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## **Affective and cognitive responses to poetry in the university classroom**

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Is there space for greater affective engagement with poetry in the English Literature university classroom? This article reflects on how poetry is currently taught in higher education and argues for the need for affective response in the study of poetry. In universities, as in mainstream education more widely, cognitive approaches to poetry are often dominant. Far from being irrelevant to the serious study of literature, we argue that eliciting students' affective responses to poetry can deepen their cognitive understanding and analytical skills. Drawing on recent research in psychology on the relationship between cognition and affect, we show that poetry has particular potential to make us aware of the crucial interrelation of our cognitive and affective processes; and that bringing those responses into balance can deepen our understanding of poetry. Building on recent educational studies of typical student (and teacher) anxieties and assumptions about working with poetry, and on our observations from our own initial, exploratory seminars, we explore some of the obstacles to rebalancing the cognitive and affective dimensions of poetry in higher education, and point to the potential value of such an approach if such obstacles are overcome.

Keywords: teaching poetry; cognition and affect; poetry seminar; poetry and emotion; higher education

### **Introduction**

I ask them to take a poem  
and hold it up to the light  
like a color slide...

(Billy Collins 'Introduction to Poetry')

In the teaching of English Literature in higher education, a cognitive, analytical approach to poetry is often dominant. Degree courses across the country promise to

turn prospective English students into critical readers. 'Studying literature at Oxford', declares the university's website, 'involves the development of sophisticated reading skills and of an ability to place literary texts in their wider intellectual and historical contexts. It also requires you to consider the critical processes by which you analyse and judge, to learn about literary form and technique, and to study the development of the English language' (University of Oxford 2016); studying literature at Cambridge instils 'the valuable skills of critical thinking, scholarly rigour and good writing' (University of Cambridge 2016). This emphasis on analytical engagement with poetry and skills development can also be seen in the independent overview for prospective students of what an English degree will involve on the Higher Education Academy's website ('Why study English'): 'Whatever you're reading, your English course will teach you how to read the work – or, in academic-speak, text – attentively and analyze its construction and effect' (see also the description for the Open University's course 'Approaching Poetry'). The emphasis of these undergraduate English courses reflects both the rise of critical thinking in education more generally (Williams 2016),<sup>1</sup> and the persistence of the analytical techniques of aesthetic formalism alongside the newer intellectual tools of critical theory and cultural criticism in literary studies. As Daniel Green (2003) argues, literary study in Universities at the beginning of the 21st century 'is most strikingly concerned not with the appreciation of the intrinsic qualities of literature but with the historical and cultural "knowledge" that can be acquired from works of literature through a special kind of analysis' (p. 62). Through their study of literature, students can therefore expect to be trained to employ close linguistic analysis and contextual

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<sup>1</sup> See also LaCroix's (2005) book *Inspired English: Raising test scores and writing effectiveness through poetry and fiction*, which promotes the study of literature as a tool for developing critical thinking.

discussion as techniques for unlocking meaning.

Yet poetry requires not only technical understanding, such as knowledge of poetic forms and features, but also an appreciation of how such response-dependent features unfold in experience. Indeed, we do not always acknowledge that ‘seminars (classes) operate simultaneously on intellectual, affective and social levels’ (HEA 2011, 1), and that ‘...the social and emotional life of the group will ... affect the ability of its members to learn’ (p. 2).

In this article, we argue for the value of promoting greater affective engagement in the university English Literature classroom as a means of enhancing appreciation and understanding of poetry. We are not denying that some degree programmes do place emphasis on affective engagement; our aim is to draw attention to the importance and value of taking such an approach and provide greater evidence for promoting such affective engagement with poetry. Drawing on research from psychology which shows that cognitive and affective responses are closely interlinked in the brain, we will argue that combining these modes of engagement has the effect of deepening, rather than detracting from, the quality of students’ analysis. In the case of poetry, a combination of cognitive and affective engagement is particularly beneficial because of the unique combination of form and response-dependent features in unlocking the expressive potential of the written word, and both modes of engagement should thus be nurtured.

In making this case, we draw on a small-scale study of the potential effects of bringing emotion and experiential-focussed pedagogic techniques into a formal university seminar-style setting. We attempted to synthesise cognitive and affective approaches to literature by making students’ personal and subjective responses to a poem a more central part of the discussion than is perhaps typical in an English Literature seminar. Reflecting on the outcomes of our pilot study, we observe the

potential benefits of this approach; identify the obstacles – both internal and external – to an affective engagement with poetry among university students; and suggest some practical ways in which we might adapt our seminar teaching to encourage a more optimal balance of cognition and affect in future.

