

Gordon Harvey

Elements of the Essay

When you are asked to write essays in Harvard classes, you are being asked to write arguments. An argument is a proposition plus some reasons why the writer thinks it true: "I think that X is the case, because A, and because B, and because C—where A, B, and C are sub-topical propositions containing items of evidence that support the truth of X and that follow one another in a significant, developing order." Following are some basic elements of academic argument (whatever terms you use for them):

1. **Thesis:** a general idea, about a text or topic, that functions as the main idea or proposition being argued. It should be (a) true, but (b) arguable—not obviously or patently true—and (c) limited enough in scope to be argued in a short composition and with available evidence. It should also get to the heart of the text or topic being analyzed (not be peripheral), be clearly and sharply stated somewhere in the essay (not just implied), and govern the whole essay (not disappear in places).

2. **Motive:** the context or situation that the writer sets up for the thesis, to suggest why someone (besides your instructor) might want to read an essay about the announced topic—why the thesis needs arguing, why it's not just obvious. A problem, difficulty, dilemma, over-simplification, misapprehension, or violated expectation that the writer defines at the start of the essay, and to which the essay's thesis acts as an answer, solution, correction, or clarification.**

3. **Evidence:** the reasons, facts, examples, or details, that an essay refers to, quotes, or summarizes to support its general ideas. There needs to be enough evidence to be persuasive; it needs to be the right kind of evidence to support the thesis (with no obvious pieces of evidence overlooked); it needs to be sufficiently concrete for the reader to trust it (factually true, too); and the evidence needs to be worked into the argument: it needs to be clearly connected to the thesis, so you see why it is evidence—what inference the writer is making from it.

4. **Keyterms and Assumptions:** the recurring terms or oppositions that an argument rests upon, along with the unstated beliefs about life, or literature, reasoning, etc. that the essayist doesn't argue for but simply assumes to be true. An essay's keyterms should be clear in their meaning and appear throughout (not be abandoned half-way), and they should be appropriate for the subject at hand (not unfair or too simple—a false or constraining opposition). They should not be inert clichés or abstractions (e.g. "the evils of society"). An essay's assumptions, often implicit in its keyterms, should bear logical inspection, and be explicitly acknowledged if tendentious.***

5. **Structure:** the sequence of an argument's main sections or sub-topics, which should follow both logical and dramatic order. An essay's structure should be firm and clear—not vague, drifting, miscellaneous—but it shouldn't seem rigid or mechanical; and it should have a direction or development, not be simply a list or a series of restatements of the thesis ("Macbeth is ambitious: he's ambitious here; and he's ambitious here; and he's ambitious here, too; thus, Macbeth is ambitious"). And it should be supple enough to allow the writer to explore the topic's complexities, instead of only hammering home a thesis—to allow for twists and turns. (If the essay is complicated or long, its structure may be briefly announced or hinted at after the thesis, in a "road map" or plan sentence.)

6. **Complication:** thoughtful twists and turns—shifts, resistances, or delays—in the argument. Of many kinds, two are (a) *counter-argument*, where an essay imagines possible objections to its thesis or to a sub-thesis, or confronts an emergent complication or problem or question ("but at this point a problem arises . . ."), or grants a concession ("admittedly . . ."), or clarifies or qualifies ("I am not suggesting here that . . ."), and (b) *implication*, where an essay draws out the wider significance of the argument it has made—what the foregoing argument (e.g. about a single aspect

of a single text) suggests about the whole text, or about the author's work, or the genre, or the nature or literature, etc.

7. **Orienting:** bits of explanation, information, and summary that orient the reader who isn't expert in the subject, that enable such a reader to follow the argument. Orienting takes many forms: necessary information about the text, author, or event in the essay's introduction; a summary of a text about to be analyzed; pieces of information along the way about passages, people, or events mentioned (including the kind of announcing or "set-up" phrases for quotations and sources described in *Writing with Sources*).

8. **Stitching:** words that make connections between the parts of an argument, most commonly (a) by using transition (turning or linking) words to show structure—how a new section, paragraph, or sentence follows from the one immediately previous; but also (b) by recollection of an earlier idea or part of the essay, referring back to it either by explicit statement or by echoing key words or resonant phrases quoted or stated earlier.

9. **Sources:** persons or documents that help a writer demonstrate the truth of his or her argument. Whether sources of opinion, information, applicable general concepts, relevant comparison, or some other thing, they need to be deftly integrated and fairly acknowledged. See *Writing with Sources*.

10. **Style:** choices made at the word and sentence level that determine how a proposition is stated rather than what it states. Besides adhering to the grammatical conventions of standard English, an essay's style needs to be as clear and readable as possible (so nowhere confusing, verbose, cryptic, labored, overloaded, etc.), expressive of the writer's controlling intelligence and energetic interest in the subject (so not bureaucratic or clichéd, but rather conveying an individual *presence*), and apt in tone for its subject and audience.

