**“With the Grain” vs. “Against the Grain” Readings**

* A “with the grain” reading is the conventional synopsis or summary of the text. This kind of reading provides a generally agreeable, uncontroversial *description* of what the text is about or what transpires within it.
* An “against the grain” reading is *your own* surprising, counterintuitive interpretation of the text. An “against the grain” reading doesn’t emerge out of thin air; it comes from paying attention to details that others might miss.

“Against the grain” readings are *arguable* because they make claims based on analysis of evidence that someone could plausibly disagree with.

“With the grain” readings make for weak arguments because they point to obvious interpretations or repeat the general consensus surrounding a work. They often lack analysis and assume that textual evidence speaks for itself.

**Close reading will allow you to make against the grain readings!**

**Case Study Part 1:**

**Emily Jaeger’s “The Roundworm”**

**“With the grain” reading:** *Emily Jaeger’s “The Roundworm”* *is a poem about a woman’s relief and renewed sense of human identity upon ridding herself of a bodily parasite.*

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| **Evidence** | **Analysis** | **Claim** |
| “The foot-long worm that lands in the toilet bowl explains a lot of things:” | -- | The poem’s speaker is free of the parasite and now understands the symptoms that had afflicted her over the past six months |
| “The week you gnawed through artichokes, heart to leaf tip, your body hankering for a bitter cure.” | -- | The effects of the parasite produced strange hungers in the poem’s speaker. |
| “You look at the foot-long worm: one pinkish slime of a sentence, not wriggling, but certainly still alive. Then flush the fucker down.” | -- | The poem’s speak triumphs over the parasite and successfully rids herself of its influences. |

**Case Study Part 2:**

**Emily Jaeger’s “The Roundworm”**

**“Against the grain” reading:** *Emily Jaeger’s “The Roundworm” initially appears to be a triumphant poem about a woman ridding herself of a parasite, but in fact expresses the speaker’s anxiety that her role as host has forever altered her understanding of “human” identity.*

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| **Evidence** | **Analysis** | **Claim** |
| “The foot-long worm that lands in the toilet bowl explains a lot of things:” | The use of the verb “explain” is ambiguous because it contains the suggestion that the roundworm might actually be communicating with the poem’s speaker, implying a shared language between human and nonhuman creature. | Even as the poem describes the parasite’s removal from the human body, the language suggests that human and parasite, in fact, still share a deep connection. |
| “The week you gnawed through artichokes, heart to leaf tip, your body hankering for a bitter cure.” | The syntax in this statement makes the action difficult to visualize because human beings tend to eat the leaves of artichokes *before* reaching the heart. The speaker, in other words, appears to be imagining *herself* eating like a worm or insect, *burrowing* in the artichoke in the same way the roundworm burrows into her body. | Again, the poem produces a paradox: we *think* the speaker wants to be “cured” of her parasite, but the cure involves mimicking the eating habits of the very parasite she is trying to get rid of. |
| “You look at the foot-long worm: one pinkish slime of a sentence, not wriggling, but certainly still alive. Then flush the fucker down.” | The metaphor comparing the roundworm to the “pinkish slime of a sentence” again suggests the possibility of communication between parasite and host; however, the expression “fucker” implies a *failure* of communication, as if the language of the poem is trying to *reject* the possibility of interspecies understanding. | The poem ends with an ambiguity: the speaker expresses hatred toward the parasite, but that hatred seems to be the result of an uncanny *intimacy* between parasite and host rather than their difference from one another. |