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A BASIC WRITER'S TOPOI FOR TIMED ESSAY TESTS

ABSTRACT: This article describes the problems the author's basic writing students have had in generating ideas for writing in response to timed essay tests. Since many of the common pedagogical approaches for helping students generate or create ideas for writing are ineffective, the author proposes an alternate technique based on the classical notion of the topoi. This ideological system enables students to generate ideas for timed writing tests and equips them for participation in the social and political dialogues that they encounter in higher education.

Last summer, after studying and practicing various "pre-writing" strategies, one of my students, Virginia, asked me what I would do if I had to come up with ideas in response to a timed essay test. She made it clear that the creativity techniques—free-writing, brainstorming, and clustering—simply had not worked for her. Every time she faced a timed essay assignment, her mind simply went "blank," and she could not think of anything to write. Even though she understood how to "cluster" for a textbook clustering assignment, she came up with nothing but empty bubbles when she had to get ideas for a timed essay. The rest of the students in the class sat quietly, waiting expectantly for my answer; Virginia, a "displaced homemaker," evidently represented many in this community college class when she asked this question. I suggested that they try a technique I use: When you get the essay topic, think about what other people might say in response to it. For example, if the topic deals with censoring rap song lyrics, imagine what friends, acquaintances, and others who have differing viewpoints might say about the topic, write all these ideas down, and then sort them out.

The students were excited by the technique, and because it worked so well for me, I was certain that it could help them. However, when they tried it, they had only limited success: they had great difficulty imagining what these differing viewpoints could be. The method I

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suggested, similar to the ones in their textbook, took for granted that the ideas for writing were “there” in the students’ minds in some form or another if they could only use the proper “creativity” techniques to tap into them, bring them to the surface, and organize them into coherent written form. However, my students needed something more than instruction about what to do first and how to organize the clustering bubbles: they needed a ready source of ideas from which to write. Therefore, I had to rethink my suggestion to determine why it worked for me and not for my students. By examining various approaches to teaching students to generate ideas, I have discovered what I believe is a missing element in my basic writing pedagogy. From this discovery, I have developed a new approach for teaching students how to invent ideas for timed essay tests. In the paragraphs that follow, I will describe this method and suggest classroom activities that have helped my students improve their writing.

Before Virginia and her classmates asked me what I would do to get ideas for timed essays, we had already spent a considerable amount of time discussing the writing process and “pre-writing” strategies. “Pre-writing” suggests that writers take steps before they write, presumably to get ideas about what to write, and is clearly a helpful concept for those students who do not realize that good writing arises as a result of a process. Indeed, some basic writing students mistakenly believe that good writers are people capable of thinking up a perfect paper as fast as it can be written down. While this knowledge of a process is helpful, for basic writers, it is not enough because they often interpret this as advice to mimic the textbook formula of the process. Then, when following the process does not work, basic writers respond with complaints such as, “I don’t know anything about this topic, so I can’t even get started.” For students thinking about the timed writing test itself, their question is often, “How am I supposed to complete all those steps in an hour?”

James Berlin points out that this process pedagogy arises as a result of what he calls the “objective” (139) approach to writing instruction. He explains that this objective approach is based on a positivistic, behavioral epistemology that focuses on steps in processes and descriptions of external reality (140-5). With the attitude of a scientist, the writer’s task is to carefully observe external reality and record observations as clearly as possible. For a basic writing student facing a timed essay test, the problem with this instructional approach is that it skips over their first problem with the essay test situation: for Virginia, knowing that she is to “pre-write” before she writes does nothing to fill her blank mind with ideas.

Virginia and her classmates had also practiced several creativity techniques in the pre-writing chapter designed to help them get ideas for writing: brainstorming, free-writing, clustering, and keeping a jour-

nal. These strategies are supposed to help students tap into some internal creative wellspring and then organize this gusher of ideas for writing. For some students, these strategies can be very effective. Certainly the textbook authors are generous in encouraging students to believe that they, too, are creative, and those who profit from these techniques seem to gain self-confidence as their writing skills improve over the course of the semester.

