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# Cummings, Abbott and Costello: How "Who's on First?" Can Help Students Understand "anyone lived in a pretty how town"

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**Abstract:** Listening to Abbott and Costello's "Who's On First?" can provide a helpful introduction to E.E. Cummings's special use of pronouns in "anyone lived in a pretty how town." Like Cummings, Abbott and Costello convert pronouns, other parts of speech, or short phrases into proper nouns. After students wrestle with this context in relation to the poem, they will be ready to think about other contexts, such as the legacy of Emersonian individualism or the Romantic idea of the child's closeness to God. Finally, the role of gender in the love story is also worth exploring, and the romance between anyone and noone can be considered in the context of the ballad tradition.

*Introduction*

Despite many linguistic attempts to account for the grammar of E.E. Cummings's "anyone lived in a pretty how town," the poem is widely anthologized, suggesting that it is well regarded and repays study, even if it may not be understood at first glance (see Cureton, Levin, Lord, Reinhart, Thorne). In other words, the poem is not just an amusing oddity or weird specimen for testing linguistic theories. This paper will describe my strategy for teaching the poem in a comparative way to help students perceive its worth as well as its meaning. The goal of my lesson is to help students decode the way the poem defines the terms "anyone" and "noone" as names as well as indefinite pronouns, together with the way these characters are opposed to "someones" and "everyones" in order to enhance the heroism of "anyone." A focus on these features of the poem can help students sort out the poem's innovations with parts of speech, word order, and storyline. This approach can also prepare students to think critically about the poem's themes and characterizations and provides a basis for understanding similar poems by Cummings.

To achieve these goals, I begin class by showing students the famous Abbott and Costello sketch called "Who's on First?" Like Cummings, Abbott and Costello convert pronouns into proper nouns. After students wrestle with the wordplay of Abbott and Costello and apply it to Cummings's wordplay in the poem, they will be ready to think about other contexts, such as the legacy of Emersonian individualism or the Romantic idea of the child's closeness to God. Finally, the role of gender in the love story is also worth exploring, and

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the romance between anyone and no one can be considered in the context of the ballad tradition. However, if there is not time in a single class session to accommodate all of these contexts, choosing the first one is a good strategy because it offers students tools for grappling with the characters and storyline of the poem. Launching a session with laughter helps warm up students to Cummings's story and the playful way he represents it.

*Teaching Contexts*

I teach "anyone lived in a pretty how town" most frequently in the context of an upper-division American poetry course, but I have also taught it in survey courses and even a few literature-and-composition courses. The poem is well represented in anthologies, appearing in *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*, *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, *The Bedford Anthology of American Literature*, *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, the second volume of *American Literature* published by Pearson, and the *Oxford Anthology of Modern American Poetry*.

*The Lesson*

Abbott and Costello's "Who's on First?" routine may be found on YouTube or on relatively recent DVDs (see Works Cited). Many of the versions available online are a bit blurry, so you might want to preview a few and save the URL before you start your class, even copying and pasting it in a PowerPoint slide or cueing up the website before class begins so that you have it ready. Here is the web address for a version I have used:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kTcRRaXV-fg>

A pdf transcript of one version of the sketch may be found at the following web address:

<http://ep.yimg.com/ty/cdn/yhst-57190479284260/WhosonFirst.pdf>

The quotation below is one version of the opening section of the sketch, as excerpted from the website of the Abbott and Costello Fan Club. According to the site, the passage is taken from the 1945 film *The Naughty Nineties*. The passage establishes the terms of the sketch and launches the comedy of errors between the "straight man" Bud Abbott and his comic partner Lou Costello:

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LOU: I love baseball. When we get to St. Louis, will you tell me the guys' names on the team so when I go to see them in that St. Louis ballpark I'll be able to know those fellows?

BUD: All right. But you know, strange as it may seem, they give ball players nowadays very peculiar names.

LOU: Funny names?

BUD: Nicknames, pet names. Now, on the St. Louis team we have Who's on first, What's on second, I Don't Know is on third—

LOU: That's what I want to find out; I want you to tell me the names of the fellows on the St. Louis team.

BUD: I'm telling you: Who's on first, What's on second, I Don't Know is on third.

LOU: You know the fellows' names?

BUD: Yes.

LOU: Well, then, who's playin' first?

BUD: Yes.

LOU: I mean the fellow's name on first base.

BUD: Who.

LOU: The fellow playin' first base for St. Louis.

BUD: Who.

