

Research Strategies Reflective Essay

My term project on cyclicity in landscape and empire began with my interest in nature's cycle of growth, decay, and rebirth. When my English 494 Honors Seminar broached this topic in class, I realized I wanted to focus on a work that examined the natural cycle of life and death in visceral detail. Henry David Thoreau's book *Cape Cod* discusses nature's cycle of life and death in the context of both human mortality and the Cape Cod landscape's inherent cycle of growth and decay. As a Biochemistry major, I had a foundational knowledge of the biology behind ecological growth and decomposition with a perspective from the natural sciences. Thus, the examination of natural growth and decomposition in the context of the ocean and the Cape Cod landscape drew my interest in how the biological phenomena are presented through Thoreau's prose. This project served a way for me to bridge concepts from my background in the biological sciences with constructing a researched argument in the English discipline. As a scholar, crafting an argument on how Thoreau presents cyclicity in the natural landscape helped me tie together concepts from two completely different majors, Biochemistry and English, in a way that unified the material learned in my undergraduate education.

Since my class discussed the natural landscape's cycle of growth, decay, and rebirth, I started off with a close reading of Thoreau's *Cape Cod* to gather the foundation of my project's argument. Later in my close-reading process, I transitioned to gathering online literary and academic resources to supplement the concepts I wanted to discuss. I started off by consulting well-known, substantial databases like JSTOR and MLA International Bibliography for background information on cyclicity in nature. After conferencing with my professor, I narrowed down my paper's thesis to comparing the conceptual contrast between natural cyclicity and unidirectional linearity upheld by civilizational progress. I then advanced my database search to cover my two selected works for analysis, *Cape Cod* by Henry David Thoreau (1866) and *The*

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Course of Empire painting series by Thomas Cole (1836). In addition to browsing literary criticism on the artifacts themselves, I consulted articles on Thoreau and Cole's lives for supplementary historical background. For conceptual evidence on my thesis, I based my search around American Manifest Destiny, American exceptionalism, and cyclical theory of history as keywords. Eventually, as my paper began to take shape, I branched out my search terms for sources to support my paper's "so what," or the relevance of my argument. In doing so, I carried out additional database searches for articles on the mandate of heaven and the Anthropocene. Often I would combine these search terms with a related concept to my paper, like cyclical theory of history or nature's cycle of life, to narrow the results of my search to my argument's scope.

Part of my paper's requirements included incorporating certain sources and concepts into its argument. Since I had to select from secondary sources used in the class, such as Robert Abrams book *Landscape and Ideology in American Renaissance Literature: Topographies of Skepticism*, I used concepts from the chapter I gathered evidence from to further my search. For example, I expanded my search process with online databases to include the Thoreauvian concept of negative knowledge. I browsed a variety of articles discussing nature's cycle of life until I found a few that discussed the concept in the context of growth and decomposition. This phase of my search process turned up multiple results from biological and environmental science publications featuring quantitative data. However, since I was trying to find a more philosophical application of biological growth and decay in the natural landscape, I made use of online database filters to comb through search results. I found articles with the most relevance to my paper's topic on cyclicity under literature, history, and philosophy. As a note, I listed some of my

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findings from other fields, like anthropology and political science, for the sections of my paper that would discuss the argument's relevance to current societal issues.

During my research process, I discovered heliotropic theory turned up rather sparse results on the online databases I was using. I found brief definitions in literary essays that focused on a related subject, but I needed a longer piece of criticism discussing heliotropic theory's specific application to American exceptionalism as related to Cole's *Course of Empire*. After trying other names for the theory on online databases, such as Apollonian theory, with little success, I concluded I needed to expand my range of sources. To find more adequate evidence, I went to the research help desk at Suzzallo Library for assistance. While doing so, I went through the UW Libraries' Research Guide using a variety to isolate potentially useful sources that came up as related to heliotropic theory. After working with a reference assistant on a search through Google Scholars, I tracked down a book in the Suzzallo Library stacks, *The Myth of West America as the Last Empire* by J.W. Nordholt. Checking out and consulting this book provided me with the evidence applying heliotropic theory to American exceptionalism and cyclical theory of history that I needed. Furthermore, the book provided me with a plethora of additional references to cross-check and verify the accuracy of source information. The book cited references to author names and their essays, from which I could search links to the related studies on the very particular topic I had previous trouble finding. From the process, I found practice in persistence and flexible thinking were key to successfully find the sources for my paper. Even though I didn't use every source I dug up, I had built a solid base of literature to support my paper's argument that I had become invested in crafting. Even after its class submission, I plan to work with this completed term paper's research even further by incorporating its argument into my English Department Honors final 30-page thesis.