

Portfolio 1 | Familiar Essay

Value: 14% of your final grade.

Due: Draft—In *Tutorial*, Oct 18-20, Final—In **Lecture**, Oct 24

Length: 6+ double-spaced pages (approx. 1800-2000 words), exclusive of Title page/works cited

Instructions:

- Compose a full *familiar essay* as per the requirements above. For this paper, your audience is “well-informed layperson,” Imagine writing for *Maclean’s* or *The New Yorker* and their readership. Consult course models in matters of style.
- For this assignment, you are required to use at least two published sources (essays, novels, short stories, poems, and so on, as per 1.3), one scene (1.2), and include a *Beginning* and *Ending* for your essay. Your paper must show *movement* between sources and ample *thought-reflection*. You may include a third source, or close off your narrative with a second (short) scene that acts as a resolution to your Journey.
- Your Object from 1.1 must also figure in the work in some way, see 1.2 for details.
- Essays of this type do not ordinarily call for a “Works Cited” list; citation is normally done within the text, without parenthetical documentation. For this essay, omit the parenthetical documentation within the text; write in your sources (as per Catalli). But include a “Works Cited” list at the end of your essay.
- Bring two copies of your draft to your tutorial on the day your draft is due.
- Include a one-page Composition Reflection, as per the instructions below.
- Please review “Housekeeping” in the Syllabus for formatting requirements.

Please Note:

- You are not locked into a final scene or source until the portfolio is due. You may change your mind about your subject or source at any time. All Portfolio assignments must be completed once and included in your final submission.
- Remember the structure of *the Journey* and incorporate it into your work. Do you return and reintegrate (show evidence of growth and new understanding)? Remember, *the Journey* can be physical, spiritual, or both. Show us yours!
- Remember, if your Journey has not been completed, then this is not a good experience to discuss. Avoid traumatic, personal events, in favour of positive learning experiences. Avoid literally naming your paper “How I Learned to Be Awesome!” but that is the general idea. If you got to University, you *are* a success story. Tell us about it!
- Overall, your purpose in this paper is to use an example, experience, or moment from your life that illustrates a moment of growth or understanding for you. **Communicate this wisdom** to your audience using your scene, sources and *Idea* developed in prior assignments.
 - Take into account all the feedback you have received in order to help you continue to thought-reflect, and fine-tune your *Idea/Preferred reading*.
 - In other words, do not tack on, **integrate** and develop. Be *recursive*. Your work

should show evidence of an ongoing writing process. Avoid a model of Scene+Source+Source. Make the insight gained from your sources *part* of your Journey.

- You must hand in your **complete portfolio for Assignment 1**, including:
 - Your composing reflection (on the very top)
 - Your final version of the essay (right under your composing reflection), marked clearly “FINAL VERSION.”
 - Your peer reviewed drafts, marked “DRAFT.”
 - Your assessed exercises in reverse order: Exercise 1.1 should be at the very bottom of the portfolio. If you do not have an assessed copy, you can turn in a clean copy. However, all pre-assignments must show evidence of revision and not simply be excerpts from your final assignment.
- **Students who do not hand in the required exercises will not receive a grade. Your tutorial leader may also choose to apply late grades to incomplete assignments.**
- If you haven't completed and submitted the Academic Integrity test, you must hand it in with this assignment.
- Your TA may have additional advice for success on this assignment.

The Perfect Deal

It is only when we willingly accept and contribute to the world, that we value Life's treasures. In her poem, "Barter," Sara Teasdale recognizes this potential when she states, "Life has loveliness to sell, / All beautiful and splendid things," offering spirits the beauty of "Blue waves whitened on a cliff" and "Eyes that love you, arms that hold." In this acknowledgment of Life's natural beauty and the "loveliness" of true bliss, it becomes clear that by learning to recognize this often-unrealized state, humans can cherish their sacred existence. To do this, Teasdale suggests to "Spend all you have for loveliness, / Buy it and never count the cost." Neither bodies nor spirits are without sacrifice, thus regardless of Fate, individuals must be reverent, surrendering the distractions that withdraw them from their short, beautiful life. Each day that we each roam beneath our skies, whether in the gutter or in the clouds, we must give in order to receive, abandon in order to be free.

My first transaction with Life occurred at birth – she removed the vision from my right eye, forever concealing it from the sights of my life. Instead of resenting my misfortune, I admired Life's creations, in awe of every uniquely shaped hand and every distinctly veined leaf. Eventually, vanity distracted me; I constantly jeopardized both my childhood wonder and my single tool of sight, hostile to the aid of others. Foolishly believing that contact lenses would lead me to "loveliness," my eye became infected, ultimately destroying my sight. My barter with Life forced me into a hazy gloom of regret, preventing my growth. Now, I had to revive my tarnished spirit.

