queer / old" appearance, might just remind readers that the spring the poem depicts doesn't go on forever. Both childhood (the springtime of life) and spring itself are joyful but short-lived: when the children follow the balloonman's whistle, they might also be following him down the path that leads to old age and, eventually, death.

But the balloonman's goat-like feet also suggest that he represents the temptations and pleasures of growing up, too. With those goaty legs, he sounds a lot like a satyr or even a demon: a figure tempting the kids to give up innocence and embrace mature pleasures like sexuality.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-5:** "the little / lame balloonman / whistles far and wee"
- **Lines 11-13:** "the queer / old balloonman whistles / far and wee"
- **Lines 19-24:** " the / goat-footed / balloonMan whistles / far / and / wee"

SPRING

The spring itself is a symbol of youthful potential, childhood, creativity, and fertility.

The poem's springtime landscape is full of mud and puddles: in other words, it's right on the verge of blossoming, but hasn't yet. In that, it's a lot like the poem's literal children, kids innocently enjoying the very beginnings of their lives.

But the satyr-like "balloonman" who wanders through the springy landscape also reminds readers that spring isn't just a time of innocent potential, but of creative potential, fertility, and sexuality—all ready to burst into bloom, just like the landscape.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-3:** "in Just- / spring when the world is mud- / luscious"
- **Line 10:** "when the world is puddle-wonderful"

POETIC DEVICES

JUXTAPOSITION

The poem's juxtaposition of fresh new life with the mysterious old "balloonman" suggests that spring has more to it than sweet little blossoms and childlike pleasures.

The children in the poem—and the springtime world around them—are the picture of youthful innocence. Playing "marbles" and "hop-scotch" or pretending to be pirates, they're living it up in a world that seems as young and fresh as they do. The mud-puddly springtime this poem paints is right on the verge of bursting into bloom: both the year and the children are at the very beginnings of their lives.

But the "little lame / balloonman" seems to be made of different stuff. Limping, "old," and "queer" (or peculiar), he's old where the year and the children are young—a reminder that spring always eventually fades into winter, and children (if they're lucky) become old folks.

This figure might also represent something else: with his "goat" feet, he sounds a lot like a satyr, an ancient Greek forest spirit representing fertility (and known for debauched partying). What's more, he calls the children *away* from their innocent games. In this guise, he's thus a hint that sweet little children eventually grow up and become sexual beings: innocence inevitably turns to experience!

The poem's juxtaposition of young and old, innocence and maturity, thus gives this springy poem its subtlety.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "the little / lame balloonman"
- **Lines 6-7:** "and eddieandbill come / running"
- **Lines 11-12:** "the queer / old balloonman"
- **Line 14:** "and bettyandisbel come dancing"

ONOMATOPOEIA

The onomatopoeia of the balloonman's whistle helps readers to immerse themselves in the poem's world.

When the "queer / old balloonman" whistles and calls the children away from their games, he's always said to whistle:

> far and wee

These repeated words play on the idiom "far and wide": in other words, the balloonman's whistle can be heard all across the landscape, and he himself might also be roaming everywhere. (Perhaps that's part of what gives him his ever-so-slightly sinister and magical demeanor: he and his whistle seem to be everywhere!)

But it's the onomatopoeia of the word "wee" that jumps off the page. The long /ee/ sound makes the word sound exactly like the whistle it describes, helping readers hear that piercing sound cutting through the poem just as it cuts through the air.

The word "wee" has other connotations, too: it might encourage readers to hear the whistle as a "wee" sound in the sense of "little," a high, thin noise that nevertheless seems audible from wherever you're standing. Maybe it even hints at an exuberant "whee!"

Onomatopoeia thus helps to bring one the poem's most striking images—that mysterious whistling old balloonman—to vivid life.