LOU: The guy on first base.

BUD: Who is on first.

LOU: Well what are you askin' *me* for?

BUD: I'm not asking you—I'm telling you: Who is on first. ("Who's on First?")

While instructors may well find it useful to asks students to skim the transcript of the skit and compare it to the poem, I believe that focusing on the performance first and foremost will help students discover the importance of the spirit of play, timing, and wit in Cummings's own poem. For this reason and because of time limitations, I concentrate on the performance of the comedy routine rather than on its written transcript.

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Let the students listen to the entire routine to get a sense of the way Abbott and Costello riff on the interrogative pronouns as personal names. It might be better to begin with a simple question beforehand, such as, "What do you notice about the names in this sketch?" While that question is extremely basic, the effort to answer requires students to listen actively for a specific quality of the performance, so that they are not passively watching. (I provide a slightly more elaborate question in my Appendix, which includes discussion questions I have developed about the poem. Aside from this first question, which is a warm-up exercise for the entire class, the others in my list are for small groups.) Helping your students to concentrate on the quality of the language and its relation to the humor of the piece can prepare them to focus on the pronouns as names in Cummings's poem. Since I assign this poem along with several others, usually late in the semester, most students genuinely need assistance in sorting out the characters to understand who is who, what they are doing, and why it matters. Once students can detect some pattern to the pronouns, they are better equipped to enjoy Cummings's story and the way he tells it.

Once students have viewed the sketch, ask them to identify the characters on the baseball team, writing the names of the various players on the whiteboard as students call them out. Students won't have trouble identifying the distinctive members of Abbott and Costello's baseball team, and you might ask them why they do not. This question can help them reflect on their process of analyzing the language, structure, and timing of the performance. Students with mobile devices such as smart phones or iPads may locate online transcripts to consult after the performance. By waiting until after the sketch is played, students can enjoy the performance and build more meaningfully on the experience. Skimming a transcript afterward could provide the basis for a small-group session about how the names function in the sketch.

Next, turn to Cummings's poem. I usually ask several individuals to volunteer to read one stanza of the poem each, reading in turn until the poem is complete. This maximizes student engagement, both as reciters and listeners, giving the class a feel for the poem's sound effects and storyline. However, a recording of Cummings reciting the poem himself is also available online if you want to play it. This recording could replace or supplement the student reading. Time permitting, you could even compare Cummings's performance with the way students read the poem. I would recommend playing it after students have recited

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the poem aloud themselves, so they get a feel for its sounds and rhythms. Reading aloud requires students to make choices about how to enunciate the lines, and this activity also allows them to hear their classmates' renditions. Because the choices involved in the delivery of the lines are interpretive, reading aloud can provide the basis for valuable discussion. I compliment students for particular qualities in their reading, so that other students take notice of the role of phrasing in individual lines and how such aspects of the poem work together to affect the reader and reinforce meaning.

At this point, you might ask students to identify the major actors in a brief and focused freewriting assignment. I often try to do this collaboratively as a class, particularly if enrollment is below average. Otherwise, you can break students into smaller groups to identify the protagonist and to compare the names of the major characters with those in Abbott and Costello.

After reading through the poem, it seems best to focus on the behavior of "anyone" and the ways his actions contrast with the behavior of "everyone" and "someone." James Gee's chart visualizes the pattern of contrasts, and it could be reproduced by the instructor on a whiteboard or PowerPoint slide to use as a basis for instruction:

Noone/Anyone		Someones/Everyones	
1. he sang his didn't	4	they sowed their isn't	7
2. he danced his did	4	they reaped their same	7
3. she laughed his joy	14	someones married their everyones	17
4. she cried his grief	14	[they] laughed their cryings	18
5. noone stooped to kiss his face	14	[they] did their dance	18
6. they dream their sleep	36	they said their nevers	19-20
7. they slept their dream	20		

According to Gee, the chart emphasizes the singularity of anyone and noone and the plurality of everyone and someone (130). In order to recognize and understand the impact of the "you-and-me-against-the-world" perspective of anyone and noone, students will have to decode the jammed-together words *no one* as a person, something which the Abbott and Costello skit should help with. But in order to discover the basic pattern of the contrast

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between anyone as an outsider and the everyones and someones as respectable insiders, students must compare the verbs associated with each character, asking themselves how the verbs align with the actors of the sentence in each case, and why they do so. As Rai Peterson observes, "'anyone' is the best pronoun/name for 'everyman' because it invites every reader to insert him or herself into the poem as protagonist" (75). (By the way, this idea of the reader becoming one with a poem's speaker is one that Helen Vendler promotes in her poetry textbook *Poems, Poets, Poetry: An Introduction and Anthology*. Instructors may want to explore this notion explicitly by asking students to think about how it works in Cummings's poem.)

