Representations of Individualism in Kate Tempest’s *Brand New Ancients* and *Let Them Eat Chaos*

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Abstract

This study provides an analysis of representations of individualism in Kate Tempest’s *Brand New Ancients* and *Let Them Eat Chaos*, charting Tempest’s criticism on contemporary western society. Little former academic research has been conducted into the poetry of Kate Tempest. Three forms of individualism are distinguished in the theoretical framework, neoliberal individualism, humanistic individualism, and institutionalised individualism. Representations of individualism are distilled from Tempest poetry through close reading, and linked to the definitions of individualism as described in the theoretical framework. Tempest depicts neoliberal individualism as a corruptive force in both poems, and argues this view on the individual is the cause of societal problems such as climate change, financial inequality, isolation, and criminality. In *Let Them Eat Chaos* institutionalised individualism and individualisation are presented as the result of neoliberal individualism, leading to the perceived death of humanistic individualism. This last form of individualism is also proposed as a new view on the individual in both poems, able to dissolve a variety of social problems. Together the representations of individualism seem to function as a warning on the societal effects of the current view on the individual in contemporary western society as perceived by Tempest.

Keywords: Kate Tempest, Brand New Ancients, Let Them Eat Chaos, individualism, neoliberal individualism, humanistic individualism, institutionalised individualism, neoliberalism, British poetry, contemporary poetry, poetry.
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1. Introduction

In a 1979 interview with *The Observer* Philip Larkins said that deprivation is for him what daffodils were for Wordsworth.¹ When reading the poetry of Kate Tempest it might be argued that her daffodils have something to do with contemporary society. Tempest interacts with the world around her by both describing and criticising global and British culture in her poetry. Tempest does not fit into the traditional description of a somewhat dusty poet who only communicates with her audience through her text. Her poetry is generally released both as written text in books, and spoken word records accompanied with music. Examples are *Brand New Ancients*² and *Let Them Eat Chaos*,³ long poems that occupy the space of an entire book and have been released as albums. On the first page of the written edition of both texts a clear statement is provided: “this poem was written to be read aloud.” Tempest’s current public persona is close to that of a rebellious and outspoken rock star. In 2017 she performed her spoken word poetry at the massive pop festival Glastonbury for an audience of thousands, and in May 2019 she toured through Europe with her own band.⁴

Tempest has not gone unnoticed by media in the United Kingdom. In response to the Glastonbury performance *The Guardian* claimed that “Kate Tempest has shaken up the world of poetry by taking it out of the bookshops and on to the festival stage.”⁵ One year earlier the newspaper had already given Tempest’s 2016 spoken word poem *Let Them Eat Chaos* a five-star review, pointing out that it represented themes such as “global financial crisis, migration, environmental catastrophe and police brutality.”⁶ These themes are universal, global problems, and relate to the entire western society, but do not exclude criticism on national United Kingdom politics.

The global character of Tempest’s texts might explain why her poetry has crossed the national borders, receiving attention in various other countries. The American business

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magazine *Forbes* described Tempest’s poetry as “reclaiming humanity amid social decay,” while *The New York Times* portrayed her as “A wunderkind rapper and spoken word performer equally influenced by Wu-Tang Clan and Joyce, Bukowski and Blake; an English poet whose musical sense of language bridges the worlds of rap and traditional lyric verse.” *Die Zeit* called her “the saviour of young, political literature,” and further acclaim was given by *The New Yorker* in which Tempest’s versatility was praised. Adding to the widespread critical acclaim, Tempest’s work has been nominated for several literary and music prizes. She was nominated twice for the Mercury Prize, for *Everybody Down* in 2014 and for *Let Them Eat Chaos* in 2017, while the book edition of *Let Them Eat Chaos* was nominated for the 2016 Costa poetry book of the year. In 2018 she received a nomination for the Brit Award for best female solo artist. Tempest won the 2012 Ted Hughes Award for new work in poetry, and was chosen as one of the next generation poets by the Poetry Book Society in 2014. Her poetry has been published in nine languages.

Given the widespread attention and critical acclaim Tempest has received over the past years, it is remarkable that her work has only scarcely been analysed in an academic context. In fact, the only findable academic paper specifically written about one of the works published by Kate Tempest on Google scholar and JSTOR is a 2014 article published in *The Journal of Humanities and Classics.* This article reads like a mix of a review of a live performance, a lament for the lack of academic attention, and a call to action.

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10 Jon Michaud, “Kate Tempest’s Transformations,” last modified May 10, 2016, https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/kate-tempests-transformations
15 Claire Armitstead, “Kate Tempest Wins Ted Hughes Poetry Prize For ‘Spoken Story’,” last modified March 27, 2013, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/mar/27/kate-tempest-ted-hughes-poetry-prize
performance of *Brand New Ancients* and a comparison of this epic poem with the classic Greek epics, but barely includes Tempest’s criticism on contemporary Western or British culture and society. The amount of critical acclaim Tempest has received, combined with the social criticism within her poetry, allow, and – arguably – even demand for academic analysis.

The aim of this study is to take a first step in the analysis of the poetry of Tempest. As almost no previous research has been conducted into Tempest’s work up to this point, the texts analysed in this study, *Brand New Ancients* and *Let Them Eat Chaos*, have been selected on the basis of comparability and critical reception. *LTEC*\(^{18}\) received a 5-star review in *the Guardian*\(^{19}\), while *BNA*\(^{20}\) won the Ted Hughes poetry prize, and received a 4-star review in *the Guardian*.\(^{21}\) The comparability of both texts lies in the observation that the theme of individualism plays a very dominant role in them. Various critics have pointed out that one of the most salient themes in both texts is individualism.\(^{22}, 23\) Close-reading confirms that individualism, indeed, is an important theme in both texts. Already on the second page of *BNA* individualism appears as a theme:

> Millions of characters,
> each with their own epic narratives
> singing *it’s hard to be an angel*
> *until you’ve been a demon.*\(^{24}\)

Tempest first draws a picture of a million people – characters – , and then zooms in saying that each of these people have their own, individual stories to tell, which can be read like an “epic narrative.” Further analysis on the implications of this message will follow in chapter 2. In *LTEC* one particular quote shows the importance of individuality in the entire poem:

> The myth of the individual

\(^{18}\) *Let Them Eat Chaos* will be abbreviated to *LTEC*


\(^{20}\) *Brand New Ancients* will be abbreviated to *BNA*


The above fragment appears on the final page of the written edition of the poem, and seems to act like a conclusion. The seventy-one pages preceding it have functioned as building bricks leading to this final conclusion, in which the individual seems to be strongly criticised. Both quotes show similarities and differences in their representation of individualism. *BNA* seems to praise the individual, by comparing him with gods, while *LTEC* is critical in its judgement of the individual. A comparison of the individual to gods could allow for a reading of the individual as a myth, as is the case in *LTEC*. A more thorough analysis of both texts is needed to bring more clarity to the meaning of these specific representations. This study aims to provide such an analysis of Tempest’s poetry. Chapter 3 features an analysis of representations of individualism in *BNA*, and chapter 4 features one of representations of individualism in *LTEC*. Chapter 2 functions as a theoretical framework providing a conceptualisation of the various forms of individualism. Together these chapters should answer how individualism is represented in Kate Tempest’s *Brand New Ancients* and *Let Them Eat Chaos*, charting Tempest’s portrayal of contemporary western society.

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2. Theoretical Framework: Defining Individualism

The aim of this theoretical framework is to capture the essence of individualism in a definition that is workable throughout the following chapters, which will provide analyses of representations of individualism in Kate Tempest’s *Brand New Ancients* and *Let Them Eat Chaos*. The first indication that individualism is a term difficult to define might arise from the lack of consensus in the definitions provided by Oxford Dictionary and Cambridge Dictionary. Oxford defines individualism as either “the habit or principle of being independent and self-reliant” or “a social theory favouring freedom of action for individuals over collective or state control.”26 Cambridge provides four definitions: (1) “the idea that freedom of thought and action for each person is the most important quality of a society, rather than shared effort and responsibility,” (2) “the quality of being different or original,” (3) “the idea that each person should think and act independently rather than depending on others,” and (4) “the principle that the single person is more important than the group and that people should work and own things for their own advantage.”27 All of these definitions seem to represent interpretations of individualism useful for specific disciplines and contexts, but the differences between them are enormous. Compare, for example, “the quality of being different or original” with “a social theory favouring freedom of action for individuals over collective or state control,” and it becomes clear that it is possible to use the same word for two entirely different concepts.

For this study, it is necessary to establish a definition of individualism that is workable in the field of literary analysis, while it should also cover the representations of individualism dealt with in the poems by Kate Tempest. Due to the wide variety of interpretations of individualism, and the various forms of individualism present in Tempest’s *BNA* and *LTEC*, it proves to be impossible to provide a single, workable definition for the term. Instead three forms of individualism, existing in the fields of politics, philosophy, and sociology, will be used to distinguish the various interpretations of the term, allowing for application in literary studies. Each of these forms, neoliberal individualism, humanistic individualism, and institutionalised individualism, will be defined concisely in this theoretical framework.

