

Laidlaw Scholarship Reflective Report

A reflective report is required after each summer period (by 20th September). Once submitted we will ask you to post onto the Laidlaw Network (without your supervisor comments if you wish).

This should be supplied as a Word document. Interesting photographs directly related to your research project or scholarship are encouraged and should be inserted into the body of the word document, not supplied separately.

There are six questions for you to complete. You are expected to write a detailed and thorough report; each section should be around 200-300 words.

Please note: This is NOT a technical research report. Scientific reports with a covering note cannot be accepted.

This report will need comments from your supervisor and is to be signed off by both you and your supervisor before submission.

If you have any problems or queries please contact the Laidlaw Scholarship Administrator, laidlawscholarship@leeds.ac.uk.

Scholar

Name:	Mia Fulford
Faculty:	Arts, Humanities and Culture
Email address:	en20mgf@leeds.ac.uk
Title of Scholarship Project:	Nature as Rejuvenation in Literary Depictions of Isolation Past and Present

Please describe the research you have conducted this period

The research I have conducted this summer has been varied, exciting, and introduced me to fields of literary research previously unknown to me.

Under my research title, I had the clear focus of examining themes of nature and isolation in literature. However, definitions of terms like these are often unstable and frequently contested within literary studies. It was therefore crucial that I was able to understand and locate the precise terms I was constructing my research around. My research began reading both my core fictional text and a wealth of relevant literary criticism which I relied on throughout. I also read throughout the research period to fill out the areas that I lacked information about as they arose. With the help of my supervisor I established the keystone texts I should refer to in order to situate my work within the literary study of ecocriticism. Reading these texts and producing a substantial literature review enabled me to understand the debates around terms such as “nature” and decide how to use them in the context of my research.

My literature review, and the understanding I gained from conducting foundational secondary reading, established the knowledge I required to move forward with my research. My final research essay is an approximately 5500 word document which details my findings from my primary and secondary reading. I have also produced a poster, which summarizes the key ideas underpinning my research. Additionally, my literature review fed into blog posts exploring related topics (such as pastoralism) that go beyond the scope of my project. The research process genuinely changed my perspective on my topic; I learnt to appreciate nature as a multi-faceted concept with a fraught history that must be understood as operating uniquely within each text. Equally, the research process introduced new areas of critical thought to me which I am interested in exploring in my further studies.

How is the research work you have been undertaking impactful or important?

The debates concerning nature and isolation are the two most important facets of my research.

The most crucial part of my research is how it begins to dissect the relationship between human and nature. My research discusses how phrases such as “nature” suppose a difference between human and the environment. This difference is not incidental or inconsequential. I believe that humanity, able to separate itself from nature, does not feel its actions upon it. The fundamental belief that humans are different to the rest of the ecological landscape they are embedded in – and hence above it - provides the framework for them to abuse it. This abuse is most obviously realised through climate change, which the IPCC has unequivocally attributed the unprecedented rise of to human activity. Crucially, the effects of climate change are unequally distributed across the globe. Many wealthier Western countries which perpetuate the human/ nature dichotomy have the infrastructure to mitigate the worst effects of climate change, yet disasters are most keenly felt by the poorer sectors of society. This is something that urgently and desperately needs addressing.

Admittedly, my research begins unpacking the relationship between human and nature on a small scale - looking at a number of fictional texts. In each text, I seek to explore nature as an embodied, powerful entity that is able to form the realities of characters. I believe this is a testament to the influential role of nature and the appreciation it requires, especially as it starts to break down the human/ nature juxtaposition. Crucially, I believe that literature is one of the most powerful tools for social and cultural understanding. The possibilities and lives individuals may access through literature force dialogue and the beginnings of conversations about these critical, consequential matters. My research starts to interrogate the fibres of human/ environment relationships. And, although my research focus is limited to the realm of fiction, the realities of this dysfunctional human/nature dualism have resounding and drastic consequences. I feel encouraged by the fact that my sentiments and ideas here have been borne from my research: if I have been led to appreciate ecological issues differently through conducting this kind of work, I hope others might be too.

Secondly, I believe that isolation – particularly feeling isolated – is something that deserves more attention. This project is timely because isolation has not been felt so acutely by so many people until the COVID pandemic. I believe it is important that literature is employed to grapple with the experiences of loneliness that we have all experienced, at one point or another, over the last year or so. It has also been interesting to interrogate the myth of “nature as rejuvenation” for isolation. Approaching this research, I believed that there was a “nature cure” these texts would be attentive to. However, this research has led me to understand that nature is not always restorative or comforting, or a solution for isolation. Despite the fact that COVID has underscored the

value of green spaces – with people flocking to them for connection and respite – it is important that we realise that nature is increasingly commodified and rendered inaccessible to marginalised groups. This research speaks to an awareness of nature as a construct, both textual and real, underlaid by social, political and economic forces that do not present themselves at the surface – forces that must be circumvented in order for nature to become a fair, equal and wholly restoring place.

