Sample Student Essay Draft

Directions: Imagine that you are teaching a class in academic writing for first-year college students. In your class, drafts are not graded. Instead, you give students feedback and allow them to revise their essays before submitting them for grades. In response to your first essay assignment (given below), you have received the following draft from Jacqueline X., one of your students. Write a brief end comment (250 words max) in which you offer advice to Jacqueline about how she might revise her essay. You do not need to submit a marked version of the sample student paper itself. We will be considering only your end comment.

Assignment: Find a problem, tension, or complicated idea in the essay, “Many masks, many selves” by Wendy Doniger, and craft an argument about this aspect of the essay so that it helps a reader understand Doniger’s essay in a deeper way.
Jacqueline X.

“Many masks, many selves”

A woman dresses as a man who is pretending to be a woman. She is a flamboyant drag queen one day and a staunch feminist the next, an admired trendsetter and a shunned deviant. Her behavior varies with those she interacts with—if they admire intellectualism, she speaks of Monet, quantum mechanics, and Ulysses; if they appreciate a raunchy sense of humor, she mirrors their uncouth gregariousness. She has multiple identities of both gender and personality. They are all authentically hers—some were bequeathed to her and others she chose. She perpetually swaps these identities, plucking the one she wants as if it is clothing on a rack and she is dressing for the occasion. Her life is a haphazard collage of selves, or “masks”: a web of lies and truths. Is she crazy? No. According to Wendy Doniger, she is ordinary, and you are just like her.

Doniger claims that we all have multiple “masks,” yet we vow that only one removable mask exists. We are trained to believe in the battle between self and mask—the lifelong skirmish from which the brave and confident cast off their mask to reveal an authentic self, an exposed nucleus. We think of masks as impersonations: habits we acquire, personality traits we show, and people we try in vain to become. Yet Doniger asserts that “masks” are not what we use to cover up who we truly are, because we possess no genuine or default self, no “monolithic core” (70). “Masks” are not cover-up impersonations but instead self-impersonations, for our “self” is comprised of these masks (69). In other words, a mask is not a consistently weathering veneer that may be scraped off to expose an invariable interior. It is a veneer that covers a body of veneers, so that one mask is no more constant or genuine than another.
Masks may be “voluntary” (such as the gender mask put on by cross-dressers) or “involuntary” (such as a mask bequeathed by race). But no matter what our masks are, how they relate, or how they came to fruition, they form an “enduring network of selves inside us” (67). We are always “imprisoned” in this network, even though we may experiment with multiple masks and rewind along our continuum of personalities to visit previous selves (68). We are limited to our past, present, and future masks. Hardly a restriction indeed, but we are nonetheless limited because we can never morph into someone else. We may only mimic that other person so that we adopt the mimicry as our own mask, and consequently our own self.

As we adopt masks, we feel out the borders of our individual self, of our “prison.” This idea of imprisonment conjures the image of an asylum, hinting by association that only the insane possess multiple selves. But Doniger shows that the sane, too, exhibit multiplicity. This description of sanity is contentious; it makes sense in Doniger’s world but seems crazy in ours. To help us reconcile our definition of “sane” with hers, Doniger circumscribes insanity with a blurry yet tightly bound border.

Doniger explains: “It is notoriously difficult to draw an objective line between healthy (rather than merely culturally accepted) and pathological fantasies” (69). She begins to draw this line by observing that pathological selves elicit the feeling of “unheimlich” (69). “Unheimlich,” a term coined by the psychologist Sigmund Freud, literally means un-homely, but in German it refers to something unsettling or even scary. It describes a quality that is familiar yet foreign at the same time. It portrays a sensation of being lost within oneself (or rather, selves).
I will venture to suggest that we—sane or insane—are all lost within the sizable prison of our unique being. I interpret Doniger’s argument to say that we all experience “unheimlich” in varying degrees of intensity that depend on our psychological state: the insane experience terror, the sane curiosity. In other words, the confusion of “unheimlich” is bivalent. It may morph into fright or it may incite a desire to roam the psyche, to experiment with various personalities.

