Interdisciplinary Research on Gothic Literature / “Transmeridian Monastic Gothic: A Tale of Two Monks”

I spent the greater part of my summer in Sewanee, where I worked as a writing tutor for summer school students and also met intermittently with Dr. Malone to discuss Gothic literature. One of the greatest joys of my college experience has been linking fascinations by finding ways to apply critical knowledge across disciplines. My fields of study certainly reflect this, as I am currently pursuing a degree as a double-major in English Literature and Asian Studies with a minor in Gender Studies and a certificate in Creative Writing. From the beginning, I planned utilizing knowledge from both my major fields of study to do an interdisciplinary comparison between Anglo-European Gothic works and Asian Gothic works.

Dr. Malone held weekly meetings in which Ellen Doster and I discussed the development of the Gothic and the label itself, focusing on two very important works in the Gothic cannon: Bram Stoker’s Dracula and Matthew Lewis’ The Monk. From there we researched and compiled bibliographies in relation to these works as well as for our personal research project. While Ellen’s focus was on vampires, mine was on comparing the Gothic of the West with that of the East. To form a basis of knowledge on the emergence of the Gothic, I read many essays in the same vein as one of my main source materials, The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Literature, whose chapters strictly adhered to the Western Gothic. However, books like Asian Gothic and The Alien Within helped me form a greater sense of how scholars view the intersection of Asian and Anglo-European Gothics. I would eventually center on the author who inspired me to write my research proposal in the first place, the Meiji era Japanese Gothic author Izumi Kyoka, as a focal point for my comparison of the Gothic novel of the West to certain Japanese literatures and
cultural forms. During my reading of Dracula, I was able to find a recent essay on the collision of East and West in the Japanese animated film Vampire Hunter D. After reading The Monk by Matthew Lewis, I became interested in how one might compare and contrast its Gothic elements with that of Izumi Kyoka’s story The Holy Man of Mt. Koya. The Monk is a story of passion, incest, and otherworldly powers revolving around Ambrosio within a Spanish monastic setting. The Holy Man of Mt. Koya features the protagonist Shucho, who is also a monk, trying to traverse an unknown landscape and encountering mystical horrors in the process. Both stories rely heavily on the force of feminine sexual power and the archetype of the temptress. In a way, this common link provides a third layer of interest for me: no Gothic work is complete without its provision of a strange gender dynamic, and both these works are no exception. I plan to compose an essay on this topic to present at this year’s Scholarship Sewanee. My ultimate goal in this is to integrate my three fields of study in order to compose a paper that is not only interesting and insightful, but one that is also reflective of my academically diverse experience as a student at Sewanee. I plan to use the research I have done over this summer as well as a paper I previously wrote for my class in Japanese literature.

Doing research over the summer pushed me to not only be self-motivated in my research but it also taught me the merits of narrowing one’s focus in any similar project. The broadness of my initial topic seemed overwhelming at first, but the process became easier and more exciting for me as my research gradually led me into an increasingly specific direction. Anglo-European Gothic versus Asian Gothic would be a topic for books upon books, and it was not until drawing themes and concepts from specific works that I finally had somewhere definitive to go. Never
before have I had such a large volume of possible material to work with, so knowing how to sift through pages rapidly while also being adequately thorough was a crucial skill.

My high points and low points mainly appeared in the form of surges and dips in productivity. Some days I encountered a wealth of relevant material, and other days were less fortuitous. Thankfully I had electronic databases and library resources to help me along with my research, along with the advice of Dr. Malone, but as my research was interdisciplinary by nature, it would have been nice to work with a group of professors to guide me in each direction of their expertise. As of now, I have built a good sense, through discussion and research, of what scholars have come to mean by the use of the term “Gothic” in its many forms, and I will continue to use the knowledge I have gained through this internship in future research projects.

At the beginning of the summer, I was quite confident that graduate studies in the humanities was a path I did not see myself taking anytime soon. I still hold that view. While I enjoy research and literature, the summer has confirmed my own belief that I am not ready to do such a thing right now, nor do I desire it. So in terms of career goals, the research internship allowed me time and space to truly consider what might be best for me when I graduate next spring. At the same time, the types of works I was reading inspired me to begin writing things of my own and led me to set goals for myself in my own creative work. While I was reading and researching over this summer, I also had opportunities to truly begin developing ideas and writing in a scheduled and consistent way that I had never experienced before. I know that I would love to do something involving writing and literature, and I strongly believe that my research internship has given me valuable knowledge for both my academic and creative endeavors.