Berlin categorizes these creativity techniques as "subjective" (139), or expressionist, writing pedagogy. In this instructional approach, reality is located "within the individual, the lone agent acting apart from the material or social realms" (139). Individual insight and creative impulses are the reasons for writing, and the best ideas are original and unique, gathered through a meditative examination of one's inner nature, and carefully logged in a journal (146). These subjective creativity techniques encourage students to believe, rather egocentrically, that the only topics worth writing about are those that concern them personally. To my basic writing students concerned with making their pick-up payments, lining up a date for next weekend, or getting the laundry done, the range of topics that interest them is often personal and narrow. Because of the emphasis on egocentrism, students trained to look at writing subjectively often respond to failing timed writing tests with a flippant attitude: "I just didn't have anything to say about that subject" and "Who thinks up those silly topics, anyway?" The problem with this subjective approach is that since it does not address the issue of how to handle topics other than those that are interesting, it fails to help basic writers respond effectively to many topics found on timed-writing tests. Further, for many of my basic writing students, training them to depend on their private responses alone may lead them to think that they completely lack creativity. Equating creativity with imagination as so many people do (Jagla 32), they believe that their imagination is inadequate for the challenge of a timed essay test.

Since neither the objective nor the subjective pedagogical responses have proven sufficient for basic writing students facing timed writing tests, an approach that fills this gap by providing a source of ideas is needed: Berlin's "transactional" (155) approach seems to fill this gap and thus provides a theoretical basis for the *topoi* technique I developed. In the transactional approach, meaning resides not just in concrete reality nor in the student's creative ability, but, instead, in the rhetorical interplay among "material reality, writer, audience, and language" (155). Pedagogy based on this transactional approach helps students connect the objective reality, their own unique insights, and the ideas and concerns of the larger society. From this pedagogical perspective, ideas arise from the students' social awareness and from the writer's ability to locate connections between him- or herself, soci-

ety, and the topic. What is missing from Berlin's "transactional" approach is a strategy for expanding basic writers' private worlds so that they become interested in the concerns of the society beyond our campus. Since the lack of ideas for writing timed essays often contributes to their earning the label "deficient" and places them outside the college level classes, helping the students gain this social awareness has the potential not only to give them a means of passing the writing test, but also for establishing the information base that can help make them a part of the mainstream in higher education.

Some critics of modern students see an obvious answer to my students' egocentrism and apathy about the concerns of the larger society: make these students culturally literate. Instructional material has been developed to help fill adult learners' minds with facts on every "literate" topic. However, filling students' heads with various facts seems to rely as much on chance for students who face a timed writing test as does brainstorming. No matter how many facts students learn, the ultimate applicability of these facts to a particular timed essay topic is as impossible to predict as the students' ability to apply facts they memorize outside of a meaningful context. The future benefit of knowing various tidbits of information is also questionable, for the cultural literacy answer ignores the fact that "the problem for basic learners, in short, is not the absence of knowledge, but the absence of knowledge that lends itself to further or broader learning" (Spellmeyer 126). In my experience, the knowledge that expands the learner's ability to learn gives basic writers an ability to respond effectively to any writing situation, including the timed essay test.

How a writing instructor goes about providing the type of knowledge that leads to broader learning presents a clear problem for designing an effective pedagogical approach. Patricia Bizzell, sensitive to the problem that basic writers often embrace outsider perspectives on topics they must write about, suggests that we teachers "present ... our political credentials" to our students (58). Our students might thus learn some carefully crafted insider positions to take on important issues and would not need to create their own views for a timed essay test. However, as Bill Bolin points out, "our adoption of such an approach might well obstruct our students' progress as developing writers and thinkers. Such an approach might very well also marginalize several of these same students" (78). Students might not learn to evaluate ideas and perspectives; moreover, they risk being unable to respond to an unknown essay test topic.

Where the ideas of the cultural literacy proponents may not provide basic writing students with knowledge flexible and generative enough for a timed essay test, rhetorical invention satisfies the need. Karen Burke LeFevre explains that "invention is... understood as a social act, in which an individual who is at the same time a social being

interacts in a distinctive way with society and culture to create something" (1). Most importantly, invention involves an "internal dialogue with an imagined other or a construct of audience that supplies premises or structures of belief guiding the inventor" (34). Thus, through this internal or mental dialogue, invention provides a framework for organizing social awareness and understanding and, critical for students whose minds go blank, for generating additional ideas.