When the discussion has gone on long enough for students to understand the way anyone's actions are characterized, ask them to draw conclusions about his personality. How do anyone's behaviors individuate him, making his life different from that of other members of the community? At this point, showing a slide with passages from Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Self-Reliance" would be relevant. Try the following passages:

1. "Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist" (261).
2. "My life is for itself and not for a spectacle" (263).
3. "What I must do, is all that concerns me, not what the people think" (263).
4. "For non-conformity the world whips you with its displeasure" (264).
5. "Life only avails, not the having lived." (271).
6. "But now we are a mob. Man does not stand in awe of man, nor is the soul admonished to stay at home, to put himself in communication with the internal ocean . . ." (272).

Remind students that individuality, resistance to authority, and nonconformity play important roles in American culture. Peterson makes this point, too (75-76). Ask students how the fourth and fifth quotations apply to anyone in Cummings's poem. Ask them to identify examples from the news or their own lives and invite them to compare these examples to the poem. It is also worth asking them why they succeed at a fuller love than the proud but faceless everyones and someones of the poem. Gary Lane characterizes these people as a "the mass of nonbeings leading their lives of fatuously self-important desperation" (99).

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Lane's variation on Thoreau's remark valorizes anyone by differentiating him from the conformists. Lane's line could be added to a PowerPoint slide (with Thoreau's original version), so students can see the connections among Emerson, Thoreau, and Cummings. Ask students to respond to the following claim by Paul Headrick: "The relationship between 'anyone' and 'noone' involves a love that contrasts with the limited connections among the townspeople and their resistance to the power of relations to shape identity, the resistance that produces their inability to care" (54).

In addition to considering the poem's attitude toward individualism, it is also good to ask students to think about the way grownups and children are depicted. I ask students the following questions:

- What did the children forget 'down' as they grew 'up'?
- What do *down* and *up* mean in these cases?
- Why are growing and forgetting respectively parallel to sky and earth?

When there are many students in a class, I make these questions the basis of small-group discussion. The questions lead students to a consideration of Cummings's poem in relation to the following passage from William Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," which I include on my list of discussion questions.

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting  
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,  
Hath had elsewhere its setting,  
And cometh from afar:  
Not in entire forgetfulness,  
And not in utter nakedness,  
But trailing clouds of glory do we come  
From God, who is our home:  
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!  
Shades of the prison-house begin to close  
Upon the growing Boy



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But he  
Beholds the light, and whence it flows,  
He sees it in his joy;  
The Youth, who daily farther from the east  
Must travel, still is Nature's Priest,  
And by the vision splendid  
Is on his way attended;  
At length the Man perceives it die away,  
And fade into the light of common day. (Wordsworth 798)

It will take students time to work through this passage, so when the small group reports their findings about it, I find it useful to poll the rest of the class about what they think of the passage and what relationship it might have to Cummings's poem. Forgetting is a key theme in both Wordsworth and Cummings, so it is best to let students discover and point this out themselves, but they may need a little more coaching to grasp the lines culminating in Wordsworth's claim that "Heaven lies about us in our infancy!" Perhaps some students will have taken a course in British Romanticism and can talk about this passage in light of the course. It is worth asking students whether they have such experience, and it is also worth trying to incorporate it into a discussion of anyone's personality, his career, and his community.

So far I have ignored one prominent feature of Cummings's poem that students will notice and wish to discuss: the seasonal-phrase repetitions and the "X by X" or "X by Y" phrases (Nixon 25). John B. Lord's approach to this aspect of the poem strikes me as useful and comparable to my use of Abbott and Costello as a model to learn from. In the past, I have not cited or explained Lord's argument in class, but my students and I grope our way towards a version of his approach in the course of discussion. To understand Cummings's surprising variations on this phrasal structure, it helps to identify everyday expressions that approximate Cummings's formula. Lord's examples are "day by day, year by year, inch by inch, bit by bit" (66) and he acknowledges that Cummings's "little by little" is a familiar phrase. Lord goes on to show how an instructor can invite students to compare and contrast

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Cummings's vivid variations on these familiar idioms, including "tree by leaf" and "earth by april."