2.1 Neoliberal Individualism

The word individualism first appeared in the United Kingdom in a translation of Tocqueville’s *De la Démocratie en Amérique* in 1841.28 As soon as the word appeared, it became politically charged; socialists used it to refer to the ‘evils’ of capitalist competition. An early definition of individualism, written from a socialist perspective, was given by John Stuart Mill, who describes it as the ‘ism’ responsible for a constant state of disharmony, due to the inherent competition between individuals it brings forward. Mill stated that in their eyes:

> the very foundation of human life as at present constituted, the very principle on which the production and repartition of all material products is now carried on, is essentially vicious and anti-social. It is the principle of individualism, competition, each one for himself and against all the rest. It is grounded on opposition of interests, not harmony of interests, and under it every one is required to find his place by a struggle, by pushing others back or being pushed back by them. Socialists consider this system of private war (as it may be termed) between every one and every one, especially fatal in an economical point of view and in a moral.29

Mostly used by socialists to criticise the ideals of the liberals, individualism had a negative connotation up to early twentieth century, as the above quote illustrates. This changed when in the 1930s neoliberalism emerged as a compromise between traditional liberalism and the increasingly more popular socialism.30 Neoliberalists saw individualism as one of the cornerstones of their economic and political philosophy. This is reflected in Springer’s definition of neoliberalism:

> At a very base level we can say that when we make reference to 'neoliberalism', we are generally referring to the new political, economic and social arrangements within society that emphasize market relations, re-tasking the role of the state, and individual responsibility. Most scholars tend to agree that neoliberalism is broadly defined as the extension of

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competitive markets into all areas of life, including the economy, politics and society.31

Key to neoliberal individualism is the idea of individual responsibility of each member of a society. People live together in such a society, but are responsible for their own lives, especially in an economic context.

Dieter Plehwe describes neoliberalism as the dominant socio-political philosophy in the Western world.32 Margaret Thatcher’s government policy, known for large-scale privatisation and reduced state intervention is seen as the ignition of neoliberalism in the United Kingdom,33 while the United States have always had a strongly individualistic society, with prominent politicians such as Al Gore and Bill Clinton identifying as neoliberalist.34 Due to neoliberalism’s socio-economic dominance in western society, it could be argued that defining individualism from a neoliberal perspective, captures the prevailing ideas of individualism on a social level. Lukes provides such a definition, and describes neoliberal individualism as “the absence or minimum of state intervention in the economic and other spheres”.35 This definition will be referred to as NI (neoliberal individualism), and followed throughout this study.

2.2 Humanistic Individualism

Neoliberalism essentially rendered individualism as being incompatible with socialism, but it could be argued that this incompatibility is merely the result of the highly political interpretation of the term by neoliberalists. Oscar Wilde, on the other hand, argued strongly that socialism, in fact, is compatible with individualism. He did not claim that socialism inherently offers space of a “minimum of state intervention” – of course the opposite is true –, but instead he interpreted individualism as a phenomenon describing the possibilities of personal developments of individuals.36 The core of this interpretation is unpolitical, but can be used for political ideologies disagreeing with neoliberal ideals. Wilde did so in arguing that in a society in which wealth is distributed equally amongst all civilians, not only a select

35 Lukes, Individualism, 35.
36 Lukes, 35.
group of people, but – theoretically – all people are able to fully develop their individual identity:

At present, in consequence of the existence of private property, a great many people are enabled to develop a certain very limited amount of Individualism. With the abolition of private property, we shall have true, beautiful, healthy individualism.37

Although Wilde still used his idea of individualism in a political context, its essence might be found in the domain of philosophy, as it answers the universal question of what it means to be individualistic. Philosophers such as Aristotle, Kant and Spinoza have pondered over this question,38 but due to the scope of this thesis it is impossible to include a history of individualism from a philosophical point of view in this theoretical framework. Instead, two core themes in relation to individualism as described by Lukes, intrinsic value and autonomy, will prove to fit in seamlessly with Wilde’s ideas, as well as be useful in relation to the texts analysed in this study. The main idea of this philosophical interpretation is that individualism offers an explanation to what it means to be an individual, and that intrinsic value and autonomy are crucial terms in this respect.

According to Lindsay intrinsic value of the individual human being is strongly linked to western society through the New Testament and Christianity in general.39 In Judaism and in Christianity’s Old Testament only societies and armies were of importance. This changed in the New Testament with the stories of Christ, who is not linked to specific people or a specific nation, but who is all, and is present in all.40 The divine presence of God, or consciousness, is present in each, individual human being. Christianity saw the intrinsic value of a human being, and thereby rid itself of the idea of the human being as a tool. Roughly two millennia later Jean-Jeacques Rousseau further described this idea by saying that “Man is too noble a being to serve simply as the instrument for others.”41 Lukes argues that “this idea of the dignity of the individual has the logical status of a moral (or religious) axiom which is basic, ultimate and overriding.”42 The very idea that any human being is intrinsically valuable, does not allow for regarding the individual as a tool. With this, automatically come rights for the

37 Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, (Wikimedia Commons, 1891), 2.
38 Lukes, *Individualism*, 52-54.
39 Lukes, 45.
40 Lukes, 46.
41 Lukes, 49.
42 Lukes, 51.
individual, as well as responsibilities. The individual has gained the right to have intrinsic value, and is thus able to think and act on his own behalf; the individual has become autonomous, or as Lukes describes it:

An individual is autonomous (at the social level) to the degree to which he subjects the pressures and norms with which he is confronted to conscious and critical evaluation, and forms intentions and reaches practical decisions as the result of independent and rational reflection.\(^{43}\)

The idea of the autonomous individual, the intrinsically valuable individual, and Oscar Wilde’s ideas of individual freedom an self-development will be unified in one workable definition which captures individualism from a humanistic perspective. This humanistic individualism is the idea that individuals have intrinsic value and autonomy, and are able to develop their own, individually-created identity within society.

2.3 Institutionalised Individualism

The previous paragraphs have shown that individualism has been linked strongly to political influences throughout history. The neoliberal notion of individualism, as defined by Lukes earlier in this chapter, is by no means a neutral one, since it strongly relies on the conviction that individualism over collectivism leads to better societies in terms of financial gain. The humanistic interpretation of individualism deals with the autonomy of the individual and individual development. Sociology, on the other hand, aims to describe the large-scale behaviour of humans within societies, and tries to produce theories that can account for these behaviours; oxford dictionaries defines sociology as “the study of development, structure, and functioning of human society.”\(^{44}\) Individualism as phenomenon within social groups, societies, can be studied sociologically in this manner. The definitions of individualism used so far in this theoretical framework are not suitable for a sociological analysis, as the neoliberal interpretation is subjective, and the philosophical interpretation functions at an individual lever, rather than a societal one. However, following the 2002 standardised publication *Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and its Social and Political Consequences*, sociologists have centralised individualisation as one of the most important phenomena taking place in late twentieth and early twenty-first century.\(^{45}\)

\(^{43}\) Lukes, 52.


seems to refer to an increase in individualism, but without definition of the latter term, the first is rendered useless.

According to Ulrich Beck the idea of neoliberal individualism is problematic, as it unjustly assumes that human beings are fully self-reliant:

Yet this ideology blatantly conflicts with everyday experience in (and sociological studies of) the worlds of work, family and local community, which show that the individual is not a monad but is self-insufficient and increasingly tied to others, including at the level of worldwide networks and institutions. The ideological notion of the self-sufficient individual ultimately implies the disappearance of any sense of mutual obligation – which is why neoliberalism inevitably threatens the welfare state. A sociological understanding of Individualisierung is thus intimately bound up with the question of how individuals can demystify this false image of autarky. It is not freedom of choice, but insight into the fundamental incompleteness of the self, which is at the core of individual and political freedom.46

Beck shows here the predicament in which late 20th and early 21st Western society finds itself. This predicament exists between the ideological idea of neoliberal individualism, which assumes that individuals are self-reliant, and harsh reality, which shows that, in fact, individuals are not self-reliant. This ideological idea of individualism has triggered a movement in Western society in which traditional social bonds have gone into decline in favour of the individual. This is problematic as the individual is not self-reliant. Resulting from breaking the ties with conventional social bonds, the individual now becomes dependent on new institutions, or as Beck puts it: “You may and you must lead your own independent life, outside the old bonds of family, tribe, religion, origin and class; and you must do this within the new guidelines and rules which the state, the job market, the bureaucracy etc. lay down.”47 Beck calls this state institutionalised individualism. Individualisation, then, is the process in which individuals, collectively, loosen their ties with traditional social bonds, while

47 Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 11.
becoming more and more dependent on new institutions that are dictated by a capitalist society.

