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TEFL AND THE TEACHING PROFESSION IN BARRY UNSWORTH'S *THE GREEKS HAVE A WORD FOR IT*

Abstract: *This article outlines how teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) and the teaching profession are depicted in The Greeks Have A Word For It (1967), a comic novel by the late British Booker Prize-winning author Barry Unsworth. Focusing on the character of Kennedy, an unscrupulous Englishman who arrives penniless in Athens and attempts to find work teaching English, this study firstly outlines the novel's unflattering portrayal of the type of people who seem to be active as English teachers in 1960s Athens. It then moves into exploring how some of the commercial realities of TEFL are presented in the work, before concluding with a character study comparing aspects of the roguish Kennedy with Jennings, the director of the official cultural institute, noting several common traits shared by both men.*

Keywords: *Barry Unsworth, fictional depictions of teaching English abroad, portrayals of teachers in fiction, professions in literature, Teaching English as a Foreign Language, The Greeks Have A Word For It*

Introduction

Among other factors, the evolving academic and professional domain of TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language, also known as TESOL – Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) reflects the fact that the English language has been growing in global importance for many decades. Indeed, this has been illustrated by the teaching and learning of the language in many different settings (Dimova 2019; 2020), as well as the concomitant rise in interest among students and teachers in acquiring language certifications and other attestations of linguistic skills (Hoyte-West 2023: 78). As discussed elsewhere, the past few decades have seen an increase in the professionalisation and/or credentialization of TEFL through schemes such as the Cambridge CELTA qualification (e.g. Farmer 2006), as well as the development and spread of postgraduate degrees in TESOL to train future teaching personnel (Hoyte-West 2024a: 197 – 198).

As important figures in education and society, teachers of various subjects have also often featured in literary fiction, with famous educators from English literature including the Doctor from Thomas Hughes's 1857 novel *Tom Brown's School Days*, as well as the mercurial Miss Jean Brodie in Muriel Spark's 1961 novel *The*

Prime of Miss Jean Brodie (see Hoyte-West 2024b). To the latter, Haider (2021) also adds examples such as Mr Braithwaite in E. R. Braithwaite's 1959 work *To Sir, With Love*, and the figure of William Stoner in the eponymous 1965 novel by John Williams. The topic has also been well-researched in the scholarly literature for several decades (e.g., see Bass 1970; Smolin 1975 etc.), and thus many studies have portrayed different facets of teachers and the teaching profession in various genres of literary works, including attempts to make a taxonomy of different depictions (Muchmore 2012). Research has also analysed portrayals of teachers in novels written in a range of languages such as Dutch (Dera, Smeets, van Wanrooij 2023) German (Smolin 1975), and Mandarin Chinese (Yau 2015), as well as in Spanish (Ezpeleta Aguilar 2016: 462 – 468) and Indonesian (Chamalah, Nuryyati, Nurbaya 2023). And turning specifically to literary portrayals of teachers of English abroad, Julian Preece and Aled Rees observe in their examination of the 'modern languages novel' that "TEFL teachers feature frequently in British post-war fiction" (Preece, Rees 2021: 3). Accordingly, through analysis of the trajectory of the main character, this study presents a brief exploration of how the contemporary TEFL profession is depicted in one such fictional work – a 1967 novel by the British author Barry Unsworth.

The Greeks Have A Word For It

Primarily known for his historically-based fiction, Barry Unsworth (1930 – 2012) was a prolific writer, with many of his seventeen novels inspired by his own experiences of living and working outside of the United Kingdom. He was a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature (FRSL), and was the winner of the prestigious Booker Prize in 1992 for his novel *Sacred Hunger* (alongside Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*). Unsworth was also shortlisted for the same award in 1980 and 1995 (for *Pascali's Island* and *Morality Play*), and longlisted in 2006 for *The Ruby In Her Navel* (for more information, see British Council Literature 2024; The Booker Prizes 2024).