Such generative frameworks were common in the pedagogy of ancient Greek rhetoric teachers who taught invention as the first canon of rhetoric. According to Sharon Crowley, these invention frameworks, or *topoi*, were "an intellectual source or region harboring proof that could be inserted into any discourse where appropriate" (49). While Crowley's definition of *topoi* clearly captures the technique's generative usefulness for students, to enable us modern teachers to understand *topoi* more completely, we also need to understand that these "intellectual sources" or "harboring proof" (49) consisted of collections of thought patterns typical of Greek politics and valued by Greek society. Ancient rhetoric students memorized these collections and learned to think through them to invent ideas for their speeches. Thus, since the *topoi* were extracted from "the issues that concerned the community" (50) and were organized systematically, *topoi* can be more completely defined as a systematic arrangement of ideologies that allows students to draw from it to generate ideas for writing. When students become aware of the range of ideas of a community, they gain the ability to invent arguments along the lines of the community's concerns and values. Modern life makes our community equivalent to our nation; therefore, to create a *topoi* with significant heuristic potential, students must become familiar with the range of political ideology in the larger American society.

The *topoi* technique that I have developed to teach my students to respond more effectively to timed writing test topics combines the internal mental dialogue mentioned by LeFevre and the *topoi* described by Crowley into a generative framework of people and ideas. The advice I gave to Virginia and her classmates—to imagine other points of view that disagreed with their own—had not worked for them because they had no one with whom to conduct a mental dialogue and little understanding of the range of viewpoints possible in American society. However, when students engage in a structured internal dialogue with an audience representing various points on the American ideological spectrum, they discover content for their essays from their mental connections with others in our society. From there, students can investigate features of the ideas and responses and evaluate their appropriateness for the particular essay being written.

In order to teach students this invention technique, I have them work in teams that read much about and by various people who repre-

sent particular political stances and positions on social issues. Their reading and reporting generates a mass of information, perspectives, and thought processes on topics and issues that I help them arrange into a system. Since the students hear and read terms such as "left," "right," "conservative," "liberal," "moderate," etc., from political commentators, I begin this activity by showing my students how this political vocabulary creates a system of political perspectives. This overview provides students with the basic framework upon which they can begin attaching the material they will be studying. The people whose work we read become reference points on this political framework, and the students learn to move mentally around this framework to invent a range of responses to issues.

Since the students in my basic writing classes frequently demonstrate various reading problems, I have designed the assignment as a team project. Students are assigned to one of four teams, each of which becomes responsible for reading and reporting on the material of a particular political or social writer. The teams read, discuss, and list the topics of concern and the perspectives of the person they are investigating. Each student on the team reads material that covers different topics of concern to their writing so that each student will have some new information to provide the group. After each team has read and discussed the work of their particular author, the class builds the topoi system by presenting and discussing the works of each team's writer. Each team becomes the expert on its own writer's ideology, but the goal is for each student in the class to become familiar with all the ideologies presented by the various groups so that each student can use the invention system. When a student uses this system, he or she responds to the topic of a writing assignment by thinking through how the various writers would respond to the topic, lists these ideas and then responds to them with his or her own ideas, judging the arguments and audience and discriminating among the various perspectives and ideas appropriate for the particular writing situation.

In order for this topoi invention system to be useful to the students when they write essays in a timed situation, the class must study people with diverse ideologies. Thus, I assist the students in choosing writers who have different perspectives from the ones that other groups are working on and from the perspectives of most people in the region. In Texas, Oklahoma, and Louisiana, the home states of most of my students, people's social and political perspectives tend to be in the conservative to moderate range. To challenge these points of view, students are reading Camille Paglia, Dick Gregory, Ralph Reed, and Marian Wright Edelman this semester. These four writers espouse political and social viewpoints markedly different from those held by most of my students and local people; these divergent perspectives help the students become more familiar with national perspectives,

thus creating a wider experience base from which the students can respond.

In addition to assisting in the selection of authors, the teacher must actively participate in the reading stage of the assignment. For lower-level writing students, the teacher needs to select brief, easy-to-read passages and circulate through the classroom to explain the difficult material. For higher-level students, the teacher can select longer passages and whole chapters for the students' reading, but he or she still needs to be present and ready to assist when the students begin to realize how much the viewpoints they are reading differ from their own. Their initial response is almost certain to be a strong emotional rejection of the ideas they are reading, regardless of their reading level. They are quite likely to express their discomfort with these new ideas by stating flatly, "I can't read this." At this critical point, the teacher needs to remind the students that they are not required to accept uncritically the viewpoints of the authors and that their own viewpoints are also valid. The students do, however, need to continue reading the material so they can report, as objectively as possible, the content to their groups and the class. After they report what they have read, they will be given a chance to share their reactions to the reading assignments.