### **Teaching poetry at university – a need for change?**

A cognitive response to literature is inscribed in the very definition of English at university level. According to the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's (QAA) benchmark statement for higher education providers, English is 'a versatile academic discipline characterised by the rigorous and critical study of literature and language'. Its students will develop a 'flexible and responsive openness of mind, conceptual sophistication in argument, and the ability to engage in dialogue with past and present cultures and values' (QAA 2007, 1). The statement's primary emphasis on 'rigorous and critical study' implies that the intellectual responses to literature listed in subsequent paragraphs – 'critical thinking and judgement', problematizing, reflecting critically, analysing, and 'knowledge' – are valued more highly than the subjective, emotional responses mentioned in passing along the way ('understand, *appreciate* and employ the expressive resources of language'; 'intellectually stimulating and *satisfying* experience'; '*enthusiasm* for the subject' (italics added)). Even the wider influence of English in the 'general community' is characterised in cognitive, rather than affective terms: 'sustaining ... a constantly renewed *knowledge* and critical appreciation of the literature of the past and of other cultural forms' (italics added).

The dispassionate, critical examination of literary texts was a foundational tenet of English as a university subject, underpinning its claims to being worthy of serious study, and, despite major changes in the critical emphases of the discipline over the

subsequent decades (such as in the increased emphasis on critical theory and cultural criticism), it persists in the way it is taught and assessed today, not least in the practice of close reading (Dressman 2015; Graff 1996; Eaglestone 2002). In ‘The Affective Fallacy’, William K. Wimsatt, Jr. and Monroe C. Beardsley criticised reliance on the reader’s personal or emotional reaction as a means of evaluating or analysing a text: ‘The Affective Fallacy is a confusion between the poem and its *results*’ (1949, 31). The main focus, they proposed, should be the objective study of unique poetic language. In their earlier article, ‘The Intentional Fallacy’, Wimsatt and Beardsley had promoted ‘the public science of evaluating poems’, as distinct from seeking to understand the emotional intentions of the author: ‘we ought to impute the thoughts and attitudes of the poem immediately to the dramatic *speaker*, and if the author at all, only by a biographical act of inference’ (1946, 470). The New Critical approach was later challenged by structuralists for detaching texts not only from their authors but from other important contexts and influences; and by reader-response theorists who saw the authorial voice as a site of narrative possibility rather than of fixed meaning.<sup>2</sup> Yet New Critical principles continues to inform the approaches to poetry in which students are typically trained in the English Literature higher education, namely analytical close reading of poetic language, often in previously ‘unseen’ texts, under examination conditions.

Furthermore, new students transition to higher education from an education system where, despite the claims of the National Curriculum that ‘Through reading in particular, pupils have a chance to develop culturally, emotionally, intellectually,

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<sup>2</sup> New Criticism was also supported by later, reactionary criticism that responded to the perceived permissiveness of youth culture, e.g.: Don Gutteridge’s ‘The Affective Fallacy and the Student’s Response to Poetry’ (1972), which argues against drawing on affective and subjective response in the classroom.

socially and spiritually. Literature, especially, plays a key role in such development'. (Department for Education 2014), they have had little reason to develop their subjective responses to poetry. Accounts from the classroom itself suggest that the structures of secondary education and assessment can crowd out an affective response. For instance, Ian Brinton observes that:

A student from [a] school whom I tutored briefly showed me an AS answer that had been given top marks by the board and used as a model. This may have covered what was formally required but Browning's poetry lay lifeless as a result. The discussion was formulaic and revealed no ear for tonal nuances at all, yet the candidate had delivered. (Brinton 2011, np.)

In Brinton's experience, pre-university students are rewarded for delivering a 'formulaic' response that covers the appropriate formal and contextual aspects of the work, but one that does not attend to 'tonal nuances' – the place where form and affect meet in a practised, individual response.<sup>3</sup> In some cases, this lack of affective engagement results in an actively negative response to poetry. Gary Snapper (2013) suggests that 'advanced level resistance' to poetry is constructed by 'the constitution of literary study in schools and universities' (p. 32). As Atherton et al (2013) comment, the tendency of students, driven by assessment, is to race to understanding meaning and 'technique-spotting', rather than engaging with the aesthetic pleasures of the text. Poems become associated with unseen exercises in time pressured terminal exams; they seem remote from the real experience of life; and the ways in which they are delivered fosters a distaste for poetry among those who profess to love literature (Regis 2013). As a result, when invited to respond personally to poetry, they are surprised (Snapper

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<sup>3</sup> For further evidence see Ofsted's *Moving English Forward: Action to Raise Standards in English*, which suggests a similar problem at GCSE level.