Throughout this study three forms of individualism will be followed: neoliberal individualism, humanistic individualism, and institutionalised individualism. Definitions of these types of individualism are provided in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Neoliberal individualism (NI)</th>
<th>The absence or minimum of state intervention in the economic and other spheres, resulting in individual responsibility for (economic) welfare.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Humanistic individualism (HI)</td>
<td>The idea that individuals have intrinsic value and autonomy, and are able to develop their own, individually-created identity within society.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutionalised individualism &amp; individualisation (II)</td>
<td>The process in which individuals increasingly break ties with traditional social bonds, and become increasingly dependent on new institutions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following chapters will link liberal individualism, humanistic individualism and institutionalised individualism through close reading with individualism as presented in the work of Kate Tempest. Not all forms of individualism presented in BNA and LTEC match one on one with the three forms of individualism as described in this chapter. However, a theoretical framework with a limited amount of definitions is necessary for the creation of a workable approach in the analysis of individualism in Tempest’s poems. When a form of individualism as presented in the poems does not fully match the description of one of the above forms of individualism, it will be labelled as the one which forms the closest match with it. Argumentation will be provided for each classification of individualism.
3. Representations of Individualism in *Brand New Ancients*

Kate Tempest’s *Brand New Ancients* (2013) tells the story of the intertwining lives of two London families and their offspring. The poem is written in free verse, and takes up the space of a novella with its 47-page length. *BNA* has been called an epic poem by promoters and critics, possibly due to its length.\(^48\), \(^49\) However, academics have argued that the epic quality of the poem is not evoked just by its length, but by the presence of conventions of the epic, recognising elements such as an introductory statement of themes and the presence of gods and heroes.\(^50\) The main narrative of the poems follows the personal lives of the various characters, but this form of storytelling is interrupted several times with short intermezzos in which a large-scale overview of society is portrayed. These overviews give the impression that the main story is not only occupied with the personal drama of the individuals taking part in it, but also with a message about something bigger, British or Western society. The poem starts with such a large-scale overview, in which the framework of the poem’s main arguments are presented. The main theme seems to be that contemporary society sees the individual from a neoliberal perspective, which leads to problems as this idea of the individual clashes with what it essentially means to be human, according to the implied author. The main narrative shows on a more intimate level how specific individuals suffer from this clash, and eventually offers a solution to the problem. This chapter will roughly follow the chronology of the poem, as the arguments presented in the text slowly build up to its central message. First, the central problem of the poem will be described, after which the manifestations of this problem in the main story will be analysed, ultimately allowing for a description of the representation of individualism in the text.

3.1 Analysis Introductory Statement

The first six pages of *BNA* serve as an introductory statement of themes in which the main message of the text is explained. This statement begins at the very first lines of the poem, with the implied author immediately addressing the central problem of the text:

In the old days
the myths were the stories we used to explain ourselves.
But how can we explain the way we hate ourselves,
the things we’ve been made ourselves into,
the way we break ourselves in two,
the way we overcomplicate ourselves?\(^{51}\)

Tempest’s use of the first person “we” shows that the problem introduced is a shared one, and this immediately creates a bond between the implied author, the reader, and other members of the – still unspecified – group of people she refers to. The connection is further emphasised by the described topicality of this problem; ‘we’ used to be able to create myths to get an understanding of the nature of our being, but now we face the problem of having to explain the ‘things’ we have made ourselves into. Apparently ‘we’ have collectively lost a value that we used to have in the past. Fitting perfectly with the conventions of the epic, society as a whole is being addressed here. It is unclear, however, which society is meant. The main events of the book take place against the backdrop of London, but the themes (that will be introduced in the next paragraph) are capable of being applied on the entire western world, instead of only the city of London or British contemporary society. Following the conventions of the epic, it seems only logical that Tempest, indeed, addresses a large-scale problem and criticises western society in \(BNA\).

The problem posed in the opening lines is twofold: (1) members of western society – referred to as “we” – used to have myths to explain themselves, but somehow these got lost, and (2) people within western society do not merely need to explain themselves; they have to explain how they hate what they have made themselves into. It acknowledges that the grand stories the members of this society used to explain themselves with – myths or religious stories in general – are lost in contemporary society, but that they still have the need to explain themselves. The problem is further complicated by a change in human nature. With the loss of these stories, the members of western society have somehow changed, resulting into a state of self-hate. The poem suggests that the cause for this is a change in perspective:

\(^{51}\) Kate Tempest, \textit{Brand New Ancients} (London: Picador, 2013), 1.
But it feels like we’ve forgotten we’re much more than the sum of all the things that belong to us.\(^{52}\)

Tempest seems to make a clear distinction between two perspectives on what it means to be an individual here. The first one deals with how members of contemporary western society see the individual, and the second with how members of a past western society used to see the individual. The people forming western society, “we,” have forgotten to see that they are more than the things belonging to them. Contemporary western society is portrayed as a culture that validates the individual by its economic worth. This view on the individual pays no attention to the intrinsic qualities of an individual (HI), nor does it show a state in which individuals break ties with traditional social bonds (II). It also does not perfectly fit the definition of neoliberal individualism as described in the theoretical framework, since individual responsibility for personal economic welfare does not automatically equate individuals to the financial value they represent. However, the idea that individuals are validated by their economic worth does match best with NI, as neoliberalism has been described as the dominant socio-political philosophy in contemporary western society, and Tempest addresses the dominant ideas on the individual in this society. The second perspective on the individual that is presented— the one western society has forgotten—is easier to identify, as Tempest describes it as something “much more than the sum of all the things that belong to us.”\(^{53}\) The way of looking at the individual that has been forgotten assumes that it is impossible to capture what it means to be human in terms of economic value, as this neglects what it essentially means to be human. Humanistic individualism fits best with this view on the individual, because it attributes intrinsic value to the individual.

It is argued in the introductory statement that with losing the great stories people living in contemporary western society have lost the capacity to reflect on who they are; they no longer know what it means to be a human individual, and instead they now see the individual as something reflecting economic value. This is presented as a problematic condition of contemporary western society in the poem. The grand stories have been replaced by neoliberal capitalism, and as a consequence the intrinsic value of the individual (HI) is forgotten. The grand stories—“myths” in the poem—cannot be retrieved in this society, as

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\(^{52}\) Tempest, *Brand New Ancients*, 1.

\(^{53}\) Tempest, 1.
they belong to the past; “the myths were the stories we used to explain ourselves.”54 Instead a
different method to reclaim HI is proposed in the opening of the poem. The remedy to the,
according to the implied author, unwanted condition of seeing the individual as a thing
carrying economic value is the creation of the mythical individual. Tempest writes:

There may be no monsters to kill,
no dragons’ teeth left for the sowing55

The monsters and dragons may represent the grand, old stories that are dead in contemporary
society. Support for this claim can be found in the following excerpt from the poem, in which
“a new mythic palette” is introduced, possibly able to replace the monsters and dragons:

What we have here
is a brand new mythic palette:
the parable of the mate you had who could have been anything
but he turned out an addict

Or the parable of the prodigal father
returned after years in the wilderness56

“The prodigal father” and the “addict” have been through experiences, and these experiences
can function as “the new mythic palette.” Tempest describes that “morality is learned through
experience,”57 so by sharing these experiences people are able to learn from the stories of
others, or as Tempest writes:

Our morality is still learned through experience
gained in these cities in all of their rage and their tedium and yes –
our colours are muted and greyed
but our battles are staged all the same
and we are mythical:
call us by our names58

54 Tempest, 1.
55 Tempest, 2.
56 Tempest, 3.
57 Tempest, 3.
58 Tempest, 3.
The above stanza suggests that individuals can learn from the stories of other individuals, just as they did before from the myths that were ingrained into them. Seeing people as humanistic individuals, people with intrinsic value and their own life stories, allows for an understanding of what is good and what is bad, and although the lives of these individuals are not as spectacular as the traditional, ancient myths (“muted and greyed”), the struggles the individuals go through are not less mythical than those of the ancient gods. Tempest gives a first indication that human individuals possess a divinity, and demands that contemporary western society will see them as such: “we are mythical: call us by our names.” The idea of the individual as god is further explored in the following lines:

We are perfect because of our imperfections.
We must stay hopeful;
We must stay patient -
because when they excavate the modern day
they’ll find us: the Brand New Ancients

The people together forming a society, “we”, seem to have become the new gods, “the Brand New Ancients”. Although Tempest does not specify what “they” refers to, it could be argued she means future generations. These people will be able to “excavate the modern day”, and use the stories of the “Brand New Ancients” to establish what is moral, immoral, important, and unimportant to them, just as past generations did with the ancient myths. NI has prevented this, as it aims for a minimum of economic intervention, thereby placing all economic responsibility onto the individual itself, and is consequently primarily interested in the economic value of the individual, as this reflects the wellbeing of an individual within neoliberalism and capitalism. As a consequence money has become important, but interaction has been put to second place in contemporary western society. However, it is this interaction – the ability to listen to and learn from the stories of the individual – that is needed. As a consequence the individual identity of each person is presented as godlike. Tempest shows this by portraying a variety of people literally as gods:

The gods are in the betting shops
the gods are in the caff
the gods are smoking fags out the back

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59 Tempest, 3.
the gods are in the office blocks
the gods are at their desks…

Although Tempest calls these people gods, they still are not portrayed on a very intimate level, but are instead characterised by a single thing they happen to be doing at a certain moment in time. This might reflect the manner in which an individual sees others individuals within society; as flat characters that only do the thing they are occupied with at that moment. However, by calling these people gods, Tempest seems to give a first indication that there is more to the anonymous people with whom one is surrounded. These “gods” carry myths with them that can be shared and learned from: “the stories are there if you listen. / the stories are here, / the stories are you.”

