

## Final Essay: Opening Paragraphs

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Before leaving the States, I made mental maps of who to spend time with, who I'd get to know more, and who I'd try to avoid. I made note of those that would undoubtedly find me trivial, and those who would endure my constant company. I was, almost entirely, wrong. Which I should have been, of course, because what fun would it have been to go and not be surprised by something? This has been the beauty, and the curse, of my time in Ireland. All of your ideas, your pre-conceived notions, your expectations, and your fears jumble around and end up how you never would have expected them to, upside-down, backwards, all wibbly-wobbly, and turned on their heads. You're left breathless and confused. It has been exhausting and invigorating, trying and terrific, lovely and lonesome. It has been an experience I will never forget, or regret.

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*You told me the plough was immortal!  
O green-life-conquering plough!*  
- Patrick Kavanagh

From the jagged cliffs and rocky shores of Donegal, I felt like I could see the curve in the earth if I looked hard enough. Standing on the bouncy boggy ground, I felt the resonance of man's footstep on nature. It's easier to understand why people migrating to the city were historically considered deserters from this awe-inspiring vantage point. Even being back in Olympia surrounded by the tall, rich, green trees, I feel there is too much concrete between the fertile forest and me.

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I spent six months studying Ireland in an American classroom. Until the wheels of my plane hit the tarmac at Dublin airport, I felt like Ireland could have all been an elaborate hoax, a mythical country made up so that academics could write books about it and bars could sell Guinness. Everything seemed too complex and powerful to be true; it seemed impossible that so much history and culture could be condensed into an island the size of Indiana. In class, I was particularly fascinated by how Irish identity and value systems are shaped by and have shaped history. Being in Ireland was an opportunity to see these values and traditions in practice. My two months there were a window through which I could explore the ways that traditional cultural values and sources of identity are being transformed by the increasing wealth and modernization of Ireland and finding their place in a rapidly changing society.

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Ireland is past, present and future, all rolled up into ball of paradox, half-visible gray lines and misty half-truths that tend to skirt the subject, whatever it may be, just for the sake of being undecided. If that only half makes sense and partially hurts your brain then you have some idea of what this year has done to me. I dove into this year, knowing a little about the language, but mostly not knowing what I was getting into. I love to study people, and I wanted to get out of the Unites States on the government's dollar, so why the hell not, right? I had never spent an entire year studying one subject, and with such a small class, it was bound to get interesting. "Interesting" is the understatement of the year. Ireland pulled at so many strings inside of me, emotional, spiritual, physical, psychological; I feel as though I was thoroughly picked apart and then put back together more whole than I was when I started. Sean Williams, I am forever your humble servant, and I bow to your eternal wisdom in all things. Can I have your autograph?

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I found myself and my life stuck in an unending rut, replaying the same mistakes and struggles over and over again. My married life continued to play down to an ending I dreaded. My working life had lost its challenge and appeal. I followed the advice of my sister in law and enrolled in classes at Evergreen. Eventually I found myself in a class with Sean Williams by the title of Performance Works. Near the end of that class, I had the chance to sit with Sean at a pub in Ashland, Oregon, where she offered me a chance at something that would change my life. My life would forever be altered for the better, once I stepped through that door....

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When I got into the Ireland Program I knew that I needed to put Carna on my itinerary. Initially I hoped to find work on a sheep farm in the area, but soon discovered that it is not a sheep raising community. While I was in the process of finding a farm I decided to attempt to contact Micheal Ó Cuaig, whom I had meet two years earlier. Since I didn't know his address I just addressed a letter to his name and mailed it to Carna, Connemara, co. Galway. About two weeks later I relieved an email from Micheal's wife. She connected me with a man named Máirtín Tom Sheáinín who works at RTÉ Raidió na Gaeltachta Connemara, the Irish language radio station for the area. He tried to help me find a farm by doing segments on me during his program. Even though I couldn't find a farm I was still determined to go to Carna. Since Máirtín knew that I have an interest in sean-nós singing he offered to record me singing some songs once I get to Carna, to play on his radio program.