The way in which masks are donned determines further how “unheimlich” is manifested. Masks may be acquired “passively, helplessly” or “actively and knowingly” (69). Passively acquired masks are “pathological” according to Doniger (69). They are forced and involuntary, and thus elicit the terror of “unheimlich.” Actively acquired masks are chosen with purpose, curiosity, and desire. They are designed, not imposed. Such masks are worn only by the sane. They are put on with confidence and control, whereas the masks of the insane are monsterized creations of powerlessness.

Doniger further links confidence to what appears to be sanity: she contrasts those who suffer from “pathological” psychological disorders with those who confidently accept their past selves. The reader is mistakenly led to believe that this is a binary comparison between the insane and the sane. But if we look at Doniger’s description of what appears to be sanity, we see not the norm but an ideal: people who “actively and knowingly,” thus with purpose, accumulate past selves and “believe all selves are them” (69). To believe every self is oneself, no matter how repulsive or embarrassing that self may be, is to exercise deep acceptance over every part of one’s life—past and present. Taking responsibility for one’s identities is a rare quality, one that all sane people certainly do not possess. Doniger addresses self-acceptance: “the fanatical belief that I
am (only) the new I, the now I, makes it impossible to keep, let alone to cherish, so much as a hair of the head of the then I, the old I” (69). She acknowledges that if people find themselves improved, they tend to discard their former selves. Depending on how eager people are to be rid of a past self, they may also give in to “self-loathing” (69). This behavior surfaces most often when one is ashamed of a past self: “Disdain of the old I is common […] among people who clean up some particularly messy aspect of their lives” (69).

Burial of past selves in the promise of the present is common; so is a dislike of the past. There are many sane people who pretend to be what meets the eye—but nothing else. By this broad example, we see that one does not have to accept past selves to be sane. One may even “kill off their past selves” and remain sane (69). But although Doniger acknowledges this, she seems to conclude the contrary: that all non-pathological selves are accepted and remembered. But since all sane people clearly do not exhibit such self-loving behavior, we see that pathology of selves is found in the insane and the sane.

To prove further that “pathological” refers to both the insane and the sane who behave in a non-ideal manner, I will give an example of sane individuals with involuntary masks (one of Doniger’s characteristics of “pathology”). Doniger states that individuals “are often driven to self-impersonation through the pressure of public expectations” (60). This quotation describes a forced mask, involuntary because the person who donned it felt compelled to sacrifice freedom of expression for acceptance. “Race and gender, not to mention the masks our parents bequeath to us,” also bestow involuntary masks (69). Such masks, however pathological they may be, are prevalent among the sane.
Ideally, past selves are accumulated and accepted. Such self-assuredness promotes “freedom” of self-exploration and creates a “cohesive” sense of “perduing personal identity” (69). Cohesiveness can only be achieved if past identities are upheld; if there is no gap of a lost or discarded self within the library of selves created over a lifetime.

The first tenet to this theory of cohesiveness, so to speak, is that past masks must be remembered. But Doniger states that “we exist only when someone sees us” (67). So do past masks not exist? No one sees them. Why should we remember them if they don’t really exist?

Doniger implies that the only those who do not possess pathological multiple selves—the “ideal”—are able to achieve connectivity. But we are previously told that masks “reaffirm an enduring network of selves inside us which does not change even if our masquerades, intentional or helpless, make us look different to others” (67). The author says here that all masks, helpless or intentional (therefore pathological or not), are true and are reassertions of our true beings. So are all masks connected in this network, regardless of whether or not they are pathological? They must be—as long as they are remembered and accepted.

These contradictions further blur the border between sane and insane and between pathological and ideal. The sane may possess multiple masks as well as involuntary masks. As long as these masks are remembered, and thus “seen” (and not forgotten or avoided) by those who possessed them, they will exist within a network of selves. Accepting one’s selves to create such continuity promotes future self-experimentation by boosting confidence and imparting the freedom of personal choice. Doniger, aware that
we do not behave ideally, encourages us to achieve this confidence and freedom by outlining how we may reconcile our multiple selves.
Works Cited