Locking the door behind us, my mother and I begin our walk beneath the cloudless sky as the cool wind gently blows through our blonde hair. As the sun softly descends onto our pale faces, I hear birds faintly chirping amid the earthy scent of the autumn air. Walking side by side,

I enjoy rustling my feet in the crisp leaves, occasionally kicking a small pile up into the air and watching them pirouette across the pavement. During our serene stroll through the neighbourhood, we broadly discuss life: she asks me how I am enjoying my first few months of high school, I ask her how work is going, and we both agree that it's a perfect day to be outside.

Once we turn at the end of our street, she carefully reminds me about tomorrow's optometrist appointment that will ensure my eye infection is properly healing. I know that she is strategically selecting her words; she recalls my haunting experience with temporary vision loss.

"Don't be alarmed at what the doctor tells you tomorrow," she reassures me, sensing my nervousness.

"Mum . . .," I begin, "I'll be fine. I'm not worried at all," I respond, lying through my teeth.

"Either way, I can go back to wearing my contacts," I continue, watching my mother's brows knit. "I mean . . . the infection is all gone, right?"

As the vacant memories whirl through my mind, there is a pause in the still air as Mother Nature holds her breath and the sun conceals herself behind the approaching clouds. Once I enter the grayness, my eyes are immensely relieved from the previously unnoticed strain.

Suddenly, I become aware of a loud thumping noise.

My mother calmly replies, "You know that your left eye, which has been severely damaged, is all that remains of your sight. You have been warned: you *need* to take better care of your vision – before it's too late."

The thunderous booming becomes louder, faster, following my every move – it's my pulse.

As we walk further away from home, my mother knows that I am distracted by the heavy beating inside, my wide eyes looking anywhere but up. Sensing I need to be alone, she drifts away with the wind, leaving me to continue my journey beneath the ashen sky. As autumn seemingly passes the peak of her days, all that surrounds me are the complicated patterns of the bare, contorted trees and the few decaying jack-o-lanterns left behind from neglectful neighbours. Slowly breathing in and out, my nostrils begin to burn from inhaling the frigid air and small white clouds begin to form before my lips. Other than the sound of my old Converse shoes scraping across the concrete, the streets are now silent.

As I meander through the barren land, I find myself yearning for the lifeless tranquility that lays before me. This wistful admiration occurs as I am trapped within the tempest named neglect, hopelessly clinging onto any coherent thoughts. Unfortunately, they each wash up on the shores of my consciousness soaked with remorse. I shouldn't be surprised, though; I have been warned of this inevitable storm and, as captain, I am liable to manage my chaos.

Before I am aware, my feet roam onto a sturdy metallic bridge. Naturally, I lean on the peeling tawny bars, as I have for nearly a decade, observing the murky, lethargic waters below. As my feeble eye scans the nostalgic scenery, the faded trio of graffiti scattered across the structure's posts, the empty birds' nests hidden among the trees, and the deteriorating benches nearby remain ideal subjects for a perfect childhood game of *I-Spy* with my parents and the fragments of my vision.

However, I am no longer interested in this innocent amusement – I discarded this gift long ago. Slowly, I realize that I cannot recall the past few years of my life – this loss is the result of my consumption with distraction. I know this *now*. But still, I lie distraught in the remnants of my poor choices, unable to locate an escape. Perhaps, it is better to remain within

my grim burrow – after all, it has been my home for years. Gradually, my straight paths become misshapen circles. With every step I take, attempting to flee fugitive thoughts, droplets descend from my eyes and the heavy skies, coating my rosy cheeks and the bridge’s metallic body.

As I slowly sink, poet Carl Phillips becomes the author of my thoughts. In his poem “My Meadow, My Twilight,” he considers the significance of choice in the midst of inner turmoil, such as the decision “to look up” or to “close the eyes entirely.” Although perception of the physical can be controlled to calm the self, darkness becomes inescapable if ignored. Phillips recalls the sentiments of an experience overcoming personal hardship when he states:

You look
 again, down the steep corridor of what’s just another
 late winter afternoon, dark as night already, dark
 the leaves and, darker still, the door that, each night,
 you keep meaning to find again, having lost it, you had
 only to touch it, just once, and it bloomed wide open....

These words ring in my mind as the skeletal arms from the canopies above seem to enclose around me. Just like the webbed shadows that appear to swallow the light as they sprawl across the earthen floor, each person has their own darkness that consumes them. As soon as individuals close their eyes, ignoring Life during “what’s just another late winter afternoon,” the stealthy gloom strikes, plunging them beneath obsidian waters. This dreadful obscurity eventually compels individuals to persevere through their personal abyss and to trust the light on the other side. After nights of anguish, a door, a new opportunity, reveals itself, finally enabling change.

Currently, I am looking through my own “steep corridor” that darkens with the passage of time – it is my own creation: my regret, my distractions, my fears. I acknowledge that, as a consequence of my actions, a day may come when I will no longer be able to play *I-Spy*, not with my family, not with a friend, not with anyone. Nor will I be able to appreciate a rotting pumpkin, an empty street, the slender trees, or the robust construction that is supporting me – I will only

guess that they are all lovely, hoping that they are preserved by my memories. I will wish that my eyes will be tired from squinting at the sun, rather than being trapped in an eternal night, yearning for what I once saw with my single tool of sight.

