

Research on the Value of Poetry Teaching for English Majors in Applied Undergraduate Universities Under the Background of the New Liberal Arts

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Abstract: The emphasis of the traditional teaching environment on English instrumentality has resulted in the marginalization of poetry teaching for English majors in applied undergraduate universities. The construction of the new liberal arts affirms the importance of the English literature curriculum and also inspires people to re-evaluate the potential and unique value of English poetry teaching. English poetry is the material for the cultivation of students' patriotism. Its condensed space contains multi-disciplinary knowledge, its long history makes it bear rich cross-cultural information, its beautiful language helps improve students' aesthetic and creative ability and its dialectical thinking stimulates students' critical thinking. English poetry teaching is an effective way to cultivate international compound talents with Chinese feelings required by the new liberal arts construction for applied undergraduate English majors.

Keywords: English poetry; Teaching value; New liberal arts construction; English major

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1. Introduction

As China's development enters a new era, higher education has also entered a new journey, and the construction of the new liberal arts launched in 2019 is an important step. Up to the present day, Chinese academic circles have launched extensive discussions on the construction of new liberal arts. However, further research in some specific professional teaching areas, such as in the area of the teaching of English poetry for English majors, is needed. The teaching of English Poetry is an important part of literature teaching for undergraduate English majors, but it has not been fully appreciated. The value of English poetry teaching for English majors should be re-evaluated.

2. English Poetry as the potential material for the cultivation of students' patriotism

As a new stage of the development of modern higher education in the country, the construction of new liberal arts attaches more importance to the training of the builders and successors of socialist cause. Cultivating college students' love for the motherland and home is an inseparable part of the core goal of fostering virtue through education in the construction of new liberal arts ^[1].

According to Samuel Johnson, the ultimate goal of literature is to instruct the people, though it has the function of entertainment ^[2]. Like traditional Chinese Poetry, English poetry can also be used as the material to strengthen the Chinese students' love for home and motherland to meet the requirement of the new liberal arts construction.

There is no denying that many English poems express their love for the country and nation directly, or express their feelings of home and country through the language and subject matter with national characteristics, both of which can be used as the teaching material of English poetry to invisibly stimulate the patriotic enthusiasm of Chinese students. The former is like the poems written by the American poet Walt Whitman, and the latter is like the poems by the English poet Robert Burns. Whitman wrote in his poem "Song of Myself" the following lines, "... My tongue, every atom of my blood, formed from this soil, this air, born here of parents born here from parents the same, and their parents the same, ..." ^[3]. In the poem, the tongue is the organ to express thoughts and emotions, representing thoughts and emotions in a metonymic way. Blood is one of the basic elements of the body and is the representative of life, every atom of blood fully reflects any tiny unit of life, but also emphasizes the whole of life. In just a few lines, the poet sincerely attributes his individual thoughts, emotions, and life to the land where he was born and bred and to the ancestors who have multiplied here for generations. The deep local feeling and love for his motherland and people are expressed in words, which deeply move the readers and will strongly infect the learners. There are also some poems whose themes have nothing to do with the theme of motherland and national feelings, but they are rooted in the language and subject matter of the nation so that students can deeply feel the author's intense love for his home and country ^[4]. Take the poems by Burns as an example, his poems not only express directly his homesickness and patriotic feelings like "My Heart's in the Highlands," but also indirectly express patriotic feelings by using his Scottish national dialect as the creation language and Scottish folk songs as the inspiration source. For example, "A Red, Red Rose," although it sings a song of the warm and sincere affections for his lover is based on several Scottish folk songs ^[5], and there are many Scottish dialects in the poem, such as Luvie, lass, gang, etc. The creation based on the author's race and culture shows his affirmation and love for the culture of his race. This kind of knowledge can make the students understand that each nation or culture has its own uniqueness, while the most special and charming is the culture of one's nation. Then, the students will be stimulated to think of their feelings or love towards his motherland and to realize their responsibility for exploring and promoting the culture of their nation.