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As different as I found the east and west to be culturally, the one thing that tied the whole island together was its past and the thousands of archaeological and historical sites all across the country that give evidence of it, as well as its culture and music. Two important historical sites that I was lucky enough to get to visit were Newgrange and Tara. Both were amazingly powerful places to be, and to finally see them in person after

having learned about them in class was awesome. Indeed, having spent time in class going over their history and importance, I thought I'd know what to expect when I actually got there. I was wrong. Both sites were far more impressive and powerful than I had ever imagined, Newgrange especially. I hadn't expected it to be so big, for one, and to actually go inside and see the light display was incredible. The amount of effort and skill it must have taken to construct such an impressive monument is extraordinary, considering it was built even before the Pyramids along the Nile. Getting to stand inside of it, where the ancient inhabitants of Ireland had stood thousands of years before and see the evidence of precise calculation and construction the form of the thin beam of light stretching across the dirt floor was a surreal experience. I wish I could have stood there for an hour instead of the ten minutes we had.

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Globalization is by definition a global issue, so I don't know why I was so surprised to find it in Ireland. After having learned so much about Ireland's unique culture and influence on the English speaking world, like the ancient customs and the ability of the Irish people to persevere in the face of powerful internal and external influences that sought to change them, I found the exact opposite when I arrived in Dublin. I saw how Western culture had pervaded and diluted indigenous Irish culture and how the European Union had turned Ireland's sacred things into tourist attractions that felt like tools for the enrichment of the European economy rather than a careful infrastructure put in place for outsiders to honor hallowed places. I found Western culture and ideals being clumsily smeared over indigenous culture everywhere, and it was not pretty.

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“You make a grab at time in the hope of catching eternity, that is what a poet does”  
Cathal O'Searcaigh

North, South, East, and West I covered almost every part of Ireland during my two month stay at the end of this academic school year and yet I still did not see enough or learn enough. Twenty more trips to Ireland would still leave me with a yearning to see and learn more, but nevertheless this trip with the Ireland program was invaluable. Having the opportunity to learn all about Ireland's history, culture, language, and people throughout the school year was very helpful during my travels in Ireland. The classes we took at Oideas Gael in Glencolmcille, county Donegal helped to solidify my understanding of the Irish language, dance, poetry, music, and history. There were a few ideas and concepts during my two-month stay in Ireland that especially helped me learn and grow as a student and individual. The first was my solo trip to Killarney National Park in county Kerry where I spent a week exploring the park, working on my book that takes place in the forest, and reflecting about the Famine. The second is the poetry that I have both written and read while in Olympia and in Ireland and the connection I felt with the land and Ireland's history that made itself visible through my writing. The third is my reactions, throughout the year, to the 1916 Easter Uprising and the Civil War and how my feelings about these two events resurfaced in a startling way while in Ireland. The

fourth and final was, and still is, my understanding of myself as an American, a foreigner, and a child of the world and how I interpreted this feeling of being all three while I was in Ireland.

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“And catch the heart off guard, and blow it open.” -Seamus Heaney

One could say that this is exactly what happened when I stepped off that airplane at the Dublin airport. As soon as Irish air hit my lungs it caught me off guard and blew my heart wide open for new experiences to love. Was I prepared for this? Not in the slightest did I feel prepared. My situation is just like that of a newborn lamb. I felt as if I was born into a brand new world that you have no clue about. My feet were extremely unsteady and I could not seem to find the right footing. The first thing you want to do is eat. So I find comfort in something soft like a hostel bed, or next to my mother sheep. I felt exactly like I was at the threshold of being a newborn lamb.

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“Am I here at all, am I?”  
-Don Byrne

I stepped foot off the plane into the Shannon Airport, and the lack of hustle and bustle instantly brought me comfort and kept me at ease, as though I was not entering into this completely foreign place. I purchased my ticket for the bus and waited. Soon after my journey to Ennis began, most likely assuming I was just like every other yank, the kind bus driver asked, “So do you know Dog the bounty hunter?” The first couple days in Ireland, which I spent in Ennis and then Dublin, I had a hard time even believing that I was even in Ireland. The accents on everybody’s tongues, and complete unfamiliarity with my surroundings, still did not convince me otherwise. It was not until I arrived in Gleann that I truly felt like I was in a foreign place, I had never seen anywhere so beautiful. While I did get the whole “I’m not in Kansas anymore,” feeling I can’t say it was at all unpleasant. As the days turned into weeks and the weeks into the month, I grew to consider Gleann my home away from home, and it became the home I preferred.

