

## **Balliol College English: Professor Seamus Perry and Professor Adam Smyth - video transcript**

The tutors, Professor Seamus Perry and Professor Adam Smyth are seated, facing the camera. The tutor's name and course subject are shown the first time they appear. The tutor answers the questions that are displayed on screen.

>>PROFESSOR SEAMUS PERRY (PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH LITERATURE, MASSEY FELLOW, TUTOR IN ENGLISH): MY name is Seamus Perry and I'm one of the Tutorial Fellows here at Balliol, my specialism is in poetry written in English, so both British and American, of the 19th and the 20th and even, the 21st century.

>>PROFESSOR ADAM SMYTH (PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH LITERATURE AND THE HISTORY OF THE BOOK, CLARENDON UNIVERSITY LECTURER, A.C. BRADLEY-J.C. MAXWELL FELLOW AND TUTOR IN ENGLISH LITERATURE): My name is Adam Smyth. I'm also a Tutorial Fellow here in English and I specialise on the early modern periods, that means text written in the 16th and 17th century, including Shakespeare and I'm also interested in the history of the book which means thinking about how texts were circulated, printed, published, read, those kinds of questions too.

[Question displayed on screen:]

### **What qualities are you looking for in undergraduates?**

>>PROFESSOR ADAM SMYTH: A key quality is enthusiasm, a delight in reading, in literature, we want you to really love reading and also to want to read new texts written in different centuries by different authors, in genres you've maybe not even heard about yet. We want you to want to think critically and thoughtfully about the reading that you get through, to pause on particular passages and work out why this paragraph is particularly interesting, or powerful, or creates amazing magical effects.

>>PROFESSOR SEAMUS PERRY: Intellectual curiosity. But, also a great desire to read. There's an awful lot of reading to be done on the course and if your instinct when you have a spare moment isn't to pick up a book, then it may not be quite the course for you. You can't study the Victorian period, for example, without reading big long great novels and if that doesn't appeal to you then maybe it's not the course for you. It's a wonderful, rich and diverse course and if you do love reading and you do love thinking about texts, then nothing better.

[Question displayed on screen:]

### **What type of work do you give students to prepare for a tutorial?**

>>Professor Seamus Perry: It varies a little bit for different parts of the course but most of the tutorials and classes that I give are in the 19th and 20th century and typically for a class I

would ask students to have read a particular text, so we all have a text in common that we can then discuss in the class. For a tutorial, they would write an essay of perhaps, between 1500 and 2000 words on a particular text that I've allocated or, perhaps something they want to do from their own choosing. They submit the essay in advance, I read it and then we meet and have a chat about it.

>>PROFESSOR ADAM SMYTH: One of the great things about the course is that there's lots of latitude, there's lots of freedom to develop your own intellectual interests. Particularly, as you get to the second year and third year, if there are particular kinds of writers, or questions, or ways of thinking about literature that you're interested in then we can pursue those. If we're doing for, example, a Shakespeare tutorial, you would normally read two or three plays and you'd read some criticism, so some scholarship written by critics about those plays. You'd write an essay and then you'd come to a tutorial which for Shakespeare, would be normally one-on-one, sometimes they're two on one, meaning two students and one tutor, where we'd talk about your essay and then we'd kind of build out from that essay that you've written and think about what are the interesting questions that it raises that you haven't had a chance to explore quite yet and develop it out from there.

[Question displayed on screen:]

#### **How are tutorials structured?**

>>PROFESSOR ADAM SMYTH: For the tutorial, the student comes along and we begin by discussing that particular essay, their particular argument, looking quite closely at points they've made, or close readings they've offered, or arguments they've developed and then we might say: "that's a really interesting idea you've made here but what if we add in this play that you've not looked at yet?" So, we might begin to look at that bit or, "what about this critic here, who you've not yet heard of? Let's read a page of that and see how that connects with what you're doing." It's this gradual (hopefully) process of enrichment and expansion from what they've brought. By the end of the tutorial, we've worked on their particular essay but we've also got a richer sense of a topic beyond that essay.

>>PROFESSOR SEAMUS PERRY: Feedback for the essay takes various forms and it can be picking up particular points in the argument that the student has made and thinking more about the ideas or the arguments that are at stake in in those points. It can be a comment on the essay as an essay, how you can improve it as a piece of writing in its own terms and also, what you can go on to do next. Every essay is the first step in a journey to read more and to think more about other things and to write another essay.

>>PROFESSOR ADAM SMYTH: Those essays are not formally assessed during the course. They're ways of the student thinking about the text that we're talking about so, when they work really well, they're exploratory and they're ambitious and the student might try interesting new ways of writing or thinking and not hopefully just repeat the same kind of essay over and over and over but, experiment with new kinds of writing themselves.

[Question displayed on screen:]

**What do you enjoy about conversations with students?**

>>PROFESSOR SEAMUS PERRY: We have bright, able and keen students, who are always a pleasure to talk with about anything, including English Literature. The course here is such a stimulating course to teach. It covers the entire range of English literary history from old English all the way through to a novel published yesterday in New York. The curriculum for each student is very largely driven by what the student's own enthusiasms are.

>>PROFESSOR ADAM SMYTH: The students are enthusiastic and full of really interesting ideas and because there is that latitude in terms of the essay titles we set or the text that we set in our capacity to respond to their own interest, you can see them develop as intellectuals think. They're treated right from the start I would say as grown-up readers and learners and there's an expectation that they'll work hard and want to read new things. There's also an expectation that they can come to a tutorial with their own ideas and with their own thoughts which we can think through together.

[Question displayed on screen:]

**How do students inform your own understanding of the subject?**

>>PROFESSOR SEAMUS PERRY: I think literary criticism is a collaborative effort. When you're writing about Shakespeare now, you're not just writing about Shakespeare as a solitary person, you're also engaging with what Coleridge said about Shakespeare, with what Dr Johnson said about Shakespeare, with what Ben Johnson said about Shakespeare, so there's something absolutely sort of conversational about the way that literary criticism works. So, talking to bright young students who are keen on their subject and have ideas of their own is all part of that large, transgenerational conversation that the subject is all about. It's what T.S Eliot calls in the great phrase, "the common pursuit of true judgment". You work out what you think about a text by talking to someone about a text either, figuratively by engaging with other critics or literally, by sitting in a room for an hour and talking to someone about the essay they've just written.

[Question displayed on screen:]

**What is the best thing about teaching at Balliol?**

>>PROFESSOR ADAM SMYTH: There are lots of great things. I think the scale of the teaching is really wonderful, in the sense that the year group doing English at Balliol is quite small, there might be eight or nine, occasionally 10 students in a year group and so those students move through the first year, second year, third year together, get to know each other really

well and teaching takes place in classes or seminars where everyone is together, eight or nine/ten but also through these small tutorials. I think there's a real level of connection and intimacy and directness in the conversation as a result

of that.

>>PROFESSOR SEAMUS PERRY: It's a very individualised teaching system. Every student almost has a course of their own. That's what's so great about teaching here, that it is absolutely student specific.

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