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UCLA English Department Graduation
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Hello, everyone. I'd like to thank Professor Gallagher for the invitation to speak to you today on behalf of the your teachers. Far more importantly, I'd like to take a moment to thank again the families and friends and partners of every student graduating today, for letting us, in some little way, into your lives and into your graduates' lives. More than once you helped your graduates along the way - nobody gets through a UCLA English degree without needing a hug, or a good meal, or some clean laundry, or a shoulder to cry on, or some encouragement, or a little extra help articulating an idea for a paper. Thanks for helping them get it done. We know that it hasn't been easy, in the classroom or out of it.

OK, graduates, here's the bad news: studying literature is not something you will ever be finished doing. Reading, as you know very well, is not a single thing – this, in fact, is one of the reasons it has been so difficult to explain to your parents what, exactly, you have been doing in your classes for the last few years. It is not as if you finish reading *Jane Eyre*, or *Moby Dick*, or *Invisible Man*, and then set the book down, check your answers against an answer key, and never think about it again. Science graduates have it easy. What you have learned to do here is different, and it matters.

Reading literature makes you a different person. That, however, is the part of what we do that everyone recognizes, and is probably the bit your families were most skeptical about when you announced that you were majoring in English or American literature. I hope that aspect of reading has stayed with you through your time with us. There is an enormous difference between seeing a version of yourself in a character, or seeing a version of who you want to become, and the kind of reading that you have been trained to do. In Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, a character spits out that another “represented all that was most detestable in British middle-class life... ‘He’s read nothing,

thought nothing, felt nothing.’” That is most certainly not the case with you. Even if you’re a bit exhausted now, don’t worry: your love for books will return, and there will always be room in your lives to weep at poetry and stories, and to stay up all night because you can’t put a book down.

Some of you will have taken English 10A with me. One of my favorite lectures to give is on Philip Sidney’s *Defense of Poesy*, written just as Shakespeare was getting going at the end of the 16th Century. My colleagues might already find this a strange choice, as I work on medieval literature – on *Beowulf* and Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* and the book of Margery Kempe. But I can also honestly say that the only time I’ve ever stayed up all night to read medieval literature was when I had a deadline the next day. Which is not to say that I don’t love it, but my ongoing fascination with the medieval world and its texts is a very different proposition from some of the other ways in which I love books and read books. I don’t think I’m going out on a limb in suggesting that many students find English 10A a struggle because old literature is, well, old, and it takes a while to get into the rhythms of reading and analyzing the earliest texts. So, by the time we get to Sidney and the Renaissance it’s always a bit of a bittersweet relief: students warm to the poetry just as I begin to teach things well past my areas of research expertise. Sidney writes to defend poetry from its detractors, which, frankly, is already an odd proposition – poetry doesn’t have detractors these days so much as near-total cultural invisibility. Anyway, Sidney ends his *Defense* with a curse I’ve always found terrifying: “Yet thus much curse I must send you, in the behalf of all poets, that while you live, you live in love, and never get favor for lacking skill of a sonnet; and, when you die, your memory die from the earth for want of an epitaph.” Now, we didn’t train you to write sonnets, and I sincerely hope that there hasn’t been a lot of epitaph writing. But, Sidney isn’t trying to get you to write sonnets either. His curse, of a life without love, challenges us to confront the ubiquity of poetry, the power of words in shaping emotions, the poetry of how we connect to each other, desire each other, and remember each other. His curse demands us to imagine how we will be remembered

by those who love us and by those we've never met. Sidney's words are terrifying and unsettling, because they're not about epitaphs and sonnets, but about reading. And that is what you have become experts at doing.

In your time with us, we've worked with you to read, write, and speak critically about texts. We've also taught you how to argue, and in all of the conversations about the utility of the humanities, many say arguing is one of the more important, practical, and transferrable skills you've learned here. I am, in fact, unpersuaded. Moreover, I have bad news about arguing - my four year old knows how to argue. The cesspit that is Twitter makes it pretty clear that everyone and their third cousin once removed fancies themselves the best rhetorician since the Wife of Bath set out to persuade the Canterbury pilgrims that a good husband isn't that hard to find, or since Milton's Satan made it clear to the other fallen angels that none of this mess was his fault, nor could it possibly have been avoided.