Despite the quality and quantity of his literary output, as American literary scholar Greg Forter underlines, Unsworth's oeuvre has not been subject to significant scholarly attention (Forter 2010: 781 – 782). As far as can be ascertained, this includes his early novel which is the focus of the present analysis, *The Greeks Have A Word For It* (Unsworth 1993 [1967]). Comprising 186 pages in the 1993 paperback edition, the work is a relatively light-hearted yet impacting tragicomedy which, despite a brief mention in Preece and Rees's (2021: 3 – 4) study, appears to have attracted little research interest up until now.

Essentially, the novel is a fictionalised humorous take on life in 1960s Greece, an era when Unsworth spent a period of time teaching in Athens (Preece, Rees 2021: 4). It is important to note that this was also a seminal moment in Greece's modern history: World War II and the ensuing civil war had ended just two decades beforehand, yet rule by the military junta was still on the horizon (see Clogg et al.

2024). Given its compact length, the novel is distinguished by its intricate and tightly-woven plot, which represents two intertwined narratives that ultimately end in tragedy. The principal protagonists are Bryan Kennedy, an impoverished reprobate Englishman who is something of a 'chancer', yet is described as being physically imposing – even attractive – in a dishevelled sort of way. The other is Stavros Mitsos, an ethnic Greek now based abroad who is returning to Athens in an attempt to avenge the long-ago death of his father, a wartime collaborator who was murdered after the end of Greece's occupation by the Nazis in the 1940s. With the focus of this study on the portrayal of TEFL and the teaching profession in the novel, it is Kennedy's trajectory of his attempts to work as an English teacher in Athens that will be analysed in the present article.

The type of people

At the opening of the novel, the reader is introduced to Kennedy (and also to Mitsos) when they both disembark from the same vessel at Piraeus, the ancient and modern port of Athens. Kennedy has arrived in the city virtually penniless, and consequently, he needs a job as a matter of urgency. It quickly becomes apparent that Kennedy is a remarkably unusual and slippery character, who bizarrely "expects to speak French on arrival" and additionally makes derogatory remarks about his fellow boat passengers (Preece, Rees 2021: 4). It transpires that he was sacked from his job in Britain as a door-to-door encyclopaedia salesman for attempting to seduce the housewives; he ends up choosing to come to Greece because of unsolicited advice he receives one day in a pub: "And then this voice from further down the bar: "You want to go to Greece, old man. I would, if I were single. Marvellous climate, bloody marvellous, four thousand years of history. They're all dying to learn English over there. They need it, you see, being a commercial nation. Anyone could go over there and get a good living. You only have to be English"" (Unsworth 1993 [1967]: 7).

According to the wisdom of the man down the pub, it appears that – at least ostensibly – entry barriers to TEFL in 1960s Greece seem rather low. For Kennedy, this is certainly a good thing, given that he holds no academic or teaching qualifications, as well as character references that he has forged himself. Undeterred, he heads straight for the Cultural Institute, though he holds no appointment scheduled. Once in the waiting room there, he turns to Miss Diamantopoulou, the Institute's secretary, who proves to be a useful source of information for him, though seemingly out of pity: "She forbore out of kindness and the linguistic complexities involved to tell him of the long succession of derelict or eccentric Britons she had seen occupying these chairs in the two years she had been working there" (Unsworth 1993 [1967]: 11).

When they meet, Jennings (the expatriate snobbish, pompous, and self-important director of the Cultural Institute) dislikes Kennedy on sight (the feeling is mutual), and sees right through him and his numerous untruths. Yet, as Kennedy attempts to find a job, it is one of the teachers from the Cultural Institute who assists

him, a man called Willey, who has been teaching in Greece for several years after leaving England in disgrace. Although he later helps Kennedy enormously, Willey initially complains to his long-term fiancée that: '"Another homeless Briton dumped on me this evening" […] "Not a usual type" […] "Not a professional teacher at all, by the look of him. There's sort of an unauthentic heartiness about him, rather untrustworthy, really. I couldn't quite make him out" (Unsworth 1993 [1967]: 34-35).

Eventually, as Preece and Rees state, the "imposter" Kennedy obtains a post "in an Athens language school with fake references and made-up qualifications" (Preece, Rees 2021: 4). As such, from the outset of the novel, the image of the calibre of person employed in the TEFL profession is definitely somewhat less than perfect, as will be observed subsequently.

