

ENGL 120: Reading and Writing the Modern Essay
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Behind on Our Bathroom Habits

By Andy Zhao '23

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic has given us all similar stories to tell. While walking outside, we have habitually smiled at strangers passing by, only to remember that smiles don't translate well through face masks. We have furiously wiped down every surface we touch with a Clorox wipe. And, oddly enough, we still have not shaken off the surprise in seeing the very existence of toilet paper at grocery stores and supermarkets. This surprise ties back to the beginnings of the pandemic, when people everywhere panic-bought every last disinfectant, canned good, pantry staple, bottle of milk, case of bottled water, and roll of toilet paper off of grocery store shelves. Lines stretched for hours. Waitlists spanned for days or even weeks. Most of the things were survival items. However, the panic-buying of toilet paper - a seemingly non-essential item - was rather peculiar.

Yet, imagine the dystopian state that America would be in if we had actually run out of toilet paper. I'd imagine vultures circling in the distance. Black crows cawing. Innocent people sitting frozen on their porcelain thrones, unable to process that their favorite Charmin bear wouldn't be giving them a hug today. People in public restrooms would be forced to break the strict social contract of silence between bathroom goers, as the alternative would be far worse. “Hey, do you think I could borrow some toilet paper?” I imagine they'd ask. “Nah, sorry man,”

would be the only response. Running out of toilet paper would make for a far more intimate relationship that we would ever like to have with our waste.

Long before toilet paper was invented, we cleaned up in the bathroom by wiping with assorted objects. It was often with whatever was in the vicinity, from stones and seashells, to moss, bamboo, and broken pieces of pottery.¹ The first recorded use of paper for cleansing was in 6th century China. Toilet paper was not seen in the Western world until 1857, when Joseph Gayetty of New York advertised his medicinal product called “Medicated Paper, for the Water-Closet.”² By this time, however, Americans had become used to wiping with pages torn from the Sears Roebuck catalog and the Farmer’s Almanac; they didn’t see the need to pay extra.√ Not to mention that Americans were so squeamish about this tushy taboo that by 1930, the German paper company Hakle used the tagline, “Ask for a roll of Hakle and you won’t have to say toilet paper!”³

The fate of this now-beloved item changed forever when marketers came to understand this concept. In 1928, the Hoberg Paper Company’s marketing campaign for its new brand, Charmin, featured a feminine logo displaying the silhouette of a curvaceous woman. Customers and toilet paper companies alike now had the perfect euphemism for avoiding talk about the matter at hand.√ Silhouettes of women were eventually replaced with baby humans and baby bears, but the tactic stuck. Looking at a handful of more modern advertisements, we see this trend continue. A Quilted Northern advertising campaign in 2015 proudly expressed the slogan

¹ Crystal Pointi, “All the Ways We’ve Wiped: The History of Toilet Paper and What Came Before,” History, A&E Television Networks, Last modified April 15, 2020, <https://www.history.com/news/toilet-paper-hygiene-ancient-rome-china>

² Ibid.

³ Linda McRobbie, “Toilet Paper History: How America Convinced the World to Wipe,” Mental Floss, Last modified March 5, 2021, <https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/23210/toilet-paper-history-how-america-convinced-world-wipe>

“Designed to be Forgotten.”⁴ A Kleenex Cottonelle commercial gives more airtime to a cute puppy prancing around the house than any actual toilet paper roll.⁵ None of the commercials fails to emphasize the comfort, the softness, and the absolute *luxuriousness* of its product.

No wonder Dave Praeger, author of *Poop Culture: How America Is Shaped by Its Grossest National Product*, thinks one can track the spread of globalization via the adoption of toilet paper. As Brazil started to break free from its developing country status during the 2000s, sales of toilet paper skyrocketed along with disposable income, changing demographics and shifting social expectations. With wallets flush with new income and minds full of Western marketing, the comfort, softness, and luxuriousness of toilet paper proved too hard to resist. Toilet paper, it seems, is definitely here to stay.

The best purchase that I’ve ever made for my off-campus apartment cost me \$43.41. Thanks to the magicians at Amazon, my bidet arrived just two days later. Despite having already bought one for my home back in Massachusetts, I was still pleasantly surprised by how quick it was to install. Unscrew the connector hose from the toilet tank and the toilet seat from the bowl, place the bidet attachment on top, attach the bidet hose to the connector hose using a T-valve, and screw everything back up. In less than five minutes, a stream of clean water could now be squirted out of the contraption with a twist of the knob. What took longer, and is still a work-in-progress, was convincing my roommates to use it.

I was surprised because I figured that we were in college, where people go to open their minds, try new things, and broaden their perspectives. And given that two of my roommates are

⁴Peter Prevos, “The Evolution of Marketing Toilet Paper,” Lucid Manager, Last modified July 16, 2020, <https://lucidmanager.org/marketing/marketing-toilet-paper/>

⁵ Ibid.

also Asian, I guessed that they were no strangers to this gadget; bidet usage is particularly widespread in Asia, as well as parts of Europe and South America.⁶ I doubted that they were repulsed by its historical association with European brothels, the stigma of which prevented Americans from adopting it after soldiers first encountered them during World War II.⁷ And as for other challenges—not knowing about bidets in the first place, lack of bathroom space, and the plumbing adjustments required—I had already taken care of them for our apartment.⁸

“I don’t like the idea of water shooting up my ass,” my roommate Ed complained.

