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In Their Own Words: The Reflections of Hungarian Youth on Self, Family and Culture

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This paper describes the process of collecting memoir writings from Hungarian youth inspired by readings from American autobiographical literature. This work was completed over the period of an academic year through the process of teaching a literature course, The 20th Century American Experience through Autobiography, to Hungarian university students majoring in English. In addition to describing the content and structure of the course, the students' voices on the topics of self, family and culture in Hungary are presented.

1. Introduction

In the Fall of 2005 and Spring of 2006, I led a course titled: *The 20th Century American Experience through Autobiography* to students majoring in English at a Hungarian university. The university requested that I teach an American literature seminar, however gave me the freedom to select the focus and structure of the course. The motivation for designing this seminar developed partially from a trend I observed during other periods abroad; namely, the export of 'American culture' through mainstream media. I found my life experience as an American missing from the presentation of

internationally popular television shows, such as *Baywatch* or *Friends*, platinum selling records and blockbuster movies, for example *Titanic*.

Additionally, I was struck by the dearth of information in English about the perspective of my Hungarian peers. My interest in the life experiences of Hungarian youth is not only a personal response; I share some heritage, but related to the historical time period in which the current young adults of Hungary were raised. As this generation has entered adulthood after having grown up during a societal transformation towards democratization, decentralization and capitalism, its members, perhaps, have unique perspectives on their roles as individuals, within families and as citizens of Hungary and the world. From the few resources located on this subject, the voice of Hungarian youth was missing.

The American autobiography course was designed to accomplish two specific goals. First, the course includes memoir writings encompassing a more broad portrayal of American life than can be found in popular media. The selections share stories of self, family and culture in the United States of America. The authors represent multiple perspectives through gender, geographic, social and ethnic diversity.

Second, the format and content of the course should elicit students' written response, including autobiographical products. The exposure to authentic, personal texts will demonstrate to participants that they too have a perspective to share that would be of interest to readers, including an audience

beyond Hungarian borders. The written contributions of students would be presented collectively to represent a part of the viewpoint of today's Hungarian youth.

2. Structure of the Course

2. 1. Course Design

The design of the one semester long course was influenced by the *Book Club Workshop* (Raphael, 1999) that uses autobiographies to encourage professional educators, and future educators, to reflect on literacy, culture and autobiography, and influence their instruction. Using aspects from this model, the instructor selects American autobiographical literature representing diverse cultural, language, geographic and gender backgrounds from the spectrum of years within the 20th Century (see Appendix A). The selections were further organized by American literary themes specifically regionalism, realism and multiculturalism. Many selections included aspects of more than one theme, for example Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* exhibits regional (American South in 1930s) and multicultural (Black American experience) traits.

The role of the teacher requires an interdisciplinary approach to teaching. Through the process of facilitating discussion of autobiographical readings and encouraging students to reflect on their own lives and culture, language, literature and higher level thinking instruction are integrated. Classroom lectures introduce themes in American literature and give

brief historical and cultural background information to the texts. Discussions further explore the literary characteristics of each autobiographical selection; however mostly focus on cultural aspects of the piece's content.

Prior to each class period, students are required to read specific selections and respond in a written form of at least 250 words. Usually, the instructor suggests a theme for the writing related to each week's reading (see Appendix B), however students' are also encouraged to respond to the literature in their own way. For example, in response to the essay *The Ethics of Living Jim Crow: An Autobiographical Sketch* by Richard Wright students are given the optional prompt to think of unwritten rules in their lives (as a student, daughter, male in society, Hungarian in the world, etc...). At the end of the semester, students engage in the peer editing process to edit and expand two of their weekly reflections. The culmination of this weekly writing exercise is a portfolio presentation of their self-selected, highlighted entries. Students are also required to compose a research paper providing additional background information on at least two autobiographical writings from the course and comparing and contrasting the selected pieces based on one of the American literary themes covered. During each class period, student participation is emphasized.

The classroom discussions focus on connecting the American autobiographical excerpts to broader concepts of American life, parallels to Hungarian culture and the

individual students' lives. For instance, including multicultural selections from U.S. literature can influence students to think about multicultural writing within their native country and perhaps multiculturalism in their own lives.