2013, 39), more likely, as in the Billy Collins poem that Snapper quotes in full, to ‘tie the poem to a chair with rope/ and torture a confession out of it.’, then ‘begin beating it with a hose/to find out what it really means.’ When we do hear of schools actively encouraging a personal response to poetry, it often manifests itself in creative writing, rather than in critical reading (Wilson (in press); see also the HEA's 'Teaching Poetry: Strategies for lecture, seminar and independent student work')

What we would suggest is missing from the student responses described by these educational researchers is a sense of *how* poetry works in terms of the experience the poem affords the reader – a quality that can only be articulated in terms of an individual reader’s experience. Although attention to the formal qualities of the poem is important, this must be taken in union with what is being said, that is, we need an appreciation of how the form of the poem comes together with the meaning of the words and sentences of the poem. It is not enough to notice the use of assonance, for instance, we also need to appreciate how the experience of the resulting sound pattern impacts on the meaning of the work as a whole. As philosopher Peter Lamarque observes, ‘A good reader attends not to some content beyond or behind the mode of presentation but to the mode of presentation itself, to the fact that what is being said is being said in this way’ (Lamarque 2009, 416), with appreciation of how the aesthetic features of the poem contribute to the experience of the work. Hearing patterns is important because this leads us to appreciate the expressive quality of a poem. It is in such patterns of sound that the ‘poem expresses *something* – it must have reference, however inconsequential – and at the same time a poem is expressive, as if with musical dynamics’ (Leighton 2016, 174).

Sound is a powerful tool in aiding the reader in forging connections between ideas, meanings, thoughts and images in a poem. A number of literary critics emphasise



the importance of sound to meaning in poetry. For instance, William Empson argued that

very similar devices of sound may correspond effectively to very different meanings ... But this is only to say that a sound effect must be interpreted ... its most important mode of action is to connect two words by similarity of sound so that you are made to think of their possible connections. (1956, 31; See also T.S. Eliot (1964) and R. Jakobsen (1987))

When we read we become aware of similarities in word endings, syllabics, consonance, assonance, alliteration through responding to the affective aspects of the work. These devices can make certain words ‘chime’, forging a connection aurally which makes the reader think of these words in conjunction, even where the connections between the words are not obvious on a linguistic level; they are connections supported by feeling.

This idea of the experience of the aesthetic features of the poem as important to meaning is echoed by Susan Stewart who argues that 'metre augments, extends, and organizes our hearing of speech rhythm in such a way as to intensify our experience – we hear the sound of sound and become aware of the meaning of sound in consequence' (2002, 77). Rhythm and metre are powerful tools in conveying the emotional intensity of a poem; these devices create the feel of a poem, revealing an element of meaning that cannot be articulated. It is the metre of the poem which allows us to experience the emotional content.

Philosopher Susan Feagin (1996) also emphasises the importance of attending to the unfolding experience of engaging with a work of literature: 'Experiences do not come divided up into discrete chunks, arising out of easily identifiable sets of verbal stimuli. At least that's not how experience is *experienced*. ... The effects of a quite specific thing may be vague and amorphous; they will leech into other experiences and be affected by prior experiences' (p. 26). What such experience of verbal stimuli can do

is create what she calls 'mental shifts and slides', which are changes 'in attitude or "point of view," that governs the way we think and feel about things' (p. 60). She argues that the aesthetic features of the work can produce such mental shifts that changes the way we process information by making us aware of something's significance, and therefore affects our appreciation and understanding of the work itself (p. 64).

### **Evidence from psychology**

Further support for the integration of affective and cognitive approaches to poetry in the university classroom comes from experimental psychology and neuroscience. Recent research in these fields suggests that there is a deep connection between affect and cognition in the brain.

Traditionally, it was thought that emotional and cognitive processes were located in separate areas of the brain, with the amygdala responsible for emotions (Banich and Compton 2010; Zajonc (1980); Baxter and Murray (2002); LeDoux (1996); LeDoux (2003); Phelps and LeDoux (2005)) and the prefrontal cortex responsible for cognition, e.g. decision making, attention, memory, problem solving and planning (Gazzaniga et al., 2008). However, recent research points to greater integration of cognition and emotion that goes beyond occasional interaction and challenges the central assumption of the debate about which is prior, cognition or affect (Salzman and Fusi 2010). For instance, in their study using brain imaging to examine activity in cognitive and affective brain areas during a working memory task, Gray et al (2002) show that 'emotion and higher cognition can be truly integrated, i.e., at some point of processing, functional specialization is lost, and emotion and cognition conjointly and equally contribute to the control of thought and behavior' (p. 4115). Such research suggests that the highly complex organisational structures underpinning

our brain processes involve both cognition and affect, and so the distinction between cognitive and affective processes dissolves.

