

## Week 10 Lecture: Individual Versus Community/Country

### **Introduction/Specifics**

As we leave the midterm behind and move into the second half of the course, you will notice a change. Instead of covering one theme a week, we will cover one theme (in a variety of forms) for the rest of the semester. For the next three weeks, we will deal with the general notion of the individual's place in the larger community/country. As the "Versus" in the title predicts, we have left behind Crevecoeur's best society and are looking at problems that erupt at the social level. For the next two weeks, we will cover poetry (for the most part), then the novel, followed by looking at how more specific groups navigate this problem (through race/class, women, and then immigrants in Lahiri's novel). On a positive note, this more focused reading will give us coherence as we proceed, though be ready to face problems and laments from the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**NOTE:** I've included the Nirvana song, "All Apologies," to show where the directions these poets take end up ('disaffected individuals'). If you want to have a listen while you read, you can hear the song [here](#). For the cheesy unplugged version, click [here](#).

### **The Individual in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

The status of the individual goes through a number of changes over the course of the last century, mostly because of social changes that occur: college/higher education expands from the ivory tower of the few to a necessity for a larger portion of the population, industrial jobs begin a slow shift towards less "manual" labor, minority groups (including women) begin to take a stand for their rights and privileges within American "equality," and America becomes a major global power in new and important ways. Having achieved **manifest destiny** (the colonization of the western United States), Americans stop expanding (as they traditionally did) within the nation and begin to build up and out, influencing the world in new and unprecedented ways. Several

other categories begin to form during this time as well: the ‘nuclear family’ comes into existence as the century progresses, along with the rise of “youth” culture (children as people instead of small adults). All of these changes cause the individual to attach more importance to his or her own **self**.



In his [book-length study](#), *Teenage*, Jon Savage charts the rise of youth as a cultural category. His focus includes the real birth of high school education for all, advertisers targeting youth as a market segment, and the rites of passage we recognize today coming into existence. He argues that, basically, this category of “person” didn’t exist previously.

The historical idea of the individual emerged from the Enlightenment, several centuries before. To keep this lecture from digressing, I’ll only mention that, in the Enlightenment, society took a turn from a more collective unit (the agrarian model of the past, where only those with land or money counted) to a more personal unit, where each person has the ability (given social progress) to advance and have the life he or she wants. Of course, the original Enlightenment thinkers were men with money, so it isn’t until the 20<sup>th</sup> century that we really get serious pressure from other groups who feel they should have equality. Considering that, even today, women still don’t earn an equal wage with men, but continue to fight for it, helps to contextualize this ongoing debate. The key point is that, for laws to pass and society to change as much as it has in the last century, individuals have fought for these changes.

### **Problems of Individualism**

Of course, following my train of thought, literature (at least the kind taught in college) largely deals with the problems and crises that individuals face. The psychological realism of the turn of the century (19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup>) seeks to understand the motives, values, and reasons that cause people to act as they do. To shift to this week, the poetry we read will be largely based on the place of the individual in society. If you begin by considering once again *The Sun Also Rises*, you can see a number of individual characters, “lost” or disconnected from the world. These characters are part of their time and place, but they also have personal motives for what they do and why. In last week’s lecture, on Emerson and Pound, I also laid out a few views of how people are seen as discrete individuals, arguing that, in Pound, people become **less defined** all over again. The poetry we will read focuses on where individuals **find disconnection from society**.



Eliot’s poem has left a far-ranging influence on our culture, through quoted lines or, apparently, tattoos. For all its complexity, this poem lives on today.



Let’s begin with Eliot’s poem, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” While this poem is complex, it does work from the point of view of a singular individual, cataloging the problems and crises he faces. Eliot was friends with Pound, who edited his most famous poem, “The Wasteland,” so a clear influence exists from one to the next. This poem critiques social norms by looking at the world through the lens of culture. For instance, the repeated lines “In the room the women come and go/ Talking of Michelangelo” could be merely a random comment, but the repetition draws attention to it. Do we imagine that these women are having in-depth conversations? Or, more likely, do we imagine they speak of the famous artist because he is

famous? We can't, of course, deny that he also crafted the David, a sculpture that stands in stark contrast to Prufrock's own physique. Through the poem, Eliot discusses physical appearance, clothing, style, and everyday rituals, seeing problems with all of them. When you approach this poem, consider what other comments he makes about society. What kinds of problems does he see? Is there hope here? Does he "dare/ Disturb the universe?"