Nameless individuals all are “gods” in this sense, but can only be seen as such if people show interest in the person behind the anonymous face they meet in “the betting shops” or the “office blocks”. Seeing the intrinsic quality of individuals (HI) and their stories is what makes them godlike. Looking at people from an NI perspective has prevented people from seeing themselves as godlike, as NI only looks at the economic value individuals represent. The structure of the entire poem seems to be intended to proof that the individual as god can only exist when people pay attention to the life stories of others.

Tempest does not provide any arguments in the introductory statement why it would be preferable to look at individuals from an HI-perspective. However, she does unfold her plans to show this, by zooming in on the life of one individual:

So choose one.
Choose any of these Gods watching telly on their own feeling bored but knowing what the more is to want it.
Choose one. Look again
and you will see the Gods rise
in the most human and unassuming eyes.
Now focus.

It seems as if Tempest almost playfully challenges the reader to dive into the life of one of the anonymous individuals, being confident that this will prove why he or she – the reader also being a member of contemporary western society – is able to learn from the story of this

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60 Tempest, 5.
61 Tempest, 4.
62 Tempest, 6.
individual. She commands the reader to “choose one”, and takes him or her by the hand, indicating that the main story is going to begin: “now focus.” The introductory statement does not give any arguments for Tempest’s idea that it would be better to look at the individual from an HI-perspective, rather than an NI-perspective, but this is the function of the main narrative in which several individuals will be followed, so that the reader can see the “Gods rise in the most human and unassuming eyes.”

3.2 Analysis Main Narrative

The beginning of the main narrative shows how the marriages of Kevin and Jane, and Mary and Brian are corrupted because they cannot conform to the uniform blueprint of the perfect individual as created by the society they live in. Kevin is waiting sadly for his wife to show up for dinner while looking at their marriage picture on which they are both beaming with joy.63 The marriage picture seems to symbolise a social construct to which individuals must conform. Outwardly the couple presents their relationship as a good one through this picture, but in reality Kevin is feeling empty when he thinks of his “wife and I,”64 while Jane is cheating on him at that very moment by having sex with Brian. It is the norm in contemporary society to marry, but Jane has the human desire to engage in a sexual relationship with someone else. The ideal (neoliberal) individual as created by society does not allow this, which causes her to be in a situation of being unable to satisfy the demands of NI and HI. There is a good chance she will lose status in that society if she is honest about what has happened, and as a consequence she protects her marriage by betraying the human value of trust:

trust, once there, now gone, all crushed,
her marriage, robust
to the point it was gathering dust.65

Kevin soon realises that he is being cheated on, but decides to live with that fact, not mentioning it. Initially the poem seems to criticise him for holding onto conventions that are obsolete – “Kevin, your altar is covered in moss, the inscription distorted”66 –, keeping him in a state of unhappiness, but ultimately he is praised as a “God who knows better than most

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63 Tempest, Brand New Ancients, 7.
64 Tempest, 7.
65 Tempest, 7.
66 Tempest, 8.
how to settle for less.”67 Kevin is contrasted with Mary, who does not manage to move on knowing that her husband Brian is cheating on her. She becomes an alcoholic and together with her husband she neglects her child Clive, while Kevin is aware that the child he thought was his and Jane’s is, in fact, someone else’s. Still he does not express his unhappiness about this and decides to raise the child, Tommy, as if it is his own. Tempest illustrates how society is so strongly individualised that no one seems to care about the fate of the innocent Clive placed in the incapable hands of his parents who neglect him. The neglect of Clive can be linked to neoliberalism’s incapability to look at wellbeing expressed in other forms than money. Society does simply not notice how he is treated in the dysfunctional family his parents form with him. As a result this society is unable to judge whether the action and motives of the individuals in the families are moral or immoral; what is not visible cannot be judged. However, Tempest does show the problematic story to the reader, who is consequently able to judge the character’s morality. In doing so, Tempest proves what this humanistic view on the individual is capable of doing.

Clive’s father, Brian, is portrayed as an immoral man who constantly follows his own desires without sense of guilt towards others, leaving his wife desperate and disconnected from him and his child. Mary recognises Brian when looking at Clive, and is consequently unable to pay any attention to Clive. Neoliberal society, being the people living in it, their dominant ideologies, the government leading it, is not able to recognise the small drama taking place, and Clive grows up without being loved. The reader, who is forced to witness the events taking place in the lives of the characters, is able to observe the dramatic upbringing of Clive, and is therefore able to judge which of the characters is displaying moral or immoral behaviour. Tempest seems to pose the question what if not the reader, but a neighbour or a social institution would have been witness to Clive’s situation? In this manner she shows how humanistic individualism is able to take care of societal problems neoliberal individualism is not able to see.

Clive and Tommy have the same father, but as they grow up one of them becomes an artist, while the other becomes a criminal. It could be argued that Tempest presents the idea of the makeable individual, in which personality traits are not determined by biological factors, but by upbringing or the attention given to that person. Attention for the human qualities of an individual, in particular, is presented as being key to the behaviour of that individual within

67 Tempest, 9.
society. Clive is especially interesting in this regard. He has never received any love from anyone up to the age of 12, when he meets Terry, who is genuinely interested in Clive. Immediately Tempest shows that Clive is, in fact, able to show love: “Terry was Clive’s first real mate. / And he cared about him.”68 However, he is only able to do so to the people he has received love from. From society he has never received any love, and after Terry is being ignored by a girl he asks to go out with him, they both feel unaccepted and disconnected from this society which has never offered them any shelter or attention. The two friends begin their own mini-society with its own specific rules:

A two-man nation,
with its own rules and conventions.
Each shows respect for the laws.
One man’s face is the other’s reflection,
it’s them against everyone when they go conquesting.
All men are weaklings, all women are whores.
And they will have their power,
two starving mouths desperate to devour,
to digest the flesh of the city
that raised them so sour,
a hunger for vengeance that never sleeps
but endures.69

Clive and Terry’s anger is not targeted at one specific institution or person; they see all men as “weaklings,” and all women as “whores”. Instead, their anger is directed at the “city that raised them so sour,” which might represent the entire society they have grown up in. The anger they feel is not one that will pass, and causes a “hunger for vengeance that never sleeps but endures.” The fact that Clive and Terry have been neglected by society has been the root of their anger, and has caused them to in their turn neglect that society. Accepted by each other, they make their own rules now, and take what they want, regardless of what society tells them to do, “a two-man nation, with its own rules and conventions.” The lack of attention for the individual personalities of Clive and Terry have led them to a path of dissociation and criminality.

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68 Tempest, 15.
69 Tempest, 19-20.
Meanwhile, Tommy has had the chance to develop a personal identity and ambitions due to his (not biological) father’s upbringing. His mother seems to see him as a product able to take care of himself in a capitalist society – “his mum teaches drawing at Lewisham College, Tommy’s a good kid, shows a lot of promise,” while his father, who always lets him win at Sonic – thereby giving him the feeling of being loved –, is his hero. His father’s attention has given Tommy the chance to develop himself as one of the two heroes of this epic poem, but the role of his girlfriend Gloria might even be more important in this respect. Tommy and Gloria love each other for who they genuinely are (HI), and this is what makes their lives worth living. Tommy has adapted to life in a neoliberal society, without losing his true, humanistic individuality: “a young man, whose life might seem boring on the surface: by day he works in a factory packing dog food, but by night he’s a rebel with a devil to fight.” Tommy’s true interest, which makes him human, is creating comics. By complying to society’s norms (NI) throughout the day he is able to make a living, but he defies this society at night by drawing and writing, staying loyal to his true self (HI).

Tommy’s ambition to become famous with his comics are a potential trap for him to fall into, as becomes clear in the second overview in the text:

Let’s all get famous. I need to be more than just this.
Give me my glory. A double page spread.
Let people weep when they hear that I’m dead.
Let people sleep in the street for a glimpse of my head
As I walk the red carpet into the den of the blessed.
Why celebrate this? Why not denigrate this?
I don’t know the names of my neighbours,
but I know the names of the rich and the famous
And the names of their ex-girlfriends
and their ex-girlfriends’ new boyfriends

Now watch him shaking his head, he is furious:
how dare the contestant have thought for a second
that this godhead, this champion of unnatural selection,
should be subjected to another version

70 Tempest, 10.
71 Tempest, 20.
of a bridge over fucking troubled water.
I stare at the screen and I hear the troubadours sing
the Deeds of Simon. He took the eyes from our heads
and blamed us for our blindness.
[…]
But now, we have distant pin-ups, untouchable, shining,
advertisements lying with their hands on their hearts
while we gaze up at them smiling.
But I don’t want a man of the people to talk.
I want the people to speak for themselves.72

The image of contemporary society in which the most important goal is to all “get famous” is created. Individuals in this society are scared of not being recognised for what they do in life, praying that people will “weep when they hear that I’m dead.” The implied author wonders why this celebrity-obsessed society is being celebrated instead of denigrated, stating that she shows no interest in the people around her – “I don’t know the names of my neighbours”. The obsession with celebrities is further emphasised in the following lines, when the implied author admits she does not only know the names of “the rich and the famous,” but also of their “ex-girlfriends and their ex-girlfriends’ new boyfriends.” The implied message seems to be that the individuals in western society are so strongly occupied with worshipping celebrities, “the rich and the famous,” and trying to become one of them (“let people sleep in the street for a glimpse of my head”), that they have forgotten to pay interest in the people around them.