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All year we had been talking about this trip. We had been studying the culture, the language, the music and so much more; yet I was not at all prepared for my trip to Ireland. I could have studied the culture for ten years and still not be prepared for the experiences I've had. I expected to learn more about the culture and the language. I expected to begin to feel comfortable in Ireland, with a basic understanding of what it would feel like to live there. What I did not expect was how much I actually learned about myself. This past year has completely changed my life, for what I believe, is for the better. Looking back on my admissions essay for the beginning of class; I began to wonder how I was even excepted in the program. Reading through it, I realized it does

not even sound like me anymore. My knowledge has expanded so widely on my belief system, my views, my actions and even my speech. In the essay, I talk about how much I would love to live in Ireland, being Irish, wanting to connect to my roots, yadda yadda yadda. If I have learned one thing (aha! One thing) through Ireland in History and Memory, it is that I am not Irish. I am ashamed to remember how I used to look at 'being Irish' as having red hair and celebrating Saint Patrick's day. Although I am embarrassed about my lack of information of Ireland and what 'being Irish' means, I am so proud and amazed at all of the knowledge I have gained this past year. What really struck me multiple times this year was the synchronicity and interconnectedness of everything in the universe.

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Individualization is a natural process. It is part of change and growth. As an expression of environment as well as personal choice, it occurs both the natural and artificial world. People feel they are in control by consciously making decisions that seem to affect their individualization. A typical child is seemingly less in control of their development, but if she matures creatively she will seem to become more and more independent. A person who endeavors to be free should attempt to engage in this process. Many artists' experience blocks when their creative process is interrupted for some reason.

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I started out the Ireland program thinking that it would be a perfect fit for the studies I had done in the past, the ancient Celts and the British Isles. What I received from this program were many new lenses with which to view the world. When I sat down to write this essay, I felt overwhelmed with my knowledge. I had so many ideas and so many stories that I knew I would not be able to relate. So I picked the few that were the most meaningful to me and tried to tell each story the best I could. This program, this trip was a journey that I am still processing and each story captures only a snapshot, only one new lens through which I can now see the world anew.

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I cannot, in truth, remember quite who I was at the beginning of this class. I remember something about wide-eyed idealism and thinking that the Irish language was called "Gaelic". Looking back on my entrance paper to this class, however, I find to my relief that only one of these is true. Unfortunately, it's still a linguistic fuckup, but at least I had my head out of the clouds, for the most part. This essay, or rather this series of essays, will attempt to explore certain aspects of what I learned and came to understand while on the cumulative class trip to Ireland. In total, I spent seven weeks overseas. Four weeks of that were in the town of Caiseal, in the parish of Gleann Cholm Cille, Donegal. Or, as anyone looking at a map would say, "The middle of fucking nowhere." The other three were spent gallivanting throughout Great Britain and Ireland, including such places as London, Bristol, Edinburgh, Glasgow, an accidental side trip to Ayr, Belfast, and, mostly, Dublin and surrounding areas. While many interesting things happened on this trip, I will

focus in this essay on the parts that I learned in Ireland, for the most part. And now, I think, I shall leave you to read the actual essay. I have formatted this paper into a collection of smaller essays for readability, and started out each essay on a different page to reduce clutter, and because I think it looks better.

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I awoke from a dream just a moment ago, feeling like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz. “You and you and you were there!” For in this dream of mine, we were all together in Ireland, trying to say goodbye the best way we could. Neither hugs nor pints of ciders were working out very well for any of us. Over the past 9 months we have learned the language of another country, walked down the path of Ireland’s history, sang of glory and sorrow, yearned for the ancient past and gained a few new friends along the way. So much has happened over this time that I have been having issues collecting my thoughts and storing them in a 25-30 page document, but here I go.

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I began this great walk so many years before I even thought of entering the Ireland Program, in search of something that would enrich my life, it was a long road and one I thought I would walk alone. What I did not expect were the diverse people I would meet along the way – their stories, experiences and journeys. It would be something that would affect me on so many levels.

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In a January 2014 review of Eavan Boland's book *New Selected Poems*, the poet is quoted as saying about the difference between the history and memory, “As a young writer I began to see a real difference between the two. History was the official version. The past, on the other hand, was a place of shadows, losses, and silences.” This struck me, as I had just completed my visual work in the Winter Quarter, where I had explored women's role in the history and story of Ireland. Combined with my experiences working in museum and archives, and a life-long love for history in its many expressions, I arrived in Ireland looking for way in which the narrative of the people and the place was told differently than the official versions, so readily available.