Invite students to ruminate on the poetic effect of such locutions. They will notice how they fit into the seasonal refrain, but you can build on that insight by showing how Cummings's phrases also pick up on the notion of movement or progression evident in "inch by inch." As B. J. Hunt points out, "the playful rhythm and sound complement nature's sequences where life cycles rotate throughout the nine stanzas like a merry-go-round, life on a proverbial fast-paced playground" (231). For Hunt, this is only half the story, since the poem is also about death. But of course that theme is a central one in lyric poetry, and for obvious reasons death is often connected with the passage of time. In Theo Steinman's view, "Life has come full circle, but the end is also a commencement" (72). How do students respond to such questions in light of Edith Everson's claim that "the lovers 'anyone' and 'noone' are the only ones living in the proper sense" (248)? Or Lane's view that "Death is but a continuation of growth for this poem's loving pair, but its 'Women and men' remain perennially dead" (101).

While Hunt and Steinman may not be opposed to one another in the long run, these different perspectives can provide the basis for a discussion about the prevailing tone of the poem. S. John Macksoud's remarks about the title compound such questions about the poem's tone and meaning:

[. . .] Cummings' perverse ways with grammar permit one to interpret "pretty how" as "how pretty," but another reading is possible. Suppose "pretty" is construed as an adverb, and read as "rather," modifying the adjective "how." Such a construction would drastically change the tone of the line, its implications for the whole poem, and the interpreter's entire pattern of strategies in reading. This reading has the advantage of referring to the town's universally noted involvement in the sheer routines of living. Thus, in much the same way that one would describe a town preoccupied with the oil industry as an "oil town" . . . , a "how town" would be a town in which the principal preoccupation is the asking of the mechanical question, "How?" in the sense now applied by engineers: know-how. (73)

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Macksoud's remarks can be used to prompt a number of questions for discussion. For example, are students inclined to see the poem as a celebration of *joie de vivre* ("danced his did"), a satire on misdirected, mechanistic living ("they / said their nevers, they slept their dream"), or a lament regarding the death of an apparently anonymous individual ("one day anyone died i guess")? Do students believe they should devote their lives to practical, profitable knowledge or to spiritually oriented wisdom? Is this opposition mystifying and oversimplifying? Ask students to weigh in on these positions and to explain their choices.

From a gender perspective, it is also worth asking what role noone plays. How is her life like anyone's, yet more dependent on him than he seems to be on the everyones and someones around him? How does her (elided) action of leaping into anyone's grave compare with the love plots of famous literature or grand opera? What problems might students notice in this? Or do students find noone's devotion exciting, since it indicates the strength of a love that is stronger than death? Perhaps more often, students will notice that noone is an adjunct to anyone instead of a protagonist in her own right. Her role is that of a supporting character and devoted partner.

Time permitting, such questions might be addressed by asking students what they know about traditional ballads (as opposed to ballads from popular music). While the meter of "anyone lived in a pretty how town" may not exemplify the ballad form, the storyline and use of refrain evoke its traditions. To find out what your students know about this topic, ask them to tell you about the typical subject matter of ballads. Perhaps you can supply a specific ballad about love and death. Reading and discussing one, then comparing it to Cummings's poem is worth doing, both to help students appreciate the love story and the communal dynamic of his poem and for the way gender is conceived in it. In contrast to the situation in the murder ballad "Tom Dooley," for instance, the lovers in Cummings's poem are happy together, nor does one die by the other's hands. (The Carolina Chocolate Drops perform a version of this ballad, called "Tom Dula," on their CD *Dona Got a Ramblin' Mind*). In *Making Your Own Days* Kenneth Koch includes an anonymous ballad ("The Unquiet Grave") that you may find particularly useful when discussing the role of noone in "anyone lived in a pretty how town" (160-161).

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If you do read "The Unquiet Grave" together in class, you can ask whether the voice of the woman in the ballad makes students think a little differently about noone. Compare the portrayal of noone at anyone's funeral with the following exchange between lovers in "The Unquiet Grave." In the first stanza, the mourner speaks, while his beloved answers him in the second:

"Tis I my love, sit on your grave,  
And will not let you sleep;  
For I crave one kiss of your clay-cold lips,  
And that is all I seek."

