Thanks so much for this invitation to speak here in the province of thinkers. Let me start by
telling you a little bit about myself. I live in the world of words. For me, writing is an act of love. I’m a
poet, and I’m a poet who teaches, which is to say, what I teach isn’t just poetry but how to read in the
broadest, deepest sense. I entered the teaching profession out of a belief in the power of intellectual
thought, that thought transcends individual thinkers. I therefore owe it to my students a model of the
intellectual life that I believe to be worth pursuing, and to address them with conviction about the
rewards of that life. Still, this is an intimidating task.

What can I possibly offer men and women from every walk of life who so clearly understand
the value and the joy of labor? It seems silly to think I might say something to you that you don’t
already know, and considering your red and black regalia, considering the celebration that brings us
together today, I’m not foolish enough to think that I’m the smart one in the room.

For instance, I could use this opportunity to remind you that every move we make as members
of this honors society must be a move made for the benefit of all humanity. Examining literature,
particularly the way it works to shape larger cultural notions, helps us to examine ourselves and to be
critical of the contemporary moment as well as the history which has gone into creating that moment.
We are interested in the interplay of all the traditions of literature (Women’s, Southern, American, etc.)
all of which we are descendents. Sigma Tau Delta allows experiences and interactions that render us
concerned for the rights and well-beings of our classmates and of readers all over the world. Therefore,
the most I can do is welcome you to a planet full of Black men who care about repressive immigration
legislation, a land full of Hispanic women who care that people of Arab descent feel threatened by the
images made of them in American movies, Native Americans who care about the living conditions of
impoverished white people, Asians who, while opposing homophobic manipulations of the AIDS crisis, care about the rate at which African Americans are dying of AIDS.

In any kind of serious scholarship, it's easy to slip so far into analysis that we lose sight of what brought us into this business in the first place: our love of great writing. But love can't be confining. Sometimes it involves traveling to uncomfortable places, the area outside the fortress. If your love can't survive that, it will never be safe—no matter how high the gates you build around it. The intimacy brought about through literature turns history down to the scale of one, one to whom we can all relate.

Yes, I could explain to you the importance of living in and loving a multi-ethnic society, but because of your appreciation for other languages and religions and histories and ethical systems, you already know that our only enemy is he who believes that he must convert all people to his way of thinking. So I won’t bother you with a speech about the ways our value for diversity will lead to the progression of humankind. You already know that.

I also thought to say a few things about integrity, about freedom of expression, about peace. I could, for example, talk with you about how these things really have nothing to do with “houses or land, fine clothes or jewelry.” But that, too, seems a waste of my time here when I am speaking to so many English majors. You, before your counterparts in other departments, decided that the wise are not all bankers.

You chose fields of study that fly in the face of the myth that education is meant for the swelling of your pocketbooks rather than the emancipation of your minds. There are among you artists and scholars who have the audacity to see your creations and research as gifts rather than opportunities. Who am I to encourage you to use your degrees to change the present map of social and economic priorities so that financial gain does not trump the real needs of human beings? You already know that.

There is a voice in this world that claims that the goal of life is to reap monetary rewards, that financial security will be ours if only we do not challenge the status quo, if only we do not ask questions. But that voice would have the writer confined to her laptop. That voice would have us feel
that we are irrelevant observers who have nothing to do with hunger or war. Our textbooks and teachers have introduced us to many men and women whom we admire and idolize, and not one of those heroes listened to that voice. But, of course, you already know that.

Finally, I wondered if I could write a speech that might inspire you, but then I started thinking about us and from where we’ve come. At least one of us has seen your parents work blisters into their hands so that you might be able to go to college. At least one of us (point to self) heard that by this time you’d be in prison. At least one of us has spent the last four years working at a job where you can’t leave until five o’clock, and in spite of the fact that the job was in Oceanside, you always made it to campus without a speeding ticket, found a parking space, and were seated on time, in class with your book open by 6:00 o’clock. All of us made it to this point because we had enough trust in our God or our family or our professors or ourselves. You already know that. You know all about trust and faith.

You also know that education is life-long, and today’s celebration is only a break. Our classroom interaction allows us to question our assumptions because we come in contact with one another’s ideas. I know with certainty that the world is driven by text, by writing, and therefore I can be sure that no one is wasting time by pursuing the study of narrative creation, which is what I teach. Let me say it loudly—novels and stories and poems are not trivial. On the contrary, profound stories are a means of orienting ourselves within the cosmos. Literature is a compass that points to humankind’s true north. Everyone who has ever been moved by a poem knows this.

I’m not here to tell you about integrity or kindness, and you’re much too inspiring for me to attempt inspiring you. The most I can do is welcome you to tomorrow. Thank you. God bless you. And congratulations.