

Rewriting Myself Through Literature

As an incoming freshman in fall of 2018 at Pacific Lutheran University, becoming an English major with an emphasis in literature was not my intention. I despised my limited creativity and lackluster writing. In high school, my English teachers saw my coursework differently however. One person in particular, Mrs. Swigart, a sophisticated and sweet International Baccalaureate teacher said she could see me become an English professor someday. I smiled and shrugged off her compliment as I said, "Maybe". When the time came for me to sign up for my first collegiate classes, I decided to sign up for those that fulfilled the Nursing major's requirements. My intention was to become a nurse after graduation. Yet, when I finally took the classes that I signed up for, Biology and Psychology, I felt myself become miserable. I was unmotivated, scared, and lonely. The Biology and Psychology courses were equal in rigorous coursework. The questions on the overbearing tests demanded one single answer, an answer I could not provide no matter how much I studied. Additionally, a severe sense of competition lingered in the atmosphere of both courses as there was a limited amount of students who would be eligible for the Nursing major. This competitiveness amongst myself and my peers and the only one right answer tests increased my anxiety and in turn, made me feel lonesome.

I began to flunk all classes except for one, Writing 101. Writing 101 was an English course about how writing has developed in the 21st century. In this class I felt boundless, motivated, and passionate. Aside from my underdeveloped writing skills at the time, I learned that there was something beautiful about reading between the margins of the assigned readings. The class readings opened my eyes to the realization that I enjoyed reading articles that made me

reflect upon who I was and what meanings I took from them as I applied these into my surroundings.

One journal article I felt particularly close to was “Girl Power in a Digital World: Considering the Complexity of Gender, Literacy, and Technology” by Bronwyn T. Williams. This article spoke about the increased dangers of online literacy for women as online platforms are also a way for companies to harbor unrealistic expectations of what women should and shouldn’t look like. Williams’ journal made me realize how well I could resonate with her argument which made me re-evaluate the ways in which I have been reading digital works. Additionally, I incorporated her article into my essay entitled, “Antisocial Society”, in which I further explored how digital literacy has changed the way in which we, primarily women, interact with ourselves and with others. I felt joy when writing the “Antisocial Society” essay because the topic of gender excited my interest and because I found the topic to be of relevance both inside and outside of the classroom. Moreover, it was in realizing that I felt a genuine happiness with what I was reading and writing that I became very fond of the coursework I was completing in my English class. I found that an English major may not have been my intention, but rather, it was my calling. Through literature, I was re-igniting the parts of me that made me who I was, such as values and beliefs, which I either didn’t realize I had or did but was never fully aware of. With every text I read, I re-wrote my inner self as writing and literature made me question or rethink the way I view and appreciate what it means to be human.

After the course was over, I declared myself an English major with an emphasis in literature. As I prepare to undertake the last English course of my undergraduate studies, I have come to the realization that I have grown tremendously as an English major. Admittedly, I can’t help but to grin with slight embarrassment at the sight of my introductory English essays.

Underdeveloped claims and arguments undermined my written work. Even so, however, an ambitious drive to convey meaning from the readings could be detracted from these old papers of mine. As I re-read these essays, I have found that there exists a strong pattern of topics and themes that revolve around oppression. This pattern has been the main motivation for me to grow as an intellectual thinker and writer in my English major. The three main themes that I have noticed that I care and write for the most are race and identity, classism, and feminism. In this paper, I will be writing about how my main interests in these three themes have enhanced my intellectual growth as a thinker and writer in my literature major at PLU. As well as, about any questions that I like to ask and answer myself.

As a Mexican-American, I have been drawn to write and read about race and identity. This topic has become crucial to my intellectual growth as a thinker and writer because it has motivated me to write—if not about me—about characters who at least look like me. Characters and works from Latin-American authors that made me feel inspired to re-connect to my identity include: Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*, *Corazón* by Yesika Salgado, Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands: The New Mestiza*, *La Frontera*, and *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez. These texts, characters, and authors all taught me to appreciate writing and learning more about my heritage and culture. They taught me to value my personal voice of color while writing in the English language. Similarly, my peers who identify as students of color also mention that they feel genuinely more inclined to appreciate their heritage when they read texts which resemble their culture. During my time at PLU and even before my entrance into PLU, I had noticed a lack of attention in the education system to texts from ethnic authors who also identify as peoples of color. From this observation and from the Latin-American

authors who have inspired me to write, I have realized that I have wanted to write about topics that revolve around race and identity similar to my own.

In fact, the first paper I ever wrote at PLU was about my bilingual identity as both a Spanish and English speaker. In this paper, “A Biliterate”, I wrote about how speaking two different languages can act as a gate-opener because a bilingual speaker can speak to two different cultures through two different languages. For example, in my thesis I wrote, “I finally understood that language is my own literacy. Most importantly, it is the locked gate that separates foreigners from natives” (Morales, 1). What this quote means is that a lack of understanding in language can act as a cultural barrier. In another quote, I wrote, “My Spanish speaking friends talked about family in a language that sounded like home. Whereas my only English speaking friends spoke in a pop culture influenced way. We were different” (Morales, 4). In this quote, I realized that speaking in Spanish and English felt different due to the cultural aspect that both languages represented. Though I did not realize it then, I had been adding my own personal voice of color to the literature major as I wrote upon my race and identity. From this topic, I learned how important it is for not only me, but for other students of color to write about any aspect of their race and identity as it is a part of our intellectual growth that accepts our work and perspectives as important in the literature major.

So, why is it that I don't typically read assigned texts from ethnic authors? Or persons of color? I have come to the conclusion that this could be because there aren't enough literary works from persons of color to analyze in the American literary canon. As a student who has mostly been assigned novels from Euro-American writers throughout my academic career, writing about race and identity has enabled me to assert an ethnic authority as I learn that this is a way to combat institutionalized Euro-American novels which primarily focus on white

characters. Aside from my work on race and identity at PLU, I have also been drawn to texts that revolve around classism.