2. 2. Class Composition

The course was taught twice over an academic year, once per semester. Students could only enroll once for the course. Eleven students in the Fall and 15 in the Spring joined the class. The students ranged from second to sixth year students and from twenty to twenty-six years old. At this particular university, students are required to double-major. All students were English majors and many had a second major of Communications or History. In addition, students can specialize within their English major in the areas of American Studies or Literature. Future professional aspirations include positions in the media or as teachers, interpreters, translators and tourism operators. Many students, and most faculty members as well, commute multiple times weekly to campus by train from Budapest or smaller towns within Hungary. A small percentage of students are ethnic Hungarians who grew up in neighboring countries, such as Ukraine, Serbia or Romania, fully practicing Hungarian culture and language during their upbringing and moving to Hungary to attend university.

3. Student Voices

Through their weekly reflections on the course readings, students shared written accounts of their lives. Here their writings are presented grouped by the themes of self, family and culture and further divided by subtopics. These excerpts are as the students wrote them, only spelling has been corrected and parenthetical expressions added to make the content understood.

3. 1. Writings on Self

Students were never directly asked to write about their selves only. Rather, the theme of self emerged alongside other topics and often intertwined in the context of family and culture. The writings that most focused on their concept of self were related to their childhood. Childhood memories were presented in several of the autobiographical selections, most explicitly in an excerpt from Eudora Welty's *One Writer's Beginnings*.

One of the childhood themes present in the students' writings, and perhaps no coincidence since they are now English majors in college, is the influence of books on their lives. Responses described favorite childhood story books, the one book that solidified their interest in literature and family reading routines.

I have been thinking about it [*impact of childhood experience on personality*] a lot nowadays. In my case, my beloved mother was or is, it is hard to decide, the central figure of the whole process...There is a Hungarian proverb, which we say when we talk about who is very-very cultured:

The bookshelf has collapsed on him or her at home. According to my closest friends' opinion I am one of these. I really do not care if it is true or not, that is not the point now...None of my parents could afford to go to college or university but they have been learning in their whole lives and by now the whole surface of the walls are occupied by bookshelves, which are full books on every branch of humanities... As far as I can remember I have read Shakespeare earlier than a comic strip...I have read thousands of pages, hundreds of masterpieces by now.

This passion [*for reading*] started at my age of 15 when most of my classmates were not reading more than the compulsory ones. There was only my best friend who had interest in books too and we enjoyed so much sharing our opinions after finishing a book. However, after a while it was always I, who suggested what to read, she never had any idea. It wouldn't have been a problem until the point when she started to mock the way I was dressing, bought the same pieces of clothes....at the beginning it was not a problem for me because I considered it fun among the best friends, but later I felt that my taste is not belonging only to me anymore...many times she was talking to others...about a book as if it was her new discovery though it was me who suggested it to her before.

A few students also shared memories of their elementary school years, commenting that Ms. Welty's school memories from the 1920s did not seem so different from theirs, but did contrast with their image of current American schooling.

I remember that in the school the toilet was the most important place for us, girls, because we always gathered there. It was not the same to talk in the classroom, the toilet had its intimacy, and we could speak about secrets and gossips and all kinds of important things that we were interested in.

When I was 6 years old and went to school, I had a lot of difficulties in making myself accepted. My hair was cut short. My parents believed that if they cut it regularly, my hair would be stronger. Time proved they were wrong. My hair now is still thin. But they achieved something. Due to my short hair, everyone thought I was a boy. Therefore, I often played with boyish toys. My clothes were also boyish ones. I did not used to wear skirts.

In Hungary there is a stereotype about American schools being like playgrounds where children do not learn anything and have their own way all the time.

3. 2. Writings on Family

Reflections on family indicated an important role of extended family members, especially grandparents. This phenomena was noted in all types of families, but had a practical significance in the experiences of divorce, death of a parent, an absentee biological father or both parents having to work for economic reasons.

3. 2. 1. Relationship with Parents

The influence of parents on their lives was apparent. Many student writers wrote of their parents as role models, some having worked hard and making sacrifices

to ensure their children have a better life. Others described effects on personal development.

My mother was only twenty when she gave birth to me so I messed up her life a bit because she had to continue her studies as a correspondence student. [*In the photo*] her eyes are in the distance so it's likely she was thinking of her for coming exams.

