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COPLAC Entry

In my four years, I have found that liberal arts is about conceit. Chasing after conceit. Leveraging conceit to share ideas. Offering conceit in place of hardline answers. As an English major, we frequently discuss conceit as an extended, sometimes dizzyingly drawn out, comparison of two unlike things. Take John Donne's "The Canonization" as example. Donne's poem features a rather raunchy love affair that Donne compares to the canonization process whereby a person becomes a bona fide Saint. These two topics, lecherous romance and a high pious recognition, are wholly separate and without clear connection to one another. Yet, Donne somehow manages to not only compare the concepts, but avail the reader to new ways of thinking about the emotions of an affair, the significance of Church figures, and how ideas themselves interact. Liberal Arts strives to build this same kind of mental shift that Donne offers.

I once took a class that was exclusively covering John Milton. Begrudgingly I shuffled into the classroom each day with *Paradise Lost* in hand, eternally hoping that perhaps today we could move on from this grandiose, sing-songy reimagining of a story that is considered to be common knowledge in the West. In Book 9 of this behemoth opus of rhyme and religion, the critical book of the poem where Eve is tempted in the Garden, Milton writes: "For solitude is sometimes best society, and short retirement urges sweet return." Eve needs to deliberate about her circumstances before returning with answer to Satan because he is arguing for a big proposition: all the knowledge in the world in exchange for breaking the only rule in her society. She met Satan before and had a troubling experience; it only makes sense that she would take some time to mull things over. I read that passage the night before with not much thought of it.

During this same semester, I was taking a philosophy class on the meaning of “justice.” As part of the class we were reading Confucius which I was much keener on than Milton. In *The Analects Book 2* the Master says: “He who learns but does not think is lost. He who thinks but does not learn is in great peril.” Later, I am sitting in my Milton class and it occurs to me: Eve’s main mistake in the consuming of the Apple is that she was unfamiliar with Confucius’ teachings. She is spending time to think, but she did not learn from her prior experience. She is in peril. Struck with excitement from making this connection, I offer the idea to the class in a muddled paraphrase of Confucius as I did not have the book because I had that class on the alternate day. But this contribution to our discussion of *Paradise Lost* gave a new perspective to the text. These seemingly distinct works: a poem about a Western creation story and an antique book of proverbs from China interacted together to offer insight into how to make decisions. This is the conceit. This is the great comparison that engages a person and teaches them more than the two books. It demonstrates that unlike things might not be so different.

I recall taking a history of English language course one semester at the same time as an introductory sociology course. The English course began with information of runes, proto-languages, and similarly esoteric linguistic work. This was my first upper level course and it felt as upper as I thought it would. After that class let out, I would cross a large building, climb a few flights of stairs and attend my sociology course. This was course required far less reading and homework. I could decompress in there. Toward the end of that semester, those two morning classes back to back began to blend together. The resulting French speaking bourgeoisie exercising power over the English speaking people of the modern-day UK after the Battle of Hastings in 1066 was framed in Marxist theory. The documentary about people from Appalachia struggling to make ends meet became about how people from Appalachia have dialect that is

easily identifiable. The word “Friday” for example is generally pronounced with a long “a” sound, but in Appalachia, it is pronounced with a long “e” sound. These courses began my theory about conceit.

Originally I entered university with intent to get a degree in Literature, but this exposure to the connections between sociology and English as fields of study built up a love for sociology in me today. As of now, I am a double major in literature and sociology because these sorts of connections between dissimilar things continued. In future courses I could no longer separate the two disciplines. In a Harlem Renaissance class, I utilized Patricia Hill Collins’ work on intersectionality in order to digest the existence of a literary movement caught up in a post-Reconstruction, Black, wealthy, and sexually deviant time. In a class about Islamic Diasporic literature, Salman Rushdie and Edward Said offered ideas of how exiles, refugees, and immigrants may all meld together under one title. I challenged these labels because as the sociologist, C. Wright Mills states: “History is the shank of the social sciences.” My education in the field of sociology informed my work in the field of literature. My coursework imbued me with a conceit comparing the unlike disciplines constantly. And it worked in both directions. In a racial stratification course we were assigned to study ethnicity theory which is a framework that treats cultures as either assimilating or integrating at any given time and these two qualities means that different racial groups receive different opportunities. For example an Ethnicity Theorist may describe how a particular, racial group may have immigrated over to America and established themselves in business more quickly than others because of their cultural inclination to commerce. As someone who is well-versed in literature I can add to the discussion Horatio Alger stories of young men who through the power of good will and coincidence climb the social ladder just like these mentioned groups are reported to have done. Or in a sociology of food

course I can explain what yams means to the South through the lens of the narrator in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*.

These connections are what the liberal arts try to cultivate. My singularly appropriate education created in my studies vast and various links between ideas, places, people, theories and the like. This interdisciplinary approach to education compels me to see a class that may seem plodding like my Milton course, or difficult like my history of English course, and reframe its concepts for deeper understanding and appreciation. The value of a liberal arts education lies in the sharing of unlike ideas to further the knowledge of all those around us. I have found in my four years that conceit is the path to learning.