

“She Being Brand” New and Easy to Exploit:

How Cummings Upholds Power Systems

Certain tenets of U.S.-American society, namely capitalism and patriarchy, systemically dehumanize women, femmes, and people perceived as women. Capitalism dehumanizes through its transformation of women from people to objects of desire and the commodification of their sexuality. Similarly, patriarchy dehumanizes women and femmes by diminishing their financial, sexual, intellectual, and political agency to allow men to maintain their supremacy within those structures. Governments and institutions necessarily entrench these and other forms of oppression, but vehicles such as the arts and literature can also promote subjugation. In E.E. Cummings’ poem “she being Brand,” an older man exploits a young woman via the power systems of capitalism and patriarchy. Using feminist and Marxist approaches, this paper examines Cummings’ reinforcement of those power systems via humor, violence, and appeals to rape culture. Cummings combines an erotic metaphor for sex via a man and his experience driving a brand-new car and the use of humor to produce an amusing and engaging poem to the reader, but beneath the comedy and sexuality lies a disturbing subtext of oppression. Unfortunately, many Cummings scholars dismiss the poem as merely pornographic thus mirroring society’s inability whether accidentally or willfully to identify oppression. As a result, scholarly analysis has lagged in the years since the 1990s. By refusing to interact with the text, Cummings scholars miss an opportunity to explore how and why white, male literary icons use their position to reinforce abusive power systems.