Where Onomatopoeia appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "whistles far and wee"
- **Lines 12-13:** "whistles / far and wee"
- **Lines 21-24:** "whistles / far / and / wee"

ENJAMBMENT

Heavy enjambment helps to give the poem its distinctive shape and sound. E. E. Cummings was a poet as interested in the way poems *looked* as the way they sounded—or, better yet, in the way that a poem's looks affect its sounds. The arrangement of his free verse poetry on the page helps readers to both see and hear its rhythms. For these purposes, surprising enjambments were some of the most useful tricks Cummings had up his sleeve.

For instance, take a look at what happens at the end of the poem:

> it's
> spring
> and
> the
> goat-footed
> balloonMan whistles
> far
> and
> wee

Here, the poem's enjambments are so pronounced that almost every word gets its own line! That encourages readers to really take their time over these words, hearing each of them fall one by one, like pebbles dropping into water.

That effect feels especially clear because a number of the phrases here turned up *without* enjambments earlier: the repeated "far and wee," for instance, appears on one line in both line 5 and line 13. By drawing those words out with enjambments in the final lines, the poem closes on an especially long, piercing, and haunting whistle.

Enjambments also set the pace in more familiar ways, as in lines 6-9:

and eddieandbill come
running from marbles and
piracies and it's
spring

Here, enjambment helps the poem to mimic "eddieandbill" as they hurry after the balloonman, rushing the lines (and the reader) right along. But it also leaves the word "spring" hanging out on a line of its own, as if pausing to take a big breath of air and enjoy the springiness of spring.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Just- / spring "
- **Lines 2-3:** "mud- / luscious"
- **Lines 3-4:** "little / lame"
- **Lines 6-7:** "come / running"
- **Lines 7-8:** "and / piracies"
- **Lines 8-9:** "it's / spring"
- **Lines 11-12:** "queer / old"
- **Lines 12-13:** "whistles / far"
- **Lines 14-15:** "dancing / from"
- **Lines 15-21:** "and / it's / spring / and / the / goat-footed / balloonMan"
- **Lines 21-24:** "whistles / far / and / wee"

REPETITION

Repetitions help to give the poem its gleeful, mischievous, and ever-so-slightly dangerous tone.

No matter what else is going on, the poem always returns to two turns of phrase. One is simple: "and it's spring," the poem says twice:

- The first time those words turn up in lines 8-9, they already feel repetitive; the poem's very first lines tell readers that it's "Just- / spring."
- The reiteration that "it's spring" thus feels gleeful: it's as if the poem is pausing to marvel over the delightful truth it already knows.
- The second time the poem comes back to those words (in lines 15-17), they thus sound even more wonderstruck: the speaker just can't stop rejoicing at the simple fact of spring.
- These repetitions, in other words, suggest that spring feels a little bit like a magic trick: people just have to pause and wonder at it!

The second repetition has more of an edge. In the middle of its images of playful springtime freedom, the poem returns and returns to the image of the strange old "balloonman" who "whistles far and wee":

- The persistent return of the balloonman and his whistle stress that this odd figure, seemingly so out of joint with the innocent mud-puddly pleasures around him, is actually an important part of the springtime.
- And the return of his *whistle* in particular, with its piercing onomatopoeic /ee/ sound, means that readers hear his Pied-Piper-ish call just as the poem's children do—and maybe feel tempted to follow him, too!

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "balloonman / whistles far and wee"
- **Lines 8-9:** "and it's / spring"
- **Lines 12-13:** "balloonman whistles / far and wee"
- **Lines 15-17:** "and / it's / spring"
- **Lines 21-24:** "balloonMan whistles / far / and / wee"

PARALLELISM

Parallelism helps the poem's structure evoke the timeless pattern of the seasons.

All across the poem, similar sentence structures return and return—just like the spring itself. The anaphora of "when the world is mud- / luscious" and "when the world is puddle-wonderful," for instance, makes those lines sound like a hymn to all the delights of early spring, which come back and change the whole "world" again and again.

