Autoethnography

My eyes shifted between a copy of Austen's Pride and Prejudice, the worn assignment sheet, and the ocean of white on the computer screen in front of me. Hopeless. Why did I take 10th grade honors English when my brain obviously hibernates during the summer months? The words "thesis statement" loomed forebodingly in bold type. I opened Internet Explorer for a Google search. A few clicks later I found, "thesis: a position that is maintained by argument". Alright, that's not an entirely new concept. I read the assignment sheet for the millionth time. My eyes lingered on, "consider the following examples". Would using one of the given examples for my paper be encouraged or considered cheating? I leaned back in my swivel chair and sighed, wishing the instructions explicitly told me what my teacher wanted. Honors English already felt overwhelming and I hadn't even started school yet.

The papers I wrote before 10th grade were mostly reports, or essays that were meant to answer specific questions. On multiple occasions I had to do a career study, which entailed researching a profession and regurgitating the facts in my own words. The rubric had a checklist that included specific content requirements, as well as things like paper length, grammatical accuracy, proper use of MLA, and of course, a reminder to put your name and date in the header. In 9th grade English, the goal was to recite the teacher's thoughts about *The Importance of Being Earnest* by discussing the theme of honesty, or something equally idiotic, while adhering to the five paragraph essay format. These early high school papers were completely uninteresting; there was no need for imaginative thought, only thorough archival notes. However, when I received my summer reading packet for honors English, the freedom of the paper assignments

surprised me. It was a new challenge to have to come up with my own paper topic, and state it as a thesis.

With one week left of summer, I couldn't put off writing my *Pride and Prejudice* paper any longer. After looking at cliff notes for inspiration, I decided that my argument was going to be that Mr. Darcy's mansion, Pemberley, is symbolic of his true character. I only quoted one passage, and wrote the whole paragraph out after my introduction, which used up a sizable portion of the two page length requirement. The body of my paper was similar to a close reading, though I never knew that term in high school. My writing process was plagued by doubt, and the pressure to meet the new higher standards of honors English caused a lot of anxiety. The end result was a wholly unremarkable paper in most respects. It was not the best or worst thing I'd ever written, and it was only one of several English essays I wrote that summer. What makes the Pemberley essay so memorable is that it marked my first attempt at writing the type of paper that is expected at the university level. I had to formulate a thesis and support it with textual evidence without a checklist style rubric to guide me. I also couldn't regurgitate my teacher's ideas; I hadn't even met her yet. For the first time I didn't know what the teacher wanted, so I had to rely on my own creativity. While my writing still lacked a great deal of sophistication, my words were more my own than they had ever been.

Four years later, I found myself flipping through the same copy of *Pride and Prejudice*. This time I was beginning to write a midterm paper for an introductory literature class at The University of Michigan. The assignment description was long, full of thought provoking quotes and questions. It pointed to different options to consider while still leaving room for interpretation and originality. After reading my professor's

provocative prompts, I immediately latched onto the idea of using Elizabeth Bennett in *Pride and Prejudice* to discuss the conflict between the desire for autonomy and the pressure to adhere to social norms. A hypothetical outline started taking shape in my head. Surprised by my own inspiration, I tore through my folder to find the handout from Dr. John Gregory's popular conduct book for women. Before I knew it, my fingers were taking over the keyboard and quoting Dr. Gregory to begin my introduction. Other ideas kept pouring out until a very pregnant paragraph dominated the computer screen. When I went back to reread, I found wonderful sentences that joined forces to create an introduction that was mostly incoherent. If only a perfect introduction could be created that quickly! I let myself be frustrated for a brief moment before going in for another attempt.

Three pages, and a couple days later, I still wasn't satisfied with my thesis. The idea was there, but its presentation needed serious revision. I sought my professor during office hours for help. She suggested that I use two sentences to convey my thesis, the first to set up the opposition to my argument, and the second to reject that idea in favor of my own. The concept of framing my thesis with this two pronged approach was foreign to me, but it worked beautifully. I addressed my concerns about passive voice and effective transitions in our meeting, but the only major issue my professor found with my paper was that I had not yet include the required close reading. I left office hours with fresh determination.

