



Mem Fox's
Harriet, You'll Drive Me Wild!

Questions for Socratic Discussion
by Missy Andrews



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HARRIET, YOU'LL DRIVE ME WILD!



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QUICK CARD



<i>Reference</i>	<i>Harriet, You'll Drive Me Wild!</i> by Mem Fox ISBN-10: 0152045988 ISBN-13: 978-0152045982
<i>Plot</i>	When Harriet's antics cause her frazzled mother to lose her temper in spite of her attempts at self-control, the two learn to forgive one another.
<i>Setting</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Harriet's pre-school years• A family home• An average day
<i>Characters</i>	Harriet, a young girl Harriet's mother (protagonist)
<i>Conflict</i>	Man vs. Man: Harriet's childish mistakes make life difficult for her mother. Man vs. Self: Harriet's mother struggles to keep her temper.
<i>Theme</i>	Harriet and her mother build relationship through repentance and forgiveness. Universal Issues Include: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Self-Control• Patience• Motherly love• Childishness
<i>Literary Devices</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Repetition• Rhyme• Alliteration

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: SETTING



What is the mood or atmosphere of the place where the story happens? Is it cheerful and sunny, or dark and bleak? (1d)

The story takes place in a home. The mood of the story is warm and lighthearted.

Among what kinds of people is the story set? (1h)

The characters are ordinary people – a mother and her little girl. They seem a typical, middle class family.

On what day does the story happen? What time of day? (2a)

The story transpires over the course of a single day.

In what time of life for the main characters do the events occur? Are they children? Are they just passing into adulthood? Are they already grownups? (2e)

The story transpires over the course of a single day. It happens in Harriet's childhood and the mother's early parenting years. Harriet has the energy of an average 2-4-year-old. She is into everything, a very busy child.

NOTES:

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CHARACTERS



Who is the story about? (3)

The main character is Harriet's mother. She is harried because her young daughter is so very busy. She, like many mothers, wants to gently correct her daughter, who exasperates her with foolish behavior at every turn.

Is the character kind, gentle, stern, emotional, harsh, logical, rational, compassionate or exacting...? Make up a list of adjectives that describe the protagonist. (3f)

The mother is patient, understanding, calm, gentle, exhausted, exasperated, sinful, angry, sorry, repentant, and good-natured at various points in the story's development.

What does the character do for a living? Is he a professional, or a blue-collar worker? (3h)

Although this detail is not explicitly mentioned, the context of the story leads readers to believe the mother is a stay-at-home mom.

What do other characters think or say about the protagonist? (3k)

The narrator repeatedly says that Harriet's mother "didn't like to yell." Instead she would sigh when Harriet's behavior caused mayhem and say, "Harriet, you foolish child, Harriet, you'll drive me wild."

What does the protagonist think is the most important thing in life? How do you know this? Does the protagonist say this out loud, or do his thoughts and actions give him away? (3m)

Clearly, the mother thinks it important to raise her child with forbearance and patience. Both her words and actions communicate this. She thinks loving Harriet is most important. However, her second motivation is accomplishing the work of housekeeping, and it is the war between these two desires that creates the majority of the story's conflict.

Do the protagonist's priorities change over the course of the story? In what way? What causes this change? Is it a change for the better, or for the worse? (3n)

Although the mother's priorities never change, her ability to achieve them is challenged as the story progresses. "And then Harriet's mother began to yell..." Certainly this loss of self-control is no merit, except that it gives the mother the chance to repent to her child and communicate love to her in the process. The disaster, in this way, becomes a means to closer relationship with her child.

Is the protagonist a type or archetype? Is he an “Everyman” with whom the reader is meant to identify? Are his struggles symbolic of human life generally in some way? (3p)

Harriet's mother is, indeed, an archetypical mother, beset with the familiar struggles and challenges all moms face and motivated by the same maternal love and compassion. Most mothers would identify with her.

Is the protagonist a sympathetic character? Do you identify with him and hope he will succeed? Do you pity him? Do you scorn or despise his weakness in some way? Why? (3q)

Since she is easy to understand, she is a sympathetic character. What mother doesn't sigh to find her child has created a new mess for her to clean up? What mother doesn't at some point lose her cool when her child's foolish behavior interrupts her adult priorities one time too many? All she wants to do is get one thing done and keep it so! Poor mommy!

Who else is the story about? (4)

Harriet, the child, is curious and careless. She is not overtly rebellious, just active and heedless. She hasn't yet learned to foresee disaster and avoid it. In short, she is a child! Yet she is an antagonist by definition because she throws up obstacles that keep the mother from her goals.

In what way is he antagonistic? What goal of the protagonist is he opposed to? (4b)

It's not so much that Harriet is even aware of the obstacles she poses. The trials she creates for her mother are not intentional. She is a toddler and a mess-maker. When she sees the trouble she has caused, she is truly sorry.