Elements of Earlier "Elements":

*The "analytical" essay and the argumentative aren't two different kinds. Every essay you write, if it is one, will be both an analysis and an argument—analysis being the activity of breaking a text or topic down into parts, to show how they make up a whole of a certain kind, and argument, the activity of persuading a reader that your analysis is just.

**(from *Motive*) Why should your idea interest someone other than your instructor? Well, perhaps . . .

- the truth isn't what one would expect, or what it might first appear to be on first reading;
- there's an interesting wrinkle in the matter, a complexity;
- the standard opinion of the text, or a certain published view, needs challenging or qualifying;
- a simple or common or obvious-seeming approach to this has more implications, or explains more, than it may seem;
- an approach to this that may seem irrelevant, isn't;
- there's a contradiction or tension here;
- there's an ambiguity, something unclear, that could mean two or more things;
- this matter is difficult, or complicated, and needs some sorting out;
- there's a mystery or puzzle or question here that needs answering or explaining;
- we can learn about a larger phenomenon by studying this smaller one;
- published views of the matter conflict;
- this seemingly tangential or insignificant matter is actually important, or interesting. And so on.

*** (from *Keyterms and Assumptions*) Example of problematic keyterms: an essay arguing that Orwell isn't really a "political" writer but in fact a "moral" writer assumes too easily a distinction between morality and politics. Examples of deep assumptions that might underlie, for example, a literary essay: writers are products of their times; poems are written for posterity; there is a correct reading of a novel; literature is worth studying; etc.

STAYING HOME AND LEAVING HOME IN *DUBLINERS*

BY MATTHEW LIGHT

"DUBLIN IS SUCH A SMALL CITY: everyone knows everyone else's business." This is Doran's lament, one of many such laments in *Dubliners*, a book whose very title seems to presage a comprehensive portrait of Ireland's capital city (65). Joyce makes full use of the advantages Dublin offered as a setting. Both national capital and provincial town, the city was the ideal site for a probing—and often scathing—dissection of his homeland. It would be unfortunate, however, to see *Dubliners* merely as an ethnographic study, for Joyce's commentary has a broader scope. Dublin comes to serve as a locale for a drama which is played out all over the world, a drama about home. Joyce studies the nature of home, what it is, and what it means to leave it. However different his characters may be, together they form a tableau which, while it does much to indict the idea of home, also shows a deep compassion for those who are bound to it. Although this theme might be examined in many stories—the failed attempt at leaving in "Eveline" is an obvious example—a look at two less-obvious works, "The Boarding House" and "Little Cloud," may best suggest its subtlety and pervasiveness.

Joyce's indictment takes the form of an attack on many of the values of which the home is seen as the origin: public decency, responsibility, and loyalty, for instance. Joyce sees people's households as not just the locus, but actually the cause of all that is most wearing and constricting in life. Indeed, Joyce's portrayal of Dubliners' homes is noteworthy, in particular, for his attack on what he sees as the prison of respectability. In both the stories we are considering, Joyce emphasizes the city's concern with maintaining appearances, with seeming to do the right thing, and with rigid conformity to the norms of the community.

With this emphasis on family decency, "The Boarding House" at first seems anomalous. Mrs. Mooney, the proprietress, has led what her contemporaries regard as a highly irregular life, going so far as to obtain a separation from her drunken and

abusive husband. Such a step of course gravely diminishes her social prestige and respectability, and matters are worsened by her son's violence and the boisterous behavior of her lodgers. All this, Joyce writes, has led to her establishment acquiring "a certain fame" among the respectable citizens of Dublin. The beginning of the story, in fact, is rife with veiled allusions to prostitution: Mrs. Mooney is referred to as "The Madam" and her daughter's song proclaims her "a naughty girl" (62). Given Mrs. Mooney's evident disregard for public opinion, then, where is the concern for appearances which has been openly depicted in other stories?

The answer lies in Mrs. Mooney's use of her fictitious respectability as a weapon against the lodger who has become the lover of her daughter Polly. Doran, the mother calculates, will surely be condemned by public opinion if he fails to marry her daughter, since "she was an outraged mother. She had allowed him to live beneath her roof, assuming that he was a man of honor, and he had simply abused her hospitality" (64). Weighing all the possible arguments Doran might use to evade her, Mrs. Mooney correctly concludes that with his job and his middle-class connections, he can ill afford a scandal of the type which she has tolerated for years. Thus, in a particularly ironic twist, Mrs. Mooney uses the requirements of public decency to ensnare Doran—after she herself has successfully flouted them. Even more ironically, the text strongly indicates that Mrs. Mooney connives at the very breach of "decency" she now proposes to exploit with indignation. "Her mother's persistent silence could not be misunderstood," notes Polly, as her affair with Doran becomes public knowledge and Mrs. Mooney seems to condone it (63). The success with which the mother pushes the reluctant groom into a joyless marriage of convenience is, on one level, one of Joyce's efforts to expose the hollowness of the ideal of a respectable and respected home.