If isolated English or Chinese poetry teaching has limited effect, then the comparative teaching of Chinese and English poetry can better highlight the charm of Chinese poetry, enhance students' confidence in Chinese culture, and cultivate their patriotic feelings of home and country. Compared with English poetry, the uniqueness and charm of Chinese poetry lie in many aspects, one of which can be seen from the comparison of the development history of Chinese and Western poetry. As for the time when English poetry appeared, Xiao M (2009) believed that Anglo-Saxons began to write in "English" in about the 7th century ^[6]. English poetry was first written in the Old English period. "Widsith," written around the 7th century AD, is "probably one of the earliest, if not the earliest" among existing Old English poems. Chinese poetry, on the other hand, can

be traced back to the time of Tangyao and Ao Yushun, which is before the Xia Dynasty in ancient China, but verifiable, complete and readable poems were first written in 1185 BC and included in “The Book of Songs,” which was completed before 585 BC ^[7]. In other words, the earliest Chinese poetry with verifiable evidence was written about two thousand years earlier than English poetry. Poetry is the origin of literature, whether in the East or West ^[7]. Therefore, it can be said that the historical span of the creation of national poetry determines the historical depth of the national literature. From the comparison of the development of Chinese and English poetry, it can be found that no matter when the poetry originated, or when the epic appeared, Chinese poetry was much earlier than English poetry, so as to make students peek into the longer history and deeper depth of Chinese literature and explore the more advanced culture it carries.

At the same time, the teaching of English poetry will also allow students to discover the influence of Chinese culture on the creation of English poetry to correctly understand the global influence of Chinese culture, including Western culture, and to strengthen the students’ national pride. For example, the art of Oriental poetry, including classical Chinese poetry, is one of the foundations of Imagist poetry ^[8]. The core figure of Imagism, Ezra Pound, translated and created poems on the basis of his understanding of Chinese characters, classical Chinese poetry and other literary arts. For example, his collection of poetry “Cathay” includes the translation of several classical Chinese poems such as “Grass on the Green and Clear River,” “Song of the Bowmen of Shu” and Li Bai’s poems, which are also re-created poems ^[9]. In the early 20th century, Chinese culture was very popular for a time in Europe and Pound became the literary estate executor of Ernest, a famous American scholar of Chinese and Japanese art which promoted Pound’s fruitful research on Chinese language and culture and the creation of Imagist poetry. Ernest’s analysis of Chinese pictographs and poetic composition provided inspiration to Pound ^[8]. The juxtaposition of images such as the “dim subway,” “the flashing faces,” “the dark branches” and “the blooming petals” in the popular poem “In the Station of the Metro” can’t help but evoke the use of images in classical Chinese poetry, such as the juxtaposition of several images of “the crow of the rooster,” “the moon,” “footprint” and so on in the lines, “the sound of a chicken, the moon in a thatch shop, human footprints and the frost in early spring” ^[10]. They share the same beauty in different ways. The ideograph-based approach to classical Chinese poetry inspired Pound’s Imagist poetry. The influence of ancient Chinese culture on Pound’s poetry creation is self-evident. The teaching of English poetry, which helps students learn more about the influence of Chinese poetry, philosophy and culture on English poetry, will enhance the student’s pride in Chinese culture.

3. Concise poems as the carrier of multidisciplinary knowledge

“The construction of new liberal arts refers to the discipline reorganization of the traditional liberal arts and the crossover and fusion between the first-level liberal arts and the natural sciences within the liberal arts, which is mainly characterized by problem-oriented, cross-integration, application of new technologies and innovative development” ^[11]. It can be said that interdisciplinary construction with the characteristics of cross-integration is a necessary part of English education to adapt to the construction of new liberal arts.

English poetry involves multidisciplinary knowledge with short space, which can realize the purpose of multi-disciplinary integration teaching efficiently. The interdisciplinary method in poetry reach was used in Aristotle’s “Poetics” in ancient Greece. Aristotle applied the ideas and methods from other disciplines to the study of literary theory.

