Analysis of the innovations of E.E.Cummings, Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Edna St. Vincent Millay

Sonnet form has been experimented differently by many during its process. Every poet either added something new from his own or decided to follow the traditional style. In my paper, I will try to discuss the four poets, who experimented on subject, language, imagery and form.

At least my theory of technique, if I have one, is very far from original; nor is it complicated. I can express it in fifteen words, by quoting The Eternal Question And Immortal Answer of burlesk, viz. "Would you hit a woman with a child?--No, I'd hit her with a brick." Like the burlesk comedian, I am abnormally fond of that precision which creates movement. (E.E.Cummings)

E.E Cummings is a very popular poet. Some admire him greatly, whereas some people cannot understand him properly and regard his works as unimportant. Although he says he is far from original, it is agreed by all that he was an innovative poet in many fields, especially form. In many of his poems, we see that he attempts to deal with his words visually and this way takes his poem closer to visual arts and painting rather than music. He ignores punctuation and capitalization in many places and the critics state that he wanted to ignore them to criticize the purposes of their invention. He uses them rather for emphasis. In many places he writes “i” instead of “I”, which is very unusual for the readers. He breaks the poem into pieces also to give a message. For example in his poem “Space Being (don’t forget to remember) Curved”, the poem also makes a curve towards the end, supporting the curvature of space. In some poems, he uses words or letters to give a visual image like in “r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r”. He does not even use words in his poem. Instead he uses letters and scatters them in the poem to create the effect of a leaping grasshopper and even thinks of giving the image of the grasshopper if a line is drawn between the letters. He is also a satirical poet as he makes fun of the patriotic and religious cliches like in “next to of course god america i”, in which he imitates the 4th of July speechmakers and points out the meaninglessness and emptiness of these appeals. He also coins some words and combines words very unconventionally. He is thought to be influenced by cubism and expressionism so these examples can be taken as a proof to this. Many of his sonnets are fourteen line works in which he experiments many novelties like we have discussed in the previous lines. So he is one of the most innovative poets, who had a unique way of handling the sonnet form. Although sometimes his poetry is considered not to be “poetry” at all, for me he is one of the most creative poets of literature and he created himself a unique way and is very successful because he also wants the reader to take an active role by seeming “not to show” everything that obviously, whereas putting the picture in front of us and expecting us to see it if we can. His poetry is like a game we are playing with him. If you win by finding out what he wants to show, you really enjoy what you see.

Robert Lowell is also a poet who was innovative. With his book Life Studies, he became one of the leaders of “Confessionalism”, although some people found his work personally embarrassing and said they could not find anything worth considering in it. In his sonnets, which are mostly fourteen lines, he uses a loose iambic pentameter and there is no rhyme. He comments on American history, (also history in general in sonnets like Death of Alexander and Napoleon) and combines it with his own life and family. The Dolphin, in which he talks about his marriage, won him The Pulitzer Prize. Confessionalist poetry was a new approach to
poetry so with this, he attracted the attention of many people so we can say that he experimented in subject matter more than in other fields.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning, although not as famous as Robert Browning, also made a unique attempt by being the first woman who wrote love poems for a man. Many Victorian readers believed that the function of a woman was "not to write, not to act, not to be famous, but to love" (Stephenson 69). Critics also argue that her poems have the Victorian tone of gloom and sorrow. She is thought to be very sensible to illness and death. In her most famous book Sonnets from the Portuguese, the intensity of her passion is great and it was something unique to be expressed by a woman of that time. In all the sorrows of her life, the book is considered as her healing of her pains in real life and gave her courage to have her own identity out of her father’s house.

As both "England's greatest female poet" and the "most inspired woman poet of history," Barrett Browning attained sainthood not just as a poet but also as a wife based on the love story told in "Sonnets" (Lootens 137).

Some of her poems have religious symbolism in them and are known to carry a further meaning than their Victorian identity. The connection between love, marriage, religion and literary genius is commented on as "just as the 'chief event in the life of Elizabeth Barrett was her marriage,' the 'height' of her literary achievements was the Sonnets" (Lootens 139). Barrett Browning was criticized not only for her higher-level use of language and idiomatic expression, but also for the manner of her language; Virginia Woolf criticized Barrett Browning’s use of this unrhymed type of metered verse saying it had forced her to "ignore the slighter, the subtler, the more hidden shades of emotion by which a novelist builds up touch by touch a character in prose" (Harris 128). She usually chooses double rhyme. She uses many kinds of meters from the most regular to the Petrarchan Sonnets. The way she changes her way of writing was criticized but it was a great experimentation in her time. For me, she has a very important role, by opening up a way for other poets that will come after her. She was so brave to talk about her own life and love story without caring much about how people may react.

Finally, Edna St.Vincent Millay, who is considered to be the poet of “eternal youth, feminine revolt and liberation, sensivity and suggestiveness”(American National Biography Online), wrote about the themes of love, sorrow, the inevitability of change, resignation, and nature. Being a poet of the Jazz Age, these subjects that she wrote about are considered to be innovative although she preferred to write in a traditional style. She was the poet who represented the New Womanhood in that social and political change. She, in a way opened a new way in this field and placed women in a new position both in social and literary life of modern New York. She reflected a very open sexuality in her poems which was also new for the women of that time. There seems to be an individual woman telling about her own experiments in love and passion in her sonnets. This is also important for her to create women an individual place in society. So, we can say that she followed traditional forms, and experimented more with the subject matter in her works, which makes her one of the most unforgettable figures of literature. Like Elizabeth Barrett Browning, she also opened up a way for women, who would like to follow her afterwards but in my opinion, her effort has a wider social and political value.

As we see, all those four poets, made unique experimentations in their works and became the ever lasting figures of literature of all times. Their experimentations made them universal and they gave courage to the people who came after them and influenced them positively no matter how much they were criticized at that time.
SOURCES:

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Cummings, E.E 1926--from the foreword to a book of poems called Is 5


