

Reflection on My Time as an Undergraduate at the University of St. Francis
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Before Fall 2022

My time at the University of St. Francis began in a way that one might think is similar to most other college students; with being part of the graduating class of 2020 and all the lackluster experiences that Covid allowed, I was excited to dive into all of this headfirst. What I realized quickly was that the boredom I had felt in too many high school classes was not just a symptom of going to a public high school, but more an indication that I wanted something different than most educational institutions are willing to offer. My hopes were raised when I attended “Major Discovery Day” as part of the Foundations I curriculum; it was then that I met with Dr. McDermott and she made me truly excited about joining the English department. She gave me Dr. Spicer’s contact information, who I immediately emailed and made an appointment to meet with. After that first meeting, just over two years ago, I remember thinking that I had found a place where I truly belonged, where I could be understood.

That next semester, I took my first English course and while I fell in love with that program, my overall desire to be at USF faded. Over the span of 2021, I had thoughts of transferring, thoughts of leaving, thoughts of taking a break from school; USF was taking more from me than I could scrounge up in all my classes, jobs, and experiences. At the end of 2021, I was desperate and confided to Dr. Spicer my feelings, thinking that I had already lost all capacity for loving learning and reading. In true Spicer fashion, though, he listened and devoted himself to helping me in any way possible; thus arose the possibility of my graduating early. He told me that I could be done by this time next year, that it wouldn’t be easy, but that we would do it together. This togetherness was unfamiliar to me in an academic setting, as I had always been taught and encouraged to work alone. I would like to say that I was wary for a brief moment about this proposition, but that would be untruthful; I was super excited to jump into my last year with the support of someone I had grown to admire and look up to so much at USF.

The two of us had already set quite a foundation for working and thinking together before I even thought about finishing early and taking an expedited path. I would often leave my classes and head straight for his office, where we would talk about whatever I had been tasked to read; he would often help me unlock parts of texts that I never would have been able to access alone, which is something I had never found in a conversation partner before. When it came time to work on our various independent and directed studies together, it was an easy adjustment. Talking about things in such a deeply analytical way has always come so naturally to us, even from our first meeting where I told him that Polonius was my favorite Shakespeare character. Right from the very beginning of our first independent study, entitled “Style”, I felt that my love for learning had been reignited; rather, the wick had been totally replaced: this was not a type of learning I had ever experienced but it was so much more fun and enriching than the learning I had come to take as the only option.

Embarking on my first two Independent Studies with Dr. Spicer in the Spring of 2022 feels like forever ago: I have read, learned, and grown so much since January. Reading some of

Friedrich Nietzsche's key works in the "Style" course helped me understand how apropos the name of the course was; Nietzsche's style is unique and captivating, something I found myself continually getting lost in when reading his texts. So much of what I had been taught about the expectations of scholarly texts completely melted away when reading things like *Human, All Too Human* or *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, where Nietzsche plays with and challenges all the norms and expectations that come with writing and presenting theory. This course helped me realize that the "professional" way I had been taught to write had served me well, but in no way reflected the way I actually *wanted* to write. The way writing is taught is so formulaic, enforcing some kind of standard onto everyone who chooses to pick up a pen; Nietzsche, though, will have literally none of it. This is when writing started to excite me again; instead of finding enjoyment in filling in the blanks that my teachers provided me, I was able to delete any sort of predetermined outline or expectation from my head. The way Nietzsche writes about everything, but especially language, casts it in a new and captivating light. I'd like to end my section about Nietzsche¹ with one of his aphorisms that I clung to early on from *Human, All Too Human*:

Stone is more stony than it used to be. – In general we no longer understand architecture; at least we do not do so nearly as well as we understand music. We have grown out of the symbolism of lines and figures, just as we have weaned ourselves from the sound-effects of rhetoric, and no longer imbibe this kind of cultural mother's milk from the first moment of our lives. Everything in a Greek or Christian building originally signified something, and indeed something of a higher order of things: this feeling of inexhaustible significance lay about the building like a magical veil. Beauty entered this system only incidentally, without essentially encroaching upon the fundamental sense of the uncanny and exalted, of consecration by magic and the proximity of the divine; at most beauty *mitigated* the dread – but the dread was everywhere the presupposition. – What is the beauty of a building to us today? The same thing as the beautiful face of a mindless woman: something mask-like.²

I think what is so special to me about *Human, All Too Human* is the aphoristic style that Nietzsche employs; each of his sections is preceded by a title that encompasses the content of what will follow in the aphorism. These aphorisms are all incredibly bite-sized, yet they fit and flow together so well to make for an interesting text. Reading so much of what Nietzsche had to offer in the Spring of 2022 gave me the confidence I needed to write in a way that was fun for me, despite not necessarily fitting into the rigid expectations set for students and scholars.