This research, through the lens of fictional texts, engages with the important, contemporary realities that underpin the inequalities and crises behind nature and isolation.

What impact has conducting research had on your degree course and university experience?

I've greatly enjoyed my experience of Laidlaw research this summer. Firstly, it's been valuable and insightful to get to know my fellow scholars, all of whom are inspiring individuals. We have all been communicating and supporting each other across the research period duration and it has been these are certainly worthwhile connections moving forward with the scholarship and my degree.

This research has also reinforced a number of practical and personal skills which will be useful for me in terms of my future studies. I feel well-equipped from my research to deal with future essays and, in particular, my dissertation. My research this summer has given me worthwhile experience of grappling with new critical fields and theories, and has increased my familiarity with referencing and independent research. Working independently is something I am particularly growing to enjoy as it enables me to shape my own critical voice and pursue my emerging interests across the research process. For instance, finding my own texts and criticism to research exposes me to avenues of thought I may have not initially considered. Additionally, producing a satisfying research product after a summer of independent work has consolidated my organization, self-motivation and communication skills. I also learnt how to manage my time in order to juggle both the research task and my personal needs; something critical, I believe, for the wellbeing of yourself and your work. A healthy work-life balance equally underscores the significance of strong organization and communication.

Excitingly, my research has also introduced me to a topic that I might pick up for my dissertation: ecofeminism. Ecofeminism is an exciting and contemporary field at the intersection of my main passions of climate justice and feminism. I'm excited to see how the knowledge I have gained over this research period will support my academic interests beyond the scope of the scholarship.

What leadership skills do you believe you have gained from the research period? (please refer to the leadership attributes below)

For me, this research period falls into two key sections, divided by a personal challenge midway through. Both portions of time have been developmental and important for me as a leader, for different reasons. I am grateful that I was organised, and able to “make things happen” in the first section of my research. For example, I managed to get the bulk of my reading completed and had elaborated upon the key ideas I wanted to develop in my final report through both my literature review and planning. Without this foundation, I think I would have been in a worse position when I came to pick up my work again after an unforeseen break. I had given myself a strong intellectual foundation in the scholarly material I was researching and was meeting my timescales for planning and drafting. I had also managed to successfully grapple with complex and difficult ideas, and creatively apply them to my own niche of research. Furthermore, my supervisor and I retained close communication throughout the project to discuss my progress. I believe I have learnt to be honest about the gaps in my knowledge and to ask for help when I need it, learning continually, whilst also listening with understanding.

Asking for help is a crucial skill, and one that is often overlooked. Resuming work after an obstacle is challenging, and it is important to be honest about your limitations. I had adjusted my timescales in order to give myself some time off, and was hoping that I had enough understanding from my previous work to get started again. My supervisor and I also discussed how I might want to re-adjust my word-count targets (thankfully unnecessary) and we delved into some of the specific literary debates that I felt more unsure approaching. These conversations reassured me and set me back on track.

It's hard not to feel a sense of failure when you're behind and think you are missing your initial goals. Because of the break I took, I felt further behind on my first essay draft than I wanted to be. As a perfectionist, this felt particularly problematic. However, I've learnt that one of the most important things to realise as a leader is that you are not invulnerable. As such, I knew that both myself and the project would be better off if I left my research for a few days and came back to it with a clearer head. It's hard to look after yourself when you feel impending deadlines, and a need to keep going at your work. Yet, I am realising that a strong leader is somebody who is empathetic, emotionally intelligent and kind. I am also realising that a good place to start practising compassion is on yourself. I'm learning to feel proud of how I handle challenges, rather than resentful of how they throw me off the planned path: the obstacles I overcame with my time-scales, perfectionism and drafting have helped me to realise more practical and less-daunting goals. I feel grateful for what I've achieved in spite of set-backs, and have more support and compassion to give to others because of it; vital characteristics to lead and elevate peers with.

Please talk about activities you've been involved in to disseminate your research, including but not limited to attending conferences, producing research posters, and promotion of the scholarship

Now that I am more confident in my research, I am anticipating that the majority of my research outreach will be conducted over the following year and next summer. That said, I have begun the process of dissemination already and started to engage with new audiences.

Most significantly, I have set up a linked blog and Instagram. The account grapples with a variety of subject matter, spanning from my specific research to broader questions of literature and ecology. I've maintained a consistent posting schedule and have worked hard to produce content which succinctly summarises the technical ideas of my research as well as that which creatively and artistically engages others on wider literary themes. Posting at least twice a month, I've produced content related to broader ecocritical theory, such as the social reality of pastoralism, and items more specific to my research, such as that which addresses the challenges of research. This has required me to be innovative with how I engage people – I've made posts across a variety of media and have challenged myself to repackage ideas I have only recently learnt myself. My goal is to appeal to as many people as possible and hopefully introduce a new audience to ideas about the environment and literature.