The next stanza deals with how existing celebrities, look down upon the regular people. A talent show is described in which Simon, possibly referring to British tv-personality Simon Cowell, responds arrogantly (“shaking his head, he is furious”) to a ‘normal’ individual (“contestant”) performing a song. However, Simon’s godlike status is described as being a random one: “this champion of unnatural selection.” His status of god is a fake one. Natural selection refers to Darwin’s idea that the being most fit to certain conditions is able to survive in those natural circumstances,73 but the image of “unnatural selection” reduces the position occupied by Simon to one that is arbitrarily created, and does not follow

72 Tempest, 27-28.
automatically from nature. Simon, in other words, seems to be presented as being not better than any other individual, and that is why celebrities such as him are presented as false gods in the poem. Simon, representing celebrities, is accused of taking “the eyes from our heads, and blaming “us for our blindness.” This blindness possibly refers to the idea that people are unable to see that the gods are fake, and Simon’s blame expresses that the Gods no longer treat these people as being equals.

The final stanza presents the results of the creation of these false gods. Celebrities are distant, and separated from the ‘regular’ individual: “distant pin-ups,” who use their godlike status to sell something in “shining advertisements,” but the words they say are lies told “with their hands up their hearts.” Still the ‘regular’ individuals “gaze up” smiling at these false gods, wanting to be like them. Neoliberalism and capitalism seem to be presented as being responsible for the worshipping of these false gods; through marketing they are promoted as the ideal person, possessing exterior beauty, economic wealth, and with that social status. At the same time individuals in this neoliberal society have gotten out of touch with the people who they can truly learn from; the neighbours who’s names they cannot remember. The implied author states that she does not want them, “a man of the people,” to talk, but instead wants “the people to speak for themselves.” Tempest’s referral to Simon Cowell indicates that she is not criticising a society that only exists in the book, but the one existing in the real world, as Cowell belongs to this world.

The overview does not only function as a critique of contemporary western society, but can also be interpreted as a warning for Tommy, who has just signed a contract, to not get carried away by success as perceived from a NI point of view. He still looks at the individual from a humanistic perspective at the moment he signs the contract:

Tommy is nervous, all that he’s ever wanted to be
is an artist, a wordsmith, a cartoonist,
and even though he kind of hates the fact
that this gross little man has the power to do this,
he’s 26, he knows well enough to smile in all the right places,
this might be a chance, and he’s not gonna waste it.76

74 Tempest, 28.
75 Tempest, 28.
76 Tempest, 26.
Tommy hates the fact that someone else, a “gross little man,” has the power to make or break his life, but knows he has to humiliate himself by laughing and smiling – betraying his human individuality –, as these are the norms set by the society he lives in. This moment forms the first moment in the poem in which someone, other than Gloria, shows any interest in Tommy’s art, and the reason seems to be that his talent can be used to create money; the company for which he has a job interview is specialised in advertising. Again a critique on contemporary society can be distilled from the text, as it is portrayed as a place in which art – Tommy’s art in the text – is not intrinsically valuable, but only becomes valuable to society when it can be used to make money.

As Tommy becomes more and more successful in the eyes of the society he has rebelled against, he gradually loses his intimate bond with Gloria. He starts hanging out with people who have become the individuals NI demands them to be: fake, only looking for profit, and attempting to fill up the lack of real human contact with empty imitations. Tommy is rewarded for his financial successes by his colleagues, who bring him to a strip club.77 Tempest portrays this neoliberal lifestyle as empty, in which fake items have to fill the emptiness created by the loss of humanistic individuality. A contrast is created between the pub in which Gloria works, and the strip club. People are talking with attention for each other in her pub, and they offer Gloria drinks, while in the strip club fake plastic leaves hang down from the ceiling to create a jungle atmosphere, and “everyone’s young and clean and fake laughing and talking far too loud.”78 This is not who people really are, Tempest seems to suggest, but merely what people have come to believe is the rich lifestyle they hope to find happiness through. Tommy realises in the strip club that he has tried to find happiness through consumables, but he has lost the connection with Gloria, and is now trying to compensate this by buying ‘intimacy’ from a stripper.

It is this moment of realisation that is crucial in the poem, and it could even be argued that it leads to Tommy becoming one of the two heroes of the poem. He realises that the individual in neoliberal society is an empty vessel, and rebels against this by immediately leaving the strip club to return to his girlfriend, planning to offer an apology. Tommy may represent the individual as such, as the main narrative of the text seems to function as both a demonstration and explanation of the disadvantages of looking at the individual from a neoliberal point of view. Individuals, however, are presented as able to overcome the

77 Tempest, 33.
78 Tempest, 31.
disadvantages of a neoliberal view on the individual, by retrieving the ability to be aware of
the intrinsic value of other individuals. Tommy’s love for Gloria cannot be replaced by the
services of a stripper bought with money, and upon realising this he reclaims the capacity to
see the intrinsic value of individuals. Meanwhile, Gloria is going through a transformation as
well. Throughout her entire life she has been the victim of excesses caused by western
society, and now the only two customers left in her pub are Clive and Terry, who lock the
door intending to rape her. Clive essentially is the child of neoliberal society, and now
represents that society, while Gloria has always – despite a difficult youth – been loyal to
humanistic individualism, by paying genuine interest into the lives of others. She thinks of all
the times society has let her down in the past:

… for every lie she’d been told,
for every time she’d been beaten down, used and made weak –
she called upon that weakness now
for Tommy’s silent stares
looking past her, looking through her,
for every one who’s ever fucked her over.79

Gloria channels all her anger, created by society, and grabs a bottle as Clive opens his flies.
Now, at this ultimate moment when she has to fully rely on her own capacities, she smashes
the bottle into the monster that contemporary western society has formed. Tommy, who had
just walked in, seems to see Gloria for who she is from a humanistic perspective now:

.. in that moment when he’d watched,
her defending herself like a heroine, a god.
And with his eyes he apologized for every night
he hadn’t kissed her right.
And he knew that he was understood ‘cos he felt her hold him tight.80

Tommy and Gloria have both just rid themselves of what contemporary society imposed on
them. Tommy had replaced his love for Gloria with items and services that can be purchased,
but he had discovered that such a life felt empty to him, while Gloria has just defeated the
monstrous person, created by this society. This can be seen as a victory of the humanistic
individual over the neoliberal individual. Tommy has just watched Gloria “defending herself

79 Tempest, 39.
80 Tempest, 42.
like a heroine, a god,” and Gloria sees the feeling of guilt in Tommy’s eyes. Both now fully seem to see and understand each other for who they intrinsically are, and this leads them to a state of serenity or happiness, as is shown in the poem when “they put their arms around each other.”

Throughout the text two views on the individual are presented: neoliberal individualism and humanistic individualism. Tempest seems to present the dominant view on individuals in contemporary society as one in which the individual is valued by its economic worth. Although this does not match the exact definition of neoliberal individualism as described in the theoretical framework, the classification of NI can be justified as neoliberalism is seen as the dominant socio-political view in contemporary society, and therefore best reflects the dominant views on individualism in contemporary society. Tempest is critical towards this view on the individual, and presents it as leading to a society filled with people unable to look at the personal circumstances that determine someone’s life. As a consequence artificiality replaces true values in this society; making money is prioritised. Unable to get in touch with the people around them, these neoliberal individuals find themselves stuck in a society that leads to unhappiness, a sense of disconnection, inequality, and even criminality.

Tempest does not criticise a fictional society, but contemporary western society, which is imitated in the poem. The type of individualism that keeps societies together, Tempest argues, is one in which all members show personal interest into each other; a society in which people look at each other as gods. The intimate nature of the poem itself – in which social problems are examined on an individual level through various characters – shows that when looking at the stories of individuals, it possible to create a sense of what it means to be human, and to get an understanding of which values are important in the lives of the people forming a society. In its past, western society was able to use myths as the stories to understand its own nature, but now the individuals have become gods. Together with the heroes of the poem, Tommy and Gloria, the reader is able to form a judgement on the morality of the characters described in the main narrative through this demonstration of looking at the individual from a humanistic perspective. The idea of HI in *BNA* matches almost perfectly with the definition provided in the theoretical framework (individuals as having intrinsic value and autonomy), and is presented as the medicine against NI, which

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81 Tempest, 42.
functions as the corruptive, dominant force in contemporary western society. Tommy and Gloria each overcome the challenges that NI placed upon them, and find happiness in seeing the intrinsic value of each other.
Kate Tempest’s *Let Them Eat Chaos* was published in 2016, three years after *Brand New Ancients*. The identity of LTEC is somewhat difficult to determine, as it has been published both as a music album and a poem, printed in book form. On the album, the entire piece is split up into songs, while such a division is not made in the book. As the artist has consciously decided to publish LTEC as an independent work of art in book form, it will be referred to as a poem throughout this chapter. This means that only the printed text will be analysed, and that the album version will not be dealt with, as it forms a different, independent work of art made from the same concept. Similarities exist between LTEC and BNA in both form and themes. Like BNA, LTEC is one, long poem that takes up the space of an entire book, while another similarity can be found in the dominant presence of individualism as a theme. Both varieties of individualism present in BNA, neoliberal individualism and humanistic individualism, appear in LTEC, with a third form, institutionalised individualism, being present as well. LTEC partly follows the manner in which individualism is represented in BNA, but it also features entirely different representations.

