

2004 AP[®] ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND COMPOSITION
FREE-RESPONSE QUESTIONS

Question 3

(Suggested time — 40 minutes. This question counts one-third of the total essay section score.)

Read carefully the following passage from the introduction to *Days of Obligation* by Richard Rodriguez. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how Rodriguez uses contrasts between Mexico and California to explore and convey his conflicting feelings.

Line For the last several years, I have told friends that I
was writing a book about California and Mexico. That
was not saying enough. I've been writing a book
about comedy and tragedy. In my mind, in my life,
5 Mexico plays the tragic part; California plays the role
of America's wild child.

Or was I writing a book about competing
theologies?

10 Josiah Royce, another Californian, another writer,
became a famous Harvard professor. Royce wrote
about California with disappointment from the
distance of New England. Royce believed that some
epic opportunity had been given California—the
chance to reconcile the culture of the Catholic south
15 and the Protestant north. California had the chance to
heal the sixteenth-century tear of Europe. But the
opportunity was lost. The Catholic—the Mexican—
impulse was pushed back, vanquished by comedy; a
Protestant conquest.

20 I use the word "comedy" here as the Greeks used
it, with utmost seriousness, to suggest a world where
youth is not a fruitless metaphor; where it is possible
to start anew; where it is possible to escape the
rivalries of the Capulets and the McCoys; where
25 young women can disprove the adages of
grandmothers.

The comedy of California was constructed on a
Protestant faith in individualism. Whereas Mexico
knew tragedy.

30 My Mexican father, as his father before him,
believed that old men know more than young men;
that life will break your heart; that death finally is the
vantage point from which a life must be seen.

I think now that Mexico has been the happier place
35 for being a country of tragedy. Tragic cultures serve
up better food than optimistic cultures; tragic cultures
have sweeter children, more opulent funerals. In
tragic cultures, one does not bear the solitary burden
of optimism. California is such a sad place, really—a
40 state where children run away from parents, a state of
pale beer, and young old women, and divorced

husbands living alone in condos. But at a time when
Californians are driven to despair by the relentless
optimism of their state, I can only marvel at the comic
achievement of the place, California's defiance of
45 history, the defiance of ancestors.

Something hopeful was created in California
through the century of its Protestant settlement.
People believed that in California they could begin
new lives. New generations of immigrants continue to
50 arrive in California, not a few of them from Mexico,
hoping to cash in on comedy.

It is still possible in California to change your
name, change your sex, get a divorce, become a
55 movie star. My Mexican parents live in a California
house with four telephones, three televisions, and
several empty bedrooms.

How could California ever reconcile comedy and
tragedy? How could there not have been a divorce
60 between Mexico and California in the nineteenth
century?

The youth of my life was defined by Protestant
optimism. Now that I am middle-aged, I incline more
toward the Mexican point of view, though some part
65 of me continues to resist the cynical conclusions of
Mexico.

Which leaves me with at least a literary problem to
start with: How shall I present the argument between
comedy and tragedy, this tension that describes my
70 life? Shall I start with the boy's chapter, then move
toward more "mature" tragic conclusions? But that
would underplay the boy's wisdom. The middle-aged
man would simply lord over the matter.

No, I will present this life in reverse. After all, the
75 journey my parents took from Mexico to America was
a journey from an ancient culture to a youthful one—
backward in time. In their path I similarly move, if
only to honor their passage to California, and because
I believe the best resolution to the debate between
80 comedy and tragedy is irresolution, since both sides
can claim wisdom.

(1992)

END OF EXAMINATION