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WRIT 3500

### Module 5 Reflection

For this assignment, I chose to reflect on the final essay I wrote for Lit of Utopia/Dystopia, or Dystopian Lit. I took Dystopian Lit as one of the upper level requirements in the English major in the Winter of 2018. Our prompt for the final paper was to write a 6-7 page critical research essay that combined critical literary discourse and theory. We were also tasked with using one of our six class novels as the primary focus of our essay. I chose to write about surveillance, human connection, and mediation between the virtual world and real world in Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One*. I titled my critical research essay, "Congratulations! You Have an Extra Life!," a quote that appears in Cline's novel.

### Looking Back

Coming into the Dystopian Lit class in the Winter quarter of my junior year, I had already written an abundance of papers in college. I am an English Major, which means that I typically write at least a few literary papers per class per quarter. I had also taken Theories of Writing, Topics in Writing Theory, and was taking Composition Theory at the same time as Dystopian Lit. I entered the class with a breadth of writing knowledge. However, a few of my friends had told me that our professor, Dr. Billy Stratton, was a difficult grader and that he would challenge me to think and write in different ways than I was comfortable. They were right. When choosing a topic for our final paper, we had the freedom to write about any book we had read and analyzed in class. Over the course of the quarter, I had already written shorter papers on many of the classic Dystopian novels like *1984*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *Brave New World*. To change things up, for the final, I decided to write about *Ready Player One*, our most recently

finished book. In choosing new source material, I thought I would be challenged to think differently and to explore dystopian themes in a more creative way. However, I encountered more obstacles than anticipated. The paper was due on Monday of Finals Week. To keep myself on track to finish all my studying and assignments in advance, I budgeted a few hours to write and set a deadline for myself to finish a decent draft by Friday evening. Now, I laugh at my Friday afternoon self who proudly declared “I’m going to finish my paper today.” I grossly underestimated the amount of time and commitment that it takes to search for quotes in a 400-page novel. Sifting through my starred margin notes and underlines, I found countless themes and connections. But I struggled to narrow down what I wanted to include in my paper. Through researching both *Ready Player One* and the various scholarly sources, I amassed twenty-three pages of single-spaced notes. I got through a partial draft on Friday before I decided to restart from the beginning. It actually took me most of the day Friday, most of the day Saturday, and part of the day Sunday to finish my paper. Along the way, I became frustrated and discouraged at my lack of ability to commit to a topic. Over the course of the weekend, I worked and reworked different paragraphs, ideas, theses, and sources before I could finally get a sense of what I wanted to write. Coming into Dystopian Lit with so much writing experience, I think I underestimated my burnout and my ability to write a good paper in a short amount of time. I had written a number of literary papers and quite a few research papers, but I had never combined the two disciplines before. This challenge proved far more difficult and required far more time than I originally committed.

Looking Inward

By the time I wrote the third draft of this paper, I felt defeated. After countless hours of staring at the random ellipses and question marks littered across my page, it became painful for me to re-read what I had written. Nearly every thought seemed to end as a fragment or a half-made connection that hadn't fully been thought through. After hours of working, I finally found some direction and some clarity in what I wanted to say. While writing this piece, I learned the importance of budgeting time and willpower. I discovered that I am persistent and determined to write something that I can be proud to turn in. Through reflecting on this writing process, I also learned the importance of being patient with oneself and allowing some failure and experimentation when writing. In hindsight, I realize that my overambitions allowed me to learn about my writing process, though this lesson did not seem to pay off in the moment. It was risky to analyze this book instead of another book because we only had one class day to discuss it. As a result, I found myself nearly re-reading the entire novel to pull out pertinent information. Though I gathered a copious number of examples, my source library became just as overwhelming as the paper itself. To include as much of my gathered information as possible in my seven-page paper, I kept trying to connect unrelated topics and make them work together. I ended up writing several disjointed paragraphs at a time before I realized they couldn't coexist in the same essay. My insistence on including several different topics made it so that I had to include integrated textual evidence from the book and support for each topic from scholarly sources. Because I focused on three separate topics, I had an overwhelming amount of information to synthesize. In addition, I became paranoid about overutilizing just one or two sources, so I had to keep re-reading the scholarly sources to balance out the number of examples I included. Though many parts of this paper required risk-taking and stepping outside of my comfort zone, I was comfortable using Jean Baudrillard and Walter Benjamin as sources because

both of them had been introduced to me in other classes (Baudrillard in 20th Century American Fiction and Benjamin in Topics in Writing Theory). I was also comfortable with gathering literary sources from a selected novel and research sources from the DU database.

