

The Swimmer's Moment

For everyone
The swimmer's moment at the whirlpool comes,
But many at that moment will not say
"This is the whirlpool, then."
By their refusal they are saved
From the black pit, and also from contesting
The deadly rapids, and emerging in
The mysterious, and more ample, further waters.
And so their bland-blank faces turn and turn
Pale and forever on the rim of suction
They will not recognize.
Of those who dare the knowledge
Many are whirled into the ominous center
That, gaping vertical, seals up
For them an eternal boon¹ of privacy,
So that we turn away from their defeat
With a despair, not for their deaths, but for
Ourselves, who cannot penetrate their secret
Nor even guess at the anonymous breadth
Where one or two have won:
(The silver reaches of the estuary²).

Margaret Avison

1 boon—something beneficial or pleasant, a favour

2 reaches of the estuary—wide stretch of water where the mouth of a river meets the sea

"The Swimmer's Moment" by Margaret Avison suggests that we choose either to avoid or to enter into the challenge of the unknown.

What does "The Swimmer's Moment" convey to you about the significance of our response to challenge? Support your response with reference to detail from the poem.

Marilyn: Writing a strong essay is greatly helped by the development of a strong introduction. With that in mind, and working from the original introduction of your response to “The Swimmer’s Moment,” I have put together the following as a suggested opener. How about reworking now the rest of your essay, developing two new body paragraphs and a conclusion that will suit with this introduction?

Ordinarily we might suppose that the consequence of taking a risk would be either good or bad, depending on one’s situation. For example, learning any new skill, such as snowboarding or understanding advanced calculus, can prove enormously helpful to the mind, the body, the spirit, or to all three. On any given day, however, the snowboarder may slip off his mountain and the mathematician may slip into insanity. At this point, each would probably suggest, while plummeting to his literal or figurative doom, that taking the risk wasn’t worth the trouble. But in her poem “The Swimmer’s Moment,” Margaret Avison takes a different view of risk-taking. She suggests that the risk-taker, regardless of what happens to him, always gains something, while the non risk-taker, regardless of how safe he stays, is always bound to lose.

Note that this revision of your introduction serves four important functions:

- It establishes a gentling-in—that is, an interesting introduction to the topic and one that doesn’t thrust the reader too abruptly into a discussion of the work.
- It includes the title of the work (“The Swimmer’s Moment”), the author’s name (Margaret Avison), and the genre of the work (poem).
- It concludes with a statement of theme for the work to be discussed (namely that the risk-taker always gains something, and the non risk-taker is always bound to lose).
- It sets the organization of the essay’s body paragraphs—in this case, one paragraph devoted to a discussion of the positive consequences of risk-taking (as revealed in the details of the poem), and one paragraph on the negative consequences of risk-rejecting.

This basic structure can serve as the outline for practically any introduction to any essay you write in this course.

As for improving your essay-writing skills generally, my best suggestion is that you keep working in a focused way with your text *Rhetoric Made Plain*. If you are interested in improving your control of basic sentence mechanics, I have worksheets that will probably be of use to you.

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Response to "The Swimmer's Moment"¹

There is a whirlpool in everyone's life, as conveyed by the lines "For everyone / The swimmer's moment at the whirlpool comes,"² in the poem "The Swimmer's Moment" by Margaret Avison.³ We will always encounter challenges, despite drastic measures many will implement to protect themselves from the intimidating unknown. When humans are faced with a challenge, some will accept it with a smile on their face and a strong sense of will in their heart, while others will simply dismiss it and will return to the familiar comfort of their drab lives.⁴

Those that are thirsty for knowledge fearlessly dive into the unknown, into a challenge and never look back. They never regret their decision, even if the outcome is less than favourable. From each new challenge, they learn something, and become stronger.⁵ Those who take no risk are eternally stranded in the river of self discovery, never to bank for they will never accept a challenge that allows them to do. They have no passion for life, nothing to live for. They're afraid to lose everything, which ironically is nothing.⁶ Avison states,⁷ "And so their bland-blank faces turn and turn / Pale and forever on the rim of suction," I agree with this idea⁸; those who refuse challenges are boring, and are forever faltering on the rim of a high skyscraper. Those who refuse secretly want to know, but are terrified of the unknown. "With a despair, not for their deaths, but for / Ourselves, who cannot penetrate their secret."⁹ They despair, for they know not what they have refused. Possibly a whole utopia was at their finger tips, but too afraid to give up the old and familiar, that they will never reach their eldorado.¹⁰

People when faced with a challenge, will either accept knowing their is a possibility for something extraordinary to occur or they will refuse knowing their is a chance all too great that they will fail.