As a Mexican-American whose family emigrated from Mexico to the United States in the 1990s', I have always been conscious of my family's humble origin and socio-economical class. From this economic standpoint, I found myself able to relate to the main character from *The House On Mango Street*, Esperanza Cordero. Esperanza is a 12-year-old Mexican-American girl who shares her perspective on growing up in a low-class neighborhood in Chicago, Illinois. Within the novel, she deals with the limitations that low-income communities deal with on a daily basis, something of which I have witnessed myself in present reality. In addition to this self-awareness from Esperanza, I learned through countless literature texts that class systems are used to keep people suppressed, I have realized that classism is a topic of which I find myself writing about.

Take for instance, *Oil on Water* by Helon Habilla. This novel revolves around two main protagonists who are journalists, Rufus and Zaq. Through both characters, the novel shows readers the mistreatment of impoverished communities in Nigeria. In fact, large oil companies left the people within these communities to succumb to deprivation by the depletion of their surrounding environments through the extraction of oil. These impoverished communities did not have the means to fight against these large corporations and were thus forced to live under harsh conditions that endangered both their food and their already-scarcely clean water. This taught me that both in the United States and around the globe, class impacts the way in which ethnic groups are treated by their class and their socio-economical position. In my global literature course, I wrote an essay called "The Challenges of Environmental Justice in Global Literature". In this essay, I wrote about the novel, *Animal's People* by Indra Sinha which was

about the aftermath effects on the people of India from the Bhopal chemical disaster. I argued that “the challenges Sinha addresses in his novel regarding environmental movements include: the visibility of the affected communities in written and mediated works, class, situations and circumstances of poverty, scientific resources, cultural and discriminate power structures, and foreign saviors” (Morales, 2). Moreover, I realized that the Bhopal chemical disaster kept the affected people of India under impoverished conditions and in the class of the poor. This class in which the people were in kept them from seeking out medical treatment and resulted in an increase in birth defects and death as the environment kept the people in the class of the poor. From this topic, I have learned that this scenario, in which a class is limited by their environment, isn’t only talked about in literature but rather is a circumstance which happens to Americas as well.

This analysis has made me raise additional questions about other environmental problems. For example, think about the Flint Michigan water crises which is still only affecting low-income residents to this day. How is it that low-income residents, mostly minority groups, are drinking contaminated water in one of the most developed countries in the world? Though I do not have an answer to this question, I have realized that this is a question I may not have asked had I not read literature that revolved around classism. Similarly, in my essay, I wrote, “The poor do not have the financial resources, another challenge, to plan for a ‘better’ future, they are living preoccupied with the moment of now” (Morales 3). Literature has opened my eyes to the realization that this narrative derived from classism is something that a lot of low-income communities in America struggle with today. In this sense, the theme of classism has made me realize that I have grown as an intellectual thinker and writer. Another theme that I am highly interested in writing about is that of feminism.

As a person who identifies as female, the theme of feminism in literature is one that I am very passionate about as it has aided me to grow as a thinker and writer. As a female whose family comes from a humble socio-economical class, I have noted inadequacies both in literature and in the real-world. Such that both class and gender, particularly for females, can influence the way in which we are treated in a dormant male-led society. Moreover, the theme of feminism in literature is one in which I have written papers in.

For instance, in my class, studies in theory and criticism, I wrote a paper about *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston. My paper was titled “Patriarchal Values and Submission in: Their Eyes Were Watching God”. In my paper, I said “by using a feminist lens, I argue that Zora Neale Hurston’s novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, reinforces a patriarchal agenda—one in which men limit a woman’s interactions; to the point of submission—through Janie Crawford’s passive to non-existent interaction with her three domineering marriages” (Morales, 2). Through the characterization of Janie Crawford’s three marriages in the novel, I wrote about how she was living in a male-dominated society. Though I mentioned that the novel reinforces a patriarchal agenda, what I really meant to write was that the novel undermines a patriarchal agenda as Janie Crawford ends up unmarried at the end of the novel. This type of analysis of the novel helped assert my voice as an emergent literary critic because I learned that I was able to come up with my own analysis about the novel. What I mean about coming up with my own analysis is that I did not have to read the work of other literary scholars to come up with an interpretation of the novel. Similarly, in my essay, I argue, “Janie as a character represents the submissive patriarchal woman that cannot escape the loop of male dominance” (Morales, 4). In this quote, I mention that Janie’s relationships throughout the novel assert that in a male-led

society, their dominance will always affect the main heroine Janie. In this paper, I learned that male dominance in the current age is still as present as it was in the late 1930s’.

Though I did not ask any questions in my paper, I now wonder if the patriarchal society in which we live in will improve in terms of gender equality in the next fifty years as more literature written by women writers increases? Though I could not answer this question, I have a suspicion that literature written by female writers will continue to raise awareness to the aspect of gender equality in this country. Thus, the theme of feminism in literature has made a contribution to my intellectual thinking and writing.

The three themes I have mentioned—race and identity, classism, and feminism—revolve around the interests and most passionate work I have both written and read at PLU as a literature major. Though I had not noticed that these themes were ones that were central and personal to my own identity, I have come to realize now that I have read these themes in the same manner in which I now read and analyze the world around me. This is the objective of any literature major. The connection of the texts that we interpret into that of the world around us. If I could change one thing before my freshman year at PLU, it would have been to have chosen the English major. Not the Nursing major. In this paper, I wrote about questions that I asked myself, as well as, how the three themes and interests that I have written and cared for the most have enhanced my intellectual growth as a thinker and writer in my time at PLU as a literature major.