**Integrated writing and literature study abroad: final question and sample answer**

Student Essay #1 Final Exam

Question: What have I learned about British literature while on this study abroad?

Answer: The main thing I learned, while on this study abroad, about British literature, was attaching a real place where I had been to the imagined world I had previously read and studied about 90% of the course pack reading in classes I had taken already in my undergrad and Masters programs: not much of it was new to me. And while I benefited from another reading of them, and discussion with my professors and fellow students, the main benefit was going to the places these texts spoke about. I had never been to the United Kingdom before this trip: that was the new thing for me.

In one of the additional books I was reading for this 590 Directed Readings course, it said that the good travel writer can write about place in such a way so as to let the outside imagine the place and the inside recognize it: I feel that, though I’m certainly not what could be considered an insider of any of the places we have visited on this trip, that I have become closer to that in having at least seen these places once, places that previously had existed for me entirely in my imagination. I will never be able to read the Bronte sisters again without remembering the 20 mile hike we took over the heathered moores, or read Wordsworth’s poems without recalling this idyllic paradise at Rydal Mount where he retired, or Arther Ransome’s (a children’s author I had read years ago) Lake District where he, and the children in his novels, went sailing in the summers, or Thomas Hardy’s novels without thinking of his coastal and pastoral landscape. Indeed, after we visited Boscastle, perhaps my favourite place on the trip, I taught, and read for the first time, A Pair of Blue Eyes, which I had been told Hardy had placed his novel. This experience was different than my other reading (not just the works on this trip, but in general) because it was perhaps one of the first times I had been to a place before reading about it, and reconstructing the place I had seen physically to match the place I would then imagine in the novel. To have a mental picture of the places I’ve read about seems to me, on paper, a rather insignificant experience, but it is one I will forever have—this place closer to insider—every time I read a piece of British literature now.

But what is more is something I heard during our last Sunday in church, in the Ward in Cambridge. Someone, I believe in Sunday School, made the comment that more important than walking where Jesus walked was to walk how he walked (metaphorically). We had spent the previous several weeks walking where some of the greatest British writers had walked, and yet, this was not the most important thing I could learn. If I want to be a good writer—which I do—I’ve realized that the most important thing I can do is to adopt those habits and practices that perhaps they shared that allowed them to become good writers. One of them, I’ve realized, is to write daily recordings of the world around me, something I’ve tried to do on this trip, and which I would like to bring back with me when I go home.

Question: What have I learned about myself, God, and others while on this study abroad?

Answer: Most of the things I learned while on this study abroad were about myself, which surprised me, because I feel I know myself pretty well by now, and have been on different types of trips and different living situations over the years. My introverted self learned I enjoy travelling in a large group more than I thought I would. I’ve learned that this group pulled together to help out, whether it was helping others with luggage or dishes or meals. People were, for the most part, very considerate and thoughtful of others. I learned that there are a lot of other people who also need their alone time, and that we all have a lot more in common than we have not in common. Though we have differences and some people’s actions occasionally were annoying for whatever reason, for the most part, I found myself enjoying being with and part of the group.

Something I did not expect on this trip was for me to think so much about my life and the direction it would be taking in the next few months and years: it surprised me that this was on my mind so much now, and I was grateful I had peers and friends I could talk with about it. One of the most surprising things on this trip for me was my discovery of my desire and need to play. Having Benj(?) on the trip was such a treat and a blessing: he was a catalyst for this discovery, and a great playmate. Though personal, I think it’s relevant to say that in the past few years I’ve had a growing concern about my future role as a mother, especially as I’m getting older and don’t feel I have nearly as much energy as I had when I was 20. Included in that was a worry that, if and when I do get married and have children (a worry in and of itself), I wouldn’t have enough energy, or perhaps even the desire, to play with my children. Numerous times on this trip, I’ve just wanted to play, and I instinctively look for Benj to join me, or join in when he wants to. Even when he’s not there I’ve discovered I have this need and desire to play, whether it’s frolicking in a meadow, dressing up in play clothes, having a sword fight, or going on a play structure and climbing up and down it. While this might sound elementary, it was an important discovery for me to make personally, and I feel it also plays an important role in my spirituality and writing as well. Christ said that we are to “become like a little child,” and I think He’s talking about more than humility and submissiveness there. I think, though perhaps I’m projecting on to it, He’s also talking about a child’s sense of awe. That sense of awe seems to be essential as a creative writer, especially a personal essayist, as I look at the world around me and try to present it in the unique way I view it. I think, as is usually the case with me, I’ll discover more things I’ve learned from this experience after I’ve gone home and more time has passed.

Student Essay #2 Final Exam

Some thoughts from my travels

As we have been ambling through the United Kingdom, I have realized that literature and creative writing is really an amble. There is a lot of freedom to roam through ideas in the way that we do our hikes. We are less concerned with making it to our destination as we are with making connections along the way. I have learned that anything can become an essay or a story or a poem. This came from reading thought provoking work about toast, moths, pigeons and cows. I enjoyed the day that we had the assignment to come up with ten essay ideas because it helped me look around and be more fascinated with the things I observed. I think that writing helps me become more curious and thoughtful about my life.

So I have realized that writing can be free and it can be inspired by simple things, but I have also learned that I need to push myself to discover deeper and deeper layers of meaning in my own writing and in the things I read. I really appreciated the feedback that I got on my papers because instead of talking to me about my writing mechanics, both Steve and John asked me questions that made me think farther and uncover new levels on the issues I chose to write about. Our class discussions also really helped me do that with our readings. I often just understand the first layer of what is happening in a poem or story, and I can pick out little phrases that are particularly beautiful or interesting. But in class we were asked questions that guided me toward bigger issues, like the purpose of art, ways of coping with tragedy, the value of a community, etc.

