

## **Week 11 Lecture: Looking Back and Looking Forward (with the Individual) “Confession and the Individual”**

### **Introduction**

I’ve titled our lecture “Looking Back and Looking Forward” because I’ll spend the first part responding to the journals that were submitted from last week in the first half and then project where we are headed in the second half. In the spirit of coherence, I’ll put off doing much more than setting up this week’s readings in this lecture, as I’ll discuss them in connection to the novel next week.

I’m a bit concerned about the falling completion rate for assignments. I know we’ve had a lot to do between the readings, midterm, and first paper, but our curriculum demands that we keep pushing forward. For this week, your only response will be a quiz, which will hopefully give you time to read, process, and mentally prepare yourselves for the weeks ahead (specifically, for the novel next week). Excluding last week, the second half of this semester should make more sense than the early readings, so try to find the energy and drive to push through the midterm funk so we can tackle the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Revisiting Complex Poetry**

While I hope that more journal responses will be posted in the next day or two, my initial reaction is that you are getting the “gist” of these readings, even if you doubt yourselves. As several of your journals argued, these poems bring up more questions than answers. Concurrent themes that came up in the journals include the problem of individuals existing within social constraints and rituals. Many of you noted that the rituals and social norms disconnect the individual (or community) from the real meaning of the event (like “Tract,” which looks at revising the funeral to remind us what it really means, not what it covers over). Most of you also noted that there is little hope in these poems and much fear, of death, of judgment, and of where

the individual fits in society. Finally, there is the sense that we can't help who we are (as individuals). Hopefully, by offering you a few more specifics about these poems, you can better appreciate where they fit in the grand scheme of our semester.

In my section of 2041 which met on Thursday nights at the Jeff Center last semester, we literally spend two-and-a-half hours reading through and discussing these poems, which is impossible for an online section (unless we schedule a conference call). What I'll try to provide you with here are some of the ideas and conclusions your counterparts came up within class and that you came up with in your detailed and clear journals.

Let's begin with *Prufrock*, by Eliot. Much of this poem details rituals and social conventions (the constant taking of tea, coffee spoons as measuring sticks). Our narrator feels constrained by these conventions, especially as he ages (how many times does he mention his bald spot?). In the famously quoted lines, "Do I dare/ Disturb the universe," the narrator asks himself if he is willing to cast off fear and convention. Unfortunately, following those lines with "In a minute there is time/ For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse," gives us the hint that he probably won't follow through on his plan. The yearning of the individual for change, for courage, for greatness is all left as idle thoughts; Prufrock never reaches the point of action. As one classmate lamented, "I wish I could shake him and say he shouldn't be, but I can't."

Instead, he reevaluates and overthinks his life, just as he sees others judging him. On page 1727, when he describes the "eyes," he provides an image of himself as a bug pinned to a board, writhing around but unable to free himself from the prodding eyes of those observing him. He follows this by discussing the "arms," and discounting the "downed with light brown hair" comment, he is clearly distracted by this beauty he cannot possess (the perfume has him excited). **Unsure of what to do, he does nothing but overthink the situation.** When he sees the lonely

men leaning out of windows (how does he know they are lonely?), he notices that he too is a lonely man, unable to make a connection. This imagery of loneliness and misery is evidenced throughout the poem. Look at the first stanza – his description of the sky and the winding streets show that he sees horror (the sky like an etherized patient) and malicious confusion (“Streets that follow like a tedious argument/ Of insidious intent/ To lead you to an overwhelming question”) everywhere he looks.

On page 1728, Prufrock seems means to connect, but he provides evidence that people can't understand each other (“That is not what I meant at all”). He laments of himself, “It is impossible to say just what I mean!” His logic here leads him to take on the role of the Fool, the jester/entertainer of medieval times and the courts of kings. Fools in literature are known for speaking truth, but in ways that other people can't understand until too late. This poem tries to solve the problem of his loneliness and insecurity, but by the end, it seems he can't find his way out of the trap. As several of you noted in your journals, he ends by mentioning his age (and unattractiveness), which brings him to the mermaids, who aren't interested in Prufrock. He poses two questions at once: “Do I dare to eat a peach,” usually translated as asking if he will take a chance or make a move (especially concerning love), and why would these mermaids (or women) be interested in him, as they clearly aren't? These questions lead him into a final dream/fantasy vision, which ends with the disastrous image of drowning. In other words, he cannot live in a fantasy because society always returns to remind him of his place in the world. If you can find hope in this poem, please let the class know.

If you thought Eliot was confusing, just wait for Stevens, whose poems are known for their dreaminess and difficulty. In my class last semester, we attempted to draw (literally) the

two buildings he constructs on the chalkboard, one a Christian church that leads to “haunted heaven” and the other a Greek temple that leads to the pleasures of Bacchus, our local Mardi Gras celebrity. Part of the explanation for this poem is that old traditions (Christianity/morality, living for sensual pleasure) don’t work anymore. Our narrator in this poem seeks a method of living life, but only finds two ridiculous extremes. As a poet, however, he chooses the “supreme fiction” of poetry, even if it leads to false notions of the sublime (probably found at the bottom of a bottle). In other words, he chooses the party and the relaxed social norms because they will at least annoy his high-toned old Christian woman, who he addresses in the poem. Instead of letting tradition continue when it makes no sense, he would rather buck the system and, by making widows wince, try to change the world he finds. I could keep going with this poem, but for our purposes, note how it connects to our themes of the individual versus the behavior of his community and the need for growth and change.