Cognitive and affective processes, other researchers suggest, are not merely difficult to distinguish, but mutually interdependent (Pessoa (2009); Pessoa (2008); Dolcos et al (2011)). As Duncan and Barrett (2007) argue:

parts of the brain that have traditionally been called 'cognitive' participate in instantiating an affective state, not merely regulating that state after it has been established. Furthermore, the parts of the brain that have traditionally been called 'affective' participate in cognitive processes. The so-called 'affective' brain areas (e.g. the amygdala and brainstem) participate in sensory processing and contribute to consciousness in a manner that meets most definitions of 'cognition' (p. 3)

Duncan and Barrett take the relationship between affect and attention to exemplify the complex relationship between affect and cognition. Attention is a paradigmatic cognitive process and there is evidence to suggest that our affective processes can in fact increase attention (see Pessoa 2008). Duncan and Barrett further argue that 'core affective circuitry helps to select the information that reaches conscious awareness by directing the formation and maintenance of the neuronal assemblies that underlie conscious experience' (Duncan and Barrett 2007, 7). That is, our core affective functions direct our attention and focus (determining, for example, whether our focus is narrow or broad), which ultimately affects how we experience the world. Core affect 'helps to orchestrate the binding of sensory information into a single, unified conscious field' (p. 7). In other words, it is the affective dimension that gives us the subjective quality of experience, which in turn creates our sense of a central perspective and individual point of view.

Researchers have found that specific emotional states can have particular effects on our cognitive processes. For example, Andrews and Thomson (2009) point to

'evidence that sustained higher order cognitive processing takes place in depression' (p. 643), and argue that in some cases depressive episodes can produce cognitive gains, such as enhancement in analysis and problem solving, whilst acknowledging that this is not the case with all types of severe depressive episode. Additionally, there is evidence that *inducing* emotional states can lead to narrowing of attention, which can be beneficial for analysis. For instance, Bellaera and Mühlenen (2016) have argued that that inducing a negative mood can increase attention and enhance our capacity to filter information; while Rowe et al (2007) found that priming for positive affect (which they induced by playing 'happy' and 'sad' music to induce affective response in participants) produces the opposite cognitive response, i.e. broadening scope of attention and processing more information, which allowed for looser connections to be made. Both studies suggest that affective states lead to a kind of attention-bias (as a product of narrowing or broadening attention), which makes available different sorts of connections depending on whether in a negative or positive affective state.

Given this support from psychology, it is perhaps unsurprising that those scholars who have promoted the benefits of a more combined, cognitive and affective engagement with poetry in education often come to the study of literature from a background in psychology and therapeutic practice. In *A Therapeutic Approach to Teaching Poetry: Individual Development, Psychology, and Social Reputation* (2012), Todd O. Williams sets out to 'maximise the developmental potential of poetry in the classroom by enacting classroom practices that help students gain a greater awareness of themselves and others' (p. xi). Williams observes that:

Students are typically taught to read and experience poetry strictly in terms of linguistic meaning, but when students learn to pay attention to their experience of poetry through all three registers [i.e. linguistic, imaginary and emotional] and

begin to analyze their experiences, they become better integrated and more self-aware (p. xii)

The idea of heightening students' 'attention to their experience of poetry through all three registers,' including the imaginary by engaging with metaphor and emotional by engaging with the musicality and aesthetic feature of the work, and not 'linguistic meaning' alone resonates with the aims of our study. Williams' project, however, is oriented towards personal development in itself, where ours proposes that fostering emotional engagement with poetry might also help to deepen cognitive understanding and thus support students in fulfilling the goals of literary study in higher education.<sup>4</sup>

### **Rebalancing the cognitive and affective in university teaching**

Our research is focused on the value of incorporating greater affective engagement with poetry into critical discussion in the university classroom. In order to take our theoretical position to the practical domain, we designed a small-scale study to test the hypothesis that engaging with a poem affectively can enhance our cognitive appreciation of the work (and vice versa) by prompting 'mental shifts and slides'; and to explore what approaches to teaching poetry can bring the cognitive and affective aspects of our experience into optimal balance. We present it here not as a representative study but as an initial experiment that illuminates some interesting aspects of the debate around how we teach poetry.