Our second independent study in Spring 2022 was entitled Topics: Psychoanalysis, Politics, and Culture and stemmed from my limited knowledge of the primary works of Freud, Lacan, Žižek, Ruti, and other monumental psychoanalysts. Admittedly, due to a pretty packed semester, I was not able to get through all the readings that Spicer and I had hoped to get through at the beginning, but psychoanalysis remains a topic of discussion for the two of us on a nearly daily basis. Reading Freud's foundational texts really allowed me to clear away some of the

¹ Though I make no promises that he or his work will not be brought up again.

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 101.

stereotypes I had bought into regarding his work and the field of psychoanalysis in general. While there are a lot of valid criticism of Freud,³ so much of what I had heard about him seemed to have no basis in the actual stuff he wrote. These realizations – that so much of what has come to be understood as the truth by so many, including scholars I have learned from – have been frequent throughout these past two semesters, and I could not be more thankful for the opportunity to challenge my preconceived notions. This is something I have come to believe is of the utmost importance for those who have an interest in intellectual work, but it seems so rare to actually see people challenging these long-held beliefs.

Fall 2022 Classes

A lot of the work for this Fall 2022 semester – and more specifically, for this paper – happened unconsciously, so that when it came to writing, the task ahead seemed easy. Truthfully, though, this work began long before we knew we would be writing this paper. I had expressed interest in wanting to read the Bible as part of one of my final courses long before I even knew *A Children's Bible* existed. The works of Deleuze and Guattari, of which the former played a large role in this paper, had always been familiar to me, as Spicer had suggested early on that the work we do largely resembles the way in which those two tackled thinking together. When I first read this novel over the summer, I had no intention of writing anything supplementary for it; I truly approached it as one of the very few books I get to read “for fun.” In fact, for a long while, I was fully intending on revolving my thesis around another super impactful novel for me: *The Handmaid's Tale*. There was no hiding how enamored I was with Millet's book, though – I was so intrigued by its brevity yet fullness, Millet's ability to capture the young person's experience with “political problems” that are really our entire existence, and the variety of avenues of thinking that this novel led me down. When Spicer told me about the call for papers from Dr. Ashman, for a collection comprising essays about the intersection of crime fiction and ecology,⁴ neither of us could deny how *well* this novel fit that bill.

Before I jump into the actual details of writing this paper, I'd first like to look at each of my classes this semester and how every one of them helped in the composition of this piece. Firstly: Free Speech, the class that pertains most succinctly to my future goals to become involved in the field of law. This class first saw Spicer and I reading and talking through various “watershed moment”⁵ Supreme Court cases pertaining to the First Amendment – later, we started

³ I think the most obvious and pertinent example here is Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*. These two get so much of their foundational thinking from Freud, their predecessor, yet they oppose so many of his concepts. The important thing here is that they are familiar with his work and have done the reading of primary texts. Like all good students, they do not blindly follow their professor but take his ideas and expand on them or reject them based on a nuanced approach.

⁴ The initial CFP can be found [here](#). I can take absolutely no credit in finding this, all effort and props in this realm should be rightfully accorded to Dr. Spicer.

⁵ This class was even further motivated by this summer's [Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization](#) decision, which famously overturned two previous Supreme Court decisions (*Roe v. Wade* and *Casey v. Planned Parenthood*) that were seen as historical moments in the womens' rights movement. In the [oral arguments](#) for Dobbs, Justice Breyer cites *Roe* as a “watershed,” a rare case that laid down the Constitutional principle of women's choice (9). The release of this decision was a difficult day for many, including Dr. Spicer and I, who were so confident that

incorporating oral arguments into our discussions, as we often found the lines of questioning incredibly fascinating. Reading these Supreme Court cases did not just primarily serve as some sort of practice for my future law school classes; actually, we always found that the language and rhetorical choices within these decisions to be the most interesting points of focus. A common thread through so many of the cases was the “marketplace of ideas” metaphor,⁶ something that seemed to require and necessitate protection from the Constitution. This course gave me a deeper understanding and appreciation for the power of the metaphor and our perceptions of truth, something that had been introduced to me in one of my first Nietzsche readings: “Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions—they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins.”⁷ This marketplace of ideas trope, first introduced into the Supreme Court’s lexicon by Justice Wendell J. Holmes in 1919, became a notorious refrain in our readings throughout the semester – the phrase became so commonplace that we even watched as it became a practiced truth in the view of SCOTUS judges. This course helped me to further understand how frequent these instances are and just how language develops over time to assert specific agendas or support specific functions.