Some general notes

* In general this is a good personal response to the text "The Swimmer's Moment."

- * The introduction is well organized. It includes 1) a gentling-in, 2) a situating reference, and 3) a thesis. However, the gentling-in is a bit too brief, and the thesis should be more clearly identified **as** the thesis.
- * The body appropriately discusses the idea expressed in the thesis. But there are some lapses in coherence that could have been eliminated by the use of transitional words or phrases.
- * The conclusion appropriately restates the thesis but is too brief. It does not therefore completely frame the essay.
- * The overall treatment of the poem would be improved by the essayist's having focused more pointedly on some of its details.

Some specifics

¹ Note the essayist's correct titling of the response. Many students incorrectly titled their essays simply "The Swimmer's Moment."

² Note the essayist's correct application of a quotation. First, it is well assimilated by the phrase "as conveyed by the lines," rather than being roughly inserted. Secondly, it makes correct use of an oblique (/) to indicate a break in the verse lines. Thirdly, it appropriately sets the end comma **inside** the closing quotation mark, rather than outside, as many student writers would do.

³ This first sentence is somewhat too long and cumbersome. As a rule, a short, sharp opening line is more forceful and inviting than is a long one. As it stands, the sentence does double duty, for it supplies both the introduction's gentling-in and its situating reference. A more effective choice would be to break up these two elements into multiple sentences—say, two or three sentences for the gentling-in and one for the situating reference. Perhaps something like this:

There's a whirlpool in everyone's river. One moment you're side-stroking gently down the stream, and the next moment you're being drawn unavoidably, it seems, toward a swirling vortex that wants to pull you in and down towards heaven knows what. What to do? Do you dog-paddle frantically away from the force and pull yourself safely into the shallows at the river's edge? Or do you, as they say, go with the flow and hope for the best there at the heart of those troubled waters? This image of a whirlpool as one of the threatening forces or challenges that one must somehow cope with in the course of ordinary life is central to Margaret Avison's "The Swimmer's Moment."

⁴ This is an effective statement of theme for the poem and thesis for the essay, though it might be expressed more economically (i.e. in fewer words); as well, a phrase should be included to indicate more clearly that this is in fact the theme that will be argued for the poem. Something like this:

Avison uses the whirlpool and two kinds of swimmers to suggest the idea that some people in their encounters with challenge will choose to protect themselves from the intimidating unknown, while others will embrace challenge with willing hearts.

Incidentally, Avison's speaker does not indicate that those who go willingly into the whirlpool always do it cheerfully. Indeed, we would expect that many people, regardless of how deliberately they enter a whirlpool, would not appear too happy about risking their safety. For this reason—although I like the juxtaposition in the phrase "with a smile on their face and a strong sense of will in their heart"—I've deleted the detail of the smile.

⁵ These first three sentences of the body speak effectively about the experience of the risk-takers. A few suggestions, however:

1. One or two details from the poem, preferably in the form of embedded quotations, should be included to support the observations.
2. The assertion that risk-takers “*fearlessly* dive into the unknown” is questionable, for one may choose to take a risk and be terrified at the same time. Avison’s speaker does not say that those who “dare the knowledge” are unafraid.
3. The passage has some comma faults. In the first sentence, “Those that are thirsty for knowledge fearlessly dive into the unknown, into a challenge and never look back,” a comma is missing. It should read, “Those that are thirsty for knowledge fearlessly dive into the unknown, into a challenge, and never look back. In the third sentence, “From each new challenge, they learn something, and become stronger,” the comma after the word “challenge,” though it is not technically misused, is unnecessary, and the comma after the word “something” should be deleted.