Does the author believe this character to be responsible for his own sinfulness, or does he believe him a product of a “negative environment”? (4l) Is the antagonist truly evil, by definition, or is he merely antagonistic to the protagonist by virtue of his vocation or duty? (4m)

The child is not condemned for her foolishness. She is not evil. She is merely immature, lacking the foresight necessary to avoid the accidents she causes.

What are the antagonist's surroundings? Are they related to his character? Did the author put him there on purpose? (4n)

A mess follows Harriet wherever she goes. (Dripping paint, spilled food, flying feathers from ripped pillows.)

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CONFLICT AND PLOT



What does the mother want? (5)

Mom wants several things, including:

- A moment's peace
- To accomplish something
- Harriet to stop acting foolishly
- Patience and self-control.

Does he attempt to overcome something – a physical impediment, or an emotional handicap? (5b)

To accomplish these things, she must gently admonish Harriet for her behavior and patiently teach her to think ahead. She must exercise self-denial and self-control, placing the needs of her daughter ahead of her own needs.

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)

The conflict is both external and internal. Externally, she must continually clean up messy Harriet's mistakes, admonishing her to think ahead. Internally, she must remain unimpassioned and patient.

Why can't the protagonist have what she wants? (6)

The main obstacle mother faces is her own limitations: her temper. She does not have endless patience. Her outburst, however justified, is as wrong as the actions of young Harriet which provoke it.

What kind of conflict is represented in the story? (6g-k)

This is a man vs. man and a man vs. self conflict since she struggles both with Harriet and with her own temper.

What happens in the story? (8) What major events take place in the story as a result of the conflict? (8a)

Harriet is a messy child. She spills her milk and food when she accidentally pulls the tablecloth off the table at dinner. She damages the rug when she brings her still-wet painting through the house to show her mother, dripping paint along the way. Finally, Harriet's mother loses her patience when, during naptime, Harriet's tussle with her dog results in a ripped pillow and a room full of feathers. Despite her efforts at self-control, Harriet's mother gets angry and yells at her daughter.

How is the main problem solved? (9) Does the protagonist get what he's after? (9a)

The story's climax occurs when a "terrible silence" is followed by the mother's yell. Once her anger is spent, she sees her own foolishness and apologizes to her daughter. When all is forgiven, the two clean up the "big mess," laughing together.

Is the situation pleasantly resolved, or is it resolved in a terrible way? (9c)

The mother's outburst is a terrible event, one that she'd worked hard to avoid.

What events form the highest point or climax of the story's tension? Are they circumstantial events, or emotional ones? Is the climax a spiritual or physical one? (9d)

This is a tense, emotional climax. The mother's nerves are stretched too thin. Her human sinfulness gets in the way of her better self.

After the climax of the story, did you wonder how it would end? How does it end? How are the "loose ends" tied up? Were all of your questions answered? (10a)

The story resolves pleasantly since the mother's love for Harriet leads her to take responsibility for her outburst and repent. Harriet and her mother, both prone to mistakes, find fellowship in their inadvertent failures and foolishness. As a result, their relationship is strengthened.

Do you believe the characters' responses to the cataclysmic events, or are they anti-climactic in some regard? (10c)

Because of this, it's perhaps better that the outburst occurred than if it had not. Now, Harriet and her mother understand one another in a better way, and know one another's love in forgiveness.

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: THEME



What does the protagonist learn? (11)

The protagonist learns that she herself needs grace, forgiveness, and patience for her shortfalls as much as does her little Harriet.

Are other people in the story ennobled, changed, saved, improved or otherwise affected by the story's events? (12a)

The two characters laugh at themselves together at the story's end. The tension is diffused in self-awareness and covered by love.

Do they re-examine their values and ideas? (12e)

The mother doesn't so much reevaluate her values, but affirms them in the end by her response to her own failure. She is committed to loving Harriet in spite of herself.

What is the main idea of the story? (13)

This story deals with the universal problem of sin. While Harriet's mother wants to control her temper and deal gently with her daughter, her own impatience and frustration make this a difficult matter.

Does the story offer an answer to a particular problem associated with one of those themes? (13b)

The story seems to offer repentance, reconciliation, and forgiveness as solutions to the problem of sin.

What answer does the story seem to suggest for the question, "What is a good life?" (13d)

The story seems to suggest that a good life is a life of self-control, patience, repentance, and forgiveness, all of which contribute to relationships and peace.

NOTES:

QUESTIONS ABOUT STYLE



Does the author use the sounds of our language to create interest in her story? (14)

- **Rhyme**

“Harriet, you foolish child, Harriet, you’ll drive me wild.”

“...what are we to do?...I’m talking to you.”

“...instead she said...”

- **Repetition**

“just like that...”

“...and she was.”

- **Alliteration**

“feathers flew”

“Harriet Harris”

“...she dribbled jam on her jeans...”

“...Harriet was painting a picture; she dripped paint onto the carpet...”