The children who live in this springtime world also turn up in parallel lines. Compare these two passages:

and eddieandbill come
running from marbles and
piracies [...]
[...]
and bettyandisbel come dancing
from hop-scotch and jump-rope [...]

Here, parallelism makes it sound as if the boys and the girls are doing matching choreography in an old dance. (The fact that their names run together without spaces, "eddieandbill" and "bettyandisbel," also suggests that these kids aren't distinct individuals, but the Idea of Kids: there will always be an "eddieandbill" and "bettyandisbel" playing in the springtime, even when those names aren't so common anymore!)

Last but not least, the little old "balloonman" who calls the children away from their games is always introduced the same way: with a series of adjectives. First he's the "little / lame balloonman"; then he's the "queer / old balloonman"; finally, he's the "goat-footed / balloonMan." The parallelism here invites readers to see the balloonman from a number of different angles:

- First, he's tiny and frail.
- Then, he's strange and ancient.
- Finally, he's "goat-footed" like a forest spirit.

That parallelism asks readers to sit up and pay attention to *all* these qualities—and the way they interact. Spring brings new childlike life to the world, but it's also as old, strange, and mysterious as that balloonman!

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- Lines 2-3
- Lines 3-5
- Lines 6-8
- Line 10
- Lines 11-13
- Lines 14-15
- Lines 19-24

ASSONANCE

Assonance gives the poem some evocative music.

For instance, listen to the sounds that turn up in both of these parallel passages:

> [...] when the world is mud-
> luscious [...]
> when the world is puddle-wonderful

That muted /uh/ assonance sounds just like what it describes: soft, squishy, and delicious, they evoke all the pleasures of jumping right into the middle of a huge mud puddle.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Just"
- **Line 2:** "mud"
- **Line 3:** "luscious"
- **Lines 6-7:** "come / running"
- **Line 10:** "puddle-wonderful"
- **Line 15:** "hop-scotch"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration, like assonance, helps to give the poem its springy tune.

Listen to these sounds from lines 2-4, for example:

> luscious the little
> lame balloonman
> whistles far and wee

The long /l/, liquid sounds here (which also thread through these lines in the consonance of "balloonman" and "whistles") evoke a combination of pleasure and pain: they draw attention to how "luscious" the world feels, but also to the balloonman's "lame" (or limping) legs. All together, then, they feel both musical and a little poignant—as spring itself can.

The /w/ of "whistles" and "wee," meanwhile, helps to create the sound it describes! Alongside that long piercing /ee/ sound, the /w/ sound here is onomatopoeic, making the word "wee" into the *sound* of a whistle, not just an adjective *describing* a whistle.

/W/ alliteration turns up again in line 10:

> when the world is puddle-wonderful

Here, that /w/ sound just plain feels emphatic: it links a time ("when") to a place (the whole "world") that feels a certain way ("wonderful"), emphasizing the feeling that spring makes the whole world feel fresh and delicious.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "luscious"
- **Lines 3-4:** "little / lame"
- **Line 5:** "whistles," "wee"
- **Line 10:** "when," "world," "wonderful"
- **Line 12:** "whistles"
- **Line 13:** "wee"
- **Line 21:** "whistles"
- **Line 24:** "wee"

ALLUSION

One subtle allusion suggests that the poem's "queer / old balloonman" might be more than just an old street vendor.

In line 20, the poem describes the balloonman as "goat-footed." That particular choice of adjective calls to mind a few different figures usually depicted with goat legs:

- Satyrs: Greek fertility spirits said to live in the woods and spend their time on wild, sexy, and sometimes dangerous partying.
- Pan: the Greek god of shepherds, but also a common symbol of fertility, nature, and the rhythm of the seasons.
- And last but not least: the Devil himself, in a lot of traditional depictions. (Some speculate that this image was *inspired* by Greek images of Pan and satyrs.)