Tempest addresses a variety of crises, most notably climate change, financial inequality and isolation, and shows how the three forms of individualism can be linked to these problems. Breaking with the form of the traditional epic poem applied in BNA, Tempest uses a fragmented structure in which she addresses individual problems through seven different characters, Jemma, Esther, Alicia, Pete, Bradley, Zoe, and Pious, only connected with each other by the fact that they live on the same street in London. Each character is given a small chapter in which they are able to explain the individual problems that they are occupied with. The large-scale overviews have not disappeared in the structure, and connect the individual problems with each other. It could be argued that the poem criticises the life in London; the city forms the setting of the narrative. However, the crises described have a larger scope than just applying on a city, or even England. One of them is a global crisis, and the others are crisis that appear in contemporary western society. When referred to contemporary western society in this chapter, the people forming it, it’s dominant ideology, and the governments leading the countries within it are meant. This chapter will first show three crises, climate change, financial inequality, and loneliness, that Tempest addresses in the poem, and then focus on the role of individualism in relation to these crises.
4.1 Crises in *Let Them Eat Chaos*

*Let Them Eat Chaos* begins with something similar to a guided meditation. Kate Tempest actively breaks the fourth wall in the first sentence by telling the reader to “picture a vacuum, An endless and unmoving blackness.”\(^{82}\) She guides the reader from something universal to the location in which her story is set, the city of London, showing him or her the universe, the sun, and the earth. In doing so, Tempest seems to create a bond between the seven – seemingly randomly chosen – individuals that are followed throughout the poem, and the reader. They all share the fate of living on the same small planet in a vast universe, and are thereby connected, whether they want to or not. Especially the earth receives special attention in this meditation, and is presented as something inherently beautiful:

> There is our Earth.  
> Our  
> *Earth.*  
> Its blueness soothes the sharp burn in your eyes,  
> its contours remind you of  
> love.  
> That soft roundness.  
> The comfort of ocean and landmass.\(^{83}\)

The words used to describe Earth – “blueness,” “soothes,” “love,” “soft roundness,” and “comfort” – have positive connotations. The bond between the reader, the seven individuals followed in the poem, and even all humans living on earth is further emphasised; everyone shares the fate of living on this beautiful place.

The description of the earth also forms the prelude to the introduction of the first crisis in the poem. Unmingled nature is described as something beautiful, with “ocean and landmass” as things that bring “comfort,” but the idea of an untouched, beautiful and safe place is harshly interrupted when earth is being personified as the mother of humanity:

> Older than she ever thought she’d get.  
> She looks at herself as she spins.  
> Arms loaded with the trophies

of her most successful child.

The pylons and mines
the power-plants shimmer in her still, cool breath

Is that a smile
playing across her lips?

Or is it a tremor of dread?

The sadness of mothers
as they watch the fate of their children

unfold. 84

The personified earth reflects on herself, and on the visible landmarks humanity has placed on her surface. Humanity is presented as “her most successful child,” but the trophies that prove its success, “pylons,” “mines,” and “power-plants,” do not have the same positive connotations as the words used to describe the nature of Earth; they are more likely to bring forth associations with pollution and war. The imagery that is used to describe human activity on earth forms a strong contrast with the description of untouched nature. Humanity’s trophies are representations of human development; innovation, cooperation and technological developments were needed to build these complex constructions, but Earth does not seem to be happy with them. Earth either displays a smile, or “a tremor of dread,” when watching the fate of her children, humanity, unfold. The earth, presented as being unmingled nature, seems to feel threatened by the direction in which human development is moving.

It could be argued that the described developments of humanity has to do with the consequences of climate change on the planet. The era in which the poem has been released is dominated by discussions on the impact of climate. One year before the release of it the Paris Agreement was signed by 195 countries, and the agreement is seen as a global plan to slow down global warming. 85 With this in mind, the idiom used to describe the natural state of the earth, and the influence of human beings on the planet, together with Earth’s “tremor of dread” for the fate of her children, seem to indicate that the text, indeed, is referring to climate change. The image used for the cover of the poem strengthens this idea, as it displays half of the earth being destroyed by a men-built, polluting construction. Climate change is only mentioned explicitly on a few occasions in LTEC (most prominently perhaps: “The water

84 Tempest, 2-3.
level’s rising / the animals / the polar bears / the elephants / are dying.”86), but especially the imagery used throughout the poem seems to blend in perfectly with climate change as a crisis. Against the backdrop of the night in which the narrative is set, a storm is slowly building up, looming silently, but potentially possessing a catastrophic force. The storm might be a metaphor for climate change, which also holds the properties of slowly and unpredictably gaining in force, holding the potential for a disaster. A large scale overview in the middle of the poem presents a fragment in which the four horsemen make an appearance as witnesses of human pollution, seemingly supporting the idea of the storm as metaphor for climate change:

Most left it to the weathermen
to tell them there was nothing to see.
You can play dumb and ignore for so long
But we’ve been in the mountains getting strong
We’ve seen you
filling up the sky with your fumes87

The image of humans “filling up the sky with” fumes, can be linked directly to the emission of carbon dioxide. The four horsemen (“we” in the above quotation) create an apocalyptic image of the eventual consequences of climate change, and human’s role in it, who have played “dumb and ignore for so long.” Climate change, thus, is identified as the first crisis being described in LTEC.

The second crisis presented in the poem is the portrayal of the city as a place only affordable for the rich due to an increase in financial inequality. This is perhaps most clearly visible in the story of Zoe, who is forced to move out of her apartment as she is not able to pay the tripled rent her landlord is asking. As her neighbourhood is being gentrified, wealthier people are about to take over the houses that the original occupants can no longer afford:

For years
the landlord never fixed the shower
The mould kept growing up the kitchen walls.
He’ll do it up nice now
sure
repaint it.

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86 Tempest, Let Them Eat Chaos, 19.
87 Tempest, 41.
He’s tripled the rent.
He’s gonna get it and all.\textsuperscript{88}

The crisis of inequality is presented in two manners. The poorer group of people lose the place they have built up a living, as they cannot afford the tripled rent, and, secondly, the landlord never felt obliged to fix the showers for those with lower incomes, which resulted in tenants living in worse living conditions than their richer counterparts. It is also implied that no social protection exists that ensures basic living conditions, such as a working shower. Tempest presents gentrification as a problematic development, as the identity of entire neighbourhoods seems to be removed, and replaced with one for a wealthier group:

\begin{quote}
The squats we used to party in
\hspace{2cm} are flats we can’t afford
The dumps we did our dancing in
\hspace{2cm} have all been restored

[…]
I don’t feel like home no more
\hspace{2cm} I don’t speak the lingo.
Since when was this a winery?
\hspace{2cm} It used to be a bingo.\textsuperscript{89}
\end{quote}

The culture of the original tenants in the now gentrified neighbourhood is affected by the higher rents. Social gatherings, “the squats we used to party in,” have been replaced by flats this group “can’t afford.” The identity of the neighbourhood has changed, with Zoe (“I” in the above quotation) not feeling home in it anymore, as she does not speak the new dialect, “lingo,” that has emerged. The places important for the poorer group of people that used to live in the neighbourhood (“a bingo”) have been replaced to facilitate the demands of the new, richer group that is now living there (in this case “a winery”). Tempest creates the image of a city literally being taken over by the rich, at the cost of those with lesser financial power. However, this is not the only manner in which financial inequality is presented throughout the text. Most of the seven individuals appearing in the story seem to have some sort of problem to make ends meet. Pete is forced to move back to his father, as he cannot afford the rent,\textsuperscript{90} and Esther and Jemma have to work long days – even night shifts – to be able to pay the rent

\textsuperscript{88} Tempest, 52.
\textsuperscript{89} Tempest, 53.
\textsuperscript{90} Tempest, 31.
for apartments described as being very basic and not well-maintained considering the words used to described their atmosphere: “broken blinds,”91 “the tattered carpet,”92 or “the slats on her blinds are all wonky and skewed.”93 The entire neighbourhood in which these individuals live is described in a similar manner, with tramps living on the street and the litter in the alleyway singing.94 Financial inequality, consequently, is the second crisis that can be found in LTEC.

The third crisis elaborately described in the poem is the perceived sense of loneliness and isolation all seven individuals share. It is difficult to separate this concept from the idea of individualisation, but the link between individualism, and loneliness and isolation will be analysed extensively later in this chapter. As a result this paragraph will only provide a short enumeration of characters feeling lonely and isolated, demonstrating the existence of this crisis in the poem. Jemma experiences loneliness as she is suffering from a trauma, but is unable to talk to someone about this,95 Alicia misses her husband who passed away,96 Pete feels like he is looking at the world from behind glass,97 and Zoe has to move out of the neighbourhood where she has a social network, isolating her from social contact.98

4.2 Interaction between Crises and Individualism

Although the most important form of individualism Tempest seems to presents in Let Them Eat Chaos is closely related to the perceived sense of isolation and loneliness as described in the previous paragraph, it is important to make a distinction between both concepts. The aforementioned individualism shows how people in contemporary western society have cut the ties with traditional social institutes, such as a spouse, family, or their neighbours, which has led to an increased interest in the self. This form of individualism best fits the idea of institutionalised individualism, as described in the theoretical framework. The loneliness and isolation are the result of the individualisation of this society, as are the crises of climate change and financial inequality. The following paragraphs will show how the presence of institutionalised individualism can be deduced from the poem through close reading, and will provide insights in both the creation of II as a result of developments in the view on the

91 Tempest, 9.
92 Tempest, 9.
93 Tempest, 14.
94 Tempest, 6.
95 Tempest, 13-14.
96 Tempest, 26-27.
97 Tempest, 46.
98 Tempest, 53.
individual within contemporary western society, and the role of II, NI and HI in the three crises described in the previous segment.