I've also produced a research poster, which I have shared on the Laidlaw Scholars platform and my blog. A research poster isn't particularly common for research projects in the humanities. However, I found it an exciting challenge to try and summarize and accessibly explain my project on one side of paper. Through including relevant images, short and digestible chunks of texts and clear subtitles, I made the poster a visually-engaging, logical and informative document that could be easily found and read.

Finally, I have been keeping my Laidlaw Scholars profile up-to-date. I hope this will be a useful starting point for people hoping to find out more about my research, or those seeking to apply for the programme. I look forward to the education outreach days later in the academic year and the leadership development days approaching in September.

What are your future career or educational plans?

In terms of the immediate future, I plan to complete my degree. I really enjoyed my first year of study, covering topics such as medieval witchcraft and Marxist interpretations of the museum, and was pleased with my result. I hope that I can continue this trajectory across the next two years. I look forward to formulating and writing my dissertation as part of my final degree award. I'm unsure at the moment as to whether I will write an English Literature or Art History based dissertation, as I am a joint honours student studying both. If I choose to do an English Literature dissertation, I anticipate

ecofeminism – the very thing I've discovered through this research – will be a strong contender for the topic.

I am planning to study for a Masters. Whether this will be in English or Art History, however, remains to be seen and is contingent upon my dissertation topic. I have a lot of thinking to do over the next year or so! I hope to study for my Masters at an institution such as Cambridge or The Courtauld Institute of Art; both offer courses aligned with my specific academic interests.

In terms of my career, I'm still deciding. The one thing I know is that I want to write – and whether this is in journalism, screenwriting, authoring, publishing or academia is something that I hope to find out over the next couple of years. For now, I still run a zine and contribute to student publications. I hope to start getting both articles and fiction published in small magazines and papers over the coming years. Ultimately, I am passionate about using writing to explore social issues and for activist purposes. Any role doing this is where I see myself.

Supervisor

Please comment on your scholar's research period, what you consider to be your scholars' strengths and which leadership attributes (please refer to the leadership attributes below) you feel your scholar has demonstrated and is particularly skilled in. You could also identify areas which your scholar can develop further.

Throughout her research period, Mia has been communicative, engaged and interested in her project and its core themes. She has demonstrated many key leadership attributes and strengths whilst navigating the challenges of producing a piece of independent research over the summer break.

Mia's particular strengths lie in her strong intellectual abilities. She has successfully pursued a complex and intellectually challenging area of research, one that grapples with abstract philosophical questions alongside the intricacies and aesthetics of literary texts. She has risen to these challenges effectively: she is continually willing to learn, and pursues difficult questions and topics with curiosity and open-mindedness. In my communications and meetings with Mia, I have found her to be articulate and understanding, and she strives to explain her ideas clearly and concisely both orally and in her written work.

Mia has also shown a particular strength in her willingness to listen with understanding when receiving constructive feedback. She is also adept at assessing her own knowledge, and is always ready to change her path or revise her perspectives accordingly on a topic, should she encounter persuasive new information. This was demonstrated when we collaboratively revised the range of texts that Mia's project considered, which resulted in removing one text and adding another. This was necessary due to the difficulties posed by synthesising discussions of literary texts from such different literary traditions, and Mia was ready to accept guidance and feedback on this, as well as on other challenges that she encountered during the project.

Throughout the trajectory of Mia's project so far, she has effectively prioritised the different demands of her work, completing necessary reading, planning and writing tasks according to her other commitments and activities earlier in the summer. This demonstrates strong organisational skills and time management, but her willingness to be flexible when she encounters unforeseen challenges or personal difficulties also shows a high level of emotional intelligence and self-awareness.

I believe there is scope for Mia to further develop some of the other leadership attributes in her future work on the Laidlaw Scholarship. There will be particular opportunities for Mia to work on her relationship building and networking, as she pursues the public engagement aspects of her project next year. I believe Mia would also benefit from finding new ways to expand the reach of her digital presence, and from seeking out innovative and creative

solutions to building both digital and real-world networks around her project's core aims.

Signature of Scholar *miafulford* Date: 21 / 09 / 21

Signature of Project Leader *DLB* Date: 17/09/21

Leadership Attributes

Able to lead without authority

Able to convey purpose and build coalitions

Cultural intelligence and capacity for empathy

Honestly assess own knowledge/leadership style/preferences

Knows own limitations and acts accordingly

Learns continually

Speaks and writes clearly and confidently

Able to listen with understanding

Uses digital connectivity

Makes effective decisions in complex environments

Seeks out and fosters innovation and creativity

Strong intellectual ability

Turns ideas into action

Builds relationships and networks

Works collaboratively and across boundaries

Uses emotional intelligence to achieve this

Capitalises on the power of diversity

Able to navigate new and foreign situations

Uses this to build relationships and networks

Has energy and impact

Makes things happen

Able to analyse data and interpret results

Able to work and think independently

Prioritises activities and manages own time