This goat-footed balloonman, then, might be a little dangerous! With his alluring whistle, he seems like a tempter, a figure calling children away from their innocent games and toward the pleasures and dangers of maturity. The springy naïvety of childhood, this allusion suggests, is both doomed to end and surrounded by dangers and temptations.

Of course, the poem makes this point very delicately: it's only that single adjective, "goat-footed," that alerts readers to the idea the balloonman might have more on offer than balloons. Before those feet appear, he's still an uneasy, Pied-Piper-like figure—but afterwards, readers get the sense he might just be calling children away to some dark mystery in the woods.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 19-21:** "the / goat-footed / balloonMan"

VOCABULARY

Mud-luscious (Lines 2-3) - This word suggests that the springtime mud is as rich and delicious as fresh fruit: "luscious" means "delectable and juicy."

Lame (Line 4) - "Lame" is an old-fashioned word for "having injured or disabled legs": the "balloonman" has a limp.

Far and wee (Line 5, Line 13, Lines 22-24) - In the phrase "far and wee," Cummings is playing on "far and wide"—that is, "everywhere." But he's also using the onomatopoeic sound of "wee" to evoke the balloonman's high, thin whistle.

Piracies (Line 8) - In other words, "pirate-like behavior": the little boys are pretending to be pirates.

Puddle-wonderful (Line 10) - This image suggests that all the drippy, squishy wetness of early spring feels absolutely delightful.

Queer (Line 11) - Strange, odd (with just a hint of "uncanny and unsettling").

Goat-footed (Line 20) - This image might suggest that the balloonman has odd, bent legs like a goat's—but also suggests that he might be a little bit like a satyr, a half-man, half-goat forest spirit from Greek mythology.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

Cummings's poems are famous for their vibrant, inventive free verse. This poem uses all sorts of surprising shapes and sounds to evoke the scenes it describes. Its 24 lines are broken up into what looks like 10 stanzas, but these are hardly regular—one consists only of a single word: "the"! There's no pattern of meter or rhyme here either; instead, the speaker plays with the way the poem *looks* on the page to create rhythm, music, and meaning.

For example, take a look at this excerpt from lines 3-5:

> the little
> lame balloonman
>
> whistles far and wee

- Here, the poem sticks a surprising enjambment between the words "little" and "lame," creating a herky-jerky rhythm that evokes the "lame" (or limping) balloonman's movements.
- Then, the poem describes what the balloonman *does* in a whole new separate stanza, only one line long: this "whistle," the reader senses, is going to be important.
- The huge spaces between the words "whistles far and wee" work like musical notation, inviting the reader to draw this sentence out long and slow—and to imagine the long, high, piercing sound of the balloonman's whistle carrying over miles through quiet air. (The whistly onomatopoeia of "wee" helps a lot here, too!)

And look at what happens in lines 6-9:

> and eddieandbill come
> running from marbles and
> piracies and it's
> spring

- Here, the lack of spaces in "eddieandbill" makes the little boys sound like a tight-knit group—and presents them as a kind of unified, symbolic idea. In a way, they're not two separate, individual little boys: they're the big, everlasting *idea* of boys, playing marbles and pirates in the springtime since spring has existed.
- And all those enjambments, falling in places where you wouldn't normally pause in everyday speech, sound like the boys' excited gasps for breath as they scramble after the balloonman's whistle.
- Enjambment also leaves the word "spring" all alone on a line by itself like a single egg in a nest: a treasure to be admired and marveled at.

Playful, experimental choices like these allow the poem's shape, not just its language, to mirror the lively, vibrant, edgy springtime energy the speaker describes.

METER

Written in free verse, "in Just-" doesn't use a meter. Instead, the poem creates rhythm by playing with space on the page. This is the kind of poem that's written to be *seen*, not just heard: big gaps between words, surprising enjambments, and varying line lengths conduct the poem's sounds like musical notation.

For example, take a look at lines 1-2:

> in Just-
> spring [...]