We trialled our model of an affectively-orientated approach to leading a poetry seminar with a small group of undergraduate students of English Literature (two second

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<sup>4</sup> See Eva-Wood (2008) for a further example of an approach to teaching poetry that values emotional and personal development in its own right.

year students and one first year) at the University of Birmingham. We subsequently led two seminar groups of eight people comprising a mixture of students and others associated the Shakespeare Institute at the University of Birmingham, and members of the public from the Stratford-up-Avon area (aged 22-70), who we brought together as part of a World War One Poetry day at the Shakespeare Institute. All but one of the participants were experienced readers of poetry, i.e. they had studied poetry at A level or University level. All seminars were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

In our poetry seminar, we first read an unseen poem aloud to the group, and then asked participants to reflect on their affective responses to it, before looking more closely at the formal qualities of the poem. In designing opening questions to elicit students' subjective responses, we drew on Nicholas Mazza's (2003) poetry therapy model of engagement, which prioritises questions that relate the poem to the individual and allows space for personal meanings to emerge (p. 3); and consulted with Emma Howells, an AHRC project collaborator, who uses poetry in her therapeutic work with post-traumatic patients.

	<b>Cognitive-led seminar</b>	<b>Affective-led seminar</b>
<b>Presentation of the poem</b>	Text-based analysis	Poem read aloud, focus on hearing the poem
<b>Opening questions</b>	What do you think the poem is about? What do you notice about the text?	How did the poem make you feel? What emotions does it evoke? How did you respond to the poem? What response does it elicit from you?
<b>Follow up questions</b>	How does that relate to the text? What devices are being used?	How does that relate to your response? Did any particular words, lines, images stand out?

The structure of the session differed from what we might regard as a typical university seminar in several important ways (see the table above for comparison between the two

models; a cognitive-led seminar and an affective-led seminar). First, students did not have the opportunity to read the poem – and thus to begin the process of analysis – in advance, but encountered it for the first time during the seminar. Second, students first heard the poem read aloud by the researcher. This allowed students to respond to the aesthetic *experience* (as opposed to aesthetic *properties*) of the work as well as thinking about what the words meant. They were subsequently given a copy of the poem to look at and draw on in the group discussion. Third, they were encouraged to identify the affective and emotional effects of the poem, before discussing how the language of the poem produced those effects, rather than to identify literary features and then to try to explain their effects in the context of the poem. This discussion was led by the researcher.

We selected for discussion ‘The Dancers’, a lesser-known poem of the First World War. We hoped that its relative unfamiliarity compared to poems such as Wilfred Owen’s ‘Dulce Et Decorum Est’ would mean that students brought to the discussion fewer pre-conceptions about its meaning, allowing greater opportunity for pre-theoretical response to their experience of the work. To that end, we also initially presented the poem to the students without identifying its date (1916), its subtitle (great battle), or its female author, Edith Sitwell.

The speaker of Sitwell’s poem offers the perspective not of soldiers in the Great War, but of those at home. Central to the poem is the juxtaposition of dancers in a music hall and soldiers dying on the front line. Take, for instance, the first stanza:

The floors are slippery with blood:  
 The world gyrates too. God is good  
 That while His wind blows out the light  
 For those who hourly die for us –  
 We still can dance, each night.

This juxtaposition of the life of the dancers and the death of the soldiers is heavily underscored by the rhyme scheme, which pitches ‘blood’ against ‘good’ and ‘light’ against ‘night’. The apparent simplicity of these contrasts, taken at face value, can invite the literal interpretation that those at home are being protected, their freedom assured by others’ sacrifice: ‘while His wind blows out the light/ For those who hourly die for us – /We still can dance, each night.’

However, if we consider how these words unfold in experience, we can become more sensitive to the tone of the stanza. We might notice, for example, the heavy weighting of ‘blood’ and ‘good’, and the shadow that the former casts over the latter; and start to see the irony of ‘God is good’, and the deliberate futility of the speaker’s attempt to shift our attention from the horrors of war to the benevolent will of God. The powerful imagery of the floors ‘slippery with blood’ does not allow us to accept the gentle imagery of ‘blows out the light’, and leads us to view this as a euphemism that masks a much more brutal, and indifferent, reality. The poem instantly appears more complex, its tone open to interpretation: does it bitterly criticise the ignorance and indifference of those at home, or guiltily lament that ‘We still can dance, each night’?

In our seminars, we found that encouraging an affective response from the outset by asking how it made students feel, encouraged them to focus on tone, and to navigate its complexity with skill. We observed more than one breakthrough moment in each seminar when the sheer fact of reflecting on the experience of the poem led to a more nuanced articulation of its meaning, and, subsequently, a more mature assessment of the literary and formal techniques used to achieve them. In developing their response to the poem, we noticed that the students returned to the words of the poem, repeating key phrases to re-experience the sounds of these words as they explore possible interpretations. For example:



Student C: I think it flits between life and death quite quickly because dancing and the fact that they are dancing and still moving – that’s a very alive thing to do, yet the music has '*grown numb with death*' and the dancers are '*the dull blind carrion fly*' and so that’s quite an interesting contrast I suppose. And about sucking '*their dying breath*'. As if they’re taking away the dying breath of other people. So I don’t know if that’s a guilty conscience or something.

