



Virginia Sorensen's
Miracles on Maple Hill

Questions for Socratic Discussion
by Missy Andrews



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MIRACLES ON MAPLE HILL



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QUICK CARD



<i>Reference</i>	<i>Miracles on Maple Hill</i> by Virginia Sorensen ISBN-10: 0152545611 ISBN-13: 978-0152047184
<i>Plot</i>	When Marly's father, a POW, returns from the Korean War troubled and disturbed, her family moves to mother's ancestral home in Maple Hill, Pennsylvania, hoping for a miracle of restoration.
<i>Setting</i>	Maple Hill, PA, a rural community. Marly's family. Marly's childhood
<i>Characters</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Marly, the 10 year-old protagonist• Joe, Marly's 12 year-old brother• Marly's mother and father• Mr. and Mrs. Chris• Annie-Get-Your-Gun, the rural truant officer• The Hermit
<i>Conflict</i>	Man vs. Nature Man vs. Society
<i>Theme</i>	The reality of miracles. Renewal and regeneration. The healing effects of nature. The value of community.
<i>Literary Devices</i>	Imagery Metaphor/ Motif Foreshadowing

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: SETTING



Where does this story happen? (1)

This story takes place in rural Maple Hill, Pennsylvania. Far from the city, the area is forested with maple trees and rich in scenery. The place, as the title of the story suggests, is weighty too with miracles. This lends a bright, inviting atmosphere to the story.

The story takes place over the course of a year. The protagonist's family arrives in Maple Hill in winter. During their stay they enjoy tapping maple trees, the arrival of spring, summer in all its splendor, and the pleasant repetition of seasons. These orderly and anticipated events create a sense of calm expectancy and hope. There is security in the familiarity of Nature and her seasons. There is healing in humble work with abiding things, like the family garden. There is joy in making life spring out of soil and coaxing plants to yield their fruits. The peaceful regularity of these activities contributes to healing the main character's father, and consequently her family.

The story hinges on the changing of the seasons. Their cyclical nature lends stability and security to a world of instability and fears. The constancy of nature proves a balm to the weary, harassed, and victimized.

When does this story happen? (2)

The story occurs in the childhood of Marly, the main character. This is significant because of the hope that is often characteristic of children. Grown-ups doubt; children believe. Although Marly isn't sure Maple Hill will heal her father, she hopes it will, believing in her mom's magical stories of her own childhood there. Maple Hill is where all the miracles occur. The miracles Marly witnesses – the coming of spring, the arrival of the flowers on the barren ground and the birth of young animals in the woods – encourage her belief.

The story happens in the midst of a family crisis for Marly. Marly's father has been robbed of hope by his experience in a POW camp. It takes a full year of nature's common miracles to restore his basic hope in life. Yet, just like the earth after its long winter rest, in due time life springs up once more in him. The fact that the story happens in Marly's childhood also increases the conflict of the story. Not only does her father depend on the miracles, but Marly does too, since her whole world is characterized by his moods and behavior. She and her family depend upon him.

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CHARACTERS



Who is the story about? (3)

The story is about Marly. At 10 years-old, she considers the prospect of real miracles in an everyday world enchanting. All the stories she has heard of her mother's visits with grandmother at Maple Hill Farm have charged her imagination, and she can't wait to go there herself.

Is the protagonist kind, gentle, stern, emotional, harsh, logical, rational, and compassionate or exacting...? Make up a list of adjectives that describe the protagonist. What words or actions on the character's part make you choose the adjectives you do? (3f)

Marly is:

inquisitive

frightened

gentle

childish

caring

compassionate

joyful

sincere

hopeful

unaffected

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

To Marly, the most important thing in life is her father's health. She wants him to be healed so that he can take his place in the family again. She fears a continuation of the pall that has hung over the house since he returned from the POW camp. She, like her mother, hopes Maple Hill and its miracles will restore him.

