

I Have an Olive Tree by Eve Bunting

A Teacher's Guide for Socratic Discussion
by Michaela Peine and Missy Andrews



TABLE OF CONTENTS



Introduction	3
Quick Card	5
Questions about Structure: Setting	6
Questions about Structure: Characters	8
Questions about Structure: Conflict and Plot	11
Questions about Structure: Theme	14
Questions about Style	16
Questions about Context	18
Suggestions for Writing Assignments	19
Story Charts	20

INTRODUCTION



CenterForLit’s teacher guide series is intended to assist teachers and parents in conducting meaningful discussions of literature in the classroom or home school. It is important to note that they are **not** intended to be workbooks for the student, but rather models and guides for discussion leaders. Questions and answers follow the pattern presented in *Teaching the Classics*, CenterForLit’s flagship literature seminar. Though the concepts underlying this approach to literary analysis are explained in detail in that seminar, the following brief summary presents the basic principles upon which this guide is based.

The *Teaching the Classics* approach to literary analysis and interpretation is built around **three unique ideas** which, when combined, produce a powerful instrument for understanding and teaching literature:

First: All works of fiction share the same basic elements — **Context, Structure, and Style**. A literature lesson that helps the student identify these elements in a story prepares them for meaningful discussion of the story’s themes.

Context encompasses all of the details of time and place surrounding the writing of a story, including the personal life of the author as well as historical events that shaped the author’s world.

Structure includes the essential building blocks that make up a story, and that all stories have in common: Conflict, Plot (which includes *exposition, rising action, climax, denouement, and conclusion*), Setting, Characters, and Theme.

Style refers to the literary devices used by authors to create the mood and atmosphere of their stories. Recognition of some basic literary devices (alliteration, simile, personification, metaphor, etc.) enables a reader not only to understand the author’s themes more readily, but also to appreciate his craftsmanship more fully.

Second: Because it is approachable and engaging, *children’s literature* is the best genre to employ in teaching the foundational principles of literary analysis. Children’s books present these building blocks in clear, memorable language, and are thus treasure mines of opportunities for the astute teacher—allowing him to present Context, Structure, and Style with ease to children and adults alike. Having learned to recognize these basic elements in the simple text of a classic children’s story, a student is well prepared to analyze complex works suitable for his own age and level of intellectual development.

Third: The best classroom technique for teaching literary analysis and interpretation is the *Socratic Method*. Named after the ancient gadfly who first popularized this style of teaching, the Socratic method employs the art of questioning, rather than lecturing, to accomplish education. Based upon the conviction that the process of discovery constitutes the better part of learning, our program uses well-placed questions to teach students how to think, rather than dictating to them what to think.

The *Teaching the Classics* seminar syllabus supplies a thorough list of Socratic questions for teachers to use in class discussion. The questions are general enough to be used with any book, but focused enough to lead the

student into meaningful contemplation of the themes of even the most difficult stories. Questions on the list are arranged in order of difficulty: from grammar-level questions which ask for the mere fact of a story, to rhetoric-level questions which require discussion of ideologies and transcendent themes. Properly employed, this list can help teachers engage their classes in important discussions of ideas, and can also provide a rich resource for essays and other writing assignments! Used in conjunction with a good writing program, *Teaching the Classics* produces **deep thinkers** at any age.

The questions used in this guide have been taken directly from the Socratic list, and will therefore be familiar to the seminar alumnus.

More information about *Teaching the Classics* may be found at www.centerforlit.com/teaching-the-classics.

Happy reading!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Adam Andrews", with a long, sweeping underline.

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QUICK CARD



Reference	<i>I Have an Olive Tree</i> . Eve Bunting. (1999) ISBN: 978-0060275730
Plot	For her seventh birthday, Sophia's grandfather gives her an unusual gift: an olive tree, growing on the Greek island where her mother was born. When Grandfather dies a year later, he asks Sophia to take her Grandmother's beads back to Greece and to hang them in her special tree. As Sophia and her mother make their journey through Greece, Sophia learns about her heritage.
Setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sophia's childhood, ages 7 and 8.• California and Greece
Characters	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sophia, a young girl (protagonist)• Sophia's Grandfather, who immigrated from Greece to California• Sophia's Mama, also born in Greece• Sophia's Papa, also born in Greece• Georgios, Sophia's brother
Conflict	Man vs. Self, Man vs. Society: Sophia does not understand the importance of her heritage.
Theme	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Identity and heritage• The importance of places• Home• Generational family relationships• Memory
Literary Devices	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Symbolism• Imagery• Simile• Sensory Language

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: SETTING



The following questions are drawn from the “Setting” section of the Socratic List, found in Appendix A, pages 80-81 of the Teaching the Classics syllabus.