Nevertheless, while this story hardly paints a flattering picture of family life, a great compassion

for the characters is also evident. In the unappealing person of Mrs. Mooney, Joyce shows how a person whom life has battered can, as a result, resort to the most dishonorable and desperate tactics to safeguard her family's material interests. Doran, too, is at least partly a victim of circumstance: a middle-class man caught in an unseemly affair with the daughter of his landlady, he seems to have little choice but to sacrifice his own happiness in order to avoid a scandal. Finally, Polly herself has clearly been exploited: not only by Doran (who, Mrs. Mooney points out, is far more experienced than the girl), but also perhaps by her own mother, who failed to take action when to do so might still have been useful.

Doran and Polly are propelled into their unwanted marriage by forces neither of them can control, and their feeling of being driven confers a curious nightmarish quality on the event. The helplessness is evident in Doran's own recognition of what is happening to him. "Once you are married you are done for," he tells himself (66). Nevertheless, Doran is compelled by the weight of social opinion to make "reparation" for the sin he has committed (67). In essence, Doran's future is being determined not by his own will but by the outrage of the community: "He longed to ascend through the roof and fly away to another country where he would never hear again of his trouble, and yet a force pushed him downstairs step by step" (67-8). Fear of censure and of Mrs. Mooney's wrath, blind him to all concerns of individual happiness or growth.

Yet there is more to Joyce's compassion than what these observations might suggest. He is not simply presenting a gloomy tale of Faulkneresque determinism, but rather attempting to elicit an emotional response to characters who have much that is appealing. While the America of the 1990s—even the Ireland of the 1990s—may have more relaxed social standards than did the Ireland of the 1890s, these characters and their plight have hardly lost their appeal. Would anyone feel any warmth toward Doran if he brutally rejected the vulnerable girl he had disgraced? Can anyone blame Mrs. Mooney for attempting to salvage something of her daughter's happiness from a life which was far from idyllic? Finally, would Polly herself necessarily be better off disgraced, husbandless, and possibly impoverished than as part of a functioning household?

Questions like these put Joyce's portrayal of Dublin in a different light. "The Boarding House" is not just, though it is partly, a condemnation of

respectability. It is not just, though it is partly, a pessimistic view of family life. It is also a sympathetic picture of two young people forced into a life which, while not perfect, or even particularly happy, is still the best that the protagonists of this small tragedy can achieve. This story, then, is about making do, about trying to rescue what one can from a situation that is not very promising. Joyce suggests, not surprisingly, that much of life is rather like that.

In a sense, one could think of "A Little Cloud" as representing the logical conclusion of "The Boarding House." In this other story the object of Joyce's scrutiny is, in part, a marriage very much like that which Mrs. Mooney concocts for her daughter. While the match between Little Chandler and his wife appears originally to have been one of love and not necessity, Joyce's description of it suggests that this distinction has lost whatever practical significance it may once have had, since their claustrophobic life together has killed all their youthful romance. Everything in Chandler's life is small, not only his physique but also his household and the objects which surround him. The word "mean" repeatedly occurs in the description of his rooms, as does "prim." Life with his wife Annie is pinched and narrow, the narrator suggests. The "lady-like" decorum of the struggling housewife has imposed a grey and tedious existence on them, causing them to make use of what small resources they have to purchase correct and tasteful furniture for their cramped dwelling. Their marriage, based on a determination to preserve appearances at all costs, has thus been robbed of all spontaneity and possibility of growth.

The last scene of the story, in which an enraged Mrs. Chandler returns home to find a screaming baby, further accents the isolation which prevails within this family and on the years of grinding unhappiness ahead of them. Even as tears of remorse and pity, for both the child and himself, start to Chandler's eyes, he is turning his back on his utopian dreams of escape to London (85). His fate is quite obviously sealed. Meanwhile, the rather vulgar ex-classmate who inspired these hopes in him, Gallaher, is about to end his visit to Dublin and to embark once again for England, where he has a successful career as a journalist. He does not share Chandler's indignation about the state of morals outside Ireland, nor since he is single is he restrained from action by any responsibilities at home. Gallaher is, in fact, just the sort of rootless free spirit many of Joyce's characters (including

Chandler) yearn to be. Yet he is also important in the collection because he is hardly a model for anyone. Greedy, vulgar, and amoral, he lacks all the kindness and decency which mark Doran and Chandler, both of whom sacrifice much in order to give others a stable home life.

