

## **Week 12 Lecture: *The Book of Daniel* and the Confessional Mood Midcentury**

### **Introduction**

This week, we are diving into our second novel of the semester, TBOD (for future reference). With this novel, I hope that the themes we have been talking about for the last several weeks (from Emerson and Pound through the Modernist poets to the Confessional poets) shine through. This novel bridges multiple categories: Confessional, the experimental novel, the historical novel, and Surrealist techniques (which will remain beyond what we cover). More importantly, this novel mixes together a variety of techniques to get its point across.

Our real question is, what is its point? This lecture will try to bridge a few ideas from last week with the novel this week, while working to show how this novel brings some of these ideas together. I will also include a few questions for the novel, to help direct your reading a bit. Because this novel is complex, your goal should be to try to keep reading, even if you get confused, to attempt to make sense of it from the end looking back (which is sort of how this novel works). Before I even more forward, please note that the novel works in both first and third person (with the same narrator) to tell its story. As you read through and think about the lecture, novel, and questions, consider why you think this is the case.

### **Confessional Poetry**

The readings for last week (coupled with the difficult quiz) focused on the move to the individual, processing his or her experience through works of art. In all the poems from last week, family members are mentioned and personal concerns are worked out through social themes. Frost, of course, is the exception, since his narrator stands alone (with the exception of his little horse), contemplating a snowy evening. What are we to make of Frost's poem, anyway?

At first glance, it seems like a poem of a man contemplating a lonely, snowy wood, “lovely, dark, and deep” (1610). If you look closely, however, there is **an air of individual isolation and alienation**. Our narrator on a mission stops and stares longingly at the lonely wood, wondering what comfort he can find there (a snowy wood looks inviting, right?). The owner isn’t present (who could be a member of the town or, alternatively, God, whose house, the church, is back in town). Our narrator seems to consider avoiding the miles and miles he has yet to go by accepting peaceful sleep in the woods. That he chooses not to end his life there, but to continue on still draws our attention to his potentially dark thoughts. Without the help of his little horse, things could have ended badly in this place beyond society or company.

Frost’s narrator’s moment of isolation resonates through the rest of the poems from last week. Instead of working them all out in great detail (as I did last week), I will work through a few common themes. Lowell’s poem, “Memories of West Street and Lepke,” is also a reflection on the present, but through the past. Our narrator, Lowell himself, sits in his plush house on a fancy street, living out his comfortable existence. The question this poem asks, is this existence fulfilling, can only come through a look back in time. Lowell recounts memories of his more radical days, when he was imprisoned for refusing to fight in WWII. He shows us a complex comparison between his two lives, the past and the present. What is most unusual in this poem is the comparison between Lowell and Lepke. Who is Lepke again? A professional assassin, he is in prison awaiting his execution, “flabby, bald, lobotomized,” living in his special cell (1945). A complicated view of this poem pits Lowell against Lepke: is Lowell, in his nice house, simply awaiting death? Does he fear becoming a man with no future? The answer lies in the facts: the year Lowell wrote this poem, he moved from his plush house and got involved, all over again, in

activism. The poem, in other words, confesses Lowell's confusions and concerns about his own life through references to his past and his society.

This same thread runs through the other poems. Sexton, Plath, and Bishop **all create art out of their personal pain at relationships** (to a father/husband, "Daddy," and a dead lover, respectively). Each poem processes some of the personal pain and anguish the poet feels in dealing with the emotions connected to the figure. Sexton's poem, for example, lays out her dealings with the men in her life, a traveling salesman father and a traveling salesman husband, both in the same business and living the same life, while she sits home, "each night with no place to go," looking at maps and dreaming of the world they travel (1951). Poetically, note the lengths of lines (each stanza of three lines seems to have a topic, followed by a brief discussion) and the separate parts of the poem (her father, herself, her father's death, her husband). We are left to wonder at the pain she feels, with a husband who is a watered down version of her father, a man she had little connection with besides the financial support he provided. Do these relationships seem stable or positive?

