

## Week 9 Reading Questions

### **Reminders:**

The poems for this week are all designed to be complex, so take your time and try to work out the meaning, especially as it relates to our theme of the individual versus community/country. They are difficult by design.

### **General Questions:**

Why are these people so disaffected? Is there a positive/hopeful position offered or only critique? What kinds of things do these individuals have problems with?

### **T.S. Eliot, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1725-1729)**

To begin, this is probably one of the most “anthologized” and taught poems from the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As you read, think about why this poem might be so powerful/popular.

1725 – Note the inscription, from Dante’s *Inferno*, involves answers from beyond death: Does this poem attempt to offer answers beyond life?

1726 – Note the brand of images Eliot uses in the opening stanza (and throughout) – what kind of adventure does he propose to go on?

Note the yellow fog later on the page – what kind of world are they adventuring in? Does yellow have a negative or positive connotation? What comment, in the same section, does he seem to make about time?

1727 – On this page, we learn about body parts, clothing, spinning in circles, and Prufrock’s fears. Do you imagine a man like this could disturb the universe? What social conventions does he struggle with?

What is his issue with the “lonely men in shirt-sleeves”? Does he feel connected to them or disconnected?

1728 – What, ultimately, is Prufrock afraid of? What kind of relationship does he seek from women? We are back to communication problems (like “Entropy”) – why can’t he say what he means?

1729 – What does it mean to be a Fool, in medieval times? In his lament of growing old, what does he seem to want/fear? What does the “peach” have to do with it?

Finally, the poem seems to end with a kind of dream vision about mermaids: how does it end? What are the connotations of drowning? Is there any hope offered here?

### **Wallace Stevens, “A High-Toned Old Christian Woman” (1776-1777)**

1776 – In some ways, this poem is about the world poetry can offer versus the old, moral world. The poem is in the form of a **dramatic monologue**, where the speaker addresses his audience (the woman) throughout the poem. Our goal is to figure out what he is trying to convince her of. Notice the contrast between the “supreme fiction” (poetry) and moral law. Clearly these two ideas are in contrast in the poem.

1776 (cont.) – Note that a peristyle regards the kind of architecture used in Greek times, while the moral law points to the nave of a church. In this way, the “supreme fiction” of poetry harkens back to an earlier time, perhaps, when society functioned in a different way. How does this contrast help to show the two sides of the poem?

1777 – After explaining what could happen, Stevens mentions making “widows wince.” How does this connect to his argument? In other words, what should poetry do and what kind of world should it seek to create?

NOTE: This poem is difficult, but focus on the contrast to understand his meaning. In some ways, the whole poem could be a joke on what people think poetry ACTUALLY DOES to society, but I’ll leave this to you to ponder.

### **William Carlos Williams, “Pastoral” (1782)**

Remember that, for Williams, we are dealing with “imagist” poetry, which focus on concrete objects. As he famously claimed, “no ideas but in things,” so look at the things he chooses to represent in his poems.

Before you even begin, note that the title, “Pastoral,” brings to mind a certain kind of poem of the past, where the shepherds, for instance, were praised for the simple lives they led. Pastoral poems tend to see only the good in the world.

1782 - What contrast does Williams open his poem with? How could the “houses/ of the very poor” relate to the idea of a pastoral poem?

What kinds of things/images does he show us? Why does he show us these things?

Finally, what do the last three lines do to the meaning of this poem? What kind of comment does this poem make, in a social sense?

### **WCW, “Tract” (1782-1784)**

Overtly, this poem is meant to teach people how to have a proper funeral. Williams is also talking, however, about how poetry should be written and read. For our purposes, focus on the funeral itself as a social function – what does he want?

Note: the extra spaces and dashes within the lines is called **caesura**: it just means there is a break within lines, so if you were reading this poem, you would stress these pauses. I mention this because reading with the pauses helps add meaning to the poem.

1782-1783 – What kinds of problems does our speaker have with funerals? What kinds of changes does he recommend? Why?

1783 – What kind of memento should a person be buried with? Why?

1783-1784 – What comments does our speaker make about the driver? What is wrong with his sitting up high in a silk top hat? Where does he want him?

1784 – Finally, what comments does he make of the funeral processors? What final advice does he offer?

What larger social issues might he be pointing to? How or why would changing a ritual change the meaning behind that ritual? What would happen if people followed his advice?

### **E.E. Cummings, “anyone lived in a pretty how town” (Blackboard)**

At first glance, this poem just looks like nonsense (let’s be honest). As you read, however, pay attention to the overall meaning and social commentary.

What is the significance of all the seasonal and natural changes (“sun moon stars rain”)? What do they provide for the poem?

What are the significance of names in this poem? What does it mean to be anyone? noone? What about someones and everyones? Do these names help us see the larger point the poem tries to make?

What happens in the poem? Is there a plot? What kind of lesson can we learn?

NOTE: Don't be distracted by the confusing images ("with up so floating many bells down"). We are concerned with what sense we can make, so ignore the images that make no sense at all. Focusing on the story the poem tells can help.

### **Nirvana/Cobain, "All Apologies" (Blackboard)**

To spice up our readings this week, I thought a more contemporary example that relates to these poets could be useful. Of course, nearness in time doesn't make the meaning that much easier. Let's see what sense we can make of this song.

First, what kind of hope is offered here? Does the individual have much to look forward to? What does it mean to apologize (seems obvious, but think about it in this context)? What is this poem an apology for? Looking back at Cummings poem, what similarities do they have? Are they complaining about common social issues? Finally, what does it mean to "feel as one"? In conjunction, what can we make of the final lines, "All in all is all we are"?

For this song, let's avoid reading too deeply (online, most of what you find is biography – Courtney Love is easily amused by her drugs, though she has found his stash ("nest of salt")) and stick to what social concern this individual voices (if he in fact voices any).

### **Final Thoughts**

Overall, try to read these poems in communication with each other. What kind of common views of society emerge (specifically)? What kind of hope is offered? Is hope offered? If you get confused, try to make what meaning you can of the poem. While these poems are challenging, I think we are up to the challenge.