

LITERATURE: THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE COMMUNITY

CRI Spring 2004

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Textbooks:

Thornton Wilder, Our Town. Perennial Classics, 1938, 1998.

Sophocles, The Oedipus Cycle (Antigone). Harvest Book, 1949, 1977.

Outlooks and Insights: A Reader for College Writers, eds. Eschholz and Rosa.

4th ed. Bedford/St. Martins, 1995.

Short story or novel to be announced for the Apr. 9 unit.

Journal.

Course Description:

Our course will travel across times and cultures to follow the development of an idea: the relationship between the individual and the community. The reason we care about that idea is bound up with the core experience of what it means to be human. Our *mortal* survival brings us together to share common resources. We instinctively form communities, and not only that; when viewed from a distance we “swarm” in communities much the way ants do (Lewis Thomas, The Lives of a Cell). Our survival as *moral* beings, however, draws us to one another for reasons that distinguish us from the animal world: to share common values. Our community of values, then, is what we want to look at closely, and that’s why we begin the semester by exploring the different ideas of community from the family on up, beginning with the play Our Town.

What are some of the common values on which community is based? Among the most important is the *preservation of human dignity*. To preserve human dignity we uphold the principle of self-sovereignty, from which we draw the premise that all people are created equal. When my individual rights are taken away, I am no longer free. And when I am no longer free, I no longer have a sense of self-worth, without which I am virtually nothing. The guarantor of those rights is the social order to which I belong, my community. I thereby have a duty to my community to help protect my rights, if only by paying taxes. Sometimes my need to serve the community exceeds my own self-centered needs and I reach out to help others. I have thereby made a moral choice to serve what we call the *common good* at the sacrifice of my own interests. This self-transcendent act on behalf of the community brings by far the most profound sense of self-worth. This act may be the single most important way of ensuring the future of our planet. We’ll see what you think.

One big problem, at least in the Western world: The exercise of our individual rights and the performance of our social duties sometimes collide with each other. We have all experienced that problem in our own little circle of friends and family, when we want something we can’t have because it violates the freedom of another, or we *don’t* want something forced upon us

because it violates the rule of the majority. In our life as a nation, the American Constitution was a contract designed to reconcile and resolve the tension between the individual and the state, and it's been uniquely successful. We'll look at the reason why.

The democratic tradition in the West has roots that go as far back as ancient Greece. The play we'll be reading by Sophocles, Antigone, will dramatize the struggle and its resolution between one fiercely independent woman and the state, ruled by her uncle. In that play there were no easy answers, nor should there be, we will discover, as we explore the tension between individual and community in a few of its many manifestations in the history of literature.

As we approach the second half of the semester, our focus will shift to a largely non-Western worldview that sees the individual as a *microcosm* within the whole rather than an entity apart from and often struggling with the whole. We'll find a world of difference in the way the individual relates to community, and there are some serious lessons to be learned by observing the way this paradigm works. In fact, this is a natural way for the mind to operate when freed from the constructions and constrictions of so-called left brain thinking. Indigenous peoples, for example the Australian Aborigines and the Native American, evidence this kind of thinking in proclaiming that we are all interconnected as part of a greater whole, indeed we are this whole. Hurting another, even an organism of nature, can be seen to be an act of violence directly against oneself, and vice-versa. The whole system of thinking in ancient India, for example, was based on such a belief. Most recently the 1960's saw an influx into the West of teachings from Hindu and Buddhist and also Taoist sources. The Yoga and T'ai Chi many of us do derive from those teachings and cannot be truly practiced apart from their observance.

Perhaps we'll find we can blend these two worldviews into one that fits our personality and our lifestyle. Maybe we can become more enlightened, or just happier. Let's see what our readings and writings bring.

Course Requirements:

1. Be there. Be on time. Keep up with your readings on the day due. It is mandatory that the papers be handed in on time.
I may have you do a little in-class writing now and then on the reading for the day.
2. Keep a journal in which you jot impressions of your readings, reflections, and observations at least once a week. They can be useful in the development of your papers.
3. Your papers should follow strictly formal guidelines. Any hint of plagiarism earns an F. Papers are worth 80% of your final grade (20% for each one).

