

Why English Language and Literature? Why Wadham?

Some thoughts from our Wadham Fellow and Professor of English and World Literatures, Ankhi Mukherjee.

I started my career at Wadham College straight out of a PhD, nearly 20 years ago. I teach three Prelims papers – 1830-1910, 1910-present, Introduction to Literature (1b) – and one Final Honour School one, English Literature 1760-1830. I supervise dissertations that correspond roughly to any of these time periods (and have critical foci that are relevant to my own research expertise).

I felt like an outsider to Wadham and Oxford when I first arrived, trained in India and the US as I was. A senior colleague likened the tutorial system to “Socratic dialogue,” while others said equally helpfully that there was no one way to describe it. The trick, I’ve learnt, is to show up prepared to the eyeballs (I still nervously clutch index cards) and then let the unscripted, inspired madness happen. While the best, most stunning intellectual fireworks in a tutorial cannot be programmed, it is easy to predict that deep, immersive scholarship on the part of the intergenerational interlocutors and a mutual responsiveness to each other’s thoughts, words, and silences are key to these performances.



I usually start every tutorial providing a historical context of the genre we are studying, moving excursively from the vicissitudes of form and style to larger questions of authorship, audience, identity, philosophy, aesthetics and politics. The students, a pair, occasionally three in number, take it up from there, discussing works they have read and written on, the critics they have relegated to the dustbin of history, the new recombinant ideas about the decade (say, the 1840s or 50s), the form (the “social problem novel”), the forgotten classic (*Alton Locke*). The historical survey papers are meant to be the mainstay of the canonical curriculum at Oxford: in reality, we read non-canonical, obscure, and forgotten figures alongside the mainstays



of Victorian literature. This is not simply done in the spirit of a feminist or postcolonial reckoning but to learn how the memory system of literature is also, as Franco Moretti says, a “slaughterhouse”: what is transmitted by way of literary history often leaves out 99.5% of the literary field in question, as is the case with the twenty thousand nineteenth-century British novels no one has ever read.

The collegiate system at Oxford offers students the unique advantage of having personalised teaching (and training) in college while also getting a blast of the English faculty’s rich and varied research specialisms in the form of classes and lectures. This amplification of teaching is replicated by the library and other resources which exist in duplicate or triplicate. The colleges often host long-running seminar series or annual conferences. The English Faculty’s fortnightly “Postcolonial Writing and Theory seminar” is one such phenomenon, where internationally renowned critical thinkers – and Nobel- and Booker-winning stars of the literary firmament – may be found chatting to students in the homely setting of the C. Day Lewis room or nursing a pint at the King’s Arms pub. The versatility of English studies has also meant that English can be interdisciplinary not only with respect to other Humanities subjects but a vital partner in knowledge exchanges with Anthropology, Environment Studies, AI, or the History of Medicine, to name a few.

If you are still wondering, why English? (alongside why Oxford? why Wadham?) one possible answer may be that a degree in English language and literature provides very rigorous training in the philology, history, geography, and cultures of a literature that has pluralised itself with abandon, moving well beyond ethnocentric definition to become a global vernacular. The interpretive skills we teach enable students to locate the text in the world and the world in the text. Studying English at Oxford doesn’t only provide an overview of the intellectual history and imaginative explorations of different periods in British, European, or American literature: it facilitates the significantly more difficult task of envisioning linguistic and cultural relativity in a world with inter-implicated histories yet terrible inequalities.