The humanistic and neoliberal ideas on the individual present in *Brand New Ancients* are similar to those found in *LTEC*. A short fragment in the narrative of Esther, one of the seven individuals followed in the poem, captures the essence of this idea:

People are dead in their lifetimes
Dazed in the shine of the streets
But look how the traffic’s still working
The system’s too slick to stop working.
Business is good.99

The people described are not literally dead, but somehow they are not living either. Meanwhile, contemporary western society is described to still be functioning well; “the system’s too slick to stop working.” A paradox is created, as society (“the system”) is still running, but the individuals forming that society are “dead in their lifetimes”. A solution for this paradox can be found in assuming that the individuals are still contributing to keep “the system” running. Contemporary western society as portrayed by Tempest (“the system”) only seems to be able to judge the wellbeing of individuals by the working of this system, which leads to the conclusion that everything is well, since “business is good.” The individuals are judged by their contribution to keeping the system running, which matches with the neoliberal view of the individual. The question as to who has died remains to be answered. The lives of the people in this society have been reduced to their productivity, rendering them similar to a tractor ploughing the land; they are merely things that can be used to add financial value. Being seen only as such, people within contemporary western society have lost the feeling of being alive and human. Their lives have been reduced to their productivity, while their intrinsic value of being is forgotten. The humanistic view on the individual has died.

Tempest seems to show that this development from HI to NI has led to individuals feeling disconnected from the world around them. Everyone is being valued for their economic position, and individuals do not receive appraisal, or merely recognition, for who they are. Even the economically well-doing character Bradley experiences that he is not being valued for who he is:

Package and sell.
Flattering girls,
battle reality,
it’s Battle Royale
Everyone’s chattering,
nothing is Real.
Collect my salary.
Cooking a meal,
rice and vegetables
I exercise regularly
How do I feel?
Whistle a melody
Is this
all
that’s ahead of me?
I always thought
that life
would mean more to me
eventually.\textsuperscript{100}

Bradley is occupied daily with a variety of activities, but all of these activities are described in a matter-of-fact tone, as if they are governed mechanically. No emotions are connected to him working (“package and sell”), taking care of himself (“collect my salary / cooking a meal / rice and vegetables,” and “I exercise regularly”), or interacting with other people (“flattering girls,” “everyone’s chattering”). Economically, Bradley is contributing to society through his work and the taxes he pays, but his intrinsic humanity has died, as he describes that “nothing is real,” while sharing his thought that he expected life would mean more to him. The life in which an individual is only valued for its economic contribution to society leads to people like Bradley feeling less alive, yet the same people are caught in the rat race of reaching the top, continuing to value others for their professional successes, as that has become the norm in contemporary western society. The consequence of this is that people become detached from this society they sense is incapable of seeing them. They become apolitical, and are no longer

\textsuperscript{100} Tempest, 49.
interested in what is happening around them. Tempest describes the problem and its consequences in the following stanzas:

Work all your life for a pittance,
maybe you’ll make it to manager
pray for a raise
cross the beige days
off on your beach babe calendar.

[…]

It’s the
Boredofitall Generation
the product of product placement
and manipulation,
shoot ‘em up, brutal
duty of care,
come on! new shoes!
beautiful hair.101

Individuals see no escape from the life they are trapped into by western society. They have to work all their “life for a pittance,” with the promise of maybe making “it to manager.” Feeling disconnected from the world that does not acknowledge their intrinsic human qualities, they become detached from the world they live in, transforming into the “Boredofitall Generation.” This generation is presented as being the result of the neoliberal view on the individual, in which they are only validated for their economic value, “the product of product placement and manipulation.” No longer being valued as people with a personal identity, they aim to artificially create their own identity. The result is the self-obsessed individual, created by NI, and this is how Tempest sees institutionalised individualism: the individual as being self-obsessed in its search for identity, ignoring the world around him:

and selfies
and selfies

101 Tempest, 21-22.
Dietz, s4220099 / 37

Selfie-culture is presented by Tempest as a scream for attention, as this is what the “Boredofitall Generation” is missing. Their HI being neglected, they resort to extremities to get noticed, with their selfies saying “here’s me outside the palace of ME!” Members of the “Boredofitall Generation” are unable to see the crises they and others in the world around them are suffering from: “the people are dead in their droves but nobody noticed.”

The self-obsessed individual is unable to truly connect with the people around him, and this causes him to become isolated and lonely. Tempest shows this state perhaps most strongly in the structure of the poem. Seven people living on the same street are unaware of each other’s existence and personal problems. Not connecting with each other and the world around them, they are unable to see that the problems they suffer from – struggling financially, and feeling lonely – are, in fact, large-scale societal problems. Tempest describes the state in which they believe themselves to be in as dead, but the all-knowing narrator sees them as sleeping, asking the individuals living in contemporary western society:

What we gonna do to wake up?
We sleep so deep
It don’t matter how they shake us.
If we can’t face it, we can’t escape it

Waking up is the moment when members of contemporary western society realise that the problems they are experiencing are widely shared, and the result of this society they live in. However, Tempest seems not to be sure whether these people are actually going to wake up, and if they do – how long it will take.

The crises that are being described are not attributed to the individuals within society directly. The central problem is the dominant ideology within society, neoliberalism, stating that each individual is responsible for its own life and happiness. Tempest presents this image as being false, as she shows how it corrupts the lives of individuals. Yes, the big system might

102 Tempest, 21-22.
103 Tempest, 68.
still be running, but the people within it are not happy with their lives anymore. Their
detachment from western society, the result of institutionalised individualism, is, thus,
described as being the result of the dominance of the neoliberal view on the individual over
that of the humanistic. The individual is put to sleep, and is unable to see the societal crises
around him, as he is too deeply involved in them. However, there is one crisis that forms a
strong exception: climate change. Everyone is aware that the world is getting warmer, and
that this can have catastrophic consequences, yet no one is engaged with society anymore, so
no one seems to care about these consequences. Because this crisis is so clearly visible,
Tempest holds the individual responsible for letting the crisis of climate change happen. Not
only the big companies and investors are accountable for it, but the self-obsessed individuals
ignoring a threat that is in plain sight are too:

In their rooms, Alicia,
and Esther
and Jemma
are too concerned with their own thoughts
to think about the weather.¹⁰⁴

The above quotation could still suggest that Alicia, Esther, and Jemma are merely put into a
situation that is caused by the neoliberal system they live in, but Tempest shows that this
environmental crisis is so visible that it gives them a unique opportunity to wake up.
Somehow they refuse to do so:

The water level’s rising!
The water level’s rising!
The animals -
the polar bears
the elephants are dying.
STOP CRYING START BUYING!!

But what about the oil spill?

¹⁰⁴ Tempest, 38-39.
Shh.
No one likes a party-pooping spoilsport.105

Even when some people within western society are experiencing a state of panic due to environmental problems, as shown in the first stanza of the above quotation, most individuals in that society lack to see the urgency of the problem, and see the people talking about it as “party-pooping spoilsports.” The problem is that these individuals have become individualistic due to society, hence the term institutionalised individualism, but this does not change their status exclusively to that of victims. Instead they have become part of the problem itself. The appearance of a crisis so visible as climate change renders all individuals responsible for acknowledging and acting upon the threat, according to Tempest, as it affects the common heritage of everyone, Earth.

The end of the poem reflects that dealing with climate change can be something that can end the state of detachment and boredom. The storm, representing climate change, breaks out, and all seven characters suddenly see their city light up in the thunder. They connect with each other by walking out on the street during the night:

Seven broken hearts
Seven empty faces
heading out of doors:
Here’s seven perfect strangers.
And they see each other.106

Truly seeing each other, these seven individuals are enabled to connect with each other, and talk about the problems they are facing to discover that the ones they are experiencing individually are shared by all of them, and form societal problems. The visibility of climate change has led them to wake up, and awake they can now not only attack climate change, but other problems the entire society suffers from as well. The question Tempest poses, is when individuals within contemporary western society will eventually experience the moment of being brought together, because up to that point, she argues “existence is futile so we don’t engage.”107 The answer to social problems concluding the poem is the search for connection,

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105 Tempest, 19.
106 Tempest, 65.
107 Tempest, 71.
instead of an acceptation of loneliness and isolation; seeing the individual for its intrinsic qualities rather than is economic value:

Till love is unconditional
the myth of the individual
Has left us disconnected lost
and pitiful.

