

English 481  
Reflective Essay for Portfolio  
April 23, 2004

### **Walking the Literary Path: A Reflective Journey**

Reading has always been a part of my life. However, during my time at UW Oshkosh, the study of literature has consumed most of my waking moments. Of course, I have done other things, but the more I have studied, the more connections I see between the written page and the world in which I live. I have learned much about the cannon, multicultural texts, literary discourse, and formal writing. However, the more I learn, the more I realize what I do not know. Learning is a lifelong process and will not stop with the completion of my degree. Reflections are difficult to look into because we see what was lacking. On the other hand, nothing could be more valuable. The process of looking back has enabled me to complete this portfolio, and it has also allowed me to discover a great deal about myself as a student of English. I have constructed this essay to reflect a dynamic process. That is when I write a paper, it is not (I hope) permanently filed away on my hard drive, nor is it hidden in the cobwebs of my long-term memory. Rather, looking back at earlier paper has often inspired me to expand upon an idea in a new paper. Thus I have included samples of early papers, followed by the more polished works that have grown out them.

The transition from reading for recreation and reading with the critical eye of an English major was a difficult one for me. I had always thought about and interpreted text. What I had trouble with was creating a sustained textual analysis. The first inclusion in this portfolio, a short essay from 281, illustrates my early tendency to jump around, to want to say everything in one paper. I revised this paper several times before it was at all coherent, and looking back, I can see how much I still had to learn about expository writing. I chose to write this particular paper about

Emily Dickinson's "A Bird Came Down the Walk," a poem I have admired since high school. While this paper lacks focus of critical lens and the polish of an experienced writer, it does capture my reverence for Dickinson's poetic genius. Rough as it may be, this paper was a good starting point. Years later, it would help delve into a more extensive study of Dickinson's work.

The next selection is appropriately, a longer piece on Dickinson. Written for Noelle Baker's Women's Personal Narratives class, it was developed towards the end of my program. Here, I address the issue of Dickinson's construction of a sexual self in the letter-poems of *Open Me Carefully*. I explore Dickinson's representation nature and its connection to female sexuality and homoeroticism. Unlike the 281 Dickinson paper, this one is written from a critical stance, actually a combination of two—queer theory and feminism. My thesis, too, is much more focused in this paper. Unlike the earlier paper, I use secondary sources, which strengthens my argument. For the most part this is a sustained textual analysis. However, looking back, I see that I may still have been trying to do too much in fifteen pages. Effective editing is an art that I still need to work. The main reason I have included this paper is that preparing it allowed me to read Dickinson through a strange and wonderful lens. The process of writing this paper shattered the image of Dickinson as a Victorian porcelain doll. The spinster recluse in a white dress, whom I met in my high school textbooks, was transformed into a woman with progressive thoughts and human desires. It called into question everything I had been told about a literary figure. The result was a cognitive dissonance that Vygotsky would have been proud of. I am proud of this paper not because it is perfection; there is no such thing in the study of English. Rather, I hold it up as an example because of the learning process out of which it evolved.

The second longer paper is also part of a learning process. After several novel attempts at feminist criticism, I began to develop more focused pieces. This paper, the final piece for Dr.

Thaine Stearns' Reading Virginia Woolf class is one such piece. Virginia Woolf is such a duplicitous writer that it was difficult for me to pick a topic narrow enough to cover in 17 pages. However, there was a theme that I saw as a consistent thread throughout her novels. There is, I believe, a strong connection between the devastation of war and the tragedy of a patriarchal marriage, which this paper explores in depth. This was a connection that I defended throughout our class discussions, one that many of my classmates did not see as a central theme in the texts. However, I was able to find some secondary support for my thesis. This is one of my favorite papers, and I contend that it is reasonably well argument. However, like many of my longer pieces, it lacks a certain amount of editing. I had so much to say, and not enough pages to say it in. This could almost be turned into a book rather than an essay less than 20 pages long. However, it is focused piece in that it stays on topic, carefully examining text passages and defending the thesis. One of the problems I encountered in this paper was narrowing down the secondary sources. Virginia Woolf has been the subject of so much literary criticism, in that it was difficult to be able to write about all the sources I had read. If I would rewrite this paper, I would perhaps discuss more sources with the aid of footnotes. I am also a student of history, so I was able to make many connections between Woolf's texts and WWI and the resulting Modernist school of thought. Such connections make the study of literature worthwhile.

The study of Shakespeare allowed me to make similar connections, between text and world, past and present. The fourth paper in my portfolio is a longer piece that reads Othello through a feminist lens. It explores the paradoxical society (with a female monarch, but a patriarchal social structure) in which Shakespeare lived and wrote. As with the Virginia Woolf piece, I struggled with narrowing down the sources. Shakespeare has been studied for so long that there is a seemingly endless body of criticism. I wish that I had chosen sources more

carefully, and that I had at least discussed some of the other secondary pieces I had come across, at least in footnotes. Looking back, I also realize that I should have gone into a little bit more historical background, perhaps discussing martial conventions and property laws, as these were central to my thesis.

The next piece is also one of historical significance, dealing with Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. "*Beloved, Bleeding Tree*," written for English 378, *The American Novel*, explores the connection between the physical scars of slavery and its haunting psychological effects. This is an earlier piece in my program. Consequently, it is a bit rough. I try to accomplish far too much in nine pages. Quotations are appropriate, but not fully explained. This paper does not always maintain a sustained textual analysis. However, what is written is thoughtful. Time and experience were needed before I would be able to accomplish the task of this particular paper. I have not included this piece because it exemplifies by written work; indeed, I have produced far better pieces. Instead, it is in this portfolio because it was a starting point. Before *Beloved*, the closest things I had read to an American slave narrative were Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. As a high school reader, the only place I had read a slave's story was on pages written by white authors. It was perhaps for this reason that *Beloved* affected me so deeply. When I was searching for a manageable topic for my 481 paper, my mind drifted back to this paper and an idea began to form.

As a future high school teacher, I do not want my students to have a limited literary experience—nor do I want them to wait until college to be profoundly affected by a piece like *Beloved*. Thus my final piece, the 481 paper, argues that neo-slave narratives have a place in the curriculum. This paper explores the differences between neo-slave narratives and nineteenth-century novels, such as Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. For many

reasons, the former have been the preferred mode of instruction. However, these texts cannot be the only exposure secondary school students get to slavery in literature, because then we run the risk of continuing to silence the slave. This is an appropriate final paper in that it combines my three major fields of study: English, pedagogy, and history. Infused with teaching ideas, this piece is a transitional one, allowing me to move from a student of English to a teacher of one.