

Close Reading in Context

Suppose you're developing an argument about *Unless* as a book about the importance of resisting conventional norms of femininity — in both writing and life. The section we read in class on Monday (on pp. 26-27) might yield a paragraph something like this:

One aspect of conventional femininity that Reta particularly resents is the pressure women experience to present themselves as sweet and unthreatening. She reacts with hostility to Madame Sylvia's comment that "a woman's charm is with her for life . . . but you must pay attention": "I have no plans to be charming on a regular basis," Reta declares (28). To her, charm is "a cheap trick," a calculation designed to win women acceptance in a man's world (28). Her metaphoric language reveals her disgust at the expectation that she smile and pretend: for her, the sweetness of charm is not benign but toxic, something that "enters a fresh mouth and rubs against the molars . . . promoting mouth ulcers" (28). She describes the "sunbeams" women's faces are expected to emit as "spewing" forth, not "shining," the word with its negative connotations suggesting vomit rather than treasure, illness rather than radiance. It's no wonder Reta's ambivalent about the success of her first novel, *My Thyme is Up*, a book she recognizes is "a little bit *darling*" (80): a "fresh, bright, springtime piece of fiction" (as *Publishers Weekly* describes it) (79) is just the kind of conventionally feminine book Madame Sylvia would applaud.

Notice how the paragraph is structured. It opens with a sentence positioning it in the paper's larger argument, then it uses a passage from the novel to show how we *know* about Reta's attitude, where we actually *see* it in the language of the novel. Then it returns to the larger argument while also providing a transition to another aspect of it: the literary limitations of "femininity" of a certain kind.

Try it at home! Suppose you were writing an essay arguing that a central theme of *Unless* is the need for writing that is feminine but not conventionally so — that it's about the difference, say, between writing as a woman and being labelled a "woman writer." **[Note that I'm not saying that this is necessarily "the truth" about *Unless* — I'm just drawing up a plausible working hypothesis.]** What evidence could you use from the excerpt below? How would you explain that evidence? **For your next journal (due Monday November 30), write up a paragraph** that would use material from this excerpt to support the argument of the essay described. Think about the stages that argument would need to go through: where would this example fit best? In your paragraph, try to balance argument and evidence, as in the example provided on the other side of this handout.

I was thinking about Alicia in my novel who has gone on a no-carb diet so she can fit into the size-eight wedding dress she has ordered. What a vapid woman she is. What does Roman see in her really? Such fatal vanity, such a lack of suffering — either that or the suffering hasn't quite reached her. It's got blocked in her marrow, it never moves from her flesh up into her brain stem.

Suddenly it was clear to me. Alicia's marriage to Roman must be postponed. Now I understood where the novel is headed. She is not meant to be partnered. Her singleness in the world is her paradise, it has been all along, and she came close to sacrificing it, or rather, I, as novelist, had been about to snatch it away from her. The wedding guests will have to be alerted and the gifts returned. All of them, Alicia, Roman, their families, their friends — stupid, stupid. The novel, if it is to survive, must be redrafted. (172)

Name: _____

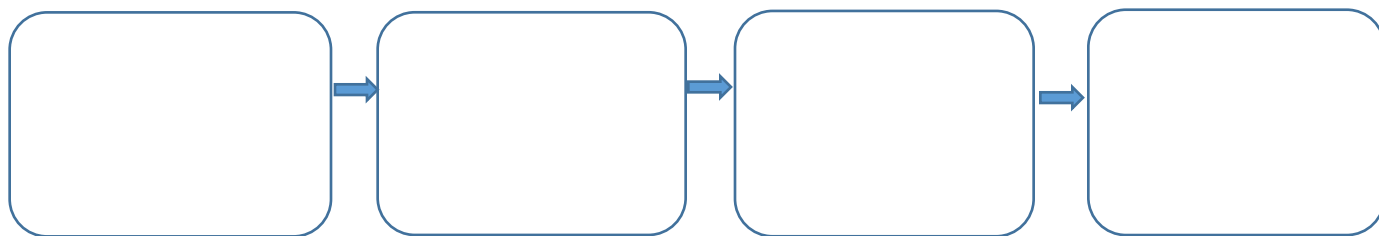
English 1010 Tutorial Worksheet: Turning Evidence Into Arguments
Turn this worksheet in at the end of class if you'd like to get credit for it.

Here is a sample thesis statement for an essay about James Joyce's "Araby."

By the end of the story, we realize that the narrator's failure to fulfill his quest is a sad but inevitable step in his maturation — in his movement from the childish world of romantic fantasy to the adult world of grim realities.

Working in your small group, go through the following steps.

1. Fill in this flow chart indicating the necessary stages of an essay supporting this argument. What would you have to show about the story?



2. Here are some excerpts from the story. Pick two or three that you think would be particularly useful to the essay we are imagining (be sure to think about which *part* of the essay they'd support) and do some collaborative close reading.

North Richmond Street, being blind, was a quiet street except at the hour when the Christian Brothers' School set the boys free. An uninhabited house of two storeys stood at the blind end, detached from its neighbours in a square ground. The other houses of the street, conscious of decent lives within them, gazed at one another with brown imperturbable faces.

Her image accompanied me even in places the most hostile to romance. On Saturday evenings when my aunt went marketing I had to go to carry some of the parcels. We walked through the flaring streets, jostled by drunken men and bargaining women, amid the curses of labourers, the shrill litanies of shop-boys who stood on guard by the barrels of pigs' cheeks, the nasal chanting of street-singers, who sang a *come-all-you* about O'Donovan Rossa, or a ballad about the troubles in our native land. These noises converged in a single sensation of life for me: I imagined that I bore my chalice safely through a throng of foes.

What innumerable follies laid waste my waking and sleeping thoughts after that evening! I wished to annihilate the tedious intervening days. I chafed against the work of school. At night in my bedroom and by day in the classroom her image came between me and the page I strove to read. The syllables of the word *Araby* were called to me through the silence in which my soul luxuriated and cast an Eastern enchantment over me. I asked for leave to go to the bazaar on Saturday night. My aunt was surprised, and hoped it was not some Freemason affair. I answered few questions in class. I watched my master's face pass from amiability to sternness; he hoped I was not beginning to idle. I could not call my wandering thoughts together. I had hardly any patience with the serious work of life which, now that it stood between me and my desire, seemed to me child's play, ugly monotonous child's play.

When I came downstairs again I found Mrs Mercer sitting at the fire. She was an old, garrulous woman, a pawnbroker's widow, who collected used stamps for some pious purpose. I had to endure the gossip of the tea-table. The meal was prolonged beyond an hour and still my uncle did not come. Mrs Mercer stood up to go: she was sorry she couldn't wait any longer, but it was after eight o'clock and she did not like to be out late, as the night air was bad for her. When she had gone I began to walk up and down the room, clenching my fists.

I lingered before her stall, though I knew my stay was useless, to make my interest in her wares seem the more real. Then I turned away slowly and walked down the middle of the bazaar. I allowed the two pennies to fall against the sixpence in my pocket. I heard a voice call from one end of the gallery that the light was out. The upper part of the hall was now completely dark.

Gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger.

3. Work independently to draft a paragraph for this imaginary essay that balances a step in its general argument with close reading of details. Then compare your paragraph with the ones written by others in your group.