On the business of teaching

Even though *The Greeks Have A Word For It* was written almost six decades ago, the events of the novel illustrate that the teaching and learning of English was lucrative even at that point in time; indeed, making money is Kennedy's overarching motivation. Yet more routine aspects of teaching also feature, such as the creation of pedagogical materials. In the book, this activity is portrayed negatively, as something utilitarian and business-like, as the following excerpt demonstrates: "Left alone in the staff-room, Willey cast his eyes with habitual distaste over the books that lined the far wall […] And always the same words on the covers, claiming to convey the essence "Comprehensive", "Basic", "Fundamental", "Concise". From Borneo to Bagdad ambitious youth was buying them, hoping to find an infallible guide to success in the examinations" (Unsworth 1993 [1967]: 24 – 25).

In contrasting the ideal of teaching as a vocation with its mundane reality, the issue is further complicated as Jennings (his boss) has requested that the unwilling Willey have a look at the manuscript of Jennings's monograph. The text is supposedly a magnum opus offering grand linguistic insights into the teaching and learning of English, but actually it represents a "chaotic mass of grammatical precept and mystical brooding" (Unsworth 1993 [1967]: 25). To add insult to injury, Jennings has made no mention of remunerating Willey for his travails. Rather, in expecting his subordinate to work for him for free, the seemingly lowly status of the teacher is demonstrated, with this time-consuming task falling under the concept of the so-called 'psychological contract', i.e., incorporating certain "mutual obligations" that go beyond the formal employment contract yet nonetheless are "for the most part implicit, covertly held and only infrequently discussed" (Anderson, Schalk 1998: 637).

A further unfavourable example of how the business of the TEFL teaching is portrayed is exemplified by Kennedy's search for employment. He has a memorable run-in with the ridiculous Melas, a young and wealthy Greek educated at both Oxford and Cambridge who is now the head of his own private language school. The reader learns that Melas "had the weirdest accent Kennedy had ever heard, an almost unbelievable parody of English upper-class speech" (Unsworth 1993 [1967]:

43), and the young man seems pathetically eager to impress 'Mr Kennedair' with the expensive and seemingly extraneous facilities that his establishment boasts (such as a cafeteria), as well as with his flashy car and a mild attempt at seduction. Yet, despite the showiness, it turns out that the pay offered to the teachers is very low – indeed, it is such a derisory sum that Kennedy, even though he appears desperate for funds, refuses the offer on a point of self-respect. As such, through contrasting the immense wealth that those involved in the business side of TEFL are evidently capable of accruing, this episode underscores the gulf between the opulent lifestyle enjoyed by Melas and the exploited teaching staff who actually do the day-to-day work for minimal recompense.

Indeed, as Kennedy learns during his attempts to find private English-language students, wealthy young Greeks are eager to pass the prestigious 'Diploma' examination to certify their skills (presumably a nod to the then iteration of the Certificate of Proficiency in English (see Weir 2002: 2 – 4)). This plants the germ of an idea in his head, leading to him embarking on a shady scheme which involves gaining unauthorised access to the test papers before the examination takes place, allowing his students to see a copy of them for a hefty fee, and thereby ensuring they are then successful in passing the actual examination, thus gaining the coveted credential. In this regard, by offering privileged access to the test papers for cash, Kennedy attempts to make a mockery of the whole business of teaching English in the city, and therefore highlights the appetite for obtaining a highly-desirable certificate, rather than on the acquisition of knowledge. As such, the ruse represents both an attempt for Kennedy to 'game' the system for personal gain, as well as to cock a snook at types like Jennings who seem to look down on him and his lack of educational and social qualifications.

Kennedy and Jennings – two sides of the same coin?

As the above excerpts have detailed, Kennedy is generally portrayed as an unscrupulous character, interested only in money and self-advancement: "he never gave considered kindness to another without some motive of gain, however blurred or impractical" (Unsworth 1993 [1967]: 59). Yet his antagonist Jennings is also depicted in a less-than-favourable light, as a pseudo-scholarly social-climbing snob with a faddish interest in high culture.

