

Professor Focus:

John Smith

One of the most familiar faces in the U.P.E.I. English department is that of Professor John Smith, who settled here in 1967. He was born in Toronto and had lived there twenty-two years. He attended the University of Toronto where he earned, of all things, a Math and Physics degree. He had always been very interested in literature, through, having worked at a college magazine. After an aborted attempt at an additional degree in Philosophy, he ended up teaching high school English for seven years and then returned to the University of Toronto where he got his M.A. in English. Following that, he ended up here, and it's the longest time he ever stayed in one spot.

When asked why he ended up teaching English, Smith recalls that English, of all subjects he could teach, had the most room for diversity. "I'm more of a dabbler in many things than an expert in anything," he says. "I decided that I didn't want to spend my life doing mathematics. I'd always been interested in literature, and had written quite a bit of poetry by that time. I followed the line of least resistance, I suppose." He admires people who have clear-cut goals and pursue them directly. "I have sort of a 'Hamlet complex'," he tells me. "I stand back and think about things."

English is Professor Smith's chief interest, and why he chose the profession of teaching was also a decision based on preference. "You stick with things you feel comfortable with," he decided. "I've gone through periods in my life where I've been very sceptical of words and the distortions that they introduce into reality. The introduction of words tends to fix something that is otherwise fluid, and shifts attention from things to words. But, in spite of that, I've cast my lot with them."

Subjects taught by Professor Smith currently include the Romantic Poets and Shakespeare, writers who have fascinated Smith for some time. He's been hooked on Shakespeare since high school, and Byron

was the first book he checked out of a library. Some students question the value of teaching works from so long ago, but opinions in favour of his subjects.

"One advantage of them," he suggests, "is that they do introduce you to a different world, and to different states of mind." He admires the flexibility with which Shakespeare treats language, ranking only behind James Joyce in his opinion.

Another important aspect of Shakespeare according to Smith is its theatrical side. As he says, "I'm particularly interested in Shakespeare too because all literature to an extent involves performance. A reader must 'perform' a poem before it comes to life. Whether in the theatre of the mind or among actors, a line must be performed before they acquire full actuality. I see all of literature like that. Whether it's dramatic literature or not the reader has to be involved, he has to participate."

Shakespeare is about as far back as most students are willing to go to explore an "ancient" text, and Smith thinks it is unfortunate that many students are unaware of earlier writers such as Chaucer. Smith is even more dismayed at the absence of Latin, Greek, and Classics in most modern day educational programs. "I've always felt reluctant to go along with majority views," he says. "That doesn't mean that they (majority views) are wrong, necessarily, but minorities keep other potentialities alive."

Outside the classroom, Professor Smith enjoys reading a wide variety of works. He's always been fascinated by Plato's Dialogues, and has also been strongly influenced by the works of an anonymous sixth century monk who went by the name of "Dionysius the Areopagite". One of this monk's books was the "Mystical Theology", which detailed the via negativa philosophy, the "negative way", which said you could find God by screening all things unholy from your life, complete denial. Another of the monk's books expresses the via affirmativa. The book, "Name of God," said you could find God by affirming all of his qualities rather than denying everything else. These are very challenging philosophies.

Professor Smith has also been influenced heavily by Chinese and Sanskrit traditions, especially the Tao Teh Ching, a book about following the way nature accomplishes the most by doing the least: non-interference. Other works that have proven influential