LITERATURE READING ASSIGNMENTS

- I. **Feb. 6:** INTRODUCTION. What are the ways in which you define ‘community’ and its role in your life? In the lives of others? What do you see as your role in its life? For what reasons? What sorts of *issues* arise in our exploration of this relationship?
View film (1940) of Our Town (1938), a play by Thornton Wilder. What do you think is meant by ‘community’ in this play and how does it speak to you? What and how universal is its message?
- II. **Feb. 13:** Discuss your *reading* of Our Town. How would you compare your reading with the performance you saw? Do you think the latter succeeded in getting across Wilder’s message? What might you do differently in the acting or in the staging of the production, if anything, to update it perhaps?
The Individual and the Community: A spectrum of commentaries from the past. We’ll read excerpts from Plato (“Allegory of the Cave”), Meister Eckhart, John Donne, Ralph Waldo Emerson (“Self-Reliance”), Mary Wollstonecraft. Handouts provided.
A look at the hero and his community in myth: J.K. Rowling’s and J.R.R. Tolkien’s novels.
- III. **Feb. 20: Paper #1 due.**
Antigone (441 B.C.E.), a tragedy by Sophocles. View parts of the film production. How is the ‘individual’ characterized in relation to the state? Discuss the role of *human dignity* in Antigone’s struggle. What *common good* is at stake? How are civil disobedience and civic duty paired in the play? When is a rule right, and when do rights transcend rules
- IV. **Mar. 5:** Guest lecture—The Founding Fathers on the contract between the individual and the state (Dr. Henning Meyn). Jefferson’s “Declaration of Independence” (Outlooks and Insights 559). “Federalist Paper #2” (handout).
John Adams’ views on education and “the good society,” and Abigail’s concern about women’s rights. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the Seneca Falls declaration (Outlooks 582).
- V. **Mar. 12: Paper #2 due.**
Examine Henry David Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience”(Outlooks 563); compare his act with Antigone’s. Snippets from his Walden (handout) reflect the Romantic identification of the valued ‘individual’ with nature: ‘Nature’ in conflict with ‘society’. We will take time to ponder some Asian influences.
- VI. **Mar. 19:** Transition to the individual as ‘*microcosm*’, ‘*a part of the whole*’ rather than ‘*apart from the whole*’ (see chart handout). Contrast the traditional Western tension between individual and community with the experience of the Australian Aborigines in “Aboriginal Solitude,” James Cowan (handout). Compare with the Native American sense of connectedness in “All My Relations,” Linda Hogan (handout).
Read together and compare poems of nature in England and America by Keats, Wordsworth, Dickinson, Whitman (handouts). Bring Outlooks and Insights.

VII. **Apr. 2: Paper #3 due.**

The ‘individual’ and ‘community’ as yin/yang polarities seeking balance: Selections from the ancient Chinese book of wisdom, the I Ching, or The Book of Change (handout).

See the cycle of “Ten Oxherding Pictures” from 12th century China (handout). What do you think this cycle reveals to us about the role of the individual in the community—or at least of one who has become enlightened? Compare insights from Friedrich Nietzsche’s Zarathustra (Henning Meyn, guest commentary).

We will also read together some poems of the Mid- and Far East—Rumi, Hafiz, Kabir (handouts).

VIII. **Apr. 9:**

Women and the notion of community: Differences in the way *women* and *men* relate to community. [Short story or novel yet to be assigned]

IX. **Apr. 16: Paper #4 due.**

The uniqueness of the *African-American experience* as ‘outsider’ in their community: Dick Gregory, “Shame” (Outlooks 45), compared with Zora Neale Hurston, “How It Feels To Be Colored Me” (Outlooks 57). Look back to Frederick Douglass, “How I Learned to Read and Write” (Outlooks 276). Compare with Langston Hughes’ poem, “Theme for English B” (Outlooks 287).

Towards a “brotherhood of man” and “the American dream”: Martin Luther King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” (Outlooks 581). Despite their clearly common ground, how does King envision uses of civil disobedience that are different from Antigone and even Thoreau?

X. **Apr. 30:**

Expanding community: The vision of a united peoples. See the Preamble to the United Nations Charter, 1945 (handout). Other readings to be announced.

Based on what we’ve read in this course and on our own experiences, what would you define as ‘the common good’? What do you see as its boundaries and expanses? What do you perceive as your responsibility to that good and what are your motivations? How would you exercise that responsibility?

We’ll read Friedrich Schiller’s poem “Ode to Joy” and hear those words set to music by Beethoven in his inspiring 9th symphony.

XI. **May 7: Final exam/class project.**