Our other readings this week proceed in a similar fashion. All of the poems are complex, but each seems to critique in some way the social conventions of its time, looking to change or teach society. Do they think they can improve things (or is that a stretch)? For both Stevens and Cummings, the poems at first glance seem very complex (unreadable might be what you would call them). Try to take your time, read closely, and determine what the poem could be about. We are interested, in this course, in both understanding literature and deciding what comments that literature makes. Reading these complex poems will hopefully show you how much you can understand, if not perfectly, then at a thematic level (the place of the individual in society).

### **The Social Role of Poetry**

The caption for this [photo](#) reads as follows: "Photo of 3 beat poets, (from right to left) Gregory Corso, Allen Ginsberg, and William Burroughs. The beat poets have been accredited with helping start the 60s counter culture movement, along with other influences." Though we won't read these poets, they stand as cultural icons in the 20<sup>th</sup> century because of the themes, technique, and social role of their poetry.



One issue worth mentioning, just to stir the pot a bit more, is the role of poetry in society (especially American society in the 20<sup>th</sup> century). The poets we are reading see themselves as changing the nature of literature to say something new, different, and hopefully truer than has

been said before. The Modernist movement uses the literature of the past, but breaks radically from its conventions (note that rhyme matters less, though rhythm (which is difficult to teach in an online class) still matter). These poets want to cast out old views of how poems should work and, instead, forge something new and different.

William Carlos Williams, for instance, was famously quoted for saying “no ideas but in things.” His imagist poetry (following Pound, who he attended college with) focuses on everyday things and local spaces, trying to bring life to the parts of the world that are often overlooked. Note in his poems the specificity and focus of language his language, as in “Pastoral” when he catalogues “the yards cluttered/ with old chicken wire, ashes,/ furniture gone wrong.” Williams takes “another” look at the debris of life and of the social conventions that create such debris. Through poetry, which gets more radical as the century progresses (through people like the Beat Poets, pictured above), **individuals try to re-imagine how to look at and live in the world.**

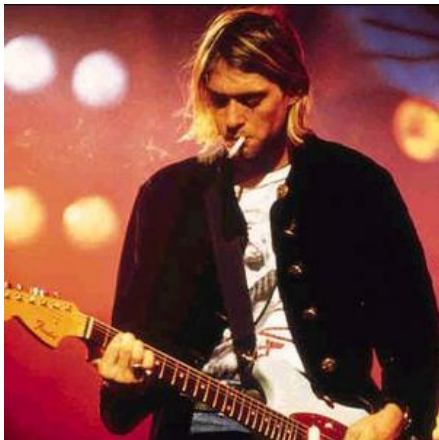
An unfortunate side effect (for us) is these poems commentary on poetry, which is hard to understand out of context. In general, however, the changes to society they see as necessary relate to poetry. As you read Williams’s poem, “Tract,” note that the very advice he gives about funerals can be applied to poets and poetry. For the purposes of our class, you don’t really need to understand the internal debates of poets, but I wanted to make you aware that part of the battle here is for a revised sort of expression. Stevens, for his part, picks on the woman in his poem for having moral/traditional values, and offers her instead a different kind of world, one that poetry can bring about (though I’ll leave it to you to decide which world you prefer).

Finally, along with a few other pursuits, poetry generally attracts disaffected individuals who are looking for different kinds of meaning in the world than that offered by “mainstream

culture.” With the modernists, this quest becomes an intellectual response to the world these poets find. These poets look at the community/country from the individual’s perspective, to see what people see and, maybe more importantly, **what they fail to see**. As a result, these poems are difficult to read ON PURPOSE (I wonder why literature gets the designation of being ‘elitist’?). However, if you read with these ideas in mind, you should hopefully be able to puzzle away some of the mystery that these poems bring.

### **Conclusions**

As you dive into the reading this week, keep in mind that we are trying to make sense of complex expression. As the weeks progress, we will look at different views of this same problem, since the poems for next week build on those for this week and our next novel, *The Book of Daniel*, builds on all these ideas. I hope that, between the lecture and reading questions, your experience of reading these poems will help you take something useful away from them. I’ll end with a final Nirvana photo, to remind you of where all this is heading chronologically:



Remember, the social impulse in these poems continues to influence society, specifically through figures like [Kurt Cobain](#) (in a more watered-down version). Note, however, that these radical positions have become more and more commercialized.