

More Help with the Atwood Paragraphs

The point of this exercise is simple. It is to your benefit to always be looking for internal contradictions in a text, since this is the most fruitful beginning of sophisticated analysis. As a concept, *ambivalence* embraces complexity in a way that *certainty* does not, and texts that are not complex are probably closer to escapism than literature (this observation is not, incidentally, a value judgment). The idea of ambivalence is also just another iteration of the idea of internal conflict, though without the suggestion that the conflict has to be decisively resolved.

The structure of the assignment is simple: describe the two points of view in a paragraph apiece and attempt to reconcile the contradictions in a conclusion. It's essentially a contrast essay without an introduction. If you want to organize the paragraphs differently, go for it. I'm just trying to suggest an easy, intuitive structure that could be used for the AP test itself.

Even though you are comparing two poems, my example will be exploring the ambivalences in a single text (picked more or less at random; it was a poem I had short-listed for writing a multiple choice quiz, but could never find a thematic place to insert it). It was written by Lưu Mêlan (pen name of Nguyễn Thị Nguyệt), a contemporary Vietnamese poet living in Ho Chi Minh City. The English translation is by Lê Đình Nhất-Lang.

The Ants

ants build the world from dust
water light
the ants flow
oozing their feet on my ears
and through my hair tonight the ants
run around the sun
and my cerebral cortex spills its sap of time
when I think about ants
I only think of a day
when they devour me the charming
little and hard-working
body-tearing ants

each night
when a dream comes hovering by my door
they have guarded my dream the ants
secrete their acid and noises the ants terrorize and threaten the
ants with their mechanical sounds
build
build

each day

their feet poke through languages and they don't need uniqueness
in herds, I think of a weak and dreamy ant
its imagination
will be the bait and the queen ants
will circle their nest all day
heaping it up higher and more monumental
just that
everywhere I see their quickness
but I already want to slow down and escape

as though being newly born the first time

In the Vietnamese original it reads:

Những con kiến

kiến tạo thế giới từ những hạt bụi
nước ánh sáng
những con kiến trôi chảy
rịn đầy những bàn chân trên tai
xuyên óc tôi đêm nay những con kiến
chạy quanh mặt trời
và vô não nhảy nhót chất dịch của thời gian
khi nghĩ về những con kiến
tôi chỉ nghĩ đến một ngày
chúng ăn thịt tôi những con kiến
xinh xắn nhỏ bé và cặm cụi
đang xé xác ấy

đêm đêm
khi cơn mơ đến thập thò bên cánh cửa
chúng đã canh giấc mơ tôi những con kiến
tiết axit và tiếng ồn những con kiến khủng bố và đe dọa những
con kiến với cái âm thanh máy móc
xây
xây

từng ngày
đôi chân chúng thọc thủng những ngữ ngôn và chúng không cần sự khác
biệt
hàng đàn, tôi nghĩ đến một con kiến yếu ớt và mơ mộng
trí tưởng tượng
sẽ là mối và những con kiến chúa
suốt ngày sẽ quay quanh cái tổ của chúng
ngày càng cao và kì vĩ hơn

chỉ thế.

đi đâu tôi cũng thấy sự nhanh nhẹn của chúng
nhưng tôi đã muốn chậm và thoát ra ngoài

nhu vừa lọt lòng ra lại cuộc sống đầu tiên

Here's what I came up with:

It is easy to focus on the end of Lưu Mêlan's "Ants" and conclude that the poem celebrates the individuality of those, like the poet, who deliberately set themselves apart from the masses through the power of imagination. There is, for instance, the obvious connotation of ants as an undifferentiated aggregate of like-minded insects, whose will is subsumed absolutely to the collective good. In this sense, those who do not share this point of view, like the "weak and dreamy ant" (22) of the second half of the poem, become "bait" (24) through its inability to hide an unconcealable imagination. This destructive image is echoed by the speaker's earlier reflection that she can "only think of a day / when [the ants] devour me" (8-9) and tear her body apart (11)-- a fate that, as with the "weak and dreamy ant," likewise suggests a connection with interiority, given that it immediately follows the speaker's observation that "my cerebral cortex spills its sap of time" (7). This simple external conflict, however, is complicated by the fact that the speaker not only conceives of herself as being in opposition to the collective will (at least in the first iteration, since the ants are completely external to the speaker), but she simultaneously identifies with it, as when she empathizes with the fate of the ant who is cannibalized for nonconformity (and is, after all, also an ant-- however imperfectly realized). The speaker is, in other words, both a member of society and one who is completely alienated from it (to the point of not initially seeing herself as belonging to the same metaphorical species). In this reading, then, though the artist is technically a part of the world, he or she is temperamentally opposed to it and, more importantly, always at threat of being utterly consumed by society's predilection for conformity and groupthink. Even the very structure of the poem supports this reading, given the way that the descriptions of the ants' work collapses the grammar of the sentences and disrupts the poetic line.