Does the story happen in one spot, or does the action unfold across a wide area? (1c)

The story begins at Sophia’s home in California, where she is surrounded by her family. Elements of culture and local color emerge when Sophia and her mother take a trip to Greece. They travel from California to Athens, to the Greek island where Sophia’s mother grew up. This journey enlarges Sophia’s understanding and appreciation of her grandfather’s gift of an olive tree.

What is the mood or atmosphere of the place where the story happens? Is it cheerful and sunny, or dark and bleak? What words, phrases, or descriptions does the author use to create this atmosphere? (1d)

Arriving in Greece, the first thing that confronts Sophia is how foreign Greece seems. She feels like an outsider, noting “Everything looked different. It was strange to think we had come so far from home” (8) and later that “it didn’t seem real” (14). The island itself is a place of mystery, described at first as “a misty hump sticking out of the water” (17). However, as Sophia and her mother travel across the island, it comes alive with color. Sophia notices “houses, whitewashed, sleeping in the sun”, as well as “rock roses climb[ing] the hedges” (21). Even the “blue light” of the sky feels different than the light at home in California. (21) Once they arrive at her family’s old home and hang Grandmother’s beads in Sophia’s olive tree, Sophia and her mother notice how Grandmother’s beads are “like liquid gold” and “like big bubbles of honey” (27). Such description casts the island in an atmosphere of bright, sunlit beauty. Young Sophia is struck by the radiance of her surroundings, while her mother is captivated by memories of her childhood there.

It is also worth noting the effect that artist Karen Barbour’s illustrations have on the reader’s perception of Sophia’s trip to Greece. While the pictures of Sophia’s home in California are lovely, the images of her travels are especially remarkable. Barbour illustrates many examples of Greek clothing, architecture, and culture, immersing the reader in Sophia’s journey. Discuss the effects of illustrations on readers’ imaginations. How do the pictures augment the narrative and contribute to the story’s atmosphere?

How long a period of time does the story cover? (2b)

The story takes place within a year. The first episode, in which Sophia receives Grandfather’s gift, takes place on Sophia’s seventh birthday. A year later, Grandfather is on his deathbed and asks Sophia to place Grandmother’s beads in her birthday olive tree. Sophia’s visit with her mother to the small island happens over the course of one day.

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CHARACTERS



The following questions are drawn from the “Characters” section of the Socratic List, found in Appendix A, pages 82-83 of the Teaching the Classics syllabus.

Who is the story about? (3)

Sophia (protagonist) – A young girl whose family has immigrated to California from Greece. She is seven years old when the story begins. On a trip back to the island where her mother was born, she begins to understand her heritage.

Sophia’s Grandfather – An elderly Greek immigrant, who dies a year after Sophia’s seventh birthday. He cares deeply for his family’s Greek heritage and wants his family to value it too.

Sophia’s Mama – Having immigrated to California during a period of national unrest, Mama’s return to Greece impacts her deeply.

Georgios – Sophia’s younger brother. He shares Sophia’s confusion about why their Grandfather has given Sophia an olive tree.

Sophia’s Grandmother – Although Sophia’s Grandmother has died before the story begins, she remains deeply important to Sophia’s Grandfather. Sophia is given the task of returning her beads to the olive tree in the family’s homeland.

Sophia’s Papa – Who is a presence in the story, though not an active participant in the journey

Of what nationality is the character? Does he live in his native land or somewhere else? (3g)

Sophia and her family hail from a small Greek island near Athens. Expatriates, they make their present home in California. Grandpa, however, still cherishes his homeland, and he wants his young granddaughter to know her roots as well. Giving Sophia the olive tree and charging her with the task of returning Grandmother’s beads to the island ensures that his daughter too will be forced to return and to remember her island roots.

Make up a list of adjectives that describe the characters. What words or actions on the characters’ part make you choose the adjectives you do? (3f)

Sophia: Sophia is curious, observant, and sensitive. She recalls, “I was all puddled up and sniffly” (6) when Grandfather was dying. She weeps again when she finally reaches her olive tree on the family’s native island. She cares deeply for her family, thinking of both her brother and Grandfather as she travels through Greece.

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CONFLICT AND PLOT



The following questions are drawn from the “Conflict” and “Plot” sections of the Socratic List, found in Appendix A, pages 84-86 of the Teaching the Classics syllabus.

Is the conflict an external one, having to do with circumstances in the protagonist’s physical world, or is it an internal conflict, taking place in his mind and emotions? (5e)

Sophia’s primary conflict is internal. (Man vs. Self) She struggles to understand the significance of her Grandfather’s gift of an olive tree in Greece. (Man vs. Society) What good is an olive tree in Greece when she lives in California? Sophia cannot understand her Grandfather’s interest in a place so far removed from her own experience. It would take a physical visit to Greece to resolve her childish bewilderment.