⁶ Sentences 4 through 6 effectively discuss the risk-rejecters. But again, some suggestions:

1. The meaning of the first sentence in this passage is unclear, a problem that might have been corrected by closer proofreading. It reads, “Those who take no risk are eternally stranded in the river of self discovery, never to bank for they will never accept a challenge that allows them to do.” To be mechanically correct, it should be something like this:

Those who take no risks are eternally stranded in the river of self-discovery, never to bank, for they will never accept the challenges that would allow them to make discoveries at all.

2. As well, the metaphor in the phrase “never to bank” does not really work. It is used here to suggest something good—a state of contented rest. In the context of the poem, however, going to the safety of the bank, or staying outside “the rim of suction,” is bad. The better place, the blessed place, by the poet’s suggestion, is out there in the middle of the river, where one can actually enter the whirlpool, thereafter to arrive at the estuary, still presumably in open water and not stagnating at the bank.

⁷ Be cautious about using phrases like *the author says* or *the poet asserts* or, as in this case, “Avison states.” First, you run the risk of confusing the intentions of the writer with those of the speaker or narrator—and, as it happens, the two voices are often at odds. Secondly, a writer usually makes “statements” only indirectly—that is, through image and suggestion. A statement is a direct declaration of fact or belief. The sentence, therefore, might work better if it opened like this:

In her lines “And so their bland-blank faces turn and turn / Pale and forever on the rim of suction,” Avison suggests that . . .

⁸ Two problems:

1. A comma splice at “. . . the rim of suction,’ I agree with this idea.” Instead it should be “. . . the rim of suction.’ I agree with this idea.” Alternately, the punctuation might be “. . . the rim of suction”; I agree with this idea.”
2. The use of first-person pronouns is perfectly acceptable in a personal response to literature. In this essay, though, the tone is fairly formal (which is fine too) or, at least, not casually conversational. The problem here is that the sudden appearance of the statement “I agree with this idea” is jarring because it is inconsistent with the tone in the material that comes before and after it. To stay tonally consistent, the whole passage could be revised like so:

In her lines “And so their bland-blank faces turn and turn / Pale and forever on the rim of suction,” Avison aptly suggests that those who refuse challenges are boring, forever faltering on the rim of great possibilities.

Note that in my revision of this passage, I've deleted the "high skyscraper" metaphor, this because it is an urban image and therefore inconsistent, also, with the general imagery of the poem, which is of water and natural forces. But note also that the writer's inclusion of the word "rim"—instead of, say, *edge* or *verge* or *lip*—is a nicely placed touch to the text of the poem.

⁹ The quotation stands as solid support for the idea that the risk-rejecters want to know the risk-takers' secret but are terrified to go into the whirlpool. But this section of the discussion lacks coherence because the quotation is unassimilated. It should read along the following lines:

Those who refuse the whirlpool secretly want to know what it can offer but are terrified of the unknown. This idea is revealed in the lines "With a despair, not for their deaths, but for / Ourselves, who cannot penetrate their secret."

More effective yet would be to embed the phrases of the quoted passage more selectively. Perhaps like this:

Those who refuse the whirlpool secretly want to know but are terrified of the unknown. And though their expression may seem to say that that they "despair" for the deaths of those poor fools who gave in to suction, the real despair is for themselves "who cannot penetrate their secret," the secret now held by those bold fools. They despair, for they know not what they have refused.

¹⁰ A strong conclusion to the body, but the sentence is slightly unclear and mispunctuated. The following revision would help:

Possibly a whole utopia was at their finger tips, but, too afraid to give up the old and familiar, they could not claim their Eldorado.

As mentioned in the general notes, the conclusion of this essay is too brief. Just as the reader should be gentled *in* to the response, so he should be gentled *out*, and the discussion should be framed; that is, the conclusion should somehow make a touch back to phrasing or idea expressed in the introduction. Try, then, your own revision of this essay's conclusion. See what you can do to more satisfyingly resolve it.

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Readers Response to Literature: *The Swimmer's Moment*

The Swimmer's Moment by Margaret Avison examines the manner in which every individual faces and responds to the challenge of the unknown. The poem implies that such a sudden accost is inevitable, and that it is up to each person to acknowledge and rise to or shrink from their impending destiny. Avison explores the fate of those who chance a plunge into the depths of the unknown using a cunning sustained metaphor: that of swimmers caught in the spinning tendrils of a whirlpool.