NOTES:

QUESTIONS ABOUT CONTEXT



Who is the author? (18)

Australian-born Mem Fox has written 25 noted children’s books. Among these are the heartwarming *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge* and the swashbuckling *Tough Boris*. In addition to children’s literature, Ms. Fox has authored *Reading Magic*, a book aimed at parents of pre-school children, and *Radical Reflections: Passionate Opinions on Teaching, Learning and Living*, a teacher’s text. In addition to her zeal for teaching, she is actively involved in a literacy campaign, writing what she terms the “literature of liberation...from the tyranny of the attitudes and expectations that the world thrusts upon each of us.”

As a child, Ms. Fox lived in Zimbabwe where her parents worked as missionaries for Hope Fountain. As a young adult she attended drama school in England, where she met her future husband. She married Malcolm Fox in 1969, and has one daughter, Chloe, now a journalist and high school teacher. She served as Assistant Professor at Flinders University in Adelaide, Australia, for 24 years, a position from which she has since retired. Currently, she maintains a full schedule writing and traveling abroad both to promote her books and to champion literacy.

NOTES:

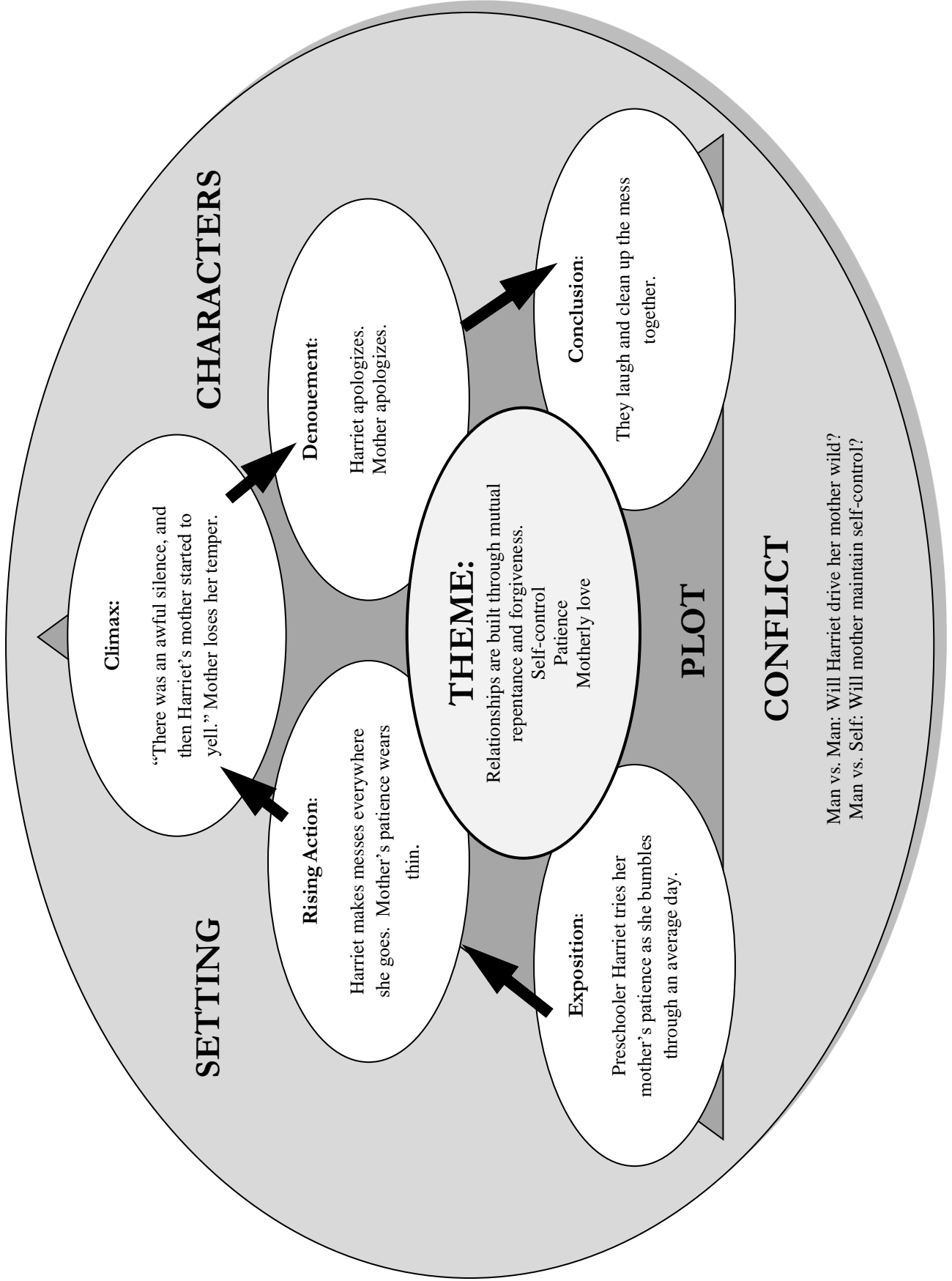
STORY CHARTS



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.

Harriet, You'll Drive Me Wild! by Mem Fox: Story Chart



Harriet, You'll Drive Me Wild! by Mem Fox: Blank Story Chart