While visiting the setting and homes of writers I have learned the importance of place in literature and creative writing. Many times while hiking in the green woods and fields, or up a rocky cliff I understood how Lord of the Rings was born in this country. I also felt the mystery of Merlin's Cave and the fallen greatness of Tintagel Castle and understood the desire to create legends about King Arthur and Gwenivere. I also felt inspired to write my own stories or poems about certain places I visited. I really want to write a story about a miner after visiting the big pit in Wales, and I would love to write something, maybe a poem, about a nun pacing in prayer at Tintern Abbey as they are forced to leave. I love that now I have a way to imagine the places that so many great stories take place. I think that I will connect with a lot of literature because of the places I have seen.

I have also realized that, while place has a huge effect on literature, this does not bind its influence. Great literature is able to reach all kinds of people at different times in history. I loved seeing Shakespeare plays performed live, especially when, in Stratford, they made the plays more contemporary. It showed me that Shakespeare's work really is timeless because power hunger, deceit, prejudice, the risk of love, etc. are universal human issues. I especially loved the performance of Every Man because it was originally written so long ago, but it was cleverly rewritten to catch the attention of a modern audience. Our modern literature does not often moralize, but that play made me think about the kind of person I am, and how comfortable I would be acknowledging all my actions and desires to God. It made me want to live more gratefully every day and love the people around me.

My experiences on this trip have really helped me understand myself in new positive ways. For one, I have rediscovered many interests and passions. Right before this trip I was serving as a missionary. This required me to sacrifice I lot of the things I love in order to spend my time serving and teaching and developing spiritually. I love all that I learned from that, but I felt some loss of identity in the experience and I finished my mission feeling a lot of self doubt. Since being here I have remembered that I love art so much. I remembered that I enjoy being along sometimes to recharge and think. I remembered that I feel so free and happy in nature. I rediscovered that music reaches the deepest nerves of my soul.

I also discovered new things that I didn't know about myself. I realized that I am very sensitive to violence and the suffering of other human beings. I was so affected my the war museum, and the torture in Othello that I felt sick and couldn't interact very well with people for a while after. I also learned, from conversations and things I read, that sexuality is a God-given attribute that should be nourished and used for good. I learned how much writing helps me think and understand myself and my experiences. I have learned the value of leisure time. I like to work hard and be productive, but this trip has taught me that having quiet, slow, chill time is so good for my overall happiness. I have learned that being with people, exercising, eating good healthy foods and being creative makes me happy. I am the most grateful that on this trip I have learned or relearned how to love myself. I really love myself. I think I am funny and kind and good and enthusiastic and interesting and capable of doing great things. I felt so insecure six months ago, and now I feel so happy with myself. I have also learned some things that I want to improve about myself. I want to become more open, honest and brave and be better at communicating. The whole storming thing was difficult for me because I usually try to avoid conflict at all costs, but I want to learn to confront them in a loving way rather than just complaining about them to myself or outside parties.

I think that my connections with people here has been a huge contributing factor to my happiness. I made real efforts to be friends with the people on this program. There are some people who I didn't connect as well with even though I tried. I think that is okay and natural. I regret not trying harder with some people though, so I want to give more people time in the future. I think I prefer having a few close friends to having a ton of people I am friends with, but it was a good stretch to become a part of a big group. I grew to really love them. This took effort, but the things that helped me were praying for them, and for the ability to love them, being in nature, laughing, validating people, making physical contact, openly sharing experiences, and trying to understand them. Something I learned is that as soon as I recognize someone is in need of love or help, I am automatically provided with love for them or desire to help. It is instinctual.

I have been so pleasantly surprised about people. There were some people I was intimidated or annoyed by before the trip, and now I know that they are like me, with their own insecurities, nerdy interests, hopes and dreams, and lovable quirks. I have made some of my dearest friends on this trip. I have been so close to my sisters my whole life that I haven't really felt the need to develop close friendships with girls. But out here I started building friendships that feel like sisterhood. I am very thankful that so many great people came together in my life.

I feel that these experiences are gifts from God. I believe that he wanted me to learn these things and meet these people. This trip has helped me love him even more. I can feel that he is putting such good things into my life because he really cares for my happiness. I often struggle with feelings of guilt for being privileged. I try to live on a budget as if my family was not wealthy because I feel so uncomfortable with the fact that I have so much handed to me. I felt conflicted in decided to come on this trip because it felt like a selfish thing to do. But I realized out here that it is not selfish to try to be happy. That is actually what God wants me to do. I have realized this as I have prayed for simple things, like the ability to laugh and joke around with people, or the ability to really connect with a place, or have an adventure. He cares that I have a good time.

I also learned that God can speak to me in many more ways that just through the scriptures, or prayer, or church. I felt the spirit so often in art galleries, while I was swimming in the ocean, eating delicious cheese, running, dancing, or talking to friends. I also learned that I really benefit from other forms of religious worship. I had a very edifying, sanctifying experience at evensong at Oxford, at a prayer tent in Leicester Square, and in St Paul's cathedral. He is inspiring people to create the most spectacular art, architecture, poetry and music for his glory.

I came on this trip hoping that I would have some guidance for my future. I don't think that really happened though. I still don't feel sure about my major, I have no idea what my career will be or where I will live. But I learned that I don't have to know everything right now. God likes to give a little bit at a time. I often like to make big decisions right now, but it is okay to just roll with the punches and take whatever opportunities come up. I know it is important to have goals and to try to achieve them, but I don't know how things will turn out for me. But because of what I have learned about God, I feel inclined to believe that things will be great.