I don't think that the key here is argument. We've trained you to make strong arguments not just about texts, but about the assumptions that underlie those texts, about the structures of power that sustain those texts, and about the ways texts perpetuate or disrupt relationships of self and other, east and west, local and distant, natural and human. To make those arguments, first you had to become better readers. For everyone in the audience who is not an English major, let me offer a brief example. Like many of you here today, I have student loans. I don't regret borrowing the money, but the loans have and will continue to shape my life in powerful ways. Those loans were a means to an end - I borrowed in order to receive an education, and I stand here today because they served that purpose. You or your families may have taken out student loans as well, and what you have accomplished here makes that decision a powerful one. But as we talk about the crisis of student loans, you've probably heard, somewhere, about the idea of student loan forgiveness. Now, politically I'm all in favor of having the conversation, and I'm sorry I'm not the guy who can pay off

all of your student loans. As English majors, however, you can spot what's at stake in how the very idea has been labelled. Which is to say, borrowing money to become educated is not something that requires forgiveness. You have done nothing wrong. You have not injured the government or the banks in borrowing from them, and you certainly have not offended or upset them. To have a loan forgiven is to concede the premise that borrowing money is a moral failing or a financial wrongdoing. It is neither, and better reading lays bare the conceptual sleight-of-hand that somehow makes this your fault. Personally, I hope that your student loan debts are small and manageable, and even that your loans are cancelled someday. If you are here today because of them, I celebrate with you, but we do not ask for forgiveness for learning how to change the world.

Indeed, the world urgently needs better readers, and you are the ones to do it. We need readers who can see humanity decentered in a text, or nature re-centered. We need you to surface read, to distance read, and above all to close read. We need you to read skeptically and read compassionately, to read ideas out of order and out of sequence, to resist narrative teleology as inevitable. Because only then can we start having better arguments, not just better arguers. So much of what seems to be going wrong in our current debates, from fake news to false outrage, is bad readers starting bad conversations. But you know how to read better, and that matters.

Early in 10A, I teach the Old English poem *Deor*, which ends each stanza with the refrain, “þæs ofereode; þisses swa mæg” – “That passed away, so may this.” The poem wields the line in perfect ambiguity, pointing out the way in which the passing of time and the transience of the world can offer the profoundest hope that hardship and suffering may pass. But as the refrain is repeated and echoes through the poem, that sense of hope is joined by an unsettling awareness of the opposite. If everything passes, then the loves we have known, the beauty we have seen, the joys we have experienced, and the accomplishments of our lives will also pass away. So, on that note, let's talk about jobs. I assume that most of you want one. You're almost certainly going to have more

than one, and it's important to remember that a job is not a life sentence. You can always do something else. Two days after I graduated from college, I was working doing construction and building maintenance full time by day, and tending bar at night. By the end of that summer I got a job as a technical writer at a startup software company. It then took maybe three weeks to decide that I was going to graduate school the next year. In between graduating from college and starting here as a professor, I did web development, network administration, freelance editorial work, and taught English at a high school in New York. Those are the jobs I included on my CV at the time.

But I also have worked many jobs that don't appear on my CV, the jobs I took to pay the rent, to buy food, to go out with friends, the jobs that simply enable us to survive. If you have ever been on hold and heard that "this call may be monitored," that was me for a while, monitoring sales calls in a job so unbelievably boring that, when I got a job scheduling driving tests for the UK's equivalent of the DMV it felt like a party. I sold paint at Home Depot in an orange apron, and just after finishing my D.Phil at Oxford, I delivered the mail for a week in London. I have temped at law firms, done freelance construction, worked at a sketchy investment relations firm off Wall Street, and very briefly worked as a motorcycle courier. There are many reasons to hide those sorts of jobs from a CV when crafting a particular narrative self. But, remember that when you do so, people only see your successes, and thus misread you and the text of your life. That's OK, but as good readers you also need to make sure that you're offering other people good texts to read.

I don't think that many of you graduating today are under any illusion that what comes next is going to be easy. But here's the exciting part: you will read your way into a job. You'll probably need to argue, as well, but it's your ability as readers to re-frame, re-imagine, and re-interpret texts, to expose what's at stake in how a text works – these are the things that will help you not just find a job, but find an area of the world that you want to change. This is not to diminish the importance of journalism or teaching or law school or Hollywood or the other traditionally obvious paths for

English majors. Indeed, it is not too late to go to law school. It's not too late to do anything. But I think we've let tradition dictate the expected paths for English majors for too long. I think, that is, that we haven't been very good readers of ourselves and what we can do for a while, now. Standing here today it's obvious to me that it is precisely as English majors that you and your work are urgently needed in the world. There are jobs for you in shaping environmental policy or health policy or food policy, in making the financial world or the tech sector more ethical and more accountable in the language they use and the inequalities they perpetuate. There are jobs for you in tiny non-profits and global multinationals, in startups and long-established companies and everything in between, because in every one of those places there is a text to be read better and a narrative to reframe. Don't let your ignorance about what is out there limit or dictate what you are going to do. Similarly, don't let employers' ignorance about what you do as English majors stop you from demonstrating how much your skills as critical writers and speakers and above all as critical readers matter in this world. We are relying on you to read your way into those jobs just as we are relying on you to read us all into better arguments and better conversations.

Don't ever let anyone tell you how to read the text of your own life. You are graduating today with a degree in English from one of the greatest public universities in the entire world. Don't let anyone tell you how to read the text of the world: you know how. As you leave us today and go forth to meet whatever comes next, remember that you get to set the terms that structure the world, and you are going to be sensational at it.

Congratulations, and good luck.