Another poet with "Daddy" issues is Plath, who lays out a painful version of her connection to her father. Through comparisons to Nazis, the devil, and a vampire, as well as a giant statue that spans the length of America, Plath sets up his figure of evil who has tainted her whole life. Without really telling us anything specific, she alludes to his mistreatment and the mark it is left on her life. By comparing herself to a Jewish victim of Auschwitz, a victim of brutality, one whose heart has been bitten in two, Plath works out the painful place her father holds in her life. I want to stress that, like Lowell and Sexton, she makes her personal misery into **art**, both as a coping strategy and to make use of these painful feelings. Whether, in the end, she is in fact "through," either with this poetic attempt at freedom or with her father, remains

unclear, but from the attempt we can see evidence of writing as a way to channel complex feelings. Her suicidal thoughts (and eventual suicide) casts her attempt in sharp relief. We can also see the personal association of ideas, reminiscent of psychoanalysis, that people use to put their own lives in perspective.

Bishop's poem, "One Art," brings these ideas together through the act of the poem itself. If you look at the poem again, you will see two strategies in play: repetition and hyperbole (exaggeration). She begins with the loss of small items, keys or time, things a reader can possibly agree are a bigger deal than they need to be. Rather quickly, however, she moves on to losing larger things, like "some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent," stretching the imagination (1942). What we learn in the end, of course, is that this poem is about coping with the loss of love. Note that after the neat and steady form and repetition of the first four stanzas, the fifth has more lines and breaks the form. The biographical information that her lover committed suicide brings this into relief. In this poem, Bishop tries to convince herself (as we all do, from time to time) that she can cope with the pain of loss. Like the townsfolk from Williams "Tract," she tries to bury her grief, only to admit, through a poem of denial, her real feelings of loss as "disaster" (1942). The inclusion of the parenthetical words, "(*Write it!*)," show us that she is forcing out her artful arguments to convince herself that losing is part of life, normal and natural. The poem, then, lulls us into a false sense of security before building to its final point, the pain of loss.

Thus, through all these poems, we see individuals coping and dealing with the pain, isolation, and misery of life through art. Instead of finding solace in community, these poets use art to express the ideas and feelings they experience, sharing with us the private life, grief, and pain they face. The Confessional mode is seldom a place of shared positive feeling; instead, a confession is usually of a fault, a wrong, or a burden. This will be true for the novel as well.

## **“Good Country People” as the Bridge**

While I know that the O'Connor story could be discussed at length, I'll only make a few remarks to connect it to the novel and the other readings. O'Connor's fiction, like Poe's, is famous for containing grotesque and confused characters, seeped in a world of violence and uncertainty. Famous for portraying “mystery and manners,” or the idea of a world we can't understand and the faulty social rituals we use to cope, O'Connor shows us the dangers of appearance and overconfidence in this sad story of misfits. There are several areas we could discuss, but I'll focus on point-of-view and characters for this lecture.

Note that the point-of-view is third-person limited, though limited to different characters' viewpoints throughout the story. We see into the mind of Mrs. Freeman, Mrs. Hopewell, and Joy/Hulga over the course of the story, though never directly into Manley Pointer's mind. This limited perspective continually stresses what these characters see or what appears to be true. Unfortunately, none of these characters see very clearly or perceptively. O'Connor also helps us with the characters names: Joy to Hulga, Freeman, Hopewell, Manley Pointer. From all of these names, we can take meanings that help us to understand the story. Mrs. Hopewell thinks and speaks in clichés to cope with her life, Hulga fails because of her delicate superiority, and Manley Pointer (which sounds sexual, in the story's context) penetrates their house and world, coming away with a nasty prize, Joy's artificial leg. Of Mrs. Freeman (a servant, barely free), we learn that she “had a special fondness for the details of secret infections, hidden deformities, assaults upon children” (1996). This is not a good world and these are not good people.

The question is, do we have sympathy? Should we? How much does each individual's limitations keep him or her from understanding the situation? Were you surprised that the dull-

looking Bible salesman turns out to have a fetish for artificial limbs? O'Connor plays into the stereotypes and conditions these characters find themselves in, to show how little sense the world makes. This idea will translate to the novel.

### ***The Book of Daniel: The Confession (and Redemption?) of a Confused Mind***



I figured I'd include a [photo](#) of our author, who is still publishing books that sell well (as recently as last year). Doctorow's fiction is known for its historical themes and revisions (since he usually plays with actual historical characters). As you probably realized through the complexity of this novel, Doctorow's fiction aims at a larger historical understanding of his subject. For our purposes, this includes the midcentury in American history and culture.