### Looking Forward

This draft helped me to learn that I need to continue working on my confidence as a writer. I struggled with this paper because I second guessed my choices and did not trust my instinct in the planning stages of writing. However, doing so gave me perspective and helped me to learn about the process of revision. I want to continue working on my ability to approach large writing tasks with purpose and with a level head. If I were to revise this paper again in the future, I would start with big picture ideas or topics. Instead of going through each line of text to find a topic, I would pick a topic and then look for evidence to support my position. To reframe this paper, I could change the lens of analysis or revise the piece for a more general audience because the book *Ready Player One* includes popular culture references and naturally appeals to a more popular audience. It would be fun to re-envision the ideas from this paper into something like a magazine article, a book review, a poster, or a digital presentation like a Prezi. Since I wrote this paper, the *Ready Player One* movie has also come out, so it would be interesting to put the ideas in my paper into conversation with the way surveillance, human connection, and tension between virtual and reality are portrayed in the film. Perhaps I could compare and/or contrast of the way these ideas are constructed in each format. Optimistically, I think each assignment, essay, or journal is an opportunity to improve myself as a writer. In the past year and a half, I have grown and changed as a writer and have gained perspective. This piece helped me to know that I was capable of seeing many different angles of a single argument and allowed me to be more realistic about my ambitions when I start writing. Last fall, I had to write a similar paper that combined

literary sources with theory for my British Literature class. When writing this paper, I also started with a plan that was too ambitious. However, I quickly recognized my error and pared down the scope of my paper in the planning stages before I started writing. In writing the paper for my Dystopian Lit class, I learned how to evaluate my progress at various stages of planning, organizing, and drafting. I also realized that just because I start off with a big idea doesn't mean I needed to commit to it until the bitter end. The errors I made writing "Congratulations! You Have an Extra Life!" taught me that writing allows for quite a bit of change and flexibility.

### Looking Outward

This piece was different from other essays I wrote in this class because it was longer and required research in addition to literature analysis. The other assignments in Dystopian Lit required close reading of a scene or a symbol. These laser-focused topics are much easier to track than themes throughout an entire novel. I didn't have the opportunity to read other papers from my peers, so I'm unsure how my paper compared to other papers in my class. However, since taking this class, I have had several other assignments that combine literature with theory. When crafting this paper, I wanted the audience to consider the book through a new frame of reference and to understand the ways that the world functioned as both a utopia and dystopia. I thought it was important to explore the complicated dynamics between reality and constructed reality and make the audience feel the tension between the human and digital personas of the characters in *Ready Player One*. And because I had such high goals, I put a lot of pressure on myself to bring these ideas to fruition. However, after looking at this paper for so long, I manifested a deep hatred toward it. Nothing that I wrote was satisfying, even when I was finished. I complained to my parents that it was the least favorite paper I had ever written. But finishing it and finally having the opportunity to turn it in made me feel a sense of achievement

more than any other paper I had written to date. I aimed to get a decent grade in order to secure my grade in the class. However, in re-drafting and revising the paper, I lost a sense of what I can usually recognize as “good” writing. This gave me a warped perception that my paper was worse than it actually was. I ended up earning the highest grade in the class – an accomplishment I was shocked but incredibly proud of. This piece showcases my belief that the writing process happens internally and on the page. When given an assignment, I often find it necessary to just “start writing” and find that my argument becomes clear as I shape my thoughts on the page. This piece defines me as a writer as someone who is determined to see my internal thought process manifested on the page to completion. I am a writer because I combined multiple genres in one essay. I am a writer because I struggled through the grueling writing process and made it out the other side. I am a writer because I got it finished.