

Portfolio Framing Essay

The beginning of my interest in English Literature did not come from a love of books or writing. My interest in English came not as a form of art, but as a concept of language itself. Language has a unique way of shaping and defining the ways societies interact with one another, socially construct mannerisms, and even societal norms. I find this aspect of language to be often overlooked yet highly intriguing. For this reason, I am fascinated and intensely interested in learning about other cultures around the world, and there is one in particular that I would like to immerse myself within and experience its beauty and sociality, as well as its problems myself. The culture I am referring to is the intriguing customs of Japanese society. With the goal of living in Japan and experiencing their culture while sharing my own draws me towards English. Through English literature, not only will I understand more about my own culture from a more intimate perspective, but it helps me identify how I came to be who I am and how English speaking and Western societies have developed for both the better and the worst. With this in mind, I began studying global literature in order to get a broader understanding of cultural perspectives from around the world.

I deeply want to be an English teacher abroad. This career would allow me to ask questions about the differences between other cultures and my own. If I can teach the English language abroad, I will not only be providing a service for people eager to learn my native language, but I can hopefully use some of my literary knowledge to provide them with different cultural perspectives and new ideas as well. Through my time studying English literature I have learned a lot about my own ways of thinking and about many of the values I hold dear. Since having learned about and practicing different lenses with the help of Lois Tyson, my

interpretations of novels have been greatly improved upon and I can interpret texts better than before and find more meaning within them. Novels such as *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, has helped give me a much deeper look into Marxism and the problems ingrained in a capitalist society. *Through the Arc of the Rainforest*, gives a unique perspective about the problems of environmental damage and the health risks it poses to not only ecology but to humans as well. And although these books have helped me understand my Marxist and environmental ideologies, I naturally read and criticize nearly every book through a historical lens. Countless novels either fictional or nonfiction have provided enriching details and insight about what American society found important in the past and still value to this day. It is refreshing to read novels such as F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, where materialism is perceived by Americans to be the solution towards finding happiness, but by the end of all Gatsby's possessions are meaningless because they did not help him forge any deep friendships or relationships. It was all merely an illusion of happiness and success. In John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, we learn about how historical, social, and economic circumstances have divided Americans in times of hardship, as well as how altruism prevailed among the poor migrant farmers. Two very real issues that have become more relevant than ever in our current days. These themes are important to analyze because it is important to understand how my American cultural perspectives may differentiate from another. While Americans may value individualism and material possessions, other cultures may find more importance in collectivism and spirituality. I think having an openness to criticize my own culture will help me free myself from my own prejudices and with it, my newer cultural experiences will be received more eagerly with a sense of refreshment.

Although Zora Neale Hurston's masterpiece, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is most critically acclaimed for its pro-feminist qualities, I had noticed a lot of Marxist criticisms about

capitalist consumerism within her story that resonated with me more. Before learning about critical reading theories, I am fairly certain I would not have spotted the capitalist criticisms in Hurston's novel. Lois Tyson pointed out to me that, "From a classist perspective, people at the top of the social scale are naturally superior to those below them: those at the top are more intelligent, more responsible, more trustworthy, more ethical, and so on." This made a lot of sense when you looked at Hurston's character, Joe Starks. Tyson helped me realize that Joe was given this superiority using the money he earned in a poor town. It gave him an authoritative voice like many of the billionaires we live under today. "People were willing to listen to Joe because he flexed his power by purchasing over a hundred acres of land as soon as he arrived; bought the first light in the town, opened a store, a post office, and became the mayor" (Schatz "Capitalist Behavior" 4). This is evident today even. Michael Bloomberg in very much the same way, gained power through money, and with that power was able to become the Mayor of New York City. These are just two examples of wealth at different scales. I do believe capitalism is a good system to a point, but in our current day it seems to me like it is reaching a breaking point and a lot more people are rightfully becoming more critical about it and we are asking, when does enough become enough?