There was a time when many young people had enough of this constant struggle [*Hungarian oppression in Romania*] and decided to leave for a less controversial country and start a new life. So after the revolution in 1989 [*my parents*] moved to Hungary.

He [*father*] died in cancer when I was 14 and that was the reason for the vanishing of my childlike personality. But till that time my childhood was a well-balanced period...I had a very special relationship with my father and I was very much attached to him so it was really hard for me to accept his absence. He was left-handed and I inherited this characteristic and I also managed to preserve this habit...I remember that he never allowed me to crop my hair but after his death I could not stand my long hair any more.

My father was a professional handball player in his youth, but later as a non-professional, he was playing in the local football team. My uncle was both a footballer and tennis player. Perhaps that is the reason why I am so fond of sports, I love watching and doing it as well. They didn't know that time [*when I was an infant*] that I was going to devote my teenage years to swimming.

3. 2. 2. Role of Extended Family

Extended family, especially grandparents, were present at more than just leisure meetings and Sunday meals. They provided essential caretaking for single-parent or two-parent working families. Additionally, grandparents have become part of family legend having lived through two World Wars, the Hungarian Revolution and Soviet rule.

When we were small children, we visited our grandparents on every Sunday. It was a usual habit and our grandma always cooked something we liked the best...After lunch we all took a nap in the darkened room and in the afternoons we usually ate bread and apricot jam. In the evenings my grandpa showed me the stars in the sky and he asked whether I could see the Milky Way...We were counting shooting stars until our neck got tired.

My Godfather and Godmother were very dutiful in showing up on every birthday and name day of mine, but I never really felt related to them.

I spent most of my earliest years in the country with my grandparents...The most intimate moments we spent together were in the evening, when the time of the evening prayer came; then I could watch my grandmother show me how to put my hands together, and listened to her voice almost singing the prayer.

He [*my grandfather*] was the chief police of the town...I was his only grandchild, his little princess, so he devoted all his free time to me. I spent lots of time at my grandparents' house and every morning I went to feed the chickens and rabbits they had...Each evening the whole family was waiting for me to choose the person to pick

me up from the kindergarten the next day, and for some reason most of times it was my grandfather.

I was six years old when my parents divorced and my mother brought me up...My mother had to work a lot and did not have enough time to take care of me, especially during the summer vacation. Usually I spent this time with my grandparents in their village near to our home town...We used to go with my grandparents to fish at a lake. The first time, my grandpa did not let me talk, because he said that my high-pitched voice would frighten away the fish. After a while, we ended up talking about his life, he mentioned a lot of things related to the war and how things went in the earlier times. Sometimes, I tricked him by pulling the string of the fishing rod, so he thought that he caught a fish. He was so sweet and so mad all the time and my grandma was a partner in my tricks.

The eldest woman I know in my family is my maternal grandmother, who sets the model of perseverance and courage to me. She is a strong-build woman with thick muscles so resistant that she is able to carry two buckets of water for the animals. She stands firmly on the ground with her big feet, and she has such wide palms that she can kill more than one fly with a single blow. I have always been amazed at her long hair, which she combed and gathered up in a knot...Life has rarely been gentle with her. World War II interfered in the carefree years of her childhood...As a young woman she chose to marry a drunkard, aggressive man, my grandfather...She gave birth to two girls...with great fears that they

should be born boys, and become just as cruel and drunkard as her husband.

My Godfather is bald and has a beard. He was like this ever since I knew him, and Mum says ever since she had known him. When I was little I was told that his hair slipped off from his head to his chin. He used to be a ship engineer and a sailor. He traveled from South East Asia to the Caribbean and back.

3. 3. Writings on Culture

Visiting other countries of the world I cannot avoid facing jokes connected to the name of my country. When foreigners overhear that I am Hungarian the general reaction is: 'Oh Hungary! Are you hungry?' Hungary is a tiny, but by no means insignificant country situated in the middle of Europe.

Cultural writings covered physical descriptions of Hungary and psychological aspects of being Hungarian. As the course focused on exploring American culture through autobiographical literature, reflection on culture was most represented in students' writing.

3. 3. 1. Physical Descriptions of Hungary

Descriptions of place in Hungary included fondness for spending leisure time in the natural environment and the pride in cultural significance of historical sites.