I’m out in the rain
it’s a cold night in London
Screaming at my loved ones
to wake up and love more.
Pleading with my loved ones to
wake up
and love more. 108

The implied author puts herself forward as an member of contemporary western society that is awake, and that feels the responsibility to open the eyes of others, as she is “screaming at my loved ones / to wake up and love more.” Human interaction seems to be presented as the solution to the problem of individualisation, which has led to a society unable to recognise the crises it faces. Up to that point institutionalised individualism has left the individuals within a society “as disconnected, lost and pitiful.”

Three problems influencing individuals within contemporary western society are presented in Kate Tempest’s LTEC. These crises are climate change, financial inequality, and isolation. Climate change is mentioned literally on several occasions in the text, and it could be argued that the theme can also be found in the idiom used to describe the planet and human activity on it. The cover of LTEC also seems to refer to climate change, with the image of a half-destroyed earth covered in fumes created by human beings. Financial inequality is portrayed as problematic in the poem through the experiences of Zoe, one of the seven characters, who is forced to abandon her apartment and neighbourhood due to the tripled rent. Other characters, Peter, Esther and Jemma, are either forced to leave their homes for financial reasons, or have to work extremely hard to pay for badly-maintained apartments in dirty streets. Isolation is presented as the perceived incapacity of individuals to connect with each other, and is shown in the sense of loneliness Jemma, Alicia, Pete and Zoe experience.

108 Tempest, 72.
Tempest presents these crises as societal problems that are experienced by the seven characters in the poem as individual problems. The structure of the poem shows the seven characters as not knowing each other, yet they live in the same street, and share the same problems. Tempest seems to create a link between the crises and institutionalised individualism, as described in the theoretical framework. She shows how the changing view on the individual from HI to NI, in which the individual is not valued for its intrinsic human qualities, but for its productivity, has led people to be “dead in their lifetimes,”\(^{109}\) and brings it forward as the reason for individualisation. Individuals within contemporary western society have a strong urge to be seen, and NI is unable to offer them this. As a consequence they start promoting themselves to fulfil this desire. The state in which these self-obsessed individuals find themselves can best be classified as institutional individualism, as described in the theoretical framework, as the former social contacts, neighbours, family, or even friends, seem to have disappeared.

This “Boredofitall Generation” is not presented as being only the victim of large, societal changes beyond their influence. Instead, it is argued that they have become part of the problem, as these individualised individuals have become so self-obsessed that they are detached from the world around them, making them unable to see societal problems. Still, they should be able to see one of the large crises affecting literally everyone, climate change, which is presented as being so clearly a societal crisis that each individual is made responsible for acting upon it. Climate change can therefore be used to wake up the members of contemporary western society, as happens when the seven characters walk outside and connect with each other as a large storm passes their street. Tempest shows that climate change can be used as a uniting force; it affects all people, and therefore all individuals together are responsible for dealing with it. Being together, the characters are now able to see that the personal crises they are experiencing, are, in fact, shared, societal crises. The answer to the individualisation of society (II), is thus presented as the attempts of individuals to interact with each other, and to acknowledge each other’s problems, which corresponds with HI.

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\(^{109}\) Tempest, 16.
5. Conclusion

Kate Tempest’s poetry and spoken word performances have received international critical acclaim. In an academic context, Tempest’s poems have only been analysed scarcely. The aim of this study was to take a first step in the analysis of Tempest’s poetry in an academic context. With various critics having pointed out the critical attitude towards contemporary western society, and the appearance of individualism in Brand New Ancients and Let Them Eat Chaos, these themes have formed the basis of this study, which aimed to analyse the representations of individualism in both poems, charting Tempest’s criticism on contemporary western society.

Three different forms of individualism were identified in the theoretical framework. Neoliberal individualism refers to the politically charged aim of an absence or minimum of state intervention in the economic and other spheres, resulting in individual responsibility for (economic) welfare. Humanistic individualism is the idea that individuals have intrinsic value and autonomy, and are able to develop their own, individually-created identity within society. Institutionalised individualism is the state in which individuals have broken the ties with traditional social bonds, and become increasingly dependent on new institutions, and individualisation is the process towards reaching this state. Through close reading these three forms of individualism have been linked to representations of individualism in BNA and LTEC.

In BNA Tempest presents the dominant view on individuals in contemporary western society as one in which the individual is valued for its economic worth. Such a view on the individual best fits NI, as neoliberalism is seen as the dominant socio-political view in contemporary society, and consequently best reflects the dominant views on individualism in contemporary society. NI is strongly criticised in the poem, and described as being unable to look at the personal circumstances that determine an individual’s life. Due to NI’s inability to look beyond the individual’s economic value, the characters in the novel experience unhappiness, financial inequality, and a sense of disconnection, with Clive, the character most influenced by NI, even becoming a criminal and rapist. The setting of the poem is a reflection of contemporary western society, and with the economic validating of the individual being dominant in it, Tempest criticises western society for having adopted this view. All social problems described are presented as being rooted in the dominant view on the individual
within western society. Tempest proposes that a change in this view on the individual could lead to social problems being resolved. Her characters in *BNA* find happiness when they start to look at each other in the same manner past generations looked at the gods in the myths they had created. Such a view on the individual allows individuals to see each other’s intrinsic value. The stories that they come to know through interaction enable them to form thoughts on the morality or immorality of behaviour and actions. The intrinsic qualities of individuals are noticed in this view on the individual, fitting with HI. The lack of attention for the intrinsic value of individuals has led to their corruption, but the corruption can be reversed if the people forming a society adopt a new view on the individual. HI is presented as the remedy against the corruptive force of NI in contemporary western society.

Representations of neoliberal individualism, humanistic individualism, and institutionalised individualism are linked to three major crises – climate change, financial inequality, and a sense of isolation and loneliness – in *LTEC*. Tempest presents these three crises as societal problems that are experienced as individual problems by the seven characters followed in the poem. NI is presented in a similar manner as in *BNA*, with the distinction that it has become so dominant in contemporary western society that these characters perceive the intrinsic value of individuals to be dead. The described change from HI to NI has led members of contemporary western society to be “dead in their lifetimes.” Their intrinsic human qualities being denied by NI, these individuals try to fulfil the gap of not being seen by promoting themselves, at the cost of social contact with others. The state in which the self-obsessed individuals finds themselves is best described as institutionalised individualism, as they become increasingly individualised, abandoning traditional social bonds. II is not presented as only being the result of the corruptive nature of NI, but also as a part of the problem itself. Institutionalised individuals are so self-obsessed that they become detached from the society in which they live, rendering them unaware of the social problems, or crises, within it. II leads individuals to seeing social problems, such as a sense of isolation and financial inequality, as individual problems, but the crisis of climate change is so clearly influencing everyone on earth that they are presented as being responsible for dealing with it. Seeing this crisis allows the individuals to see each other again, awakening HI, as they have to find a solution for it together. With HI reinstated, they are now able to discover that the other problems they are experiencing as individual ones, are broadly shared ones. The final problem the text addresses is that II has made people so disconnected from the world around them, that they no longer see dealing with climate change as their responsibility, leading to Tempest
wondering what these individuals are going to do to wake up. The individuals living in contemporary western society are portrayed as paralysed, and in this state they let social and environmental crises happen.

Tempest represents neoliberal individualism as a view on the individual leading to almost all social problems present in contemporary western society in both BNA and LTEC. The main difference in the representations of NI in both text can be found in the strength of this view on the individual. In BNA it is not strong enough to eradicate the humanistic view on the individual, while in LTEC it has become so strong that HI is perceived to be dead. In BNA people themselves were able to reverse the view on the individual to HI, but in LTEC this no longer seems to be possible. NI has led to the institutionalised individual, and this individual has become detached from the world around him to such an extent that only a global disaster, climate change, might be able to bring HI back. Neoliberal individualism is presented as the corruptive force in both text, and humanistic individualism as its remedy, but due to the development of institutionalised individualism – a result of neoliberal individualism – the humanistic view on the individual is far from gaining popularity in contemporary western society. Crises or social problems existing in contemporary western society are attributed to the demise of humanistic individualism in both poems.

Kate Tempest’s portrayal of contemporary western society, being the individuals living in it, its ideologies, and the governments leading the countries within it, is grim. The individuals living in this society are unhappy, feel unrecognised for who they are, but have become part of the problem without realising it. The paralysed state in which they find themselves disables them to look at the problems they are faced with. It could be argued that Tempest’s poems function as a warning for these individuals, by making them conscious of the problematic world Tempest believes them to be living in.

This study functions as a first attempt in getting an understanding of the poetry of Kate Tempest in an academic context through close-reading. A theoretical framework has been set up so that one of the main themes of the poems analysed, individualism, could be studied in detail. The definitions provided for institutionalised individualism and humanistic individualism seem to match well with forms of individualism found in Tempest’s poems. However, neoliberal individualism’s definition does not exactly match with the type of individualism that Tempest describes as the individual only being seen in terms of productivity and economic value. A limitation of this thesis is that the latter is only classified as neoliberal individualism, because they both are presented as the dominant thought on the
individual; NI in contemporary western society, and the individual as economic product in Tempest’s poems. More research could be conducted into the exact nature of individualism that Tempest uses to criticise contemporary society, or the dominant views on the individual in society. Such research could lead to an improved framework for studying representations of individualism in the works of Tempest, and in other works of contemporary poetry or literature, allowing for a more specific understanding of individualism in such texts.
Bibliography