The mutual dislike between the two men eventually comes to a head. Thanks to his contact in the Cultural Institute (the secretary, Miss Diamantopoulou), Kennedy has been illicitly passed the contact details of people who have enquired about private English lessons, thereby allowing him to falsely masquerade as one of the Institute's tutors. After an incident which ends in an argument with the Swedish ambassador (who believes Kennedy to be working for the Institute), the embassy complains to Jennings, who confronts Kennedy in person. The livid director admonishes the imposter, stating that "it is not too much to say that we represent our country. England is judged through us" (Unsworth 1993 [1967]: 153), thereby ech-

oing Preece & Rees's observation that in such types of fiction, "teachers of foreign languages function as cultural intermediaries" (Preece, Rees 2021: 3). As a retort, Kennedy gives Jennings some home truths about their shared characteristics: "In England, you would be some sort of schoolmaster. Your suits would get shiny and you wouldn't have a chauffeur and you wouldn't give cocktail parties. I was selling encyclopaedias in England, from door to door. We are both here because we want to be more comfortable, that's the long and short of it" (Unsworth 1993 [1967]: 153).

Affronted by his impudence, and correctly suspecting that Kennedy lacks the right paperwork to work in the country, Jennings tries to have Kennedy deported from Greece. However, his attempt is thwarted by a visitation from Eleni Polimenou, a famous Greek actress who has engaged Kennedy for private English lessons on the false 'recommendation' of the Cultural Institute. Polimenou's prestige and influence appeals to Jennings's sense of snobbery about what the actress terms a "misunderstanding with the police" (Unsworth 1993 [1967]: 166). Dazzled by her status, Jennings is enthralled by the fact that Polimenou mentions that she intends "to call the headquarters of your organisation, to tell them of the valuable part you are playing in Greece" (Unsworth 1993 [1967]: 166) during her next visit to London. In addition, the actress sings Kennedy's praises as a 'teacher' (even though their 'lessons' together are more related to bedroom activities). However, in celebrating Kennedy's pedagogical prowess, Polimenou cleverly flatters Jennings by stating that "it is the head, the organising brain, which in cases like this should take the credit" (Unsworth 1993 [1967]: 166). By invoking the similarities between the two men, this excerpt highlights how Kennedy and Jennings are both self-interested, self-aggrandising, and opportunistic, although in radically different ways. Both men are preternaturally eager to advance themselves, but whereas Jennings chooses to climb the slippery ladder of academic and social prestige, Kennedy bluntly opts for subterfuge and get-rich-quick schemes.

Coda

As illustrated through Kennedy's actions and behaviour, the TEFL profession is generally portrayed negatively in *The Greeks Have A Word For It*. Exaggerated for humorous effect, the novel depicts the teaching of English in Greece as an activity which attracts a motley crew of odd characters and reprobates, seeming only qualified to do so because of their skills as native speakers of the language. In England, however, these people would most probably be viewed as undistinguished mediocrities. Turning to the business of teaching English, the novel's portrayal of this aspect seems to be marked by a lack of overall professionalism. This includes the creation of superfluous pedagogical materials, the rapacious behaviour of Melas, the slick owner of the private language school, and the overblown importance attached to credentials such as the coveted Diploma. Indeed, these unfavourable aspects of teaching English as a foreign language are best personified through the characters of Kennedy and Jennings. Despite their differing social, economic, and educational

status, the two men nonetheless share a number of common features; perhaps most notably, a keen desire for self-advancement. Yet it must be underlined that the book is essentially a comic novel at its core. Accordingly, rather than being taken as an accurate portrayal of TEFL and the teaching profession in 1960s Greece, it must be remembered that events and personages are of course subject to hyperbole in order to magnify the sense of humour and absurdity which pervades this deftly-written and engaging novel.

Note

This article is an expanded and revised version of an online conference paper with the same title which was presented at the *Annual International Conference: Languages, Cultures, Communication,* which took place at St Cyril and St Methodius University of Veliko Tarnovo (Bulgaria) on 7 June 2024 (see Zabielski 2024: 412).

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