For the next few days I agonized over where I could inject a close reading into my paper without disrupting the momentum. No matter what I tried, an effective solution eluded me. The night before it was due, I emailed the semi-polished paper to a friend for

feedback. I considered my paper mostly done, though it still lacked the close reading and a conclusion. Forty-five minutes later I received my paper back, covered with red corrections; it was a merciless massacre. Shocked, I began to scrutinize his criticisms, many of which only succeeded in desecrating the voice of my paper. I angrily clicked "reject change" on more than half of the red insertions or deletions, and began passionately defending my writing to my friend via instant messenger. When my roommate started laughing at my rage, I realized how personal my paper had become. If the close reading doesn't work, why should I compromise an excellent paper to satisfy my professor? The obvious answer would be, to get a good grade, but my pride won out. I turned in my paper without a close reading, and without most of the corrections my well intentioned friend had made for me.

A week later, my professor handed back our papers. I held my breath as I flipped to the back page to see my grade. When I saw the letter A, I let out a semi audible squeal. My professor wrote in her comments that she could not penalize this exceptional paper, as my rebellion against the close reading was in the spirit of my thesis itself. I had never thought of Elizabeth Bennett's struggle for autonomy as analogous to my own, but it was a very clever justification. I left class convinced that I was holding the best writing of my academic career.

Looking back a year later, I wonder if the *Pride and Prejudice* paper actually marks my best scholastic writing, or if I'm biased because of my deep level of personal investment in the paper. Perhaps both are true and it's that enthusiasm that makes the paper so captivating. Ultimately, what really makes the paper remarkable is that I

absolutely refused to compromise any part of my writing, even at the risk of receiving a lower grade. It was a bold choice, certainly not one I would have made in high school.

While writing the 10th grade honors English paper, I was not the only one desperately wishing the teacher had given us a more directive assignment. Bloom captures the collective mindset accurately, "'Just tell me what you want,' our students ask- 'and I'll give it to you in order to get a good grade'" (46). High school students are used to receiving specific essay instructions and they grow dependent on them. They know their grade usually relies on presenting the teacher with specific ideas in a specific format. Some classes, such as my honors English class, encourage more independent thought, but too few high school teachers challenge their students in that way.

When beginning any writing assignment, there will always be that first step in which the student must discern what the instructor is asking for, but that does not mean there is always a singular path to achieving it. According to Bloom, "only the bold, the hyperconfident, or naïve have the courage to speak for themselves instead of becoming their teachers' ventriloquists" (46). While this is likely to be true for high school students, I question the validity of Bloom's statement in the university setting. One of the largest differentiations between high school and college writing seems to be the weight placed on independent thought. For example, my freshman English professor reserved A grades for students who presented original and unique arguments in their papers. Topics discussed in class were fair game, but not eligible for top grades, no matter how well written. The policy pushed freshman to think critically and demonstrated that it was no longer acceptable to simply be the teachers' ventriloquists. Most students were eager to accept this challenge, and easily understood the advantage of creating a paper that stood

out from their classmates'. Bloom fails to give university students credit for their intellectual ingenuity.

Both of my *Pride and Prejudice* papers mark important mile stones in the process of developing a unique voice in my writing. Honors English challenged me to discover a voice that did not imitate my teacher's. It forced me to search beyond regurgitating ideas, though I was only partially successful since cliff notes ended up being the springboard for my argument. In my university Lit class, innovative ideas surfaced quickly, but I struggled with the conflict between adhering to the assignment and writing an uncompromising paper that satisfied my own objective. My choice to risk getting a lower grade demonstrated a deep personal connection to my writing that I had never experienced before. It also exuded an extremely high level of courage, even bold hyperconfidence as Bloom would say. While I hope that in the future I do not find myself in the position to disregard the assignment parameters set by my professors, my goal is to continue making my academic writing my own. I want to push myself to make new and bold choices in my writing that work to advance the never-ending process of developing my individual voice.

Works Cited

Bloom, Lynn. "Why I (Used to) Hate Giving Grades." College Composition and Communication 48.3 (Oct. 1997): 261-271.