However, as persuasive as this view may be, this understanding of the poem remains incomplete, since there is an underlying ambivalence towards the ants in the poem that this reading fails to take into account. On the one hand, one can read descriptors such as "the charming / little and hard-working / body-tearing ants" (10-12) as obvious irony, since the initial positive diction is undermined nearly completely by the ultimate characterization of the ants as a destructive force-- here creating an implied dichotomy between the superficial conception of ants as beneficial and harmless with the intended meaning that (at least in the aggregate) ants are a permanent menace to those who oppose their will. Yet, if this is so neatly explained, how does one account for the recurrent characterization of the ants as a *productive* force? Their refrain, after all, is to

“build / build” (18-19), an idea reinforced by the later description of the queen ants as “heaping [their nest] up higher and more monumental” (26). Moreover, though the speaker (at this point wholly identifying with the hypothetical “weak and dreamy ant”) longs to “slow down and escape” (29) the “quickness” (28) of the ants’ efforts, the fact that these endeavors *are* productive inverts the earlier binary-- positing the speaker as the destructive element: the one opposed to creation and progress, the one who fails to allow her will to be subsumed to the collective good. It is especially difficult to believe that these ideas are accidentally introduced into the poem in light of the first line of the poem: how “ants build the world from dust.” Even if the reader takes the narrow view that the ants’ efforts are parasitic on the individuality of the constituent parts of the whole, it is difficult to not see at least some beneficent function in the idea of world-building. That this generative act is made possible only through the patient accretion of the world’s component elements (the “dust” in the image), suggests that those who stand opposed to these efforts also stand opposed to the idea of creation itself, since they fail to integrate themselves into this unfolding, progressive force. There is, the poem suggests, a more charitable view of the ants’ activities than a more monolithic reading might suggest. More to the point, it is a characterization that the poem makes no effort to suppress.

Ambivalence, of course, does not necessarily imply contradiction, and it is possible to feel both repelled and attracted to an idea, to be simultaneously threatened and sustained. The final line of poem would certainly seem to support this prospect. As previously noted, the speaker see the “quickness” of the ants’ effort and wishes to “slow down and escape” (28-29), suggesting an opposition to the collective will. The final simile-- an idea important enough to merit its own stanza-- is appended to this idea, reading, “as though being newly born the first time” (30). As an image, it is reflective of the earlier idea of creation arising out of constituent parts (“[building] the world from dust”), since this metaphorical birth is also not self-generated. In other words, neither creative act is *ex nihilo*, arising instead from previous causes and circumstances. This is significant because there can be unconformity without the idea of conformity itself; the one generates the possibility (and even inevitability) of the other. Similarly, both impulses can be creative or destructive, depending on point of view-- and sometimes both creative and destructive at the same time. Less abstractly, the imaginative potential of the non-conformist arises out of tension with the society, but it is a tension born of a struggle from within that same society-- both opposed to and arising from that which would deny the individual point of view. For the artist or dreamer, then, this is a creative tension that hinders production even as it nourishes it.

As an aside, this is not the only possible reading of the poem. One could, for instance, read it politically. Though Lu^u Mêlan is not herself old enough to have experienced the Vietnam War, she was born in the south and has written elsewhere of the loss of country (the former South Vietnam). Though today’s Vietnam is nominally communist, one would probably not know it unless you actually paid attention to the steady barrage of state propaganda. Nonetheless, the

idea of collective sacrifice is what made Vietnamese independence possible (first from the French and later from the Americans), and in this context, the ideal of individual desire being sacrificed for the sake of the whole is still an officially recognized virtue. Even communism itself implies a high degree of collectivism, though again, most official Vietnamese enforcement of these norms has eased up considerably in the last few years (though censorship still remains a problem, and I do not mean to imply that today's Vietnam is a liberal democracy in the way that this term is usually defined).