Sophia is viscerally impacted by her trip to Greece. From the foreign sounds of the Greek shop names on her mother’s tongue (8), to the feel of the sheep she pets on the ferry (12), to the “dry and rough and knotted” feeling of the olive tree’s trunk beneath her fingers (25), the Greek culture seeps into Sophia’s heart through her eyes, her ears, and her fingers. The reality of her family’s experience and history in Greece comes home to the child through her personal experience with the place and its people. These have palpable effect on Sophia, moving her to tears. Sophia’s journey to the island and her sensory experience there in its textured atmosphere provoke a new appreciation for her family’s history and heritage. Like the olive tree, rooted in the fertile Greek soil so dear to her grandfather, Sophia’s rich heritage takes root in her heart. In a very real way, she becomes a living and growing shoot upon that olive tree.

What happens in the story? (8)

On her seventh birthday, Sophia’s grandfather gives her an olive tree—not a plant in a pot she could hold or replant, but an olive tree thousands of miles away on the Greek island he once called home. Grandfather explains the symbolic nature of his olive tree gift, still rooted in the yard of the home that he and her grandmother and mother had left in Greece when they immigrated to the United States before Sophia’s birth. Although Sophia had secretly wished for a skateboard for her birthday, she receives the strange gift of the tree from the grandfather she loves. But she doesn’t really want the tree, and she doesn’t know what to do with it.

One year later, Grandfather dies. On his deathbed, he gives Sophia a string of Grandmother’s beads (perhaps a rosary?) and asks her to hang them in her olive tree. Mama tells Sophia that Grandfather has been saving money so that, together, they could make the long and expensive trip to Greece.

As Mama and Sophia travel from Athens to the island where Mama was born and where Sophia’s olive tree grows, Sophia watches her mother remember Greece. It takes a plane, a cab, and a ferry to reach the island, and Sophia absorbs the foreign land with curiosity. Walking through the streets

QUESTIONS ABOUT STYLE: LITERARY DEVICES



The following questions are drawn from the “Literary Devices” section of the Socratic List, found in Appendix A, pages 88-90 of the Teaching the Classics syllabus.

Does the author use common words and phrases in uncommon ways? (15)

Understatement: On the last page of the story, Sophia remarks to her mother, “I have an olive tree” (30). This quiet statement suggests the profound reality that Sophia has taken ownership not only of the physical tree, but also of the heritage this tree represents.

Does the author use descriptions and comparisons to create pictures in the reader’s mind? (16)

Imagery: This story (aided strongly by Karen Barbour’s lovely illustrations) is jam-packed with sensual, descriptive imagery, which aids the reader to experience some of the vibrance of Greece. For example:

- Bunting offers descriptions of the native clothing of the Greek islanders: “[H]e had on a long black robe and his hair was pinned up in a bun under his hat” (15).
- She describes the island as “a misty hump sticking out of the water” (17).
- Bunting personifies the houses on the island, describing them as “whitewashed, sleeping in the sun” (21).
- The author’s descriptions are characterized by active language and a use of strong verbs: “Rock roses climbed the hedges” (21) and grandmother’s beads “glitter in the sunlight” (29).
- Bunting notes the singular character of the island’s “blue light” (21).
- The author employs sensory language to liken the symbolic olive tree to Sophia’s ancient grandfather: “dry and rough and knotted” (25).
- She appeals to the senses of sound and taste by noting the names of the Greek shops Mama reads aloud, “as if she liked the sound of them in her mouth” (8).
- She appeals to the sense of taste by describing the beads, hanging from the olive tree “like big bubbles of honey” (27).

Simile: The story uses comparisons of “like” or “as” to communicate Sophia’s experience of Greece.

- She describes a vendor in the Greek marketplace, with “sponges stacked around him like great lumps of honeycomb” (13).
- “It was as if she was ready to fly” (17).
- Mother notes that Grandmother’s beads, hanging in the tree, “are like liquid gold...look how the sun traps itself in them” (27).
- The beads are “like big bubbles of honey” (27).

ESSAY QUESTIONS FOR WRITING ASSIGNMENTS



Hints for effective writing assignments can be found on pages 73-74 of the Teaching the Classics syllabus and Chapter 6 of Reading Roadmaps.

1. What is the significance of inter-generational relationships within the story?
2. How does the olive tree function as a symbol within the story? What does the tree represent, and how does this symbol speak to the story's theme of heritage?
3. How does Grandfather's gift of an olive tree connect Sophia to her family's past and make her a part of that heritage?
4. How do the story's literary devices serve the story's larger message?

