

**2023.05.03 Medicine & Literature Take Home Messages**  
**Dr. Shapiro Poetry Session**

**Student 1 (originally written in English):**

During class today, we listened to Dr. Shapiro share some of her poetry, and what stood out to me was her discussion on the relationship between medicine and literature. She emphasized that medicine is an integral part of life, yet it can be difficult for the general public to access. Additionally, medical education often involves textbooks filled with academic literature and journals, which may not fully capture the patient's lived experience. By incorporating literature, both patients and doctors can gain a better understanding of each other's perspectives, ultimately bridging the gap and improving the doctor-patient relationship.

One of the most memorable poems was "The Eyes Have It," in which the doctor is portrayed as neglecting the patient's feelings and solely focused on treating the patient's physical illness. However, the poem did not come across as critical. Instead, it conveyed a desire for more care and concern. Perhaps the professor realized that her case was just another case to the doctor, but for the patient, it was a matter of potentially losing their sight. The poem may not have intended to blame the doctor's carelessness but rather gently express the patient's feelings, encouraging the doctor to empathize with the patient's discomfort both physically and emotionally.

**Student 2 (Translated from Mandarin):**

Today's class is quite special. Unfortunately, my English is not good enough and it's a pity the questions I asked felt somewhat irrelevant. I am most impressed by the difference in the way of learning or the learning atmosphere between Taiwan and countries abroad. The discussions felt very free and unrestricted, which makes us contemplate more carefully about the questions asked and the teacher's responses.

As for the poetry shared, I feel that compared to English poems, Chinese poems often seem to be more elusive compared to the straightforward narrations expressed in English poems. In Chinese poems, the meaning is often subtly hidden within intricate sentences. However, it could also be that the teacher chose poems that are easier to understand (considering our English proficiencies). In any case, it is a refreshing experience to hear and learn about the poetry cultures of different countries.

**Student 3 (originally written in English):**

Dr. Shapiro is a renowned American medical writer and professor who believes that while medical writing from the perspective of a physician is well-established, it is equally important to write from the perspective of a patient. Illness can torment and cause suffering to a person, and while writing cannot change this fact, it can help to express oneself and prove that one has experienced it all. Dr. Shapiro also takes us through several of her poems to analyze the perspectives of patients or their family members, allowing those of us who are likely to become doctors in the future to empathize with patients.

"Drowning" describes the speaker's experience of living in the shadow of her grandmother's alcoholism, which has also affected the speaker's mother. "Downstairs My Father Is Dying" talks about the author's father who knows he doesn't have much time left but still bravely faces the disease with self-encouragement. "Visit to the Radiologist" is about the author's own diagnosis of malignant uterine leiomyosarcoma and her hope that the radiologist will treat her with care. I particularly like this piece because it reflects the expectation of every patient that doctors can see the "person" behind the "disease," which is the most important aspect of medical humanities education. "The Eyes Have It" tells the story of a doctor who cannot empathize with the patient, thinking that "treating glaucoma will

change the color of the pupil" is not a big deal. In fact, changes in the color of the pupil affect a person's identity, but the doctor did not consider this, which is a great pity.

**Student 4 (originally written in English):**

From the poetry written by Dr. Johanna Shapiro, I can realize the significant events in her different stages of life. In "The Eyes Have It", I have learned that even on the same topic, patients' and doctors' point of view can be totally different stories. I think this is the reason why medicine should not merely be science; most important of all, the morality and empathy in human nature plays a vital role in the way of practicing medicine.

**Student 5 (Translated from Mandarin):**

In today's class, Dr. Shapiro discussed with us in detail the various meanings in her poems. While I attentively tried to understand these poems, I also tried to empathize with the feelings she conveyed. Different lines in the poems brought different sensations, which allowed me to fully appreciate the charm of poetry.

**Student 6 (originally written in English):**

I was very impressed by the poem about the author's father, and it also made me feel sad. When the dearest family members are about to leave, but there is nothing they can do, I can't imagine what the author's mood at that time may be while she was singing with her father. Even though it's part of everyone's life journey, it's always sad.