Ancient Literature began with the full reading of the Old Testament’s Genesis and Exodus books⁸, then finished with a reading of Homer’s *Iliad* and Vergil’s *Aeneid*. I think that the connection between my work on this thesis and the Old Testament is rather obvious, but the full scope of how these readings aided my thinking is slightly more difficult to see. Of course, half of our paper picks out all the various connections and analogies we see between the novel and the Old Testament. That aspect was greatly helped by my being a first time reader of the text; these different perspectives from Spicer and I generated a lot of thinking for us. The Old Testament also introduced a great deal of foundational understanding of literature for me – the same could definitely be said of *The Iliad* and *Aeneid* as well. All of these texts largely served as a starting point for so much to follow; all three have such deeply enriched soil that even today there are still stories sprouting their roots here.⁹ Reading these texts has proved and undoubtedly

this could not happen in the way it did. While I found myself heartbroken about this decision, I also found this anger to be fuel for taking the LSAT earlier than I had expected and starting my law school journey.

⁶ Our first introduction to this metaphor was in Justice Holmes’ dissenting opinion for [Abrams v. United States](#), 250 U.S. 616 : “But when men have realized that time has upset many fighting faiths, they may come to believe even more than they believe the very foundations of their own conduct that the ultimate good desired is better reached by free trade in ideas -- that the best test of truth is the power of the thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market, and that truth is the only ground upon which their wishes safely can be carried out.”

⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense.” p. 4—full text is available [here](#).

⁸ We used an online source for this class, [Sefaria](#), that has the full texts and commentaries from various Talmudic and Midrashic thinkers running along the side. I specifically found commentary from Rashi to be incredibly thought-provoking and often allowed *that* to help lead discussions, rather than the text itself.

⁹ This comes from a conversation Spicer and I had late in the semester – I was pretty surprised that I was vastly unfamiliar with the contents of the *Iliad* but had heard so much about the Trojan horse, a plot point that plays out in Book 2 of the *Aeneid*. Spicer then described texts like the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and even the New Testament as truly foundational texts, the field upon which so many would plant seed. I then pointed out that nobody (besides, perhaps, the person tending to the field) really pays attention to the soil – it is always the flowers that get attention often with almost no reference to where they came from.

will continuously prove to be incredibly important when it comes to interacting with any text that dares to tell stories of heroes, love, family, sacrifice, divinity, etc.

My Shakespeare course introduced me to so many characters and stories that have always been familiar to me in some way; as mentioned above, Shakespeare is another one of those super fundamental writers that is still largely riffed off of today. This class had me challenging a lot of my preconceived notions of the writer; I had for so long accepted readings of his works that I find hardly any merit in now. Reading while ignoring the boxes that so many people try to place writers or their works in is something that I began practicing under the mentorship of Dr. Spicer, beginning with our study of psychoanalysis and Freud. Once I allowed myself to immerse myself into the plays, I found that so many who had attributed these claims to Shakespeare's works had simply misread these things. In truth, it is a really daunting task *not* to accept these readings as the truth – people have been distorting his stances on things for so long that it seems impossible to see a deviation of one of his works without the sexism or racism that so many accuse him of. While these harmful deviations and remakes that cite Shakespeare as the source material undoubtedly contribute to the still awful effects of the systems of racism, sexism, homophobia, etc., attributing these thoughts and ideas to Shakespeare himself just seems wrong. So much of his work in these spheres was satirical but taken as straightforward – I again found myself wrestling with our understanding of “truth” and its incredibly nuanced definition in this class, all while thoroughly enjoying this dive into Shakespeare's greatest plays.

Lastly, the Gender & Sexuality course is one that holds a special place in my heart: this is one I designed almost entirely by myself. That isn't to say that Spicer enforced a great deal of rigidity in my other courses – some might even say that his name and any term relating to a lack of autonomy should hardly be placed in such close proximity – but this course is where I pitched the entirety of the reading list and schedule.¹⁰ We read many of the key theorists in this department: Sedgwick, Rich, Butler, hooks¹¹. Many of these texts allowed me to wear a new hat, that of the literary/theory critic. These writers are so deeply ingrained in modern feminist thought, which made it all the more interesting to view and critique them through a deconstructionist and psychoanalytic lens. After the theory deep dive, we hit on some fiction composed by Hurston, McCullers, and Cisneros¹² – many authors I had grown to love during my high school years and was so excited to read again as an older person and, more importantly, a woman. All of this culminated into the piquing of my interest toward the final text of the semester: the *S.C.U.M. Manifesto* by Valerie Solanas. I remember sitting in Spicer's office after reading hooks' *the will to change*, feeling disheartened by bell hooks' position that women

¹⁰ Granted, the research for this class mostly consisted of Google searches resembling “Best sexuality theory texts” or “Best fiction texts related to gender.” Regardless, this was a fruitful search as we complicated and made things much more nuanced through our frequent conversations..