By repeating certain phrases and lines of the poem, rather than leaping to paraphrase, the student is allowing their analysis to emerge through lingering attention to the sounds of the words and their effects. What we also notice here is that the student is attending to the connections of movement in the poem, such as connecting the feeling of dancing (as being something which feels 'alive') with the stillness of 'grown numb with death', which transform the way in which understanding of the poem emerges. The student therefore appears to be making a connection between the meaning of the words and the aesthetic experience. Encouraged to reflect on the emotional impact of the poem, the student is able to recognise the irony of the contrasts, and to infer a 'guilty conscience'.

Further on in the discussion, the students continue to focus their attention on the aesthetic experience of the poem by repeating key words. But what we notice here is that, by articulating the affective aspects of their experience ('provocative and strong imagery'), the students are able to track a change in the musicality of the work and explore different connotations that emerge (from the business of the dancing to the stillness of 'dull'), which results in a shifting of perspective:

Student A: because we’re living off the dead that are out there – it’s the 'dull' bit, I understand that we’re dull but everyone dancing and that everything is quite provocative and strong imagery of blood and dancing and breathless and you don’t know what to do and you’re making your music louder and your living just to get through and then all of a sudden we’re dull

Student C: yeah, I agree it stands out. I would say the only link I could find with that is that the music has 'grown numb' and we are 'dull' – we are desensitised to the horrors of war as a person perhaps.

With Student C's response, we can see that their thought process begins with a feeling ('it stands out') and then there's an attempt to fill this out with analysis, to explain why they experienced it that way. Crucially in this analysis, we can see that the students begin to position themselves in the poem ('*we're* living off the dead' and '*we* are dull'), which suggests a deeper cognitive engagement that results from entering into the experience of the work and responding emotionally. From the shifting perspective that emerges by considering this contrast in movement, the students experience a 'breakthrough' when the connections made through focus on the aesthetic experience of the work and the interconnections made within the work leads to an emotionally-laden understanding of the poem in terms of becoming 'desensitised to the horrors of war'.

Student A: I think the phrase 'God is Good' kind of sounds rehearsed – that's like what you say – 'God is Good'...

This observation emerges through careful attention to how the phrase sounds and what it might mean (connecting the way this sounds with other iterations outside of the poetic context), which leads to forming the view that this is not meant sincerely. The student observes, by taking seriously their own experience of these words, that they are words repeated in everyday life to the extent they have lost their meaning, even in a poetic context.

Similarly, in our public workshops, we noticed that, encouraged to focus on their own experience of the poem, the participants willingly spent time exploring the more complex meaning of the poem as it emerged through the tone of the work:

Participant 2: yeah, in my reading there is an irony in the dancing in that it's not ... it's not a celebration of frivolity, it's er ... something's been, something's tarnished about it [...] almost a .. not dancing of their own free will ... there's almost a sense of just doing what they are required to do.

Although we can see here that the participant is struggling somewhat to articulate their thoughts, they are focused on trying to express the way the poem unfolded in their experience of hearing it, and to try to provide analysis of that experience in relation to the words on the page.

Participant 1: Though 'god die mad from the horror of the light', you know in the first verse it seems, you know, this idea that god is good, yeah but yes, so, ok these monstrous things are happening but it's all for a good purpose, you know god's in charge and he knows what he's doing. And then by the third verse, '*God* has died *mad* from the horror'. It really destroys [...] '*The light is mad*' too and even if light goes mad there is nothing left at all. It's a very nihilistic poem, I think.

We can also see that this participant reveals meaning of the poem through a focus on the sound as experienced; the comforting sound of 'God is good' ultimately undermined by the unsettling repetition of 'mad.' Such appreciation of the sound and meaning combined in the experience of the poem and the resulting feeling allowed for the appreciation of complexity and ambiguity in what is expressed, which is evident in Participant 3's comment:

Participant 3: It's almost quite sarcastic, I find, in that it's like saying oh this is the point of it, you know people are going to die for our sake so that we can be happy but it's like saying that's a ridiculous concept because of course that's not what we are going to feel, you know that's the opposite.