**Student 7 (originally written in English):**

It was really a pleasure to have Dr. Shapiro in the class and for her to discuss about her poems with us. In the beginning part of the lecture, she mentioned how she participate in medical literature. She wondered why do patients write? A point I really agreed with was that most of the time, doctors are blind-folded due to early and professional experiences. Therefore, they may neglect the will of patient and do what they think is beneficial to the patients, just as in the poem "The eyes have it". In the poem "Drowning", Dr. Shapiro combined the grief of her mother with what took away her grandmother-alcohol. I think water in this poem represents alcohol, too. She used water-connected terms such as "current", "bank", "flood", "river", "tide" in the poem. Also, she visualized the feelings with types of alcohol like vodka, bourbon and gin, which connected tightly to the reason for her grandmother's death-alcohol. The sadness of her mother was strongly conveyed between words: "A soggy flood of feeling knocking over tables and chairs", "As the river of my grandmother's grief Muddy, vicious, turbulent". I had never thought poems connected to medicine can be written in this way--full of lively image, meaning, and genuine feeling.

**Student 8 (originally written in English):**

The starting question: what is the connection between medicine and literature? I believe it was the most complicated one throughout our talk, and it really did take me a while to contemplate on. And my answer is, "medicine serves to heal the body, and literature (to heal) the mind, and those that are not tended by medical care systems." Why would a person want to write? Just as the final issue we discussed, people write to express themselves, to express their feelings and thoughts. Some argue that expression can have a healing effect on those that are not heard, but wanted to be heard, and those that should be told, but were not told. I believe it to be the essence of writing, and also the key to connecting medicine and literature.

**Student 9 (Translated from Mandarin):**

Literature is a means of conveying messages to others. Healthcare, in fact, is also a form of communication between doctors and patients. This is what I see as a similarity between healthcare and literature. Among these, poetry is a highly artistic form of literature. Thus, a few words or lines in a poem can have different meaning for each individual. This was a fascinating experience to be able to hear from Dr. Shapiro, the author of the poems—for her to recite them and explain the meanings and stories behind these poems in person. Despite some slight language barriers, it was still a wonderful experience.

**Student 10 (Translated from Mandarin):**

In today's class, the statement that left the deepest impression on me was a phrase the teacher said: "Choose me, choose me, choose me to be the patient you love." As future doctors, we may face many patients throughout our career, and it is possible that we won't be able to dedicate 100% of our energy to each and every patient. However, patients don't really care about how many patients we have, they simply hope to be the patient whom the doctor cares for with the utmost dedication.

**Student 11 (Translated from Mandarin):**

Although we read many articles and poems in previous lectures, we have been interpreting and understanding them from the perspectives of readers. This is the first time we had an author come to explain the stories/poems and the emotions behind their writing. Through the session with Dr. Shapiro, we discovered many aspects that were different from our own interpretations. By communicating with the author in this way, I believe we can better understand the intended meanings originally conveyed in these poems. The phrase that left me the deepest impression on me was "science is specific, but literature can be vague" (something like this). As a student who primarily focuses on scientific disciplines, encountering literature often leaves me in a different mindset. When I heard this phrase, I couldn't help but smile. It highlighted how something that could be expressed in just a few words can also get twisted and embellished. However, the teacher also mentioned that it is precisely this quality that gives poetry its uniqueness and beauty.

**Student 12 (Translated from Mandarin):**

I really enjoyed this class! Starting with the teacher, her teaching style is like that of most Western teachers, and I really like how they ask students questions. I feel that our class performed well this time. It was evident that everyone tried hard to think on the spot. I also had the opportunity to share my opinions and answer questions. Speaking up during this class really left a deep impression on me and I realized that I don't have to about others' opinions. If I have something to share, I should share it with everyone. Furthermore, the teacher's poems have some kind of magic. Upon closer observation, it is not difficult to notice that the teacher likes us to use playful words to describe heavy subjects such as death. The first three-quarters of the poems give a refreshing and playful feeling, albeit they are somewhat colloquial. However, the last few lines of the poems always manage to astonish me. They exhibit the strength and are sometimes mysterious and satirical, which brings readers more inspirational thoughts and imagination.

**Student 13 (Translated from Mandarin):**

I am delighted to have the opportunity to directly discuss the poems with the author. This allowed me to gain a more profound understanding of the intended messages. Compared to simply reading the work

alone on our own, I have a deeper appreciation and realization that these events actually happened and the person who experienced it is the one who is conversing with us, not just a few paragraphs in a book.

**Student 14 (originally written in English):**

Question: Is it awkward for you (especially as a doctor yourself) to write about these doctors being inconsiderate, knowing that they are probably going to read it or you're going to see them in the future as your colleagues?

--- Response from after hearing Dr. Shapiro's response to the question:

Thank you, Dr. Shapiro, for responding to my question. Her intentions are good and I feel that those physicians, even after reading and knowing that the works are about them, should be kind and generous enough to accept it and make improvements. This can also be a significant challenge.