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Peat smoke clung to each strand of hair with desperation, but I wore it down anyway, nurturing the image of obviousness: I was one of two females in the room of twenty-five people, and the other was the bartender. The young men flocked to her, her wedding ring only noted as it *tinged* against the pint glass she handed over the counter. The three pubs were too different and too similar all at once, but in that room the young and old were mingled by force, one group scarcely acknowledging the other, only interacting if a murmured “*Gabh mo leithscéal*” was deemed necessary as the smokers squeezed through the crowd blocking the door out. I spoke with many of them over the weeks,

young and old, male and female, questionably homosexual and doggedly heterosexual. Three stand out the most, and what they represented then and now:

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Where do I start? What is there to say? How do I begin a paper that is to describe and summarize what I learned and experienced from the opportunity of a lifetime? Should I start with a story about my first day in Ireland, that happened long ago and how long ago it happened? Or would it be more prudent to begin by reciting a poem I wrote, perhaps the dolmen poem “The Silent Stone Giants”? Maybe I should just start by rambling off facts that I learned over the course of the year, such as there's more cases of schizophrenia in women in Ireland than anywhere else in the world? I guess what I'm trying to say is I don't know how to begin. After all I had learned so much those first two quarters and experienced so much in Ireland from the last that it doesn't seem like anyway of starting this paper would be the correct way. In fact, the only proper way to begin would seem to be by asking questions. Why did I initially join the Ireland program? What topics surprisingly intrigued me? What subject matter created the most passion inside me? These are the questions I found myself asking while trying to figure out how to start this essay.

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It's been one hell of a trip; six months in class, four weeks in Ireland; at this point I have one foot in America, one foot in Ireland and the rest of me is off dancing with the fairies, or running from them as the case may be. Right about now I'm sitting surrounded by a pile of my own shattered notions, feeling a little like a fool and a little like a mad man gazing at the past and present all at once. I'm watching three children of Lir nailing crosses up while the youngest is hopping around the house and Cuchulainn punching Oliver Cromwell in the face, with Mary and the priest with the white handkerchief yelling “Enough!”

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*Is glas iad na cnoc i bhfad uainn.  
Distant hills look green.*

I'm standing on the beach at the shoreline. Pants rolled up, shoes and socks off. Hard, grainy sand is interlaced in my toes. There are rushing waves coming towards the sand and when they collapse, they fan out around my ankles. The water is freezing. So is the wind, and I think about hair ties because my impossible hair is getting all up in my face. I can hear the rushes and reeds behind me. They're rocking with the wind, hissing with it. I'm looking out at the sea, towards Canada and I'm thinking of home. I'm thinking of the distance and my heart suddenly hurts. It feels as though it's caged here and can't be free. Can't go home. It's beautiful here. I've been running towards this place for years now, but at the moment it feels as though the sea has locked me in Ireland. I'm trapped in its beauty and left longing for the beauty I left behind. Why? Why do I feel like this? Why do I struggle to leave only to look back once I am gone?

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**Foillsightear gach nidh le h-aimsir**  
 By time is everything revealed  
*(Or: Sean's ongoing study)*

“This is probably some social experiment of Sean’s. Her life’s work,” Sally posed. Maybe she was right, maybe part of this whole experience was, maybe all of it was, hell, it could be. 24 students in one small town, 14 in one ever-shrinking house; social experiment indeed. But I have learned more about myself, and others, in this short amount of time than I ever have before in my life. Four intense weeks of constant interaction will do that. The classes and the language all seem to take a backseat to the social lessons that were taught, the friendships that formed, and the constant, ever ebbing and flowing of the tides at the beach in Glenn.

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Things don’t feel the same. I imagine it has more to do with me being more aware of certain things than any change that took place at home while I was away. The city here, the place where I was born and raised, reminds me of being in Derry – the atmosphere slightly tense and the people busy and purposed, as well as feeling industrialized and generally unfriendly. I wouldn’t say it is actually any less friendly, but I’m absolutely more aware of it now. It’s almost as if having lived in rural Ireland began to wear away at an outer shell of gruff unfriendliness that I didn’t really know had been put in place by my life living in a, relatively, tense American city. I honestly hope it doesn’t come back, that I’ll be able to keep this friendlier, calm demeanor that was beginning to develop over my month and a half in Ireland.

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An eerie sense of doom bubbled up within me as soon as I left Dublin. I could not place exactly what was causing it but I thought that perhaps it was the reality of traveling alone catching up with me. It followed me for days but I gave it very little further thought until a tour guide in Connemara pointed to a sparse outcrop of gangly looking trees and announced that on our left we could see a forest. I could not see a forest. The sad parodies of trees that dotted the mountainside made their lack elsewhere only more startling. It hit me then that this was why I felt so disquieted all the time. There really were no trees in Ireland. Or, more precisely, there were no healthy forests, not even what I would consider woods. All the trees I had seen since my arrival were about as vibrant as those that grew against the odds on highway mediums at home.

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