While everyone in *Dubliners* must decide whether to leave home, Gallaher makes an additional choice which illustrates an important underlying theme of the book. For in addition to leaving a particular house or even a particular family, Gallaher—like Joyce—chooses to leave Ireland. Thus, home comes to be equated not just with one's household, but with one's country, as we can see in "A Little Cloud," where the possibility of flight from Ireland is an important part of Chandler's hopes. Moreover, even though in "The Boarding House" emigration is never brought up, Dublin itself is almost a character in the story: solid and unchanging, disapproving, vaguely menacing, it seems to weigh down the characters. Yet it is hard to determine exactly when Joyce is making a point about home life in general and when the country itself is at issue. The two places, "home" and "Ireland," seem to merge in the characters' consciousness; when Chandler mulls the option of "going away" and pursuing a literary career, it is not only his family he considers abandoning, but also his country, for "(there) was no doubt about it: if you wanted to succeed you had to go away. You could do nothing in Dublin" (73). This conflation of family and nation shows how intimately linked the two concepts are in *Dubliners*' understanding of their lives.

In Joyce's Ireland, everyone has a well-defined professional and personal position in the community. Both the young men in these stories have longstanding and stable, if not particularly satisfying, jobs. *Dubliners*, Joyce suggests, fit both into a family circle governed by a feeling of responsibility, and into the broader community of the city which dictates social mores. While this community and the standards it represents may seem intrusive and overbearing, they are also consistent, stable, and protective: the same rules that mar the lives of Doran and Chandler also protect the interests of the women they would abandon. Just as Doran must marry Polly, so Chandler cannot abandon a vulnerable wife and a small child to pursue his literary ambition. When someone is injured, he must be compensated. When someone undertakes an obligation, he must fulfill it. In short, home is a place where *Dubliners* can expect others to behave in

accordance with dependable and unvarying principles, and where, when others try to neglect these principles, they can be called to account.

But what about that remote place known as "abroad"? What about the *Dubliners* who go there? The answers to these questions are a lesson in contrasts: stability and vibrancy, responsibility and freedom, contentment and joy. In the meeting of Chandler and Gallaher, the main intruder from abroad in the collection, we see all these contrasts. Gallaher's boisterousness, his casual manner, his vulgarity—all stand out against the background of a drab city and its representative, the prim and fastidious Chandler. In their discussion of Paris, for instance, a telling detail emerges. What attracts Gallaher to the city is not its proverbial beauty, but its "life," its "gaiety, movement, excitement" (76). Chandler, both fascinated and repelled by his friend's descriptions of the vice of foreign cities, seems to symbolize an Ireland which yearns for something beyond the drab city on the Liffey, but also shrinks from anything smacking of immorality.

If Dublin is marked by an almost monolithic stability in *Dubliners*, "abroad" is characterized by danger and insecurity. Gallaher takes a risk when he moves to London. His career as a journalist prospers, it is true, but only after years of frenetic activity, travel throughout Europe, and absence from home. Indeed, his British and continental success has resulted in an alienation from Ireland which is complete and irrevocable. His references to "the relaxation" of a visit to "the old country" not unreasonably strike Chandler as patronizing (78): Gallaher's remarks are one more reminder that Dublin is hardly a bustling metropolis. Moreover, his first visit home to Ireland is treated not as an opportunity for restoring old ties but just as one more occasion for drunken carousing, as we see when he turns down Chandler's offer of an evening at home in favor of a gambling party (79). Finally, Gallaher's attitude toward marriage further exposes his shortcomings. Chandler may dream of leaving his far-from-ideal home, but he never seriously considers doing it. Gallaher, in contrast, says frankly that he will marry only an heiress. His rejection of romance, of what he calls "mooning and spooning" shows a crass materialism which seems ugly when compared to the touching resignation and acceptance of responsibility that characterize Chandler (81). In short, the picture of Gallaher shows a man both physically and morally unhealthy, a man whose deracination has robbed him of all sense of responsibility to others.

In spite of this, Gallaher's brilliance is undeniable; even the envious Chandler accepts it, albeit without much grace. By dint of hard work, selfishness, and a ruthless rending of all the ties that bound him to his former home, Gallaher has succeeded in creating a name for himself outside the narrow confines of Dublin and Ireland. Readily apparent, too, is the mediocrity of Chandler's sterile career and unhappy marriage. The disturbing conclusion to be drawn from these two contrasting lives seems to be that some degree of selfishness or even cruelty is necessary for creating a life of excitement and joy, whereas to behave as a decent person, restrained by the limits of law and morality, requires people like Chandler and Doran to submit, to give up their claims to individual happiness. Like these men,

Joyce himself had a family and a stake in the community. Like Gallaher, he left Ireland both physically and spiritually, and throughout his life he felt torn between bitter resentment for his former country and affection for it. *Dubliners* tells a story of the spiritual price we all pay for having a home—and the price we pay for giving it up.

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Works Cited:

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