We live in a small country, there are not big distances but we have everything we need; I mean mountains, lakes, rivers, big plains, forests, cities, smaller towns and little villages as well...When I spend my

summer holiday next to Lake Balaton I usually watch the sky by night in summer because it is so wonderful.

Although there was another 'strand' [*beach*] nearby with pools of different sizes and different temperatures of water, with buffets to buy soft drinks, palacsinta and lángos, we still liked to come down to the Danube from time to time, where there was nothing but sand. Sometimes a ship went by and made waves for us to enjoy. All the kids would run into the water screaming and all the parents were shouting not to go inside too deep...It is a funny thing that back then, nobody was concerned about how polluted the water could be. Nowadays, I'm not sure people would still go into the water.

Hungary is a beautiful and multicoloured place to visit, because through its history many architectural styles can be observed in the capital and towns...Basically it's an agricultural country but was industrialized by force in the 20th Century...The nation has many talented artists, scholars and scientists.

Csorna is the small town where I was born. The land of imagination and secrets that is how one could characterize this region of Hungary. Many castles, palaces and monasteries make this area colorful. Being a little child my parents took my brother and I to see old castles where 'those old lords and beautiful ladies used to live'...Stepping into the buildings, the rooms where hundred and thousand of years ago people lived who in fact determined the life of the people of their age has always made a great impact on me. Many times I return to these old

dwelling and when strolling in their big garden amongst hundred-year-old oaks I kind of feel at home. The weather is windy and rainy most of the times. That gives the land a picture of a mysterious world as whispering nothing remains the same though everything changes always... As far as I am concerned I could not live without this always green landscape for a long time.

Additionally, students portrayed aspects of small town or village life in Hungary. A majority was raised in this type of environment and would like to return, but for educational or economic reason have relocated temporarily to Budapest.

There are not many opportunities for the young generation because of the shortage of jobs. Especially qualified people have difficulties in finding decent jobs. Therefore they, including me too, move to bigger towns or to the capital.

Most of the people living here are ordinary ones. This territory, Nógrád county is not a rich or prosperous one. The unemployment rate is quite high, and it is just deteriorating. Therefore many people are dissatisfied, but that is understandable. I have already mentioned that people know each other, talk to each other. Wherever you go, you always meet acquaintances.

As the traveler leaves the border of Hungary and has the patience to do another 400 kilometres towards the depth of Transylvania, will get to Székelyudvarhely, the place I was born... This area is called the "Land of the Székelys" and includes two counties that give home for 200 thousands of Hungarians... [The

Székelys] are a small ethnic group inside the Hungarian nation that has its own culture and traditions though its mother tongue is Hungarian... Transylvania... has astonishing geographical conditions with endless mountains and forests. Udvarhely... is a very beautiful town surrounded by mountains. Udvarhely is also known as 'the purest town', in the sense that it is the only place that could avoid letting too many Romanians settle down there. This was not an easy task, especially in the communist era, when the main aim of the [Romanian government] leaders was to abolish the Hungarian communities.

I have two different emotions about our orchard in Kecskemét... My family has a big garden like an orchard, but there is more than just fruits there. My grandfather bought this territory several years ago to his children... Ever since I can remember my parents have been taking me there... we can say I was born into that orchard... my parents worked very hard in the Golden Sand [of the Great Hungarian Plain]. When I grew up and became strong enough I helped my parents who gave me some tasks. These were to collect strawberries, but in this case it was evident that there were more strawberries in my stomach than in my basket, or I had to collect bugs from the leaves of the potatoe plants... In autumn my task was to pick grapes... However, [as an adult] when we were lying on the blanket in the silent orchard and watching the clouds, we felt at ease. No cars, television, computer, disturbing neighbours, just us and the land. It was a real solace. There

was nothing else but silence, but we could hear our own thoughts and could leave everything behind.

Also common were reflections on 'big city life' in Budapest and living in Hungary's larger towns. Responses ranged from not being able to imagine living anywhere else in Hungary and demonstrating pride in a particular district to being frustrated with the anonymity and noise pollution in the city.

In Budapest I hardly know my neighbours – not to speak of the strangers in the streets all the time.

In bigger cities people live so close to each other but we have never time to talk a bit to our relatives or friends. We do so many things and sometimes we forget to cultivate our relationships.

