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### Excellence Personified

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# Excellence Personified

**Known for her critical rigor and concern for students' learning,  
English Professor Elizabeth Oggel represented the liberal arts at its best.**

**Story by LARRY K. UFFELMAN '60**

*(Editor's Note: Elizabeth Oggel, who taught English at Illinois Wesleyan from 1945 to 1969, died Jan. 22, 2010 — just one month shy of her 106th birthday. Oggel taught Milton, British literature, contemporary prose and poetry, and freshman composition. She was chosen as the University's Teacher of the Year in 1963 and was the author of a widely used textbook for college-level composition courses. Larry K. Uffelman '60 wrote the following tribute to "Miss Oggel," as she was widely known. He is Professor Emeritus of English at Mansfield University in Mansfield, Penn.)*

My wife, Donna (Benson) and I, both graduates of the class of 1960, were recently informed of the death of Elizabeth Oggel, long-retired IWU English professor to whom we owe a profound intellectual debt. The news of her death on Jan. 22 at the age of 105, just about a month short of her 106th birthday in March caused me to consider again just how memorable she was as a person and how fine she was as a professor.

We arrived on the IWU campus in the fall of 1956 as naïve as incoming freshmen could be. In the 1957-58 academic year, we were sophomores and had the great good fortune to enroll in Elizabeth's sections of the Survey of British Literature, parts 1 and 2. At the end of our sophomore year, we declared ourselves English majors. Later, my wife enrolled in an Oggelian course called, if I remember correctly, "Masterworks of British Poetry" and a course called "Contemporary Poetry." I skipped those, and instead took a course in Milton's prose and poetry from her.

Elizabeth taught us to read poetry closely and with great care. She applied and taught what I later learned were critical practices known as "the New Criticism." These were espoused by Cleanth Brooks and other contemporary students of poetry at the time and required a particularly close reading of texts. Although this method eventually gave way to others, it served us neophyte students of literature well. It enabled us to read poetry more closely and carefully than we had ever thought possible. Over the years, I've known many excellent professors — even trying to be one myself — but I'm not exaggerating when I say that Elizabeth's teaching, her critical rigor and her concern for her students' learning, was exceptional. When I graduated and eventually began my own career as an English professor, she was one of my models.

What follows is my attempt to make you see what studying with Elizabeth Oggel from 1956 to 1960 was like. It was rigorous, but in retrospect exhibited elements of high comedy—or, perhaps, low farce.

Probably every student who took the Survey of English Literature from Elizabeth remembers entering her office to recite to her two carefully memorized "chunks" of poetry: the opening fourteen lines of *The Canterbury Tales* in Middle English and, later, a Shakespearean sonnet of our choosing.



**The above portrait of Elizabeth Oggel was taken in 1949 by Norman Kerr Jr. Born in Orange City, Iowa, in 1904, Oggel joined Illinois Wesleyan's faculty in 1945 after teaching at Hope College and William Woods College for Women.**

“Terror” is a weak word for describing what we felt as, one by one, we entered her office to recite. When my turn came, I sat across from her, my palms sweaty and my shirt soaked as I recited and she smiled cryptically, counting off my errors on the fingers of her right hand. But my classmates and I did it and were none the worse for the experience. What’s more, we remembered the opening lines to *The Canterbury Tales* as well as we remembered our own names. And, later, in graduate school I learned to recite my carefully memorized Shakespearean sonnet with an added wrinkle: I pronounced the words as Shakespeare might have pronounced them. At least Elizabeth hadn’t required us to do that. Perhaps she felt that having to memorize and pronounce a passage in Chaucer’s East Midland dialect was plenty for our tender years.



**To celebrate the 100th birthday of English Professor Emeritus Elizabeth Oggel (shown far left), alumni and friends from around the country convened in Bloomington in March 2004.**

I also recall—with considerable pleasure — that one day during the spring term, Elizabeth warned us with her usual formality that we should pay particular attention to the philosophical ruminations with which Wordsworth opens his “Intimations” ode. When she made that assignment, I thought her eyes were boring into my very soul and decided to read that poem with more than usual care the night before class. My preparation paid off, for at the beginning of the next period, she fixed me with a steady gaze. Then she said, “Mr. Uffelman, will you please explain to us the Neo-Platonic elements of the opening of Wordsworth’s ode?” All round me I heard a relaxed shuffling of feet and sighs of relief, and I must have turned several shades of red. But I did as she had asked. My reward was a tiny dry smile and a carefully pronounced “Thank you.” But I felt as if I had swum the Hellespont.

When I was a junior, Elizabeth offered a course on the prose and poetry of John Milton. We read a whole lot of Milton’s prose and most of his poetry. Although I later specialized in Victorian literature, I developed in her Milton course an abiding interest in his poetry, which I continue to read and re-read for pleasure. Later, near the end of my graduate program, I took another Milton course — this time to prepare for doctoral comprehensives. Both that course and Elizabeth’s were excellent, but Elizabeth’s reading list and, especially, her insights into the literature itself ranked as the equal of those in

my graduate course. In many respects, it might well be the best course I took as either an undergraduate or a graduate student.

In the spring of 1959, the English Department decided that English majors should be required to take a written and an oral comprehensive examination over British and American literature. And so in the fall, we seniors were enrolled in “Senior Review” to prepare us for the exam, which we took in the spring of 1960. At some point during the spring term, we were told to select three members of the English faculty to serve as our oral examiners. Elizabeth was one of my choices. When her turn came to pose her questions, she said, “Mr. Uffelman, I will name the titles of several poems. Would you please give me the author’s name?” She proceeded to list titles and I authors. When she named “To His Coy Mistress,” I responded, “Andrew Marvell.” But, not finished, she said, “Please quote from this poem.” And so I rasped out as quickly as I could: *“thegrave’safineandprivateplacebutnoneIthinkdothereembrace.”*

It wasn’t a very dramatic recital, but it satisfied Elizabeth.

Over the years after graduation and after I had received my doctorate and was settled into my own career, Donna and I remained in contact with Elizabeth. Of course, we discovered other facets to her character and

personality. At the party Ann Sokan organized to celebrate her 100th birthday, I led a group of her former students — not all of us English majors — in a recital of the opening lines of *The Canterbury Tales*. We were impressed that all of us, despite the intervening years, had remembered how to pronounce most of those medieval East Midland sounds.

On that day, the memory of her teaching brought together a large and diverse group of her former students to celebrate her life, what she had meant to us all those years ago, and what she had continued to mean. I've never known anyone else quite like her.

A common thread that runs through advertisements for colleges and universities is that they “strive for excellence.” Elizabeth Oggel was excellence personified. We are fortunate to have been her students.