At the same time, English poetry also carries a wealth of philosophy, history, geography and other

subject knowledge between the lines. For example, Samuel Johnson's poem "Vanity of Human Wishes" presents the history of Charles XII, king of Sweden during the Great Northern War, defeating Peter I of Russia. The relationship between history and poetry is evident. Another example is from Donne's poem "Devotions upon Emergent Occasions" in which the individual is respectively compared to an island that cannot be isolated from the sea, and an insignificant but indispensable part that constitutes the whole, illustrating the relationship between the part and the whole. These are enough to show the close connection between poetry and philosophy. Only by breaking through the conventional single-discipline perspective can we understand the ideological connotation and value of this poem. Moreover, the poem can be interpreted from an interdisciplinary perspective on physical chaos, showing that the poem, written in the 17th century, foreshadows physical phenomena that scientists discovered only in the 20th century. This kind of English poetry is numerous, and its rich interdisciplinary knowledge connotation proves the value of English poetry in cultivating students' interdisciplinary awareness and ability.

English poetry is short, but it contains multi-disciplinary knowledge, which will not only expand students' interdisciplinary knowledge but also develop their awareness of interdisciplinary approaches to problems.

4. Poetry with its long history as the container of abundant cross-cultural information

In the keynote report on the construction of the new liberal arts, Wu Y (2019) pointed out that higher foreign language education should promote exchanges and mutual learning between China and the rest of the world, serve national foreign strategies such as the Belt and Road Initiative and global governance, let Chinese culture go global, and improve the international voice of the country^[1]. In this process, the reserve of cross-cultural knowledge plays a pivotal role.

Poetry, like other genres of literature, is the imitation of human beings and society. Since the earliest genre of literature is poetry, the long history of culture contained by poetry is a treasure trove of cross-cultural information.

The cultural information involved in English poetry spans many countries and regions, such as the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada and other English-speaking countries, which is especially helpful for students to increase their knowledge of multinational cultures. For example, the teaching of medieval English poetry will give students an understanding of the early history and culture of England. "Beowulf," regarded as the English national epic, shows Anglo-Saxon ties to northern Europe and the tribal culture of hero-worship; Chaucer's "The Canterbury Tales" vividly and comprehensively reproduced the real social life of that time through the people from different social strata gathered together and the stories they told. Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" has profound meaning, such as its praise of the West wind breeding new creatures, and also reflects the climate characteristics different from China and the resulting different cultural traditions. There are many kinds of such things.

In addition, English poems created under the influence of Chinese culture can not only cultivate patriotic feelings for home and country but also expand students' understanding of the history of cultural exchanges and mutual learning between China and foreign countries, deepen their understanding of the characteristics and conflicts of Chinese and Western cultures, and thus improve their cross-cultural communication ability. As mentioned earlier, the collection of Chinese classical poetry translated and revised by American poet Ezra Pound, titled "Cathay," is a classic work of American modernist poetry. Although there are some misreadings

of Chinese culture in it, its contribution to the exchange of cultures between China and the West cannot be overlooked. Eliot called Pound “the inventor of Chinese poetry in our time” and he said “Pound’s translation is more capable of enabling us to grasp the spirit of Chinese poetry than the orientalist Legge’s translation,”^[8]. Another collection of poems by Pound, “The Cantos,” not only praises Chinese civilization, but also expresses insight and criticism of various issues in the United States, such as usury, war, and capitalist democracy, conveying social and cultural information about the United States at the time. Poets like Pound who actively drew nourishment from Chinese poetry are not only English and American, but also some poets from Canada, such as Lorna Crozier, Al Purdy, and so on. Many of their poems show the unique side of Chinese culture to the West, and at the same time, the possible misreadings of Chinese culture in their understanding of Chinese culture conveys the Western cultural elements that influenced them, intentionally or unintentionally. This shows the exchange and collision of Chinese and Western cultures, which is beneficial to English majors to enhance their cross-cultural awareness and ability.

5. Poetic language as the material to improve students’ aesthetic appreciation and innovation ability

The construction of the new liberal arts requires colleges and universities to “build a strong foreign language major, and cultivate international compound talents who are expert in one field while possessing comprehensive knowledge and ability. To be exact, it should be able to cultivate first-class talents who know foreign languages”^[1]. In this process, it is the basic and primary task for foreign language majors to master foreign languages, and to improve multi-competence as a necessary supplement.

