To incorporate ideas of biocultural diversity and linguistic diversity into the LIT 2120 curriculum, this research assignment references a critical passage in James Joyce’s short story, “The Dead,” written sometime between 1905 – when Joyce was a young writer of 23 – and 1914, when *Dubliners* was published.

During those turbulent and transformative years prior to World War I, many American and European artists like Joyce were startlingly aware of how “global” and “uniform” western culture had become. In fact, the story’s protagonist, Gabriel Conroy, experiences one of his pivotal “epiphanies” during the course of a conversation he has with the Irish Nationalist, Miss Ivors, who chastises him for abandoning his country – the beauty of the unspoiled Aran Islands, as well as the insular beauty of his native language, “Irish,” or Gaelic:

“O, Mr. Conroy, will you come for an excursion to the Aran Isles this summer? We’re going to stay there a whole month. It will be splendid out in the Atlantic..."

“The fact is,” said Gabriel, I have already arranged to go ---”

“Go where?” asked Miss Ivors.

“Well, we usually go to France and Belgium or perhaps Germany,” said Gabriel awkwardly.

“And why do you go to France and Belgium,” said Miss Ivors, ” instead of visiting your own land?”

“Well,” said Gabriel, “It’s partly to keep in touch with the languages and partly for a change.”

“And haven’t you your own language to keep in touch –Irish?” asked Miss Ivors.

“Well,” said Gabriel, if it comes to that, you know, Irish is not my language.”

The research assignment for students will be to investigate Ireland’s Aran Islands as a geographic location. What unique and diverse natural features does this location contain that made it Joyce’s symbolic geography in representing “Old Ireland,” or “the real Ireland”?

Next, how did the history of this extreme western landscape influence Joyce’s choice in using it in his story?

What social and political factors played a part in preserving the original landscape, as well as the original language of this region?

Explore England’s political hegemony over Ireland in Joyce’s time, and how English came to be the “native language” of Ireland.
Why does the author choose to make this “eye-opening” experience on the part of his protagonist a seminal event in Gabriel’s transformation into the 20th Century’s “Modern Man”?

Are there similar “stories” – fiction and non-fiction -- that can be discovered in today’s biocultural landscape that reference this connection between preserving environmental diversity and preserving linguistic diversity?

This assignment will allow the MDC student enrolled in LIT 2120 to employ the following Learning Outcomes: #4 (Information Literacy); #5 (Knowledge of Diverse Cultures); #9 (Appreciation of Aesthetics); and #10 (Awareness of Natural Systems).

Questions concerning the viability of a “living language” continue today. Just as species (flora and fauna) can become extinct through both negligence and inattention, so languages – the embodiment and evidence of human diversity – can similarly be extinguished. The longing for an “Esperanto” – a universal language that would undo the traumas of the Tower of Babel – continues. Yet, linguists and scholars debate the wisdom of bringing all human expression down to a lowest common denominator.

If Joyce’s presentation of the debate between Gabriel Conroy and Miss Ivors in “The Dead” reveals his 20th Century Modernist anxieties about the homogenizing of culture, then perhaps it will be the task of a 21st Century writer – still unnamed – to find that elegant balance between preserving biocultural and linguistic diversity, while enabling communication across the landscape of human speakers.