"You crave one kiss of my clay-cold lips,  
But my breath smells earthly strong;  
If you have one kiss of my clay-cold lips,  
Your time will not be long. (Koch 160)

By portraying the dead woman as reproving her lover, the poem satirizes misguided romantic love. Asking students to compare the ballad to "anyone lived in a pretty how town" can raise provocative questions about the situation and role of noone in Cummings's poem. This line of questioning could lead students to the idea that Cummings's version of romantic love is just that: a version against which many other versions may be read. An awareness of literary history in relation to the poem can be developed by asking students to think about depictions of romance in other works they have read, in popular songs, and in movies. To take one example, Steve Martin performs "Pretty Little Thing," his own murder ballad with a funny feminist twist. You can find a YouTube performance of the song by Martin and the Steep Canyon Rangers, featuring Edie Brickell, and a Rounder recording of the song is available on Amazon.com (Martin). It is also worth inviting students to revisit one of the previous quotations from Emerson: "Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist" (261). Is noone a nonconformist? Should the terms of her individuality be measured by

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manhood? How does Cummings's poem define both individuality and gender? How do students reframe or react to these concepts as they address themselves to the poem?

*Conclusion*

While my primary goal in this this essay has been to explain why the wordplay in Abbott and Costello's skit "Who's on First?" can help students begin to understand and appreciate Cummings's "anyone lived in a pretty how town," I have also tried to subdivide my lesson into interchangeable units, so that instructors can take the parts of it that fit their needs (based on individual preferences and time constraints) and adapt them for their own purposes in the classroom. Ideally, some combination of the skit, American individualism, Romantic spirituality, and the ballad tradition could be drawn upon. But pragmatically speaking, there may not be enough time to address all of these issues in a single session. It is better to focus on fewer issues so that students understand them sufficiently than to try to cover too many topics in a limited session. Listening to "Who's On First?" can provide a helpful introduction to Cummings's special use of pronouns in "anyone lived in a pretty how town."

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Appendix: E.E. Cummings: Questions for Discussion

1. Focused Free-Write Question: How do Abbott & Costello manipulate parts of speech to comic effect in their skit "Who's On First"? How do they alter the normal use of pronouns (such as *who* & *what*) or other words?
2. How is Cummings's feeling for spring expressed in "anyone lived in a pretty how town"?
3. Like Abbott and Costello in "Who's On First?" Cummings reconfigures parts of speech in "anyone lived in a pretty how town." What part of speech is "anyone" and "no one" according to a good dictionary? Why does Cummings turn these words into personal names? What other parts of speech does Cummings alter in the poem? What is the result of this poetic license? How does Cummings rearrange normal word order in this poem?
4. In "anyone lived in a pretty how town," how does anyone define himself through his behavior? What does his behavior tell you about his personality & his "place" within both the natural world & the social world?
5. What examples of panache or gusto do you find in the way anyone lives his life? Remember how Marianne Moore used one of Cummings's poems as an example in "Humility, Concentration, and Gusto"? What does his poem exemplify for Moore?
6. How does Cummings situate his love story about anyone and noone in the natural rhythms of the earth and its seasons? Why are these earthly, earthy settings crucial to the love story? How do the seasonal & temporal transformations infuse anyone's individual life with a universalizing grandeur and majesty?
7. What connects anyone to the earth & its fecundity in a distinctive way?
8. How does Cummings portray sex & gender in "anyone lived in a pretty how town"? Consider dong and ding, for instance, in relation to the music of the bells in the first stanza. How does noone interact with anyone?
9. How is anyone an outsider hero in the poem? What makes his behavior seem offbeat? How does his personality express the poem's "vision of life"?
10. How does the poem use ballad form to tell a story? How does that narrative structure provide a framework that helps you makes sense of the redefinitions of the parts of speech?

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11. How are grownups & children depicted in the poem? What did the children forget "down" as they grew "up"? What do down and up mean in these cases? Why are growing and forgetting respectively parallel to sky and earth?
12. How is anyone's way of being playful & child-like? How does this seem to epitomize *joie de vivre* for Cummings in the poem? How is Emerson's statement in "Self-Reliance" that "Infancy conforms to nobody" (a fact he sees as positive) apply to anyone?
13. Why does Cummings vary his seasonal and weather refrains throughout the poem? How does this pattern of varied repetition provide a narrative framework for the story of anyone and noone?
14. How does cummings flip flop the meanings of someone & anyone as well as everyone & noone in the poem? Why does he do this? How are anyone and noone rebels whose lives are ironically richer, lovelier, & far more distinctively individual than the fast-track but colorless & backwards, routinized careers of someones & everyones?

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