In an attempt to avoid ruining the novel or our discussion online this week, I'll just give you a few contextual notes on the novel. As I've mentioned in previous emails, this novel mixes point-of-view (between first and third person), time (we shift back and forth over multiple times and events), and attitude. We have a novel as analysis, novel as private I, novel as collection of historical documents, all seeking what? The real question for our discussion board this week is what all these techniques and themes add up to.

The first idea I want to point out is Daniel's obsession **with peoples' hearts**, especially his own. We hear much about heart conditions in this novel in various places, though prominent enough to draw attention to itself. Late in the novel (293-294), Daniel discusses, seemingly at

random, how often heart transplant patients reject their new hearts, something doctors can't seem to understand or fix. As the novel itself continually argues, we as people still have a lot to learn about our hearts. What does this novel teach us about hearts? The answer depends on how you read the novel.

At this point, as with TSAR, I would usually give you an historical background on the period to help contextualize the novel, but if you've read, you should realize that this novel gives enough historical information (true or imagined) to make any comments I would offer superfluous. Though a fictitious account, this novel works from real historical events and theories to set its own stage. We learn about the Communist Party in America, historical reactions to radical groups, WWII and the Cold War, the death penalty, Disney as culture, race relations, and the practice of law. Through all these historical events, however, we learn about the workings of one family at the crux of so many social forces and, even more specifically, about how their son, Daniel, works to process his history, anger, and grief. In this way, the historical background works to add credence to his Confession, one filled with pain, self-hate, depression, horror, and, just possibly, **redemption.**

I'm sure you picked up on the confessional aspect of this novel. Daniel reveals his many cruelties, his sexual fantasies, his treatment of his family and everyone whose path he crosses (as betrayer), his moments of weakness, and his quest for meaning. He tries to paint the portraits of events (from his perspective, his parents, other random characters) to give us the truest picture he can of events. Thus, breaking from the normal storytelling of novels, we get real documents, letters, and constant commentary from our author. Note that Daniel, when telling the story, is supposed to be completing his dissertation in History at Columbia University (in New York). Instead of writing his actual dissertation, however, he sits in the library, writing does this

personal family story of pain and loss, trying to work out his place in the world and how to live in a society that put his parents (perhaps wrongfully) to death. What comment does this make about the value of actual history, divorced from the lives and feelings of real people?

Another prominent feature of this novel to note is his direct addresses to the reader. From his horrific challenge on page 60/61 to imagine the pain he can inflict on his wife with a car lighter, “Who are you anyway? Who told you you could read this? Is nothing sacred,” to his later angsty acknowledgment of the reader’s judgment of him, “I suppose you think I can’t do the electrocution. I know there is a you. There has always been a you. YOU: I will show you that I can do the electrocution” (195-196), Daniel constantly brings us into the story. He interacts with the reader, calling our attention to the fact that he is writing this book in his own way and to our voyeurism into his life – artificial, in your case, since I’m forcing you to read about him. Through all this technical features, Doctorow’s novel seeks to write out a new kind of truth and allow the reader to understand his character as deeply as he can.

While, with a novel like this one, I could go on forever, I’ll stop with a story about the composition of this novel. When he started this novel, Doctorow had a different plan for how it would be written. After writing over 100 pages of more standard prose (the kind we are used to), he got disgusted with his efforts and burned everything he had written. From the ashes of that fire, he started a new novel, letting Daniel tell his own story in his own way (fictionally speaking). Thus, like the thesis that Daniel fails to write, this novel shows Doctorow embracing a new style to make meaning for the readers of his time (this novel was published in 1971).

## **Conclusions**

In the DB this week, think about what stood out to you in this novel, whether because it worked or because it was confusing or because you see connections to the themes of previous weeks. Doctorow's novel, arguably the most difficult work we will read all semester, brings together a number of themes and ideas from American history and culture through the character and writing of Daniel, a victim (possibly) of the US Government, orphaned by the execution of his parents. How does a person like this respond to his country? What can he teach us as readers about that country through his experience? Let these questions guide your responses this week.