It was fascinating to observe how students and participants in the respective seminars ultimately arrived at a more complex and mature understanding of the poem by taking seriously their affective responses to it, and tracing the source of their

responses in the language of the poem itself. In one particularly interesting section of the transcript, Student A ventured that the tone of the poem seemed not so much an angry critique as something else: ‘It’s not like he’s saying “how can you dance when there’s all these people dying” – it doesn’t seem like that, it seems like this bizarre scenario where people are dying’. Student C agreed: ‘yes that’s interesting actually, despite the horror and the vivid imagery there’s not a great deal of anger’. The researcher guided their focus to the language of the poem itself with affective questions – ‘are there any other words that you found particularly moving or disturbing or intriguing?’ – and this prompted another breakthrough: ‘the music swelling to or music, it’s almost like we swell, blood sweats, pulses like it’s alive. It’s almost like .. We swell to our music like we make our lives the most important thing, like we live in our own bubble and don’t think about what’s happening in the rest of the world.’ The researcher then asked the students if they could relate personally to the poem:

Student A: I can relate to it but not in the same way as someone who lived a world war but when you speak to like relatives who have gone away ... I have a friend whose father went away and she’s like you can’t watch the news, you just can’t hack it so you swell to your music and you like make your life loud and so you haven’t go to think about what’s going on. So you can live your life, otherwise you’re just going to sit at home and worry.

This personal insight prompted recognition by all the students of another, perhaps surprising, dimension to the poem. Student B agreed that ‘you’re burying your head in the sand for your own sake’, and all of the students shared in the sense of discovery that the poem was not necessarily, or not simply, an angry critique of the ignorance of those at home, but, more sympathetically, an account of how those at war at home, quite

simply, cope.

### **Obstacles to integrating affective responses**

Despite these deepening insights, in the course of each of these seminars, we noticed that students' new understanding was accompanied with a series of struggles. Even while they enjoyed the subjective focus, the students, perhaps unwittingly, sometimes resisted the affective drift of the conversation and tried to restore a more typical seminar discourse. In the pilot session, the first resistance took place early in the discussion when, asked how the poem made them feel, the students rerouted the conversation to focus on the more measurable qualities of the poem:

Researcher: So how does that make you feel reading something like that, that kind of flitting between modes – what sort of reaction does that bring out in you?

Student C: I think that ...I'm trying to work out the rhyme scheme. I'll go through it a bit more. But there are rhymes where you don't necessarily expect them as well, so you end up moving slightly as a reader and you can't quite cling on to it.

Student A: it's A-B. No, it's A-A-B-C.

Student B: it's almost like a dance in itself – the repetition of the rhyme scheme from the first stanza to the last and it's that repetition of God is good on the second line of the first stanza, second line of the third stanza, though god is die. Both light and night; both the B rhyme schemes.

It is striking that, when asked 'how does that make you feel', Student C breaks off just three words into a personal response – 'I think that...' – to examine the rhyme scheme. The other students quickly join in with this formal analysis, despite professing to struggle with identifying metre and rhyme in their literary studies more widely; this

appears to be a more comfortable mode of engagement. The students also employ ‘distancing’ language (commenting ‘as a reader’, and using the second person, for example) in order to find a more objective standpoint from which to consider the poem.

Likewise, in the first public group, participants seemed to feel most comfortable when they were commenting on structural features of the poem and, in particular, the use of grammar, as evidenced by the length of time spent discussing these aspects as opposed to their personal responses to the experience afforded by the poem. When they were encouraged to reflect on their emotional responses, participants in both of the public workshops named emotions such as 'fear', 'despair', 'anger', 'guilt' without relating these emotional responses to their own experience of hearing the poem (e.g. 'I think of fear' in contrast to 'it made me feel fearful').

The second moment of resistance took place during the seminar every time the researcher introduced a new piece of information: the title of the poem, the date of publication, or the gender of the author.

Researcher: [...] sometimes you see this poem printed with just the title ‘The Dancers’ and sometimes you see it with a subtitle ‘During a Great Battle’ in brackets afterwards – does that change how you react to it, do you think, if you read it with that title on it?

Student C: It’s still fairly ambiguous ‘during a great battle’ but it does place itself a bit more deliberately I think ... erm yeah ... I am always a bit suspicious as well of secondary titles or titles in brackets – are they necessary? What’s wrong with the first one?

Student A: Or the fact that the poem should be able to speak for itself, like with this poem I think it does. You don’t need that to know that it says conflict.

We can see here that considering such factual information distracted the students and shifted their focus from the poem itself to generalisations: ‘I am always suspicious of

secondary titles'. Each new piece of information resulted in a setback in terms of willing emotional engagement with the experience of the poem.

The final resistance occurred at the end of the session: asked how they found the experience of discussing a poem in this way, the students said they found it stimulating and enjoyable – but would not employ it in their formal, assessed work. In the public groups, a similar resistance materialised, namely a reluctance to talk about their own response in case others did not share their response: 'I know what I think but I'm not sure if everyone else would see it the same way.'

