

## LITERATURE TEACHING IN THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT

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### ABSTRACT

*Literature teaching in the English Department plays an important role in language teaching, since literature is not just language, but it is language that works at full stretch; it is artful shaping of knowledge and experience. Excerpts on the course are carefully selected in the hope that they would furnish students with vocabulary and increase their proficiency. They also make them bring their own observations, comments and sensibilities rather than memorizing as well as illustrating the period in which the pieces were written. Wilfred Owen's "Futility" taken as an example here is not only presentation of vocabulary and structure and the illustration of the situation; but it is something that brings out metaphysical questions on students' minds. The appreciation of the poem has been made together with the students and some questions for motivation have been asked. Active participation brings about many approaches as well as the students' observations and sensibilities as seen here, and that is what we expect rather than vocabulary and structure development.*

### ÖZET

*İngilizce Bölümünde edebiyat öğretimi adlı bu yazıda Wilfred Owen'in "Futility" adlı şiiri esas alınarak öğretimin nasıl ve ne amaçla yapıldığı ve öğrencilere neler kazandırdığı anlatılmıştır. Burada önemli olan seçilen parçanın ilgi çekici olması, güncelliği, sözcük ve İngilizce'yi kullanma yönünden öğrencileri geliştirici ve yazıldığı dönemin özelliklerini yansıttığı olmasıdır. Bir önemli nokta da parçanın ezberden ziyade öğrencilerin kendi gözlemlerini, düşüncelerini ve ne anladıklarını dile getirmesi ve düşünce ufuklarını genişletmekte olmasıdır. Wilfred Owen bu şiirde sadece sözcük ve yapı kullanımı ve durumu anlatmakla kalmamış, öğrencileri düşünmeye itecek birtakım metafizik soruların da kafalarında yer etmesini sağlamıştır. Edebiyat öğretimi dil öğretiminde temel bir araçtır. Çünkü edebiyat sadece dilin kendisi değil, onun kullanımını içeren sanatsal bir bilgi ve deneyim uzantısıdır. İngilizce bölümünde 2. sınıftan itibaren her düzeyde okutulan edebiyat dersi sadece öğrencilerin dilini geliştirmekle kalmayıp onların düşünce ufuklarını da genişletmektedir.*

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In 1918, shortly before his death in action in the First World War, the English poet Wilfred Owen wrote the following poem:

### Futility

Move him into the sun ---  
Gently its touch awoke him once  
At home, whispering of fields unsown,  
Always it woke him, even in France,  
Until this morning and this snow.  
If anything might rouse him now  
The kind old sun will know.

Think how it wakes the seeds ---  
Woke, once, the clays of a cold star.  
Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides  
Full-nerved -- still warm -- too hard to stir?  
Was it for this the clay grew tall?  
-- O what made fatuous sunbeams toil  
To break earth's sleep at all?

Another world war and many momentous events later, Owen's poem is studied as part of the third year's History of English Literature course, and it has proved very popular for all the right reasons, making students and staff alike realize what literature is and what it is not. Originally, for example, the excerpts on the course were chosen in the hope that they would furnish students with useful vocabulary and increase their proficiency in English language. A second aim, which placed this poem on this particular course, was to have it illustrate the time in which it was written. Taken singly, both approaches fall short because Owen achieves far more than the presentation of vocabulary and sentence structure, and far more still than a mere painting of soldiers' conditions in the trenches. One of the most encouraging developments of the literature teaching in this faculty is that students are gradually realizing this themselves, and are coming to bring their *own* observations and sensibilities to bear on the writing, rather than memorizing it, worse still memorizing their lecturers' comments and, worst of all, committing to memory pages and pages of literary criticism. This article accordingly draws as much on students' thoughts as it does on my own.

Is this, then, *just* a war poem? What detailed comment does it make about British soldiers fighting on the Continent? These are useful questions in so far as they reach, but they provide only a starting-point. The poem provides very few local references. Plainly a soldier has just died. A commander, probably a captain, orders the body to be moved into the sun. The scene is France. It is a winter morning and there is snow on the ground. Pointing as they do to place and situation these bare statements highlight the drawbacks of this reductive approach which attempts to force literature to yield up only a set of historical facts. In this instance the very sparseness of documentation indicates Owen's larger purpose; only the allusion to France identifies the poem as a First-World-War piece. Everything

else Owen says applies to *any* recently-killed young soldier in *any* war, while the second verse moves on to larger truths still concerning the preciousness of all human life.

The best discussions of the poem have brought out the quality of human intelligence which at once expresses itself in the delicate conjunction of mind and feeling, and in Owen's economy and control. The poem works on several levels of sensibility. The imperative first line serves many functions; the speaker is in a position of authority in his command to two (so as to lift the body) subordinates, yet beyond the terseness of the order lies a deep private conviction which shows a knowledge of the young soldier who has just died. Whether this knowledge is informed or imagined does not matter. What does matter is the depth of feeling and sensitivity. The choice and positioning of vocabulary (witness the prominent placings of 'gently', 'at home' and 'always') direct us to the important emphases and themes of the poem. Not every reader will detect the backwards association of 'gently' with the moving of the soldier (even though the punctuation and syntax do not encourage such a connection) and its foreshadowing of 'whispering', but everyone will recognise the crucial notion of delicacy. With 'gently' Owen also introduces the sun's twin functions of heat and light which wake this young soldier when he is 'at home' (suggesting both his home country and the house of his childhood), but which in the later stages of the poem rouse all potential life from the cold. It was the sun which, Owen goes on to tell us in the second verse, brought all vegetable life into being ('woke, once the clays of a cold star') but which is now futile, being helpless to return life to something still warm. Furthermore, because the sun is 'kind' (both to the soldier and to all life) and 'old' (both literally and also in its sense of 'familiar') it has been constant all the young man's days, which became more and more dangerous ('even in FRANCE'). Today the sun rises as it must do, but today is vitally different, as Owen's metrical stress on 'this' proves. The syntax does not merely point to the difference between today and every other day, but also suggests the speaker's impassioned recognition of this distinction.

In the English Dept. of this faculty, some third-year students are already noting for themselves the mastery of Owen's poem, how in its second verse we recognize it as being the sun (in other words the gap is not a great one between the first verse and the second) and how the position of the imperative 'think' at the beginning of the second verse echoes the sharp beginning of the first although the speaker has moved from neutral command through private musings to a direct address to the reader. The same students are alive to the poem's wide range and sharp focus: the "limbs, so dear-achieved" and the "sides, full-nerved" are in the plural and refer to all the dead as well as to the soldier, but "still warm" is in parenthesis, and focuses all our attention on the warm corpse on the cold snow. The young man's death, as A J Smith puts it, provokes 'the most radical of questions that a pointless death may confront us with — *why* life then?':

'O what made fatuous sunbeams toil/To break earth's sleep at all?'

The effects of this poem in the English Department are various. There are students whose grammar is too weak to grasp anything more than the basic theme of Owen's poem (and some have difficulty doing even this). Many more profit from

the vocabulary and sentence structure to improve their comprehension of the language. An increasing number, however, are proving themselves capable of relishing fine writing at a high level. In the classroom they appreciate the organisation which shapes and renders telling the poem's humane intensity; they take home the large metaphysical questions which Owen asks. The teaching of literature in the English Department still remains a valuable tool for language-learning, but is also bringing out the fact that literature is more than just language, it is language working at full stretch; the artful shaping of knowledge and experience. In all its levels, ranging from the introductory second-year courses to the new Master's Programme and a possible doctoral programme after that, the teaching of literature in the English Department not only allows students to improve their language skills but also encourages them to develop sensitive intelligences of their own.