However, I am not “meaning to find” this elusive entrance; it must be deliberately recognized and conquered, thus allowing me to embrace the light. I should not wander, hoping to find the innocence I once possessed. Rather, I must learn while on my journey and march through the storm, directly to the door – and accept that it may be locked. Ultimately, upon surrendering my fears to embrace chaos, I will discover a new perspective of the world, able to appreciate Life’s “loveliness.”

While battling the wave of dread that drowns me in the reality of an infinite twilight, I understand that I must depart from the safe darkness in order to uncover a different reality. Similar to my voyage toward reconciliation, T.S. Eliot speaks of spiritual healing in the last of his Four Quartets entitled “Little Gidding.” In Part II of this piece, the speaker encounters a ghost who teaches him about the ability to transcend external events when he states:

But, as the passage now presents no hindrance
To the spirit unappeased and peregrine
Between two worlds become much like each other,
So I find words I never thought to speak
In streets I never thought I should revisit
When I left my body on a distant shore.

The spirit liberates himself from the obstacles of his past, free to explore and admire the formerly distant elements of Life. This becomes a possibility only when the ghost abandons his “body,” or his hindrances, and is able to overcome his personal darkness. This sacrifice leads him to a newfound awareness of his existence; once he is spiritually liberated, Life’s unimaginable beauty becomes infinite.

Similar to the ghost, I must also take the risk of abandoning my “body” by surrendering my regrets of the past and fears of the future in order to freely respect my life. It is a frightening process to concede the familiar and enter the unknown light. However, this necessary process of growth, whether it leads me to incredible or atrocious experiences, will guide me to an unfathomable future. With this new perception, the events to come will inspire me to learn about myself and others in undiscovered ways as I engage with the wonders of Life. My newfound ability to see with the heart will lead me to understand others in new ways, becoming more empathetic as I cherish those I have yet to meet and the memories we will share.

Accompanying my journey away from the wicked shadows is an awareness of the complexity of Life’s possibilities. Similar to the discovery of my oppressive regret that limited my ability to grow, I will inevitably encounter further barriers once I overcome my hindrances. Beginning to doubt my decision to leave my crooked sanctuary, the wind quietly howls, whispering the words of Walt Whitman. In his poem, “O Me! O Life!” he reflects upon his disdain for the world and discovers how to find meaning within its devastation:

The question, O me! so sad, recurring – What good amid these, O me, O life?

Answer

That you are here – that life exists and identity,

That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse.

Within these lines, Whitman forces me to recognize that, regardless of my adversities, I am a living, sacred human being, who can meaningfully contribute to this world. He believes that although he, too, is resentful of both himself and others, living “empty and useless years,” everyone, including himself has a choice to relish or ruin their priceless human life. During my voyage, it is crucial that I recognize the beautiful darkness of the turbulent seas. Regardless of the turmoil I experience in my escape, I must “contribute a verse” as a gift of Nature,

appreciating the unknown possibilities drifting toward me. I cannot be limited by Life's mysteries, but must cherish my experiences in order to grow, refusing to be bound by misfortune.

After running my cold fingers along the bridge's tarnished bars as if they are a life-giving rope, I emerge from the hidden door that blooms wide open. Slowly, I raise my hanging head, grateful for the splendid branches of the surrounding forestry that effortlessly intertwine with one another, creating intricate patterns in the sky. Nearly at the peak of a tree, blowing in the soft breeze, a single orange leaf persists, firmly grasping until her last breath. Above this valiant battle, I smile, thankful that I recognize the Man on the Moon, who is beaming back at me. Gazing skyward, I cross my bridge, deciding it's time to go home, and sense a change in my vocation: for as long as I stand, whirling fearlessly in the wind, I will always cherish our mysteriously marvelous world.

Temporarily losing my vision was a petrifying experience, however, it is not the event that caused my growth. Instead, this ordeal became the vehicle by which I learned that I had a flawed perception of life. I enabled my inner turmoil to restrain me, rather than overcoming my darkness, welcoming the future, and contributing to Life. Today, the consequences of my poor transactions persist; my left eye continues to deteriorate, leaving me with the possibility of a sightless life. In spite of this, Life leaves me breathless every single day, in wonder of her "loveliness."

My mother always spoke about perceiving and responding to the sublime qualities of life – now, I understand, eager to realize my infinite potential and exchange sacrifices, without counting the cost. Even if we have our eyes open, we can still be blind to Life's gifts. It is only when we *choose* to see the potential of our harvest in the midst of our own gloom that we can nourish our spirits, creating a life of endless possibilities.

Works Cited

Eliot, Thomas Stearns. *Little Gidding*. Faber and Faber, 1944.

Phillips, Carl. *Silverchest*. Farrar Staus Giroux, 2014.

Rattiner, Susan L.. *Great Poems by American Women: An Anthology*. Courier Corporation, 2012.

Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass*. The Modern Library. Inc., 1892.