It is often assumed that assessment is the chief stumbling block to students' (and their teachers') emotional engagement with poetry. Critics point to 'the malign impact of summative assessment on teachers' pedagogical aspirations', and the resulting 'reduced opportunity for epistemic and affective development within the poetry class', which has a negative 'impact on pupils' learning experiences' (Hennessy et al. 2010). We were intrigued to observe, though, that the perceived opposition of affect and the study of poetry persisted in settings that were clearly signalled as being outside assessed work (voluntary participation in a poetry research project; a public poetry day), and that students in particular tended to resist affective engagement and reach for more conventional analytical tools, almost as if they had internalised the assumptions about what poetry analysis is for.

Beyond the legacy of assessment, these behaviours might stem from a learned reverence for, and hence distance from, poetry, that some critics think is the result of training in close reading:

The practice of 'unseen close reading' is still taught at school and university as the main way to cope with short poems. The practice seems to invite reverence for poems, building a mystique of invulnerability about the poet (who produces 'the

best words in the best order', and all that), and inviting us to contemplate, when what we need to do is to intervene. The white space around a poem on the page is quasi-sacramental, like the space between priest and people at a church service: it's a kind of barrier between word and world.

The method recommended here involves taking back this space and talking back to the poem. It involves writing on the poem, substituting words, dividing the poem up – doing things with it [in] fact. In this way we try to make connections between ourselves and the poem – to read ourselves back into it, so that it becomes a part of ourselves (Barry and Taylor n/d).

Barry and Taylor recommend that we combat this distancing reverence by fostering the more active approach of 'talking back to the poem'. But by reading 'ourselves back into it', they mean to promote closer attention to words, patterns and structures of poetry, rather than to elicit a personal response. Our experience of working with students and members of the public in this small-scale study suggests that starting with a handful of questions that elicit a more personal response to the poem can help tutors to lead students, through discussion, to a more nuanced and sensitive cognitive awareness of its meaning.

However, we should not assume that a cognitive response is an artificial, 'learned' way of engaging with a poem, and that an emotional response is, by contrast, a more natural way of reacting – one for which we only need to make space in the classroom, and it will inevitably follow. In fact, as the participants' resistances suggest, it might take just as much training in order for students to be able to identify and share an affective response. With a relatively limited vocabulary for articulating affective responses, students can be tempted to fall back on spotting objectively verifiable formal features. Furthermore, there is a vulnerability associated with sharing our personal responses to a work, since these are closely tied to our core beliefs, values and



perspectives, and it is likely that others' responses will differ from our own. As we saw in our study, people deal with this by distancing such 'response' or 'affect' language from themselves, talking, for instance, as if the poem does not elicit feelings in the reader but expresses those feelings itself. Of course, for such expression to be successful, it must have elicited some response in the reader, and this is what we want to encourage our students to discuss and explore.

How, then, can we cultivate students' affective responses to poetry, and encourage them to discuss their differing responses without awkwardness? One solution might be to look to the model of 'shared reading', as practised in the public reading groups led by The Reader Organisation.<sup>5</sup> In these small-group settings, participants hear a piece of literature read aloud, and are encouraged to discuss it in a non-goal-oriented way, while the leader keeps the conversation focussed on the text by repeating lines from the work just read (See Davis (2009); Hodge et al (2007); and Davis and Billington (forthcoming)). By listening to one another, participants encounter a range of possible interpretations, and deepen their understanding of the text. In a university setting, such conversations could take place in additional reading sessions held in advance of seminars, and students could engage here with their first impressions of a poem before shifting into a more analytical mode of engagement. Reading together and experiencing the poem as a group may encourage students to break out of the analytical mode, and turn only later to such analysis to make sense of how they responded to the text. But more simply, as in our seminars, more affective questions could be incorporated, however briefly, into typical university-level teaching environments.

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<sup>5</sup> For more on The Reader Organisation and their 'Shared Reading Model', see <http://www.thereader.org.uk/>

## Conclusion

In conclusion, our initial study suggests there is considerable potential value in incorporating affective techniques into cognitive analytical training in higher education, both in terms of deepening cognitive understanding, and enhancing the benefits of study in the humanities. This hypothesis could usefully be tested in future with students at different stages of university English and with A Level students about to make transition to higher education. Future application of the findings would involve designing teaching that made space for this kind of engagement with poetry, whether through additional reading sessions where students could engage with their first impressions of the poem, or through the simple addition of questions that elicit an affective response at the beginning of more typical lectures and seminars. Crucially, these responses must be nurtured, and students trained to value them highly in an assessment-focussed learning environment. Our point – and this one that should itself be conveyed to students – is that greater affective engagement with literature in general and with poetry in particular could enhance and ensure all of the ‘critical’ outcomes identified in higher education, without detracting from the value of the subject. On the contrary, it would only deepen the perceived value of literature, and what it means to study it.

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