¹¹ *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1990); “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence”, *Journal of Women's History*, Volume 15, Number 3 (Autumn 2003): pp. 11-48; *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1999) and *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004); *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (New York: Atria Books, 2004) respectively.

¹² *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe*, and *The House on Mango Street & My Wicked, Wicked Ways*, respectively.

needed to love men more in order to get them to be on board with the feminist movement: at the end of the introduction, she writes: “Men cannot change if there are no blueprints for change. Men cannot love if they are not taught the art of loving.”¹³ I also found hooks’ critique of the radical feminists as interesting and made clear my desire to read one of the texts by these so-called extremist women. Spicer answered that he would think about which text he wanted us to look at and came back to me soon after with Solanas’ work. Reading this text generated a lot of thought for me – which, while seemingly banal, is a relatively new experience. All of these classes and their readings, but most specifically and clearly Gender and Sexuality, always seemed to propel me forward, towards more texts or more ways of thinking. This is something so new to me that I regret not experiencing it sooner in my education.

The Paper

While all of the previous sections may seem superfluous or not pertinent to the task of reflecting on my senior thesis, I find it so important to look at the full process of writing this paper; it just so happens that this process was a lot more involved than others may see at surface level. Beyond the largely unconscious work that occurred within my class readings, Spicer and I started tackling the discussion of this book really early on. I think there were a lot of things that were super obvious to us upon initial readings of this book; for example, the myriad analogies and connections to religious texts, the importance of the guessing game, and the message this novel sends about the climate crisis. What was (and still is!) always so wonderful about our conversations is that I never feel like Spicer is talking down to me; and the moments where I taught him something or pointed out something he hadn’t seen are incredibly genuine. It was rarely even that one person had something specific to teach or show the other – our conversations were almost always the most generative part of the thinking and writing process. There was always something so rewarding about the moments where we made connections or decoded something together; that shared triumph is something I feel can be so lacking in the humanities, where a relative seclusion is more often the case for scholars.

With this being my first dive into the world of truly scholarly writing, I needed a lot of guidance throughout the entire process. Luckily, Spicer was there to shape my ideas and goals for this paper into something that resembled a truly professional piece of writing. Once we had gotten through preliminary discussions surrounding the book and our plan,¹⁴ we decided to divide the paper in half, where I would focus on the section that would detail the detective game and Spicer would tackle the theological writing. At this point, as I’ve emphasized before, so much of the paper had already been worked through between the two of us – now the only task was to sit down and type it out. The actual, physical typing of this paper was probably the shortest step in all of this, which is a familiar experience to both of us, who have shared our stories of ruminating on papers many times. Once the writing of our respective sections was

¹³ hooks, p. 14.

¹⁴ As serial procrastinators and because we became so engrossed in our semester reading list, these preliminary discussions definitely lasted a lot longer than one might want. However, as self-proclaimed professional procrastinators, neither of us felt any stress about this.

finished, we swapped and edited, then set ourselves the task of figuring out how to wrap this paper up and weave these two threads together. It only took about one session together to figure out a succinct way to do just that, and we were done just about as soon as we started.

Something I find so interesting when reading the paper again, as a finished draft (awaiting edits from Dr. Ashman), is how seamlessly our two styles fit together. It feels impossible to me to point out distinct moments that one of us individually wrote – both because of our shared thought-work on all aspects of the project and also because our writing seems to flow together so well. Style is something that I think is so singular and unique but I find myself second-guessing that definition while reading this paper. I don't find this to be a bad thing at all; on the contrary, this fact even further solidifies my confidence in this paper and my hope that we can continue writing together even after my time as a student here comes to an end. I truly think that we have a special way of working and writing together and that we have some incredibly important things to say.

I am incredibly proud of the work that we put into this paper. It is something that I never could have imagined myself doing, especially as a 20 year old undergraduate student. It has been so rewarding to employ things I learned and thought about from the beginning of my time in college (and maybe even before!); the idea that someone should use what they learn in one class in their subsequent studies had never been so clear to me as it is now. I found myself employing concepts from psychoanalysis, theology, gender studies, linguistics, etc., to the writing and creation of this paper.