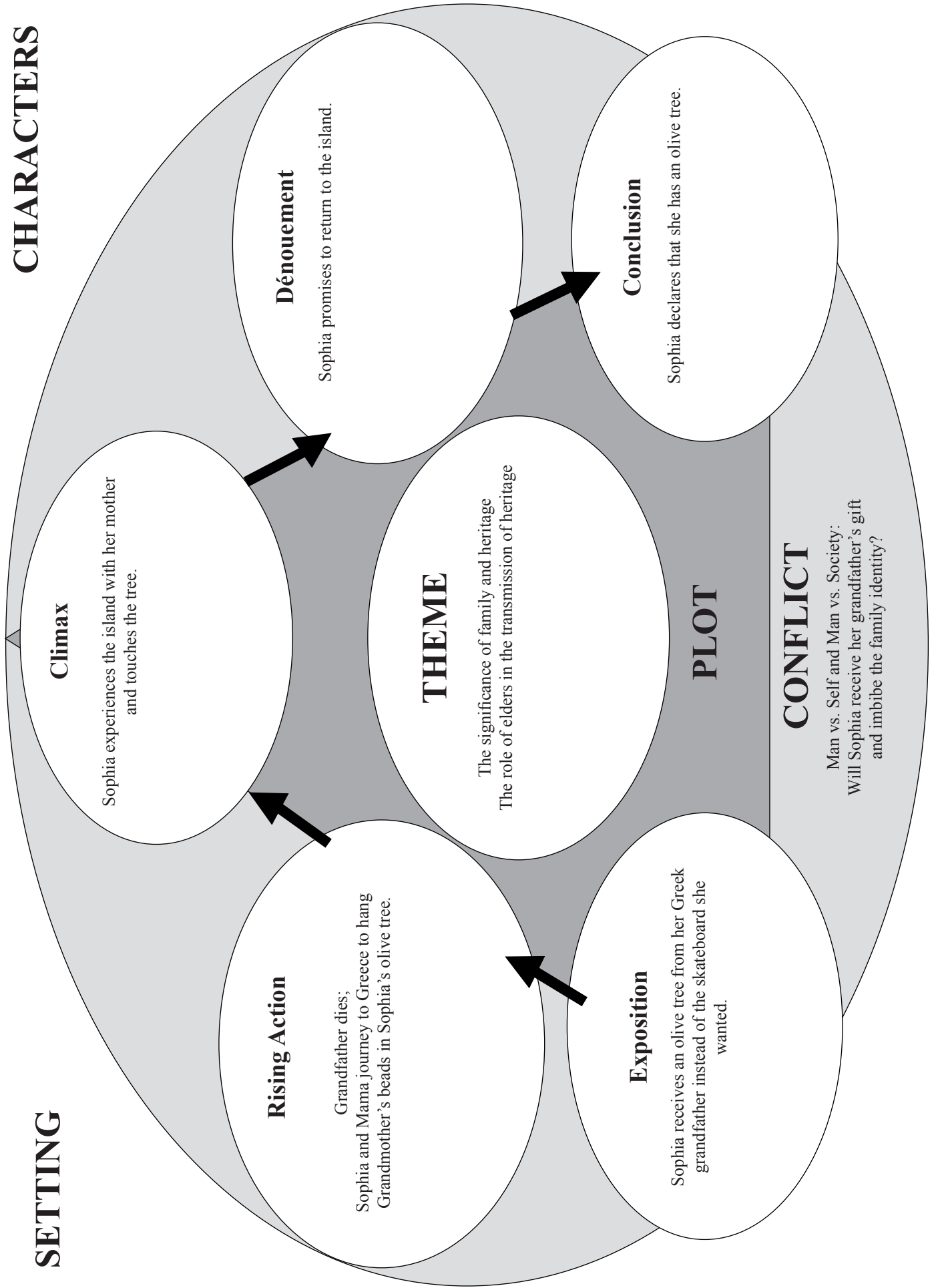
STORY CHARTS



The following pages contain story charts of the type presented in the live seminar *Teaching the Classics*. As is made clear in that seminar, a separate story chart may be constructed for each of the conflicts present in a work of fiction. In particular, the reader's decision as to the *climax* and central *themes* of the plot structure will depend upon his understanding of the story's central conflict. As a result, though the details of setting, characters, exposition, and conclusion may be identical from analysis to analysis, significant variation may be found in those components which appear down the center of the story chart: Conflict, Climax, and Theme. This of course results from the fact that literary interpretation is the work of active minds, and differences of opinion are to be expected—even encouraged!

For the teacher's information, one story chart has been filled in on the next page. In addition, a blank chart is included to allow the teacher to examine different conflicts in the same format.

Story Chart: *I Have an Olive Tree*



Story Chart: *I Have an Olive Tree*

SETTING

CHARACTERS