In this fabricated scenario, those who acknowledge and those who remain willfully ignorant of the challenge are represented by swimmers, and the whirlpool – uncertain doom. The fate of those who trust a hope and swim to embrace the current is far less dire than our imagination would have us believe however. The poem suggests that, contrary to literal implications, those who dive into “the black pit” are bestowed upon a plethora of knowledge and gifts unfathomable by those clinging to the reaches. Those left continue their safe but terribly unenlightened orbit round the edges, a listless stare forever etched on “. . . their bland-blank faces.”

Those unusual abstractions lend themselves to comparison with many common philosophies in real life. The idea that places worth seeing and things worth achieving are generally more difficult to reach or obtain, is one small truth common to the poem and life in general. In addition, the work expresses a need to forego safety and security of being and/or spirit in order to regard a challenge adequately (a task many find daunting). Ultimately it is our ability to curb our fear into something like ambition that will allow us to face the unknown: what comes next? The dark closet, the swaying trees under a full moon, or what lies beneath. Every person must try to remember, that when our swimmer's moment, win or lose, pass or fail, braving the rapids in pursuit of the estuary is far more worthy a deed, than dooming oneself to safety and eventual stagnation.

Some general notes

- * This essay is strong both in form and content, though some style choices are awkward, and organization of the introductory paragraph needs to be somewhat re-worked.
- * The introduction indicates clearly, but incompletely, the idea to be developed in the body of the essay. As well, the discussion begins abruptly; a passage of gentling-in is needed to ease the reader into the discussion of the poem.
- * The body appropriately discusses the idea expressed in the thesis, though (as with the previous exemplar) the essayist would do well to incorporate more details from the work at hand.
- * The conclusion nicely frames the essay by touching back to the introduction, but is a bit long. Some of the material in this paragraph might serve better as a passage of gentling-in in the introduction.

One possible revision

Reader's Response to Literature: "The Swimmer's Moment"

What a cliché to say that the places most worth seeing are the hardest to get to. And haven't we heard too often that the things most worth having are the hardest to get? The news is not new, and the statements, as true as they are, are not arresting. Perhaps this is because these statements are mere abstractions—ideas that hardly register with us because they aren't attached to arresting images or arresting phrases. Margaret Avison's poem "The Swimmer's Moment" is a work that takes the truth of such clichés and casts them in an inventive way, causing us to reconsider the value of responding bravely to the challenge of the unknown and the difficult. Through her speaker—who, ironically, is one of the many among us who seem immobilized in the face of challenge—Avison implies that our being accosted by great challenge is inevitable and that there are consequences profound that come both of rising to and shrinking from challenge. Through her cunning use of a sustained metaphor, Avison explores the fates of those who chance a plunge into the depths of the unknown and those who tread safely in the shallows of the familiar.

In her scenario, those who acknowledge and those who remain willfully ignorant of challenge are represented by swimmers who encounter a whirlpool. This force of nature (or perhaps of fate)—with its "gaping vertical," spinning tendrils, and "ominous center"—is a powerful image of doom. It is a potent image that represents all of those looming encounters that many, perhaps most, of us would rather not face. Indeed, we feel that even to admit "This is the whirlpool, then," is to come too close to our own destruction. However, the outcome of those who *do* trust a hope and swim to embrace the monstrous current is far less dire, far more rewarding, than our imaginations would have us believe. At least, "The Swimmer's Moment" suggests as much. Contrary to common expectation, the poem implies, those who "dare the knowledge" and dive into "the black pit" are the immediate heirs of great knowledge, knowledge unfathomable by we pitifully "pale" creatures over here "on the rim of suction." We are left safe but unenlightened as we orbit around the edge of opportunity, listless stares etched on our "bland-blank faces," unaware that this safety is a great danger.

Indirectly, therefore, Avison encourages us to forego safety and to channel our fear into something like the ambition that will allow us to face the unknown. She would have us peer into dark closets, take our place among swaying trees under the full moon, seek out the treasures that lie beneath surfaces. When our moment comes, we must remember that, win or lose, pass or fail, braving the rapids in quest of the estuary is far more worthy a deed than is dooming oneself to safety and stagnation.