This initial emotional rejection of divergent ideas, although uncomfortable for teacher and students alike, is an essential event in the process of building the *topoi*. This "conflict and tension" (Mutnick 148) between the students' ideologies and those of the authors they read indicate the students' increasing awareness of a broader range of social ideologies. As Bakhtin points out in his concept of dialogism, society's range of ideologies is based on a variety of intersecting "socio-ideological contradictions" (qtd. in Mutnick: 148). Thus, for students to systematize our society's ideologies, they must understand not only that the conflicts exist, but also that these conflicts actually comprise the system's framework.

Further, challenging the students' existing ideologies and helping them learn from the conflicts allow the students to engage in a process that can form their individualities. According to Bakhtin, this formation of individuality occurs as two types of discourse, "externally authoritative and internally persuasive" (Mutnick 149), conflict. The reading assignments carry externally authoritative weight—both by being assigned by the teacher and by being published texts; the students' current viewpoints, belief systems, and experiences combine to form the internally persuasive discourse. When the students interpret the reading assignment as a command to believe what they read, they have recognized the authority of the discourse. Once I explain to them that they need not accept uncritically the viewpoints they read in their assignments, they begin to recognize the value of their own per-

spectives, and their own internal discourse persuades them to move further into the conflict. However, after they have internally reaffirmed the value of their own perspectives, many of the students begin to discount the viewpoints in the reading they have been assigned. For students, the most comfortable way to deal with divergent viewpoints is to reject them; therefore, the teacher must help them balance, or establish a tension, between the externally authoritative discourse and the internally persuasive discourse. The teacher can do this by reminding them that the goal of the assignment is to understand and organize a broad range of issues from a broad range of perspectives; to do this, the students must read the material in a way that allows them to understand it well enough to accurately and unemotionally report to their group and the class.

Once the students have completed this challenging reading, they help teach the class about the person whose ideas they have been investigating and contribute to the shaping of the *topoi* system. Each writer, Paglia, Edelman, Gregory, and Reed, becomes a *topos* in the range of political ideas that the class assembles. After writing notes to prepare their own presentations, the students also write the points from the other teams' presentations. I help the students focus on various issues and concerns that make up each ideology by keeping a summary list on the chalkboard, and we discuss the points of conflict and the pertinent issues of each political position. Often, the students make connections between the viewpoints of their assigned writers and the viewpoints of other people they are familiar with from television, radio, relatives, or friends. These connections are extremely useful in helping them realize that they already are familiar with at least some of what they have studied and, thereby, in helping them gain a better understanding of the range of perspectives presented in class. In addition, some of my classes have enjoyed a role-playing debate in which they compare the perspectives on topics among the writers' various ideologies. During these debates, it often becomes clear that the unpopular liberal perspectives represented by Edelman and Gregory are either shared or have been accepted by some students; since Edelman criticizes welfare reform, her authority allows a generally unpopular viewpoint to be heard and recognized as a valid position.

To help the students learn to use this range of perspectives and political stances to generate ideas, I distribute a summary of each of their groups' presentations. Then, I bring in various practice timed essay topics. The students write down what Camille Paglia, Marian Edelman, Dick Gregory, and Ralph Reed might say in response to the topics and then discuss with other students what they believe these authors would say; thus, the students improve their ability to use the technique. Rather than being concerned that the students have correctly determined the response from each writer's ideology, I advise

them to apply their understanding of each political perspective to the topics and then to engage in a mental dialogue by responding to topoi people in order to select ideas.

