

Peter Lee

Fog, Sunlight, and Owls

I hated literature. And perhaps I still do. In the past, however, I disliked literature simply because it seemed incomprehensible. Poetry especially was my biggest enemy in literature that could crumble my brain into pieces. Every time I read a poem, I exactly had two responses; my responses were either bewilderment on the content of a poem or confusion on the popularity of a poem. My first response would occur after I read a poem and begin to ponder if the language of it was in English. My second response would happen when I understand the basic plot of a poem but fail to comprehend how a poem that talks about fog, sunlight, and owls became so popular. This was me for seventeen years of my life, but things changed in my last year of high school.

“Another English class, another brain cramps,” I thought to myself on the first day of school. After going over a typical and predictable syllabus for fifty minutes, my English teacher Mr. Herrera told us students that his class would be nothing like our previous English classes. I did not believe him. I could not believe him. A few weeks later, poetry unit came to haunt me down, at least that was what I thought. Mr. Herrera began by reading a poem called “Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night” by Dylan Thomas. He shouted, “Do not go gentle into that good night!” He then proceeded by tearing down the rest of the poem except the title. “Today, you guys and I are only going to look at the title of this poem for fifty minutes,” he claimed with his unforgettable smile that showed a bit of his missing front teeth. I glanced at him like a condescending man looking at a foolish person. Little did I know I was the foolish person blinded by fog.

Mr. Herrera shouted to the class, "Raise your right hand." Everyone raised his or her right hand. Then, he explained that we raised our hands because he used a command sentence, which starts with a base form of a verb. Suddenly, he banged on the board, which had the title of the poem written on it. Everyone jumped from the resonating banging sound, and before we even came to our seats, he quickly yelled, "Do not! The title starts with 'do not.'" He explained that the title is a command sentence, suggesting that the poet is demanding something. Furthermore, he expounded that the word "night" in the title is a symbolic representation of death because night occurs at the "end" of a day. Reading the title for one last time, he figured out that the entire poem is about a poet commanding someone to not gently accept death. I just could not believe the amount of information he was able to scrutinize just from the title. As if that was not enough, he asked us to think about why the night is called "good" night in the title if night represents death. "How can death be good?", he questioned. Mr. Herrera, abruptly breaking the silence of his class, also asked us to contemplate why the adjective "gentle" was used in the title instead of the adverb "gently" when it was definitely modifying the verb "go." Suddenly, I heard the bell ring and the class was over before I could even start to ponder about those questions. Speechless and dumbfounded, I just could not grasp how my teacher was able to spend an entire class time just analyzing the title of a poem. That moment, I realized how profound literature truly could be.

Next day, for the first time in my life, I went to an English class excited about learning. I wanted to learn how to analyze a poem like Mr. Herrera. I wanted to learn what meanings were behind those fog, sunlight, and owls. The first lesson I learned from Mr. Herrera was understanding the purpose of every word. He explained that every single word in a text is there

for a good reason, especially in poetry because of its brevity. From this lesson, I learned to not underestimate any parts of a text such as title, structure, and other features of a text. Beyond this lesson, his lessons throughout my senior year were like a warm sunlight to me that enabled my growth as a reader. One lesson that impacted me the most was his lecture about symbolism. He made his class memorize symbols of animals and plants and colors in a rainbow. Although the process of memorizing was boring to say at least, once I started to apply those symbols as he taught me to, I felt like I was playing a game of treasure hunt. Finding symbol was like discovering small bits of clues about an author's text that would ultimately lead me to the treasure called "author's purpose." This way of thinking made me feel one step closer to a writer and greatly improved my ability to deeply analyze literature in general. By the end of my senior year, I had acquired a skill to find clues in a text even in tough situations like owls finding their preys in the dark.

However, the process of becoming an owl-like was not easy. One novel that challenged me the most was *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad. This dense novel was layered with complex symbolism in such a way that reading and analyzing just one page of this book took me more than an hour. Despite that, nothing was more satisfying than playing a treasure hunt of symbolism with so many symbols to find. As I hunted more and more symbols, a feeling of firm grasp kept motivated me to continue finding remaining symbols. That sensation of the firm grasp I felt about an author's work and its purpose after finding a symbol was more than enough for me to push through and continue reading.

As I progressed with my new perception of literature throughout my last year of high school, I learned to play a game of treasure hunt not only of symbolism but also of diction, tone,

and many other literary devices. As a result, initially difficult texts to me became a source of place where I could dig deeper and deeper into whatever areas I wanted to discover. Eventually, I became addicted to reading and analyzing literature that I missed the deadline to apply for scholarships to support my tuition. I hate literature.