The line break right in the middle of the hyphenated words "Just-" and "spring" invites the reader to stretch the word "just" out, emphasizing how new the spring really is: it's *juuuuuust* spring. Then, an extra-long gap between the words "spring" and "when" in line 2 suggests a substantial pause, as if the poem is taking a big lungful of fresh, mud-scented spring air before it goes on.

RHYME SCHEME

This free verse poem doesn't use a rhyme scheme. Instead, it makes music out of assonance, alliteration, and onomatopoeia. When the "balloonman" whistles "far and wee," for instance, readers can *hear* his whistle in the drawn out /ee/ of "wee"!

SPEAKER

There's no clear speaker in "in Just-". Instead, the poem is narrated by an omniscient observer, who seems to be able to see the whole spring landscape—and to hear the thin whistle of the "balloonman" piercing it through. This distant, third-person voice fits right in with the poem's description of the early spring, a season that rolls around so regularly that the poem can stand back and describe how it *always* is.

SETTING

"in Just-" is set in the springtime—in particular, the *early* springtime, when the snow has melted but the grass and flowers haven't grown back yet. The landscape feels full of delicious potential: "mud-luscious" and "puddle-wonderful," it's laden with gleefully messy, squishy pleasures. As spring rolls around, the poem suggests, the whole world becomes a playground, the perfect place for "marbles" and "hop-scotch."

In one sense, this spring feels timeless. The ancient "balloonman" who always seems to turn up like the spirit of the season suggests that spring is in some sense both eternal and fresh: it always brings new life to the world, but it's also been there as long as seasons have existed.

But there are a few little hints here that the speaker is also thinking of a spring from a particular era. The children, "eddieandbill" and "bettyandisbel," have names that sound straight out of early 20th-century America, Cummings's own time and place.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

E. E. Cummings (often stylized as "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 is just one example of the ways he liked to experiment with language as a visual medium.

Cummings's 1923 collection *Tulips and Chimneys*, in which "in Just-" was published, was his first book of poetry. The collection's playful, innovative use of language made him an important voice in the avant-garde literary world of the 1920s, a movement in which writers pushed the boundaries of traditional poetic forms. Cummings is also often considered a major Modernist, one of a group of early 20th-century poets who championed free verse—though his thematic interest in love and nature shows the influence of the earlier 19th-century Romantic poets like William Wordsworth and John Keats.

Both experimental and traditional, Cummings's work met with suspicion from both more conventional and more subversive writers. But that was nothing he wasn't ready for. 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, the poetry world had recognized his unique brilliance, and he was widely lauded, earning honors from a Guggenheim to a prestigious fellowship from the American Academy of Poets.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Cummings published *Tulips and Chimneys* in 1923, during a hopeful, springy period of world history. World War I, in which he'd reluctantly served, 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 to wrap 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. When the "Roaring Twenties" kicked into gear, youth culture became an important force for the first time as the younger generation who'd survived the war partied their cares away.

The decade was marked by a rejection of old values—values which the younger generation felt had only led to devastation. Experimental, avant-garde art became popular as artists moved away from traditional forms and embraced movements like surrealism and jazz. Cummings's work was just one part of this explosion of creativity.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The E. E. Cummings Society — Visit the website of the E. E. Cummings Society, an academic group that celebrates the

poet's work. (https://faculty.gvsu.edu/websterm/cummings/society.html)

- A Brief Biography — Learn more about Cummings's life and work at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/e-e-cummings)
- Cummings on Poetry — Listen to Cummings himself describing his poetic philosophy. (https://youtu.be/iYfhsFpMdg4)
- Cummings's Visual Art — Cummings wasn't just a poet, but a visual artist. Take a look at some of his paintings and drawings at the Whitney Museum's website. (https://whitney.org/artists/307)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a reading of the poem. (https://youtu.be/lKKCVSV4k0o)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER E. E. CUMMINGS POEMS

- anyone lived in a pretty how town
- i carry your heart with me(i carry it in
- 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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