A couple of months ago we moved from my parents' house into a flat which is on the 8th floor, and the blocks of flats is in the downtown. Neither of us lived in a flat before... Ever since we moved in, my brain is moving all the time. There are disturbing noises of cars, buses and neighbours.

If I try to express my proudness being Hungarian I would steal some lines of Carl Sandburg, who wrote about his affection to his city, Chicago. Although he is aware of its depravity, he still loves being its inhabitant. I feel the same in connection with Budapest.

3.3.2. Being Hungarian

Reflection on Hungarian identity included the role of different ethnic and religious groups within Hungary and the experience of ethnic Hungarians

living outside of Hungary's borders. As supported in previous sections, students have strong national and ethnic pride, but there is a feeling that this sense is not widely shared within Hungary. They considered their national identity in relation to membership in the European Union and today's influence of globalization.

I often thought about why on earth I had been born a Hungarian. Americans, for instance, outnumber Hungarians, so the chance of being born an American seemed more possible. Moreover, our language is sort of lonely. Rather few non-Hungarians speak it. This feeling of separateness made me feel special and outstanding. 'I am the chosen one,' I thought.

Despite the fact that 15th March, our greatest public holiday, had passed, many people still wore the cockade. The little flag we are wearing on our clothes at special national celebrations tends to symbolise our pride of our nation, but that year it turned inside out. I was told that wearing the cockade means that you are a 'real Hungarian', who is conservative... and votes for the right-wing parties... The 'cockade party' hated everyone who was not on their side, saying they were not Hungarians. I had to realize that being a Hungarian to them meant something totally different of what it meant to me before. The difference was that while I simply loved Hungarians, they hated everyone else. Therefore, I became more pessimistic about my nation. Hungarianness started to mean typical characteristics to me, like feeling sorry for ourselves all the time and being not able to unite.

Hungarians do not have a collective identity...many Hungarians do not really appreciate the things that are ours. Although we have a great historical past, rich cultural and artistic heritage, and beautiful natural environment, many of us tend to forget about these facts or simply do not do anything in order to preserve them. I do not say that this is only the people's fault. For decades our national ambitions were suppressed...Politicians are so busy with our integration to the European Union, that they forget about an important thing, namely that we should first find our place in Hungary and then in a larger community and not vice versa. Though this latter aim cannot be carried out successfully without having completed the first task.

Hungary is tend to hold the American culture in high esteem – although I don't think that it was bad, but we shouldn't have forget about our nation. For example: I see a lot of people wearing T-shirts on which an American flag can be seen. Ok, that flag is nice, but we are not American. I can hardly see any T-shirts with the Hungarian flag. Why is it? Aren't we proud of our home country?

When elaborating on Hungary's multiculturalism, students mentioned the situations of Roma, Chinese, German and Jewish inhabitants. Students themselves felt open-minded towards the different ethnic and religious groups; however they were aware of discrimination and prejudices and admitted limited interaction between groups.

I was born in the heart of Europe, in a country, where the majority of the population is white, catholic – just like me

-, and men respect women. Furthermore, as the rest of my cousins went to higher education after high school, for me it was also obvious to choose a university place and try to get in. And now I realize that this is the first unsaid rule. I always knew it; I just never came to a situation to put it into words. Did I actually go to university, because I didn't want to disappointment parents? Or did I come here, because I didn't want to hang out from the row myself?

The husband of the cousin of my boyfriend is a Gipsy man. He is a truck driver and a honest and hard-working man. Several years before he went to many different companies in order to get a job. Although he fulfilled the requirements he was not employed at any of the firms probably because of the colour of his skin. Now he is working for a company in Italy, where his wage is much higher than it would be at home. He has a really good job today, but he had to go abroad in order to make his way and to get a job.

Minorities should be treated as equals and let them take part in the life of their country, they choose to live in. I think there is nothing wrong with bilingual education, and if someone is welcomed in a country, and can freely preserve his cultural heritage, that person will take pride in his new country as well.

Most of us don't like to be different and as I experienced always criticize others who follow the mainstream in all fields of life. Maybe belonging to the majority gives the security and courage to tell something degrading of those who dare to think, act, look or live differently.

Hungarian students who were

born and raised outside of Hungary's borders recounted their upbringing and development of a Hungarian identity. These students felt that one can more know what it is to be Hungarian when one is prohibited from developing and embodying her cultural identity.

