It’s 9:00pm on a Sunday and I descend in a beeping box into the foundation of Hesburgh Library. When the elevator doors open, I hesitate. Is this where I need to be? The screenshot on my phone confirms it: Hesburgh Library, General Collection, on the Lower Level floor. Nodding, I step out, leave the elevator bay, and am confronted with a brown wall. The wall consists of a series of rolling bookcases and spinning levers, hiding the precious information. My screenshot directs me to the impenetrable kiss of two such shelves and I face another problem. How do I move them? Those cranks seem to condescend my ignorance. My arms hang limp with uncertainty at my sides. Disapproving the dawdling of my hands, my feet and eyes take over and direct me toward the service desk. I’m faced with a student who contemplates me patiently as I ask for help. Walking back into the stacks, he teaches me how to work the levers. Suddenly those once pompous cranks welcome me to play the game of “open the gap.” Thanking the student, I side-step-skip into the aisle to confront the now visible books. I locate my personal treasure. Hugging this piece of my extensive bibliography to my chest, I shimmy out of the aisle and turn the levers to reseal my passage – just for fun.

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The research I conducted for the final paper of my John Donne and George Herbert seminar extended from persistent searches on Hesburgh Libraries’ One Search portal to working in Microsoft Excel to my discovery of the stacks in the scene above. The nature of my project required me to become intimately familiar with many of our library’s resources. Not only were
the Hesburgh Libraries invaluable in every step of my paper’s completion, but they also helped mold my paper into its current form.

My paper focuses on Renaissance poet John Donne’s Holy Sonnets, specifically noting how Donne’s attitude toward death evolves through the sequence. My argument lies in analyzing how Donne mentions death in a select few of these poems – whether through literary address, with personification, or using death merely as a verb. In order to contextualize Donne’s figures of speech, I examine Renaissance rhetoric and the history of personification and address. Additionally, there exist various manuscripts with different Holy Sonnet sequences and even different poems, such that one sequence contains twelve poems, another nineteen, etc. Ultimately, my paper required me to research three distinct topics: 1) Personification, address, and Renaissance rhetoric, 2) Donne’s authorial intention behind the various Holy Sonnet sequences, and 3) Scholarly opinions concerning death in the Holy Sonnets.

My research process started with a basic One Search on the Hesburgh Libraries homepage. I quickly discovered that searching “the personification of death in John Donne’s Holy Sonnets” yielded no valuable results. This led me to distill the elements of my paper in order to conduct effective research. Again, using One Search, I typed in buzz phrases for each topic, such as “Renaissance rhetoric” and “death in Holy Sonnets.” After discovering that these searches were more fruitful, I used advanced online searches to find even more specific articles. Ultimately, I acquired a collection of articles and books for each of the distinct topics of my paper. I downloaded any online articles and strolled through Hesburgh to find copies of physical books. In addition to creating a sense of tranquil adventure, I believe finding books in person is practical because it allows one to peruse other potentially valuable books in the same vicinity. I gained a few sources this way. I also discovered a new and enormously useful tool – the virtual
shelf. I used this tool often when at home, and it certainly helped accelerate my research process. The basic online and physical services of Hesburgh proved useful for initiating my research.

From these preliminary searches, I found other resources. Sometimes, I had to request an interlibrary loan. Any article or book I needed could swiftly be obtained through a branch location. Additionally, when I required a more specific search-engine, I would go directly to one of the databases provided by the Hesburgh Libraries. For example, I accessed the complete Oxford English Dictionary to help define “personification” and I often used the MLA international bibliography. At times, I would search through Google and find a useful article but not be able to access it. In these cases, I simply obtained the article by typing the title in OneSearch. Finally, the library staff proved enormously helpful with locating books and keeping books on hold. Any complication that I encountered became easily resolved through Hesburgh Libraries’ additional resources.

For the topic of the Holy Sonnet sequences, my research became a bit unconventional. I reviewed online articles and physical books as before. However, I augmented this research with the Rare Books collection, the Early English Books Online (EEBO) database, and Microsoft Excel. In order to understand the proper sequence of Donne’s Holy Sonnets, scholars look for clues in the physical manuscripts. By observing the Renaissance manuscripts in our Rare Books collection, I understood what scholars meant when they described folios or markings of different inks. Additionally, I used EEBO to analyze photographs of the Holy Sonnet manuscripts. With the knowledge gained from visiting the Rare Books collection, I could better discern the physical differences of the manuscripts. Finally, I used Excel on the library computers to develop my own table of the sequences. I assigned each sonnet to a row and used the columns to designate the poem’s appearance in each of the manuscripts, tone toward death, and literary use of death. By
filling in and then manipulating the table, I could visually understand how Donne’s treatment of death progresses in each of the Holy Sonnet sequences.

My bibliography shows the importance of the library’s online search engine, physical books, and databases for the success of my paper. However, more than that, Notre Dame’s library system permeated every stage of my research and writing process. The Hesburgh Libraries constitute the virtual and physical space in which I found my sources, analyzed my research, and conceived the ideas and words of my paper.