

ESSAY #5: "Library Floors and Literature"

Personal Statement

It happened two years ago as I lay sprawled out on the floor of the library lounge at the Université de Grenoble in Grenoble, France. I was working on an *explication du texte* of Guillaume Apollinaire's poem "La Loreley" for my *Poèmes et Proses du XXe Siècle* class when I suddenly put it together: this was *my* approach to literature. Close reading, formalism. Staying close, very close, to the text. I was certain.

Certainty, however, proved rather unstable. I knew it was important not to close myself off from other approaches to literature, so when I returned to Swarthmore from Grenoble, I took two courses which I knew would be highly theoretical—*Women Writers 1790–1830* and *Feminist Literary Criticism*. These courses brought me around to a kind of hybrid approach to literature which I find rich, effective, and enjoyable. In this approach I maintain a close connection to the text at the same time that I apply theoretical work.

I am using this approach to literature in two major projects this year.

First, I received a \$2,400 National Endowment for the Humanities Younger Scholars Summer Research Grant. I proposed to expand on a prior research project, looking at the use of silence in the novels of Elie Wiesel, and at the ways Wiesel both demonstrates and gets around the fact that conventional language simply breaks down when it is used to talk about the Holocaust. I plan to expand on the same project for my senior English thesis. For this thesis I am studying the ways Wiesel uses silence in the literal content of his novels and in his writing technique, and am working toward explanations as to how he gives these silences meaning. My fluency in French from my semester of study in Grenoble has been invaluable since most of Wiesel's works were written originally in French. My thesis involves close, formalist readings of Wiesel's novels, and is enriched by theoretical work. (This thesis appears as "Senior Essay" on my transcript; that designation will change next semester to "Thesis.")

My second major project this year is a self-designed research project which has just replaced comprehensive exams in the Swarthmore English Department. I am working with British poetry just following World War I, looking at how these poets write about a kind of war that truly had no precedent since it was the first war in which death could be so effectively and impersonally mass-produced. I am focusing on my observation that a surprising number of these poems rely heavily on biblical or mythical images, as though more contemporary images simply were not applicable any more.

I have known for several years that I want my graduate work to be in the field of English, but my approach to literature has been enriched by my double major in English and sociology-anthropology. Twice my interest in anthropology has led me to study literature of non-European cultures, both times with great personal satisfaction. My papers for *The Black African Writer* combine theoretical research with a good deal of formalist textual analysis and close reading. I had several long conversations about these papers with Prof. Wallace Mann, the R. Talbot Sondheim Professor of African Studies at Swarthmore.

This is a great experiential opening. The reader can "see" the student "sprawled out," and the essay offers an exotic setting. This candidate displays amazing breadth while leading the reader through distinct phases in her intellectual development. The masterful way the candidate weaves in theorists, theories, authors, and names of works lightens what could otherwise be heavy exposition. The essay as a whole amounts to an intellectual argument, the point of which is this: This candidate's background points to the inevitable conclusion that this student is ready to excel at the targeted graduate program.

#5: "Library Floors and Literature"

(continued)

My second excursion into less-traveled territory was a paper I wrote for *Introduction to Hebrew Scriptures*. I chose to do an exegesis of Isaiah 65:17–25. I worked from the original Hebrew text since I had taken a course in biblical Hebrew (Religion 93) and have a moderate level of reading comprehension of the language. I had a marvelous time digging so deeply into each word, and sometimes even individual letters, as is required in an exegesis of a Hebrew passage.

My two major projects this year—my thesis and my senior project—are related by the theme of war literature, and my work on one project gives me new ideas for the other. I feel fortunate that this has worked out, and at the University of Colorado-Boulder I want to continue studying twentieth-century literature. However, I am also ready to start widening my base, casting out in some new directions. I have found over and over that if I have a long-standing gut-level enjoyment of some kind of literature I almost invariably have a wonderful time and do a particularly good job taking an academic approach to that literature. Old English literature is in this category for me.

I have never done academic work in Old English literature, but for years I have treasured a cassette tape on which are recorded in Old English the stories of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Caedmon*, and *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell*. And when I am feeling particularly harried, I often go to the Swarthmore library and treat myself to an old, scratchy recording of a reading of Beowulf, following along in the Old English text and in a modern English translation. By imitating the voice I hear and following in translation, I have taught myself a tiny amount of this language. I want to follow up on this interest.

My interest in studying at the University of Colorado-Boulder has grown out of conversations I have had with numerous people, including Prof. Laurie Langbauer who had a lot of specific information since she taught there one summer. When I spoke about my interests with Abbe Blum, another professor of English at Swarthmore, she recommended that I call Prof. Margaret Ferguson. I did so, and had a wonderful conversation which helped me to confirm that I would feel very much at home in the department. I am especially excited about the department's strength in twentieth-century, Renaissance, and Old English literature.

I am also genuinely pleased about the distribution requirements, since they will help me to explore areas that I did not or could not at Swarthmore. Only by doing that will I continue to learn new things about myself as a student of literature. I do not want my experience in the Université de Grenoble library to be a unique blip in my development. I want to continue changing, refining, playing around with the ways in which I approach literature. This ever-changing, ever-learning approach will help me to be a lifelong scholar and lover of literature.

These paragraphs show the depth of specific interest this student has in this specific graduate program. Be sure to customize your essays to this level of detail. Also note the use of professors' names, both at the undergraduate alma mater and the targeted graduate program.