As a Hungarian but a Ukranian citizen, I completely understand the situation of ethnic minorities who are expected and sometimes forced to learn the language of the country they live in. I hardly speak any Ukranian although it was a compulsory subject at my school, but of course even my teacher was Hungarian. Why did not I care enough to learn the official language of the country? The answer is simple: to me language is part of my cultural identity and heritage. I lived my first 16 years knowing that we were a minority group on a land that used to belong to the Hungarians. When I look at my father or my great-grandmother, I see the pain in their eyes, the sadness that was caused by history and which cannot be changed for a while for political and ethnic reasons. There is self-consciousness in containing [*retaining*] our language and being proud of it. It is a way of quiet rebellion against oppression by those who are not willing to accept the fact that we are not willing to integrate to their society, since our heart is longing to become one with the mother country, Hungary...I definitely do not want to fail my ancestors who went through the hardest time of oppression and were still not willing to give up their mother tongue.

Whenever I read about the life of blacks in America it reminds me of my childhood life in Serbia. I experienced

what it is like to be the member of a minority class in a country. However, while I lived there it was entirely natural that as a minority we were suppressed in many walks of life. It was obligatory for us to learn the Serbian language...learning this language was very difficult for many Hungarians since we all talked the Hungarian language at home and most of us just had Hungarian friends...Those who did not speak the Serbian language could not go to Universities and did not get jobs. In this way Hungarians became poorer and poorer on their own...Even if a Hungarian knew the language, had the sufficient qualification he or she still would not get the better paid jobs.

4. Conclusion

The course was successful on several accounts. Students reported being able to relate to American people and their experience in ways through which they had not previously thought. Second, as exhibited in this article, a sample of Hungarian youth writing in English was collected. This selection is by no means comprehensive, but could be a starting point for further research into the experience of this cohort. An additional benefit of this course is that it presented new teaching strategies and classroom experiences. Literature courses tend to be lecture-based and focused on analysis rather than relating to the text. Students commented that they were more active in this course than is typical. There was more opportunity for classroom discussions in English, to personally share and connect with classmates, and for peer editing.

Appendix A

List of American Autobiographical Literature

- From The Best American Essays of the Century. Ed. Joyce Carol Oates and Robert Atwan. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000.
- Angelou, Maya. "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings." 342-357.
- Bourne, Randolph. "The Handicapped." 57-70.
- Ehrlich, Gretel. "Solace of Open Spaces." 467-76.
- Herr, Michael. "Illumination Rounds." 327-341.
- Kingston, Maxine Hong. "No Name Woman." 383-94.
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Appendix B

List of Suggested Writing Prompts

- How does where you're from or your family's heritage influence who you are? Reflect on your geographic, ethnic, cultural or religious background.
- What are some unsaid rules in your life (as a woman or man, as a student or teacher, as a young person, as a Hungarian, as a member of whichever group with which you identify)?
- What do you want outsiders to know about your culture? Write about your culture.
- Write about a time you had to stand up for a belief when most people didn't agree with you.
- Whose voices are part of multicultural Hungary? Who is a Hungarian?

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Modular Symbol Algorithms, Computational Number Theory, and the Millennium Problems

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As one of the Millennium Problems, the solutions to which carry a prize of one million dollars a piece, the Birch Swinnerton-Dyer conjecture, since its introduction in the early 1960's, has remained both a fundamental unsolved problem in algebraic number theory and one of the most challenging problems of the twenty first century. My work on the Fulbright fellowship in computing cohomology groups using the modular symbol method is not in the direction of proving the Millennium Problem, but in implementing the tools of computational number theory that have developed in the past twenty years of progress on the conjecture, and in the direction of expanding these tools for new uses. The mathematics behind the algorithms in this project lies in the intersection of algebraic number theory, homology and cohomology theory, complex analysis, and algebraic geometry, and is well explained in the order of its development using the history of the Birch Swinnerton-Dyer conjecture.

One of the seven Millennium Problems of the Clay Mathematics Institute in Cambridge, Massachusetts is the Birch Swinnerton-Dyer conjecture, named after two British mathematicians, Bryan Birch and Peter Swinnerton-Dyer, who first formulated the conjecture. The conjecture relates the number of infinite order basis elements of