

Jackson Mittlesteadt

Thesis Reflection

It truly was a privilege to be able to write an Honors English Thesis. The thesis writing process was a highlight of my undergraduate career at the University of Notre Dame. Needless to say, I was thrilled to be nominated.

It was a great deal of fun choosing a topic to write about as I was able to really think about what types of literature I loved, and which authors resonated with my own writing style and preference. I decided that I wanted to write about a poet, as poetry is my favorite literary mode of expression, and after much consideration, I decided to write my thesis about Walt Whitman, the Bard of Democracy.

During my thesis writing process, I was able to work with Professor Laura Dassow Walls with whom I had previously taken a class on the American Renaissance. It was in this class that I fell in love with Whitman's patriotic verse. Professor Walls was an amazing advisor and pushed me to become a better writer and literary critic, and at the end of the thesis writing process, I found myself unconsciously dissecting any poem I came across, attempting to delve into the deeper meaning behind the words and attain an appreciation of the work from the authorial perspective. I felt so inspired by Whitman's writing and Professor Walls's guidance that at the conclusion of my thesis, I responded to Whitman's poetry with a poem of my own, hoping that future readers may be inspired by my prosaic and poetic words about Whitman just as I was inspired by his prosaic and poetic words.

The pandemic luckily did not have as much of an effect on my writing process, as I had already written three out of the four chapters of my thesis before quarantine. Virtual meetings with my advisor were done over Zoom. While in-person meetings were preferred, I truly am

thankful that technology enabled me to continue communicating with Professor Walls and allowed for me to finish my thesis without much difficulty. My thesis itself is about optimism in times of division and discord, with Whitman placing a particular emphasis on the ability of democracy to weather both good and bad times through its emphasis on unity. At this time in our world where people cannot physically unify through embraces and shaking of hands, we must be mindful to remain connected mentally and spiritually in order to weather this storm. My thesis discusses this at length, and I hope you get the chance to read it!

I would like to thank the English Department, particularly Professor Walls, Professor Susan Cannon Harris, who led the Honors Colloquium, and Professor Laura Betz, the Director of Undergraduate Studies in English, for this thesis writing experience.