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Writing this paper was the first time I allowed myself to indulge my curiosity about a topic to its fullest extent. As my professor Kelly Derrick might have mentioned in her part of the application, the original assignment was to write 5-7 pages about women and religion; I latched on to my fascination with the Virgin Mary, Southernness, and literature, and over the course of two weeks I wrote 15 pages. I'd spent one week doing research, and the next actually writing.

The research process was new to me, and thus had its challenges. Instructors over the years have taught me many, many lessons on why and how academics research, and how they incorporate that outside information into their work, but again this was my first time really, truly researching. As an English major, most of my papers have comprised of close analysis; I sometimes chose to use external sources, but I only searched for them with the purpose of reifying the thesis I'd already chosen, and often they were just confirmation of information I already knew. This time, I had to work backwards and research before I could write a thesis.

About half of my sources are physical books and half are JSTOR articles. Of the 25 sources listed in my Works Cited, I spent perhaps two hours on each of them, reading through, annotating, and taking notes. I needed so many sources because, despite my searching, no one had ever published an article about the convergence of the Virgin Mary and Southern womanhood in Southern literature before; therefore, I needed sources about the Virgin Mary the Biblical figure, about Virgin Mary the cultural figure, about womanhood, about Southern culture, about Southern literature, about American literature in general, and so on. I synthesized this sometimes overwhelming mound of information into my thesis, and then applied my theoretical background to the texts I discuss in the paper.

I had never done a paper this extensive before, and it wasn't even required. Why would a college student, in the grips of final exams and other assignments, choose to make the assignment harder on themselves? While writing the paper, I sometimes kicked myself for overachieving, but I stuck with it because I knew that this would be the first of hopefully many passionate, difficult, illuminating academic projects. This paper cemented for me my goal to pursue an academic career in a serious way. Submitting to this contest is my first step.