Maybe the concept of a water-squirting contraption that blasts away all traces of fecal matter is too foreign for a population inundated since birth with messages about the comfort, softness, and luxuriousness that should embody the American Bathroom Experience™. But unless the rest of the world particularly enjoys the idea of water shooting up their ass, it’s probably just something you knock until you try it.

“It seems unsanitary to me,” Michael offered in response to my continued persistence.

But would one describe as unsanitary scrubbing bird poop off with water? Or washing your dishes under a running faucet? Or cleaning your car with a hose? And hypothetically, what would be so sanitary about completing those tasks with a dry sheet of toilet paper (even if you used two-ply)?

Even the obvious environmental and economic benefits haven’t seemed to sway the majority of Americans. Toilet paper users go through 27,000 trees a day in order to make almost 83 million rolls. The average roll of toilet paper uses 37 gallons of water, 1.3 kilowatt/hours of

⁶ Karine Carter, “Why Aren’t Bidets Common in the U.S.,” Mental Floss, Last modified June 28, 2013, <https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/51337/why-arent-bidets-common-us>

⁷ Michelle Huang, “Toilet paper shortages keep happening. Here’s why you should use a bidet instead.,” Business Insider, Insider Inc., Last modified March 29, 2021, <https://www.businessinsider.com/bidets-better-than-using-just-toilet-paper-2019-9>

⁸Carter, *Why Aren’t Bidets Common*.

electricity, and around 1.5 pounds of wood.⁹ A bidet uses about one-eighth of a gallon.¹⁰ Despite the promise of saving the semi-regular trips to Costco to buy those giant 30-pack rolls of Charmin Ultra Strong, adding up to hundreds of dollars a year of savings should a household choose to quit cold turkey, Americans continue to seek out their wood pulp fix.

Because it's simple and relatively cheap, toilet paper on its own is considered to be a low-involvement product. We just don't think too much when buying it. Manufacturers have therefore tried to stand out by creating emotional attachments to their particular roll. After all, why go for the generic brand when there's a cute baby or bear on the package from our dear friend Charmin, evoking memories of watching TV with the family as a kid?

Maybe this is where our true obsession with toilet paper lies. It's an emotional experience. It has supported us through our toughest times and stayed by our side during the lowest of the lows. The introduction of bidets has muddied the waters, yet it still fails to compete with the familiarity that is toilet paper. Through decades of conditioning, we have become trapped in a toxic love affair.

The only way out of this relationship is an external push. The pandemic served as a sizable one, instilling in us an almost irrational need to be clean. Membership numbers in the hypochondriac club skyrocketed post-lockdown, with a 385% year over year sales growth in aerosol disinfectants, a 180% growth in bath and shower wipes, and a 148.2% growth in multipurpose cleaners.¹¹ Restaurants no longer lured customers in through their doors by the scent of their food, but rather the scent of disinfectant. Businesses started to advertise

⁹ Veer Mudambi, "Flushing our forests," Medium, Last modified April 10, 2020, <https://medium.com/the-green-space/flushing-our-forests-fc59fbfec743>

¹⁰ Huang, *Toilet paper shortages*.

¹¹ Emma Bedford, "Cleaning product sales growth from the coronavirus in the U.S. in March 2020," Statista, Last modified January 6, 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1104333/cleaning-product-sales-growth-from-coronavirus-us/>

impersonal, rather than personal, shopping experiences: *6-feet distanced. Contactless. We promise we'll stay away!*

Given these stringent contactless measures elsewhere, it made sense that people wanted to make sure their bathroom experiences stayed equally as, err, *hands-free*. This, combined with the severe toilet paper shortages in the beginning of the pandemic, turbocharged sales of bidets. Tushy, the bidet manufacturer known for its uniquely sassy marketing strategies, saw its sales expand over ten-fold which culminated into its first million-dollar sales day in March of 2020.¹² People who had a vague memory of trying it before (and not hating it) flocked to buy these now-coveted attachments before they sold out.



Tushy's rebellious marketing wholeheartedly flaunts the taboo surrounding bodily functions. Will this strategy manage to convert the masses? I have a hunch that this strategy will be significantly more effective on the rebels of our time than on mainstream consumers. Because, admittedly, the marketing overlords at Charmin have a point. Bodily functions are unpleasant. It isn't wrong to seek comfort, softness, or luxuriousness in the bathroom.

When I think of these three qualities, though, I don't think of the comfort from wondering whether you've wiped enough as you walk down the street, the softness that you feel after wiping one too many times with sandpaper-like public bathroom toilet paper, nor the luxuriousness of using a method that is (at best) one degree of freedom away from wiping with

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Tushy, accessed April 12, 2021, <https://hellotushy.com/>

stones and seashells. I think of the \$43.41 charge on my credit card, the five minutes that I spent on installation, and never ever having to buy toilet paper again.