As previously mentioned, our timeline for writing this thesis was short but packed full of a lot of great work. I first read *A Children's Bible* over this past summer and we only talked about it during one session together, not even considering doing any sort of supplementary work with Millet's novel. Once Spicer told me about the Call for Papers, we decided to reread the novel, but didn't set any sort of concrete goals yet. I spent the first half of the semester reading sources that Spicer had suggested to me that could work within the context of the novel;¹⁵ it was not until late October when I asked, "So, when is this thing due?" only for Spicer to respond, "The end of November." The entire month of November, then, we were truly focused on writing; turning the many conversations we had about the text, the supplementary readings, and our own conclusions into words on a page. While this part seemed daunting to me, it actually felt a lot easier than I thought it would be. I had always assumed that the work of writing papers was something that "just came easy to me," which is partially true; however, it was Spicer who led me to understanding that working on a paper is not just sitting down and writing it – people like he and I so frequently go through the topics of our work so many times before even thinking about writing anything down. This sort of unconscious work is why sitting down to write a paper can seem so easy and natural to outsiders.

Despite the fact that you have now read the thesis, Spicer and I both know that it is far from done. We await the first round of edits from Dr. Ashman and hope that what he has to say

¹⁵ Some of these texts include: Guattari's *The Three Ecologies* (which we unfortunately did not gravitate towards but might utilize in future drafts; Deleuze's "The Philosophy of Crime Novels" from *Desert Islands and Other Texts*; J.J. Cohen's "Noah's Archive" found [here](#); Russell Ford's "Deleuze's Dick" and more.

will help us generate a bit more in the third section of the paper, where we weave together the Oedipal detective game and the theological strands of the novel. This will continue to be an ongoing project and process for us, even after I walk across the stage on Saturday. Nevertheless, I think that what you have read is a really great representation of the culmination of my studies here. Spicer and I have been working toward this for a long time and it feels great to have somewhat of a final draft; in the same sense that nothing can ever truly be finished.

Final Words

I am incredibly grateful to all of the English faculty who allowed me to take a truly unconventional route in my studies. While I didn't necessarily get the curriculum or teaching that USF set out for me, I think that the path I took was so much more rewarding for me. I also think having so much autonomy in designing my courses gave me a newfound appreciation for the work of those who create new courses twice a year, working to make the most of students' limited time in their undergraduate program. It would be a lie to say that this past year of being on a shortened track has been easy; in fact, I might need to get checked for whiplash on Monday, December 19. I didn't go to college for the easy ride, though. I came here hungry for a challenge, something I had pined for for so long as a younger student. I hope that our thesis and this final reflection show how fruitful embarking on this challenge was for me. While some may think of this unconventional graduation and course track as somehow less *full*,¹⁶ I have experienced the exact opposite; these past two semesters have fulfilled me more than the total sum of my education before 2022. I hope that I have properly conveyed that throughout the bulk of this reflection.

I think it also goes without saying (but I'll say it anyway) that I am incredibly grateful for Dr. Spicer and all his wisdom, guidance, and support throughout my past 2.5 years as a student at USF. He sees so much in me that I fail to see in myself and pushes me to have confidence in myself and my capabilities. Working together has hardly ever felt like work at all and I think we share in the sentiment that we will miss our Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays spent in his office thinking through any number of things each time. Spicer has a skillful way of finding something in even my most off-topic tangents, even spinning philosophical revelations from TikToks videos I found interesting. None of our time together was ever wasted, in every sense of the word – we could always generate something from incredibly minute topics and we always had fun doing it. This level of entertainment and enjoyment in productivity seems so rare. What I am most grateful for from Spicer is that I always know that he is someone I can go to. He has helped me through countless personal difficulties and has given me advice ranging from how to quit an incredibly toxic and draining job to reaching for opportunities I would have never thought to be possible. As I've told him before, I am so lucky that I found someone at USF like him. I think my college experience would have been bland and monochromatic if not for the two of us connecting.

¹⁶ In a literal sense, graduating at just 121 credits is definitely pushing the lower boundary when it comes to requirements.

I write this reflection on the final Monday of my being an undergraduate student. Where do I go from here? Currently, law school is my next step. I plan on taking the spring months to prepare my applications for schools for the Fall 2023 semester. My undergraduate studies have beyond prepared me for the tasks that lie ahead, even the ones I know nothing about yet. I currently have a lot less concrete plans than many might hope for themselves or even for me; but I find so much freedom in that – I've never understood how people have such clear plans for themselves, all I know is what I would rather *not* be doing 5, 10, 25 years from now. All I know is that I hope I can find ways to continue writing even when I don't have to turn it in to be evaluated anymore; I think that this should be easy for me.

Thank you for taking the time to read both of these papers. I greatly appreciate how dedicated you all are to my education and I hope that all of this made you proud.