This work deals with a retrospective search of the events in my life that I feel have been most influential on shaping who I am today. Currently I am writing on the relationships I have had with family members and how their actions and my subsequent reactions have shaped my own personality. Most of the literature I will be reading is on how different relationships in that author’s life has affected them. I will be doing close readings of these texts and writing reading responses for each piece of literature. The responses will answer a number of questions:

• How does the author divulge information about himself?
• How does the author craft the essay when dealing with past and present emotions?
• How does the author deal with setting up flashbacks to reveal past?
• How does the author craft his commentary to the scenes he divulges?
• Does the author present visceral scenes or reflective scenes?
• Does the author present real time scenes or compressed time scenes?
• Are there any running themes throughout the work that tie together seemingly unrelated topics?
• How much does the author reveal about himself?

The personal essay is a form of creative non-fiction that has a deep-rooted tradition stretching back to Michel de Montaigne in 1580, who quoted heavily from Latin and Greek writers of centuries past (Lopate Against Joe de Vivre). These essays help people understand who they are in history, where they come from, and where they belong in a community (Sanders). I am beginning to dive into my own personal history, trying to find how my past and environs shaped who I am today. Lopate says that “personal essayists converse with the reader because they are having dialogues and disputes with themselves” (Lopate Art of Personal Essay, xxiv). I am trying to measure my own writing with the guidelines that have been set out before me by the masters of the craft. “[The] genre’s virtues [include]: openness; appetite for pleasure; willingness to reflect, to give oneself to ‘random provocations,’ nature, beauty” (Lopate Art, xxxiv). Do I possess the art of perception and confession that makes it necessary to even begin to call myself a writer? One should be able to “tell once and for all, everything that he or she thinks, knows, and understands” (Lopate Art, xxviii). One needs to shape his experiences down to their essentials, until all that is left is the wisdom of his trials and tribulations (Sanders). The never-ending search for truth, the struggle to find a true answer in a world of uncertainties, is the task of the personal essayist (Sanders, Lopate). “I am moved to write essays not because I understand so much but because I understand so little” (Sanders, 2). Lopate summarized my goal with this project perfectly “what then, is the essay’s place in the literature of today?” What then, is my work’s place in non-fiction?

“Personal essayists converse with the reader because they are having dialogues and disputes with themselves”
---Lopate

This page contains references to the personal essay such as those by:

Michael de Montaigne
William Hazlitt
Michel de Montaigne

Since I want to find out where I fit in the contemporary scene of non-fiction writing, most of the writing I will be reading will be of contemporary authors.

Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic by Alison Bechdel
Maps and Legends by Michael Chabon
A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Size by David Eggers
Consider the Lobster by David Foster Wallace
Dead Man Laughing by Zadie Smith
The Disappointment Artist by Jonathan Lethem
I Love You More Than You Know by Jonathan Ames
The Black Veil: A Memoir with Deceptions by Rick Moody

However, I also want to be reading older works to understand the scale of the personal essay such as those by:

Michel de Montaigne
George Orwell
William Hazlitt
Charles Lamb
James Baldwin
H.L. Mencken
E.B. White

Methodology

LITERATURE REVIEW

The personal essay is a form of creative non-fiction that has a deep-rooted tradition stretching back to Michel de Montaigne in 1580, who quoted heavily from Latin and Greek writers of centuries past (Lopate Against Joe de Vivre). These essays help people understand who they are in history, where they come from, and where they belong in a community (Sanders). I am beginning to dive into my own personal history, trying to find how my past and environs shaped who I am today. Lopate says that “personal essayists converse with the reader because they are having dialogues and disputes with themselves” (Lopate Art of Personal Essay, xxiv). I am trying to measure my own writing with the guidelines that have been set out before me by the masters of the craft. “[The] genre’s virtues [include]: openness; appetite for pleasure; willingness to reflect, to give oneself to ‘random provocations,’ nature, beauty” (Lopate Art, xxxiv). Do I possess the art of perception and confession that makes it necessary to even begin to call myself a writer? One should be able to “tell once and for all, everything that he or she thinks, knows, and understands” (Lopate Art, xxviii). One needs to shape his experiences down to their essentials, until all that is left is the wisdom of his trials and tribulations (Sanders). The never-ending search for truth, the struggle to find a true answer in a world of uncertainties, is the task of the personal essayist (Sanders, Lopate). “I am moved to write essays not because I understand so much but because I understand so little” (Sanders, 2). Lopate summarized my goal with this project perfectly “what then, is the essay’s place in the literature of today?” What then, is my work’s place in non-fiction?

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OTHER LITERATURE TO CONSIDER

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E.B. White

THREE-TIERED PLAN OF ATTACK FOR RESEARCH

A portrait of the artist engaging in dialogue with himself

Photo Credit: Aaron Alexander