Your explanations of the Williams poems seem more confident and clear. In both poems, our narrators address the way things are and the way people see those things. In “Pastoral,” we have the first three lines addressing how our narrator thought as a young man (“I must make something of myself”) and the last three lines addressing the nation as a whole (his answer to what he must make of himself). Our narrator points out that the pleasure our society promises might not be as meaningful as the real lives that real people live. Beyondt his, he asserts that there is beauty in poverty, survival, and real things (even yards full of trash and houses in decline). Look to the real instead of accepted notions. Some of you also pointed out that Prufrock and the narrator here are opposites, once neurotic about each decision and his social standing, the other accepting life for what it is and finding beauty in the world, not in “success.”

This line of reasoning continues in “Tract,” with our narrator instructing people how to properly conduct a funeral. As many of you pointed out, casting off the social conventions of the funeral and focusing on what the event really signifies (death, honor of a life that has ended, respect for the dead) instead of how we look attending such an event can help connect us to other people. Think about funerals you have attended: at least in New Orleans, there is generally the awkwardness of seeing distant friends or relatives, the presence of the body in the room (sometimes ignored), our discomfort with people showing signs of real grief, and the food room, where people hide out, eat doughnuts, and make jokes. While this might be my version, I hope you can recognize similarities. Williams would like us to cast off these accepted conventions and try to accept the truth of the occasion. By casting aside the pageantry, the real grief and fear we all feel could help us connect with each other and allow for genuine feelings.

When approaching Cummings strange poem, think about nursery rhymes you may have read. They usually tell an odd story that contains a moral or lesson. How do we find the lesson here? First, we have lots of imagery of time and seasons, natural imagery that shows time passing and the cycles of life. We have bells (which could represent bells used for official occasions, like weddings and funerals) that keep people in rhythm with life. Then, as many of you pointed out, we have “anyone,” who doesn’t seem to fit in, since only the children seem to notice him. What does it mean to be “someone,” or somebody? What about “everyone,” or everybody? Poor ‘anyone’ just doesn’t fit the mold of most people.

As a result, the children (before forgetting) have determined that only “noone” loves him. I hope you could guess that noone is as likely to be a woman as ‘no one’ at all. Regardless of the reality of his love life, anyone is ground down by the constant changing of the seasons and his

lack of connection to everyone else. His best hope was the children, but “only the snow can begin to explain/ how children are apt to forget to remember.” By the end of the poem, anyone is lost from memory (“died I guess”) and things continue on. If we step back for a second, we can see that the individual, especially one who stands against normal conventions, doesn’t fare too well. If we wanted to give a more cliché reading, we could claim that “mean people suck,” but the implied message shows what happens to those who don’t fit in. Do you imagine, however, that the poem is advocating for conformity (especially written as it is written)? Or do you think, perhaps, that it is better to be anyone, even forgotten and alone? I’ll again leave this for you to decide.

NOTE: Because I’ve written you six pages of explanation, I’ll leave off Nirvana, though I think if you approach it a second time, you will find that the themes fit, especially with Cummings.

Cobain presents himself as an ‘anyone’ (he can’t be anything else) who has been accepted by the someones and everyones, which instead of gratifying him makes him hate himself. This reading is oversimplified, but note how the same themes between individual and community continues up to the (near) present.

### **Moving from Last Week to This Week**

I hope these new explanations help you see how the individual and community battle it out in these poems (and song). As we move into this week, note that the battle between individual and community/country moves inward. This week’s poets are all more introspective and focus on matters of personal interest: the family, friends, and connections between people. Through these discussions, they touch on national themes, **but the real problem has moved from the outside in, with the individual question him or herself about the world.** Thus, Anne

Sexton, for instance, discusses America and the plight of the traveling salesman, but she does so in connection to her own experiences and feelings.

As the syllabus hints, these poets are known as the Confessional poets, since their work largely confesses to personal confusions, feelings, and uncertainties that were taboo subjects in the past. Through sharing their own feelings and crazy thoughts, these poets attempt to honestly connect with their audiences, casting off the overly complex of the Modernists we read last week. Again, remember Poe's narrator from "The Black Cat" confessing his sins: **how much credence do we grant confession in our society?**

### **The Plan**

Instead of giving you reading questions, I'll just ask you to contemplate the ideas of this lecture as you complete the readings this week. In next week's lecture, I'll try to include more specifics from these poems in relation to *The Book of Daniel*. What I will include, however, are online audio versions of these poems, where I can find them. Hearing these poems, instead of just reading them, might help set the tone for them. Note that, like last week, we probably won't find too much cheerfulness or hope from this group, but they do show the issues that individuals are dealing with by the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Personal introspection and coming to conclusions about personal experiences seem the key means of finding meaning in the world for these poets.

Robert Frost – "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" – find the video [here](#)

Robert Lowell – "Memories of West Street and Lepke" – find the video [here](#)

Sylvia Plath – "Daddy" – find the video [here](#) \*\*\* - READ BY AUTHOR (haunting)

Anne Sexton – "And One for My Dame" – unavailable

Elizabeth Bishop – "One Art" – find the video (one of many versions) [here](#)

## **Conclusions**

I realize that poetry in the 20<sup>th</sup> century isn't easy to comprehend, but the themes and ideas in the poems this week should make more sense. Don't forget to read O'Connor's story. And remember that, for next week, our next novel is due, so don't wait too long to get a copy and get started. I hope that the explanations and ideas presented here will help us "catch up" on the course and draw clearer conclusions about the opposition between the individual and the community. Gaining a basic understanding of the issues and ideas from last week and this week will prepare you for the weeks to come, since we will be seeing variations on the theme of isolation, confusion about social norms, and alienation.