Do the character'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)

Over the course of the story, the family's hopes are altered as they come to love their longtime neighbors, Mr. Chris and his wife. When Mr. Chris suffers a heart attack, their gaze turns away from their own needs toward his. Strengthened by their admiration and care for this man, they give themselves to supplying his need and find themselves healed in the process. It is not only the land, but also the community of the country that bring healing to Marly's family.

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

Marly is a sympathetic character. Children feel the importance of a father's presence -- perhaps more keenly than the rest of us. Marly's family's quest to restore her father evokes empathy and draws the reader into the story.

Who else is the story about?(4)

Other characters in the story include:

The Hermit

Marly's Mother and Father

Marly's 12 year-old brother Joe

Mr. and Mrs. Chris, neighbors who knew Marly's grandmother and mother

The schoolchildren of rural Maple Hill

Does the story have an antagonist? (4b)

The story has antagonists, but the other characters in this story do not play this role. Instead, Death and Society are the antagonists in this story.

Death, or rather the threat of death, plays its part as characters struggle with health issues. Marly's father's health is threatened because of emotional instability, the effects of his time as a POW. He has seen too much of death. Mr. Chris's health concerns stem from heart problems and overwork. Interestingly enough, both men's issues are solved through community.

Obviously, Death's antagonism isn't personal even though it affects the characters personally. All men are subject to health issues. The issue of mortality makes the story more engaging and the conflict universal. This makes the characters sympathetic; they, like the readers, are engaged in a Man vs. Nature struggle. It is an interesting irony that nature is not only an antagonist, but also a source of hope and healing for each character.

Society is, perhaps, the only antagonist with a face in this story. And yet, the face belongs to no one man. It is impersonal, careless inhumanity that taints the society of the city with vulgarity. This stands in contrast to the society the family finds on Maple Hill: warm, personal, and caring like Mr. Chris.

NOTES:

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CONFLICT AND PLOT



What does the protagonist want? (5a)

More than anything else, the main character wants her father to be himself again. She wants her family to be what it was before the war intruded.

"It had to be the right place. All outdoors. With miracles. Not crowded and people being cross and mean. Daddy not tired all the time anymore. Mother not worried. But it looked little and old to be all that. She was afraid, now that she was actually here, that it wasn't. She wished that they were still on the way. Sometimes even Christmas wasn't as much fun as getting ready for it. Maybe thinking about Maple Hill would turn out to be better than Maple Hill itself. She whispered, 'Please, let there be miracles.'" (p. 23)

Marly wants a miracle, the miracle of resurrection from the dead. She wants new life to spring out of her father's dormant and afflicted heart.

Why can't she have it? (6)

Life can't be forced nor growth rushed. The nature of miracles is that they come from outside ourselves. We have no control over them. In order to have her wish, Marly must hope and wait. She must be herself, bubbling with life, enthusiasm, love, and concern. Really what Marly strives to obtain is contentment for herself and her family. Her mother was so content at Maple Hill that Marly is sure they will be too.

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)

Most of the conflict of the story occurs in Marly's heart and mind, making it an inner conflict.

Is the conflict a man versus nature struggle? (6h)

This conflict is primarily a man versus nature struggle in the sense that all the characters fight against death or mortality. It can also be considered a man versus society struggle in the sense that Marly and her family leave the city to escape society's meaner elements. It is the heartless and impersonal aspects of the city that have wounded Marly's father, used him up, and left him desolate. At the same time, human society – true community – is exactly what he needs.

What other problems are there in the story? (7)

Circumstantial conflicts abound in this story. There is the problem of Mr. Chris's health, for example. There is the problem of attending a new school. There's the difficulty of leaving the familiar and embracing a new environment. There is the problem of impending sugaring time without workers, which threatens Mr. Chris's livelihood. There is even the problem of Marly feeling marginalized and left behind by Joe as he strives to become a man and leaves her at home with mother.