Environmentalism has become something I am much more concerned about as well. Through the work of Yamashita in her novel, *Through the Arc of the Rainforest*, she addresses the issue of pollution and the ecological damage caused by humans. By looking into this closer, I referred to Jain and Shalina's journal article where they note, "Yamashita depicts the Matacão as a material manifestation of garbage from around the world that has made its way to the Amazon." The Matacão in her story is a new recently discovered wonder of the world found in the rainforest, later in the story it is discovered to be made of plastic, which is symbolic of the

humanity's problem of waste disposal much like another area Yamashita she describes. "72 kilometers outside of Matacão there is "an area that resembles an enormous parking lot, filled with aircraft and vehicles of every sort of description. The planes and cars had been abandoned for several decades. . . a number of the vehicles seem to be slipping into a large pit of grey, sticky goop. . . discovered to be napalm." (Yamashita 99). Furthermore, "within this heap of vehicular waste, it is discovered the rats are filled with toxic bile and serves as a demonstration not only how toxic waste affects wildlife but manages to work its way up the food chain to affect humans as well" (Schatz "Interesting Environmental Narrative" 5). I believe those two examples of Yamashita served as a response to "the former president of the World Bank, Lawrence Summer's advocacy of transferring the garbage and pollution-causing industries from the developed countries to the less developed ones such as Brazil (Nixon, 1)" (Schatz 5). and the lack of empathy we share for our fellow mankind and the wildlife of these regions. If it were not for English studies stressing the importance of looking more into the words of the text, I believe I would have missed the deeper inclinations of Yamashita's bizarre and whacky story. While at first it seems that her writing is focused on narrating the absurd, her book is actually a carefully written work of satire that expose the very real threats in our current day and distant futures unless they become quickly addressed. This would have easily been lost on me if it were not for my study of English and environmental literature course. I cannot help but look for these underlying themes when I read novels today.

Finally, it does not matter what book I am reading, whether it is *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Oil on Water*, or even *The Great Gatsby*. For every book I read, I can't help but take in consideration the author, the time period, and the social discourses that may have been happening during the moment they were alive and writing the novel in question. I always use a blend of New Criticism

and Historical lenses to look at a text differently. I believe this is incredibly important because without considering the time period some writings can be perceived as infinitely more offensive in today's societal standards. The use of offensive terms today would have been received much more differently one hundred years ago, but at the same time can still be racist in the past and today. That is also important to realize. Not everything is able to be excused, but to better understand some literature, perspective is important. For instance, in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, there was an expectancy at the time for women "to be models of submissiveness, purity, and domesticity" (Schatz "Overcoming Slavery" 1). With this idea, it connects easily with more conservative ideologies in which "Traditional gender roles, cast men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive; they cast women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive (Tyson 81) (Schatz "Strengthened Reader" 9). However, the idea of what it means to be a woman today has changed drastically and the opinions to that answer would differ much greatly today than it would have in the past. Although F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote *The Great Gatsby* during the Harlem Renaissance, yet only has a strange absence of black characters in the setting of New York, may suggest negative connotations about his stance on racial equality. But more than anything close reading is a passion of mine. It is my favorite thing to do when I read a novel. While it is always something I have done, I think PLU's influence has helped me greatly improve on it. This is important to me because, "I do not always find critical lenses within a text, but I do think close reading is great for critical thinking. It helps me think about other writings I have read and allows me to connect some texts to philosophy, which is something I really enjoy doing" (Schatz 3).

While I still hold some of my older reading habits dear and indispensable it is without question that PLU has greatly influenced the way I read English literature. With these new ideas

it greatly helped me understand how Western values have made me who I am today and this kind of self-discovery has really helped me loosen some of the more negative values my culture has provided. Through the works of literature, I have developed more critical views about the affects of consumerism, such as the value Americans hold towards material possessions. I have learned material things only hold as much value as we ourselves prescribe to them. I no longer feel a deep desire to wear designer clothes, or own a nice car, because I have come to the terms that is all essentially meaningless. It does not make anybody a better person, but instead seeks for attention and envy. Through books like *The Grapes of Wrath*, I have come to better understand the importance of caring for my fellow human beings and how sharing hardships with others can build stronger friendships and communities. Caring for people really is one of the greatest gifts one person can give to another. It can build common ground between people and alleviate the damaging false pretenses we hold toward each other. People united are stronger than people divided. Literature has helped me better recognize the issues of patriarchy, and environmental damages too. I now have a greater understanding for the hardships women face in their day to day lives. The consequences human decisions make do not just affect our mental health but affect the environments we live in and the innocent animals who inhabit them. Overall literature has helped me grow as a person altogether. It has helped me broaden my mind and think of alternative solutions and see other values that I different cultures hold dear. I can read about the differences and commonality of our fellow humanity through texts which is something I have found to be invaluable. Some of these important outlooks on life I believe I will find through Japanese culture, while others I am sure will remain unchanged from the very roots I was raised to believe, but I think having the perspective of two very different ways of living and interacting

with others can help allow me to understand the world and why people have very different ways of thinking.

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