This invention technique has several advantages that seem to benefit students like the ones in our basic writing program. The students in my classes range in age from eighteen to forty-two and have diverse academic interests: general studies athletic scholarship students planning to transfer to four-year institutions, students attempting to be accepted into nursing or medical technology programs, and students with work experience returning to college to improve their opportunity to be promoted on the job. Our community college has an open admissions policy with a local placement test in math, writing, and reading. Students must also take the official state placement test (Texas Academic Skills Program) in their first or second semester in college. The majority of our students have been admitted to the college based on having graduated from high school, but about one-fourth of the students in basic writing dropped out of high school and were admitted based on having passed the GED. Most students attending our college reside in rural areas or small to mid-sized towns in Texas or Oklahoma and have been raised by families with very few, if any, college graduates; thus, they tend to have extremely limited perspectives on current social issues and political positions. Because of their limited perspectives on social issues, they are inexperienced in dealing with a range of issues like the ones they encounter on timed writing tests and often fail to recognize the social significance of the test topics.

The topoi invention technique helps students to gain a social awareness of topics and the perspective that any topic someone in society is concerned about is a topic worth thinking and writing about. For example, Lynn, a student from a small town in Oklahoma, failed the initial placement test because she was not interested in the topic of her essay, the dangers of pesticides. Since we have begun working on the topoi invention technique, Lynn has recently become very curious about the person her group is studying, Marian Edelman. She obtained information about Edelman from the internet and has told me that she is looking forward to the other groups' presentations. Lynn's response to Edelman's position reveals how the topoi technique is working for her because on the first day of their reading assignment, Lynn declared that she would be unable to complete the activity since Edelman's view of welfare and black families seemed so contrary to her own views. While Lynn has clearly not changed her own perspective on the question of welfare reform, she has become intrigued by Edelman's views and has talked to me several times about the mental dialogue she has been carrying on with Edelman.

Another major idea-generating benefit of the topoi invention tech-

nique is that it seems useful in helping students in the difficult task of inventing alternative viewpoints. My students often find it impossible to accept or even work with perspectives that differ too much from theirs or their families'. However, these divergent views become easier to contemplate if they are associated with someone studied in the topoi system. The experience of one of my students, Lonnie, provides a helpful illustration. Before we began the invention technique, Lonnie complained that he could not believe that anyone could possibly understand both sides of an issue without being completely "confused." During our class discussion of the topoi system, the students responded in writing to whether liquor companies should be allowed to advertise on television. Lonnie, against the idea of advertising hard liquor on television, wrote that Camille Paglia would say banning alcohol products on the air would lead not just to hard liquor being banned, but also to products like mouthwash and perfume being banned because of their alcohol content. Lonnie wrote that he would respond to Paglia's argument by pointing out that alcohol products differ in the dangers they pose to society when they are abused. Thus, it makes sense for alcohol products to be banned because they are dangerous, but it makes little sense to ban unharmful products. Lonnie's mental discussion with Camille Paglia had helped him to find the argument of the other side, and, therefore, to formulate a response to it. This topoi technique helps students like Lonnie overcome the notion that being able to generate a particular idea is equivalent to believing it. Thus, students are able to generate enough ideas to evaluate and then to select the ones they find most appropriate for responding to a timed writing test.

The topoi technique also helps familiarize the students with reasoning patterns associated with the various authors they studied. In addition to the Camille Paglia "slippery slope" pattern that Lonnie worked with above, my students learn to associate Dick Gregory's work with a historical perspective. When students who have little historical understanding of events as recent as Watergate become familiar with Gregory's tendency to draw upon examples from history, they may experiment with this approach in their own writing. One timed essay topic that my students wrote in class after working on the invention strategy required them to write a letter to the local school board arguing whether to ban several classic American books from the library. Even though the students wrote their essays independently, thus simulating the timed essay testing condition, several students argued that these books should not be banned from the library because they have contributed historically to our culture, and that historical contribution should outweigh the judgment of a few parents. Although I have used this particular timed essay topic several times in the past, never before adopting the topoi technique have I noticed students arguing to keep

books in a library because of the books' historical importance. Students explained that Dick Gregory's historical approach to issues had influenced their writing.

Finally, the topoi invention technique benefits students because they learn a system for examining a range of responses to topics and issues. As a result, they feel they can immediately begin writing rather than experiencing the stress of the blank mind. One of my students, Mitchell, mentioned that during timed essay tests his mind used to "start wandering." His mind wandered so much that his initial placement essay received a score of 5 out of 12 possible points. Students must receive a minimum score of 7 to pass the local placement essay, and in his retest, Mitchell told me that he used the invention system to focus his thoughts. Even when his mind did wander, the system enabled him to quickly return to the writing so he could complete his essay. His retest essay received a passing score of 8. While many of the other class activities he had participated in undoubtedly helped him improve his writing, the knowledge that he had a system to rely on provided him with the confidence required to write a passing essay.

