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Lit 190

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Reflective Essay: On approaching the Completion of a Degree in Literature

What good is an education in literature? In the most reductive approach, an education in literature benefits the "successful student" (i.e. me, if I can only finish my thesis) in two primary ways: by teaching them critical thinking skills and writing skills. This means that we should be able to sufficiently analyze literary artifacts and then communicate that analysis to others, which skill should ideally be transferable to other cultural arenas outside of literature. The emphasis is on skills acquired, not on information assimilated. The Literature and Culture learning outcomes don't say anything about memorizing the works of Nathaniel Hawthorne. And yet, all anyone wants to know when they learn you are a literature major is who your favorite author is (and of course what you will do with your degree). Well I don't have a favorite author. I usually answer Hemmingway, which doesn't score me any points with the hipster set for obscurity or degree of author's marginalization. But I digress. As I have said, this is a reductive analysis of an education in literature. Besides, I have written about the utility of studying literature in a general way already (see attached essay) and I will try not to repeat myself. In that essay I

outline that utility in general and quantifiable terms and I will try to focus on the qualitative aspects here as well as provide some of my personal experience and work as proof of having benefited by an education in literature. As I hope to demonstrate, the benefits of such an education are not entirely reducible, which is why studying literature is hard to talk about in utilitarian terms and thus why it is frustrating to answer questions regarding how I intend to use my degree. After all, it is not, in my opinion, as important how I use my degree, as it is how I use my education.

First, in addressing the benefits of my education I should address my "success" as a student. To show that I have developed the skills described in the outcomes for the major I've attached "Criticism of In B Flat," a paper I wrote for the literary criticism course offered last semester. It is about postmodernism and the Internet. I've chosen this piece because I believe it most adequately shows a fulfillment of several of the learning outcomes. In it I apply some of the techniques of literary analysis to a non-literary artifact and defend that artifact against some of the more cynical postmodernist critics, particularly Baudrillard. In addressing those critics I display an ability to interpret the texts that they have written, "with due sensitivity" to both the cues therein and the cues present in the postmodern society that they critique. I also touch on the aesthetic qualities of the artifact and examine the ethical dimensions of cultural production in the Internet age. This piece of writing and others, I believe exhibit my ability to articulate myself in writing, "cogently and with sensitivity to context."

I do not wish to dwell on these points, as the paper should speak for itself. However, I should mention speech as well. In regards to articulating my "interpretations and evaluations" in speech, aside from having demonstrated this ability in numerous class presentations, I co-presented my analysis of an experimental class curriculum in studying the life and literature of Mark Twain alongside Dr. Gregg Camfield at the American Literature Association conference in Boston. The invitation to attend the conference and my performance there, which both Professors Camfield and Goggans can vouch for, should prove my merit in this aspect of my academic accomplishment.

I would also be remiss if I didn't mention the benefit that studying literature has had on my creative writing. I have attached a poem of mine, the abridged title of which is *The Rites of Spring*, which I hope exemplifies some proficiency and creativity in the practice of that form. (A comparison of old and new work might be more illustrative of an improvement but would require more space than I care to invest) In addition to being able to make cool allusions, like the one in the title to Igor Stravinsky's musical composition, which I learned about in the class Literary Genres, and the one to William Butler Yeats' theory of historical motion, I have improved in my execution of poetry. The same is true for fiction, non-fiction and of course essay writing, which is creative at its best. My letter writing, however, could stand some improvement. But as I mentioned in the essay on the utility of studying literature, citing the experience of Benjamin Franklin, there is nothing like reading good writing to improve your own.

Speaking of Benjamin Franklin, there's a benefit to one's sense of history to be had from an education in literature as well. Not to mention one's sense of psychology, philosophy and the sciences. Better, perhaps, to say that one partakes in studying all of the humanities when one studies any of the humanities. Nevertheless no subject is as gregarious as literature, and its reach extends beyond the liberal arts. I have studied environmental literature, which incorporates biology and theories of ecology. I have read a Thomas Pynchon short story about entropy. I have read the autobiography of the slave cum free man Frederic Douglass and the letters of Dr. Martin Luther King. I learned more about the state of California, where I have lived all my life, in a literature class than I had ever previously learned. In a class about Greek and Roman mythology I learned a great deal about humanity and art.

And that's what is really important to keep in mind when considering the value of my education. What is it really all about? It's about studying art; a certain kind of art in particular, but as I have demonstrated the same techniques of study and analysis learned in studying literature can be used elsewhere. Art is what humans do. That's all there really is, whether it's baking bread or making a wind-mill out of a bicycle (some art is functional). If all of the world's problems were solved tomorrow, or if a global catastrophe were to destroy civilization as we know it, we would still be making art the next day, and the day after that. So in studying literature, I'm studying and interpreting the value of what humans produce, and in turn what I produce and the myriad connections in between.

All of this adds up to making me a more well rounded person. Having studied literature will indubitably inform my choice of a career and it has already shaped my future prospects but that is a bi-product, or perhaps a co-product. The way I see it, I could be an auto mechanic and still benefit from my education. In fact, I think auto mechanics should benefit from my education. I think it makes better people. Am I being egalitarian or presumptive? Anyhow, an analogy: The philosopher Allan Watts said that the way yoga is sold in America is that it is supposed to be good for you. But, he contended, it is the one thing that is absolutely not supposed to be good for you, that is its own end. I'd like to think of a liberal arts education in similar terms. It is its own end. But of course, in both cases that's rubbish. Yoga is good for you and so is higher education. But if you do one to become more flexible and the other to get a higher paying job then you're missing part of the point. Life should be rich, and studying literature has enriched my life. I'll show you what I mean.

For a long time I couldn't imagine why I would go to college at all, let alone what major I might choose if I did go. The reasons for this ambivalence might form another essay entirely, so suffice it to say for now that I was unaware of any adequate incentives. Ironically, it would take going to college despite my reticence to find out why I might actually benefit from the experience. The knowledge gained would be *a posteriori*, as most knowledge may turn out to be, contrary to my naïve conception of the world. Thus, if life is what I make of it then I must seek out the raw materials for myself; they will not come to me. A friend of mine once said that in life, bad things happen to you no matter what but that you have to work to make the good ones come, by and large. Studying literature has been for me a way to figure

out what the good things are and to see how I might come by them. That is, the greatest thing I've learned in college is how to learn. I may retain some particulars but no erudition is justifiable in and of itself; no raw material is worth more than the will and wisdom to shape it.