The solution to each of these problems lies in the fellowship and help of community members. Mr. Chris and his family are aided by friends and even the community at large when his heart attack lands him in the hospital. Family friends nurse him to health and bring in the harvest from the maples in his absence. Even the schoolchildren help with the permission of their teacher and school administrator. In the end, Mr. Chris's trouble represents an educational opportunity, not only for the children but also for the community members. It's a reminder that they need each other, a reminder that contentment and satisfaction are found in relationships.

Marly, too, finds comfort in the company of her mother and Mr. Chris. Her brother absent, she enjoys the world around her through the eyes of her grown up companions. With their experience to guide her, she soon acquires knowledge that even Joe finds attractive. In addition, time and conversation prove that Joe hasn't really discarded her; he has merely ventured out to find himself. He comes back to his sister with even more of himself to offer, just as her time away from him enlarges her. In this way, their relationship is enhanced rather than diminished, and each learns better to appreciate the other.

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

Because of Marly's father's health, the family heads for their Maple Hill homestead. Since he improves, the family decides to make the farm their permanent home. As the family becomes more intimate with the Chris family, father's heart is healed. Meanwhile, Mr. Chris's heart worsens. The tension surrounding Mr. Chris's illness is heightened due to the fact that it occurs during sugaring time. The changing weather makes it imperative that the trees be tapped. Consequently, Mr. Chris's livelihood is threatened by the real possibility that not enough laborers will be available to bring in the annual sap and make the syrup. Father, Mother, Joe, and Marly are moved to help him. Mr. Chris's need calls father back to life, in a sense. Father is energized to help where he himself has been helped. This crisis pulls the family and the community together.

How is the main problem solved? (9)

The solution to each of the problems involves nature and community in some way. Nature, though ultimately responsible for the conflict, provides a comforting stability due to its regularity. Season follows season in an ongoing dramatization of life, death, and renewal. This demonstration provides constancy and produces security and hope in the

hearts of the family members. Community provides relationship, care, love, and help for the characters. Each of the circumstantial conflicts is resolved through relationships within the community. The needs of the community members and the conflicts each of them experience only serve to knit them together and drive them to the very things they seek: love, peace, and companionship. Even Joe's heartache over moving away from the city is mended through community (his friendship with the old hermit) and nature (the hermit's gift of two goats).

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)

Two possibilities exist for the climax. In one sense, the story reaches a climax when the family decides to stay year-round at Maple Hill. Father has gotten better and the family is content to remain. Even Joe, who has compelling reasons to return to the city, votes to stay. The family has become a part of the community.

Another possibility exists near the story's end when Mr. Chris, after over-exerting himself during sugaring, has a heart attack and is hospitalized. This really pulls the community together. Together, they bring in the harvest and make the delicious maple syrup for which Mr. Chris is known. This enables Marly's family to give back to the Chris family. The knowledge that they can significantly contribute to the life of their community fills them with encouragement and self-confidence. Mr. Chris is sure this growing sense of community is a result of Marly's family coming to stay; she and her family have become one of the miracles on Maple Hill.

NOTES:

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: THEME



What does the protagonist learn? Is the protagonist changed in her mind or heart by the events of the story? (11a)

Marly is shored up in her belief in miracles. They truly abound on Maple Hill, just as her mother and Mr. Chris said they would.

Is the protagonist sacrificed in some way? (11d)

Marly and her family are sacrificed in a sense as they spend themselves to take care of Mr. Chris.

Does the author draw upon any motifs or symbols to deepen her explanation of these events? (11f)

The motif of miracles runs throughout the story, from the simple emergence of buds, flowers, and maple syrup – the miracle of the earth’s renewal – to the ties of fellowship and community, which foster the renewal of heart and body.

Mr. Chris's comments suggest that Marly and her family have become a part of Maple Hill, one of its miracles.

What do the other characters learn? (12)

All the residents of Maple Hill are changed as a result of Mr. Chris’s difficulties. They learn to see themselves not as independent city dwellers, each man for himself, but as neighbors, loving each other practically through gifts of help and service. Their circumstances prove to them that they need one another, and they find that they enjoy the ensuing relationships. By the story’s end, even Joe values what he has gained at Maple Hill more than those things he has