Poetic language is beyond the reach of ordinary written works^[12]. The teaching of English poetry will not only help students accumulate more multidisciplinary and cross-culture knowledge but also enhance students’ aesthetic appreciation and innovation ability. Compared with the teaching of the works of other genres of literature, the teaching of poetry pays more attention to the analysis of rhyme, diction, rhetorical devices and other artistic techniques. Take the teaching of Byron’s poem “She walks in Beauty” for example, the analysis of the iambic pentameter, rhyme scheme of “ababab cdcdcd efefef,” the alliteration and so on, is the basic teaching task to show the musicality and unique beauty of English poetry’s language. The teaching of Poetry plays an important role in cultivating students’ aesthetic ability, which can never be replaced by the teaching of other genres of literary works.

What’s more, the rich rhetorical devices in poetry can stimulate students’ imagination and creativity at the same time. The above poem by Byron is just six lines long in each stanza, but each stanza contains rich rhetorical devices, such as similes, exaggerations, and so on. For example, the first stanza compares “she” with “a cloudless, starlit night,” and her beauty is like a starry night. The word “all” exaggerates her radiance by equating it with all the best of light and darkness, and accentuates the incomparable, most charming radiance she radiates. Other stanzas also use contrast, personification, repetition, metaphor and other figures of speech. The imagination in this poem is amazing and creative. Meanwhile, this poem resonates with the ancient Chinese poem “The Poem of the Playboy” by Song Yu^[13]. Both hold that the perfect beauty lies in the coordination of all aspects instead of the excellence in a certain aspect, which expresses the common understanding and pursuit of beauty between the Chinese and the Western people. The teaching of English poetry broadens students’ vision with comprehensive knowledge of language, culture and aesthetics, arouses students’ yearning for beautiful things with exquisite imagination, and inspires students to carry out detailed

observation and multi-directional free association on ordinary daily life, thus stimulating students' innovative ability to break through daily life.

6. Great wisdom in poetry as the inspiration for developing students' critical thinking ability

Scientific literacy and critical thinking ability are the requirements of the new liberal arts construction for the cultivation of English majors. Yan M (2023) pointed out that the approaches to comprehensively implement the cultivation of first-class foreign language talents should include the cultivation of students' "scientific literacy, critical thinking, analytical reasoning" and other qualities and abilities^[14]. In other words, liberal arts students should not only have a certain understanding of relevant natural science knowledge in interdisciplinary learning but also have the ability of scientific thinking. As Aristotle said, poetry is the truth that is more real than history, and poets are the "ancestors and creators of wisdom"^[12]. The wisdom hidden in poetry will inspire students to explore and understand the truth and improve their critical thinking ability.

There are numerous examples of English poetry that inspire students to think dialectically and improve critical thinking with its profound thoughts. For example, Pope regards the whole nature as the presentation of art in the last few lines of "On Man"^[15], points out that there is necessity in the contingency, and holds that the disharmony in one's understanding may be a kind of harmony that is not understood by others, and the so-called disaster is only relative and may be pregnant with blessings of greater significance. Just a few lines of the poem show the dialectical thinking of nature and art, chance and necessity, harmony and disharmony, blessing and calamity. Another example is William Blake's "Auguries of Innocence," which starts from the relationship between fine sand and the world, a wildflower and heaven, infinity and the palm of the hand, and an instant and eternity. It shows the dialectical relationship between the individual and the whole, the finite and the infinite, and an instant and eternity, which contains profound philosophical thinking. Guided by the thinking of materialist dialectics in this kind of poetry, students will gradually form the habit of objective, fair, comprehensive, dynamic and dialectical observation and thinking, and then improve scientific literacy and critical thinking ability.

7. Conclusion

Under the background of the new liberal arts, English poetry teaching is not only facing great pressure of reform but also looking forward to new opportunities for great strides in development. The team for English literature teaching in applied undergraduate universities should also follow the trend and take the new liberal arts construction policy as a guide to re-examine and understand the value of English poetry teaching in the cultivation of national feelings, interdisciplinary knowledge, cross-cultural ability, language and aesthetic ability, critical thinking ability and other aspects. This is of long-term significance for solving the problems existing in English poetry teaching and improving the training quality of English majors.

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