Comparing students' local placement test essays with their first full essays written after working on the invention technique further demonstrates how invention can help students discover content for their essays. One of my current students, David, received a score of 6 on his placement essay, one point below that required to pass. In this 330-word essay, he took a position against land in our county being sold to other states to be used as garbage storage areas. David provided two reasons for his position in the following topic sentences: "With the chemical waste in their back yards, countless numbers of children could develop brain tumors, cancer, or new diseases" and "Another major problem that will be caused by the waste is the odor." The scorers indicated that the essay's development was weak enough to be a major factor in the essay's receiving a failing score. In addition to a lack of reasons to support his view, David also failed to develop the two reasons. In the first body paragraph, David wrote about how the land should be valued and how it is important for children to learn to treat the land with respect. In the second body paragraph, after mentioning the problem with the odor of the waste storage, he repeated his point about how the land would become useless. In contrast, after learning the invention technique, David's first timed essay included 550 words with three body paragraphs explaining his opposition to funding tests for automobile safety devices for senior citizens. He developed his reasons based on those held by the topoi people we had been studying. His first body paragraph explained that "One excellent way of using the money would be to promote education. The young people of this great nation are in need of higher and better edu-

cations. The senior citizens have been taught, paid their dues to this country. They have put all they had into making American great. But now it is time to help the people that are going to be taking over this great nation." In his next paragraph, David explained that "Another way the money from the test funding could be used is to help the needy people of this nation. Thousands of men, women, and children are left homeless every year . . . The money from the funding of such tests could be use to help needy and willing people to get back on their feet . . . It is the responsibility of the government and the responsibility of every American to try and help those people . . . help themselves." David's last body paragraph explained that "A third way the money for the funding of the tests could be used is to improve our nations police force. With crime as high as it is, the officers are outnumbered. With help from the government, we would be able to increase the number of officers on the streets." David's ideas about where government money should go came up in class presentations about Paglia's, Edelman's, and Gregory's ideas.

The primary benefit of the topoi invention technique is that it strengthens students' social and political awareness. While my basic writing students are not initially excited by having to read the material by their topoi authors, once they start their work, engage in the conflicts, and understand how they will be able to invent better ideas for the timed essay test, they very willingly persevere through the reading and tension and demonstrate remarkable expansions in thinking, understanding, and writing. Since the technique both honors their existing perspectives while challenging them to understand others, the students become curious enough about political issues, perspectives, and priorities to extend their work outside the classroom. Many become participants in the ideological process: recently, several of my students voluntarily watched the President's State of the Union Address and wanted to talk about how the ideas in the speech connected to what they had been reading and discussing in our class. Thus, their preliminary, in-class discussion of political and social issues, values, and perspectives provided them with the ability to gradually build a broader and more profound awareness of the "topoi" of arguments prevalent today. They were increasingly able to determine how what they initially thought of as "silly" timed essay topics could connect to issues they and others in society believe to be important. By reading a wide range of writers in the larger American society and discussing and debating various topics and ideas with classmates, the students began to become conversant on a wide range of issues and quite willing to depart from their writing textbook's reliance on inner creativity.

Enabling students to discover the political and social topoi within our larger society completely repositions the timed writing tests themselves. By training students to invent ideas for writing rather than to

pre-write or create ideas through brainstorming and related techniques, the students contextualize the tests by creatively and rationally considering divergent points of view. Since timed writing tests are likely to remain in higher education for some time, it is important that basic writing teachers adopt pedagogical approaches that allow students to perform successfully on these assignments. By taking a broader perspective on the concept of generating ideas and developing a philosophy of idea invention, we can teach students to develop an ability that pushes them beyond the timed essay tests. They can use this information as a framework on which to begin fitting future material so that their ideological awareness can continue growing and they can continue as participants in the ideological dialogue. Thus, they become not the deficient outsiders so often pushed to the fringes of higher education, but competent insiders with the tools to connect writing with social and political understanding and experience.

Note

Student writing in this essay appears without corrections.

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