

The Garden Party

by [Paul Illidge](#) (June 2021)



The Garden Party, William Glackens, 1895

Tim Ziegler had chosen "The Garden Party" as the theme of his *Poetry in an Unconventional Context* presentation, the presentations being an inducement I offered my senior English students every spring after we completed the required *Poetry in a Conventional Context* unit (sonnets, ballads, famous 18th and 19th century lyric poetry, twentieth-century modern and contemporary) which, because of the way 20th century culture was changing as a result of technology, became harder each year for students to appreciate.

The 'Unconventionals' as I called them, were an opportunity for students to take matters into their own hands, exchange places with the teacher and create some poetry of their own. There was nothing that had to be written down or handed in, news that never failed to elicit cheers, whistles and desk-thumping.

Presentations would be live for the whole class to experience. They didn't need to take place in the classroom, the school, or in Toronto for that matter, provided a student could prove that the location was integral to the presentation and it could be organized within school policy. Most students chose to stay in school or on school property. The only stipulation on my part was that the presentation should in some fashion visibly reflect the commonly agreed-upon definition of poetry by William Wordsworth that we had used during our conventional study: "*Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.*"

The day before his presentation, Tim asked the class to meet him next day behind the school at 1:30, right after lunch, under the oaks on the lawn looking over the cricket field (this was a private school on the English model and, though only in a small way, the hundred and sixty-two year old cricket tradition proudly if obscurely continued). We were told to come prepared for some refreshment, fine music and

scintillating conversation—a proper English garden party.

The weather couldn't have been better. Sunny blue skies, a light breeze, a mid-May temperature in the low seventies as the thirty-two of us gathered on the lawn behind the school. The verdant grass freshly mown, the oak leaves a lush green, Tim had set up two round tables draped in white linen tablecloths, with colourful spring flowers in vases on each.

On one table were silver serving platters with tea sandwiches, cakes and cookies; on the other were four bottles of sparkling wine chilling in ice buckets, champagne glasses arranged in neat rows in front of them. Standing close by in a tuxedo, Tateo Nakajima, a student in the class who was a violin prodigy hoping to start a concert career when he finished school, played sprightly music by Mozart.

Elegant in white tie and tails, Tim welcomed us and with another student assisting, popped the corks, poured the sparkling wine and circulated among us offering something from the silver serving plates. When all glasses were charged, Tim raised his and offered a toast: "To the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings!"

"Here, here!" someone quipped, and we toasted.

The tasteful, convivial atmosphere continued for fifteen minutes or so (classes at that school at the time were forty minutes long), at which point Tateo suddenly stopped playing.

Tim asked us to return our glasses to the table and gather round. Done, he lifted the cloth on one table and folded it back, went to the other and did the same. He reached in and pulled out a canvas bag, opened it and distributed heavy duty safety goggles, then reached under the other table and brought out one, then another large canvas bag from which he took a four-foot length of lead plumbing-pipe, held it up

and instructed everyone to take a pipe from the bag.

Ready, though we didn't know for what, Tim moved to stand in front of us, like an officer before leading the charge. He pointed across the lawn toward the teachers' parking lot that ran behind the upper playing field.

"Let's go," he said calmly, and started walking.

We fell in behind him, quips and smart remarks flying until we reached an older-looking but still in decent condition two-door silver Chevy Chevelle sitting alone in the parking lot, where Tim called a halt. He checked to make sure everyone had their safety goggles on. "Okay," he said pointing at the silver Chevelle, "let's destroy it!"

No one moved. Befuddled, everyone looked at Tim.

"Destroy it?" someone asked uneasily.

"That's right. Destroy it."

"Whose car is it?"

"Don't worry," said Tim.

"What about the cops?"

"The cops can't come. The school's on private property."

"Come on," said Tim. "We don't have a lot of time."

"*All right!!*" yelled Dwight Hicks, a brawny lineman on the varsity football team. He ran up to the car and without a moment's hesitation raised his lead pipe and brought it crashing down on the windshield. The glass cracked but didn't shatter. It would take another whack. But before Dwight had raised his pipe for a repeat blow, the rest of the class, including me, converged on the vehicle like we'd become Jack and his group of boy savages in *Lord of the Flies*, and began

smashing the Chevelle for all we were worth—

“Tim!” I screamed, “what about the gas tank!”

“It’s okay, sir! I drained it!”

Whooping, swearing, laughing—cheering when the windshield finally caved in—some of the bolder climbed onto the roof swinging their pipes in a fury screaming *Ultimate Destructive Mode!* as they hacked away.

Another teacher at the school, my friend Jim Mackay, drove up in his Volkswagen Rabbit. He stopped, took in the wild scene and, laughing, rolled down his window.

“What’s going on, or should I ask?”

“Poetry project, Jim! *The spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings!*”

He laughed uproariously. “Carry on, Mr. Illidge!”

In ten minutes there wasn’t an inch of surface area on the Chevelle that wasn’t dented, twisted, bent or broken. The blitzkrieg petered out slowly. People stood back out of breath and panting, shouting compliments to Tim: *That was heavy, man. Way to go, Ziegler. A-plus-plus, Tim.*

Tim announced that class was over, thanked us all for coming to the garden party.

I hustled to make my next period class, got the lesson going then had to sit down, fearing that any minute I’d be called to the principal’s office like Robin Williams was in *Dead Poets Society* to explain what had been going on in the teachers’ parking lot during sixth period, the principal informing me, whatever my answer happened to be, that for exposing students to such unorthodox behaviour I was fired, effective immediately.

But no summons arrived.

At 3:30 I ran to check the teacher's parking lot. The fifteen or so cars that usually parked there were back in place. There was no sign of the Chevy Chevelle, not a speck of debris anywhere, the two tables were gone from under the oaks. There was not a shred of evidence that anything untoward had ever taken place, let alone a garden party.

I've been asked over the years, after relating this story, what mark I gave Tim for his unconventional presentation.

My response is always the same: *What mark would you have given him?*



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& Mail Best Book of 2014, and *Shakespeare for the E-generation: The Page, the Stage, the Digital Age*. His work appears regularly on Mental Health Talk.info

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