

A Gift from the Sea  
Research Essay and Reflection

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## Reflection

There are a million subjects I'd like to write about. I even wanted to write about Martha Stewart while simultaneously trying to get myself an invite to one of her Halloween parties. I was surprised by the amount of ideas I've had in this class and I'm excited to explore them all more while revising the ones I did put work into.

I chose this topic because I love marine biology in particular. I felt like I couldn't study it as an undergrad because I failed my biology 1010 course in college. This final initially started out as a "How-To Guide" on catching ghost crabs, and then it was going to be a guide on shelling because I particularly like shells and had that initial research. I also wanted to write about Hatteras because I miss it and I wanted to write about Kip and our breakup after learning of Kip's recent engagement in August. I realized pretty quickly that my breakup didn't have to be the focus of the paper, because my other passion, pirates, could also be integrated as more of my research. I think that's the interesting part, the history of shells in communities throughout time, whether it was pirates or conquering, distracted French generals. I wanted to learn about other miraculous discoveries and how people felt after finding a perfect shell wash up on the beach. How much other shells cost when my favorite and most perfect shell could only be sold for \$12. I think it's a fascinating subject and it carries a lot of emotional weight for me because Kip found me that shell. I can't really talk about shells and leave him out and this is ultimately why I left him in this version of my essay.

I learned a lot writing a research essay in a nontraditional, essayist way. It was challenging. A lot of my transitions were and still are quite choppy. It was fun to have a format where we mix the personal experience with the research and that was very new, difficult, and fulfilling. I didn't experiment much with form because I felt "safe" to stay inside the MLA

formula. The points I added helped my transitions a little so that I could find some way to block it out and help the reader understand the timeline, especially when it jumps at the end to the breakup. Ultimately with form, I'd really like to work on transitioning it to something like Anthony Doerr's essay "Thing with Feathers that Perches in the Soul." I would like to use some speculating to illustrate what the French General was experiencing that first time on a tropical beach or Blackbeard watching his men box with Whelks.

All the feedback I got from classmates really liked the ending and the full-circle love story that ties into my quote in the introduction. So, I ultimately stuck with that and tried to make characters clearer while remaining a little more detached with Kip's introduction as a character. I have a very hard time structuring my essays. I feel like I have a pretty good meandering thought process because I journal a lot and that's natural for me. I hate to admit that my structure is not related to the subject because I did it to help me simply integrate my research in easier chunks (the tip and the other price of shells and the one Kip found, also arriving on Hatteras and setting the scene), while also allowing me to better describe my place and my characters.

Nothing changed in my thinking about this subject. Just honed in how much I miss it and the beach life, the easy and fun hobbies of treasure hunting on the beach and being immersed in marine history and biology constantly. I'd like to be able to instill that curiosity in others by my love and yearning for it. I can't wait to keep working on it! I think it'd be fun to bring the history to life, rather than just reporting facts. I wonder what shell the French general found and I wonder how long boxing matches lasted. I'd like to convey how barbaric and pirate-y that sounds and create that image and scene since Disney dropped that ball when the Pirates of the Caribbean movies came out.

## A Gift from the Sea

*\*No sea creatures were harmed during this research*

1. *“Seashells are love letters in the sand” - Anonymous*

It was typical of 90% of beach finds, a beautiful piece of a shell, broken in the surf.

“Ooh, that’s part of a shark eye, aka, moon shell,” a girl next to me butts in as I rub my fingers along what I had to assume was a part of Ursula’s old necklace that contained the waves of the ocean and at one point, Ariel’s voice. I’d seen them before. Clean and manufactured looking, like the aisle in every Michael’s craft store of beach inspired décor and shell lined frames. China, I always thought to myself. I didn’t know they were *animals* once...their armored exoskeletons left behind to be collected.

I was in an excited rush to turn over all the shell bits in my hands, greedily looking for new and beautiful additions to the collection I’d unknowingly just started. “Scotch Bonnets are the state seashell of North Carolina,” I heard Emily again. She seemed to be trailing me, eager to voice identification whenever I bent down to pick something up. “They’re very rare to find in one piece because they are so fragile.” She had the slow voice of an elementary teacher and chin length blonde hair, her dainty fingers pried open my fists and worked quickly overturning all the shells I had clutched in my hands, using my palm as her desk.

My guide book arrived in two days (thanks Amazon) and researching in peace was a much better alternative than having Emily breathing down my back. She was one of the other interns who had been there for a month already and was very eager to take the girl from Utah under her tiny wing. *Their soft bodies secrete limestone-like particles in a fluid that is applied in layers and hardened into a shell that grows over time.* I read in my beachcomber guide while

waiting for my coffee. Dodging Emily before her early beachcombing jaunts meant a 5:30 a.m. start for me which I hoped was early enough.

## 2. Welcome to Hatteras, North Carolina

The land of houses on stilts and outdoor showers. Store fronts with signs that say “no shirt, no shoes, no problem.” Home of kiteboarding, marlin fishing, and surfing. Home to many cockroaches and tiny tree frogs. Home to Blackbeard, the legendary pirate. My new home for the summer of 2016.

The dangerous opposing currents gave this particular coast of the Outer Banks the ominous title of the Graveyard of the Atlantic. Thanks to these currents the island gets frequent lightning storms, high sea turtle activity, sport fishing, and exciting beachcombing finds...shells and old shipwrecks!

Shells can come in one piece like snails or conches and are classified as gastropods, Latin for “stomach foot.”<sup>1</sup> Shells also come in two pieces like a bivalve (the yummy kind – oysters, mussels, scallops) or if you’re not a seafood fan, they make a great bra for undersea mermaid princesses. I have amassed quite the collection in both my jacket pockets, my backpack, and my fists and I begin to think for the first time that I might be violating a code of the beach...to leave shells for others. But I can’t let go.

## 3. The Price of Shells

“Wow!! That’s worth like \$12!” Kip’s soon-to-be stepdad, a Florida native, exclaims amazed, admiring our treasured shark eye that eclipsed his entire palm. I swelled with pride and regaled him with the story of how Kip was Poseidon in that moment. God of the ocean, commander of all mollusks and sea magic, offering up his greatest shell to his love. Kip’s mom

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<sup>1</sup> Witherington 15

seems unamused and I take the shell back in my hand, “this will be on display at my house until the museum calls for it.”

“Wherever the mollusks are, I will go,” wrote Dr. Harry G. Lee, the man behind the world’s largest private shell collection, worth approximately \$1 million. My new personal hero has named 36 shells, with 18 shells named after himself. His most highly prized shell (much like my highly valued \$12 moon shell) is the left-handed variant of the sacred shell of Hinduism, the “Indian Chank.”<sup>2</sup>

The shelling fad began in the 17<sup>th</sup> century when the East India Company began bringing back shells from Indonesia (a mecca still for sea shells). Some collectors paid highly for rare shells, one Wentletrap or “Staircase Shell,” sold for \$100,000 dollars in today’s money. *Conus gloriamaris*, or “the Glory of the Sea,” was one of the most valuable and rare sea shells, worth approximately \$15,000 until about 1970 and now one can be purchased for about \$200.<sup>3</sup>

It has also been argued that sea shells were the reason Britain, not France, claimed Australia. When both countries had expeditions exploring unknown parts of the coast, the captain of the French expedition became too busy “discovering a new mollusk” while the British laid claims to the southeastern coast of Australia.<sup>4</sup>

Although the shells at shops are fantastically larger and bonus, in one piece, the satisfaction of stumbling upon one held its own fascination. However, there was one moment where kids in my ghost crab hunting class came upon three whelks in the sand, suspiciously all together. Whelks are spiraled shells, much like marine phones...like ones in Spongebob’s pineapple. Having been around for over 60 million years, they’ve held a variety of uses

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<sup>2</sup> Ruiz and Ramsey

<sup>3</sup> Hays

<sup>4</sup> Hays

throughout the years. Native Americans used them as gardening tools and pirates used to put them over their fists and have boxing matches using the whelks as gloves.<sup>5</sup> They've even been given as tips in modern day marine biology classes.

#### 4. A Tip Worth a Million Dollars

My jealousy over the find was hard to hide. At the end of the night, the boy who found them, came up to me offering a gloriously barnacle-covered whelk. "Are you sure?" I asked him nearly breathless, I'd been searching all summer for one. Even though I hadn't found it, I clutched in my hands, an intact whelk for my collection, but maybe the second part of my collection...shells as gifts, collected by others, with the more sacred part of my collection reserved for my own finds.

Kip and I often joked about finding a whelk on our beach walks...maybe one would just be sitting there on top of the sand with the waves slowly and gently rolling over it, or maybe it would be slightly buried underneath the sand, or maybe it'd be completely buried where the sand around it caves in creating a rough outline signaling a buried shell, according to our beachcomber guide. What would be even better is if one rose from the ocean, lifted up by the surf, engulfing us and marrying us on the spot. We'd laugh and keep looking.

#### 5. A Gift from the Sea

It was one of our last beachcombing walks. All the way out to the Cape. The last half mile of our walk was underwater, usually just about 5 inches to a foot of water. It looked more like my preconceived notions of what an island would look like. Farther away from the dunes it was just sand and clear blue water. I'd read that it was a great place to find shells because of its difficult access...we had to walk about 2 miles in, because my truck didn't have four-wheel drive.

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<sup>5</sup> Hissong

Because of this, it was remote and often occupied by fisherman rather than shell seekers. I was hopeful. But, after all the walking, the sun, and our empty water bottles, Kip was agitated, insisting that we turn back, but I wanted to ignore him for a little while longer.

Kip was so stubborn in his discomfort that he refused to swim. So, I swam alone, with him watching me on the shore, “can we go back yet?” Finally, as we turned to leave, Kip glanced back at the place I was just swimming and walked back towards it. Surprised I watched him as he waded in to his calves, bent down and put both arms in the water. One to stabilize himself and the other searching around, he wasn’t even looking down. Suddenly he pushed himself up, triumphant in that moment and shoving his other hand up into the air, something in his grasp. He came over to me and there it was. The shell I’d been hoping for all summer (aside from the minister whelk), an intact shark eye...fifteen times the size of any I’d found all summer. This was the granddaddy shark eye, a hundred grand back in the day of shell currency. A treasure from the sea.

## 6. Empty Shell

The beach days were long behind us. My shells sitting in their places on my shelves, his old fishing reel, records, and cowboy hat were still in theirs. As if the night before had only been a dream. His clothes still in the closet. After scanning the room and the inventory of our life, my eyes reach the bed and the absence of his pillow snaps me back to reality. Four days from then I’d come home to his key on the table. The shelves in the bookcase were empty except our old picture frame and the cards we’d exchanged over the past two years, my glittery favorite - “On the sea of love, you’re my soul-matey.” Nothing more than a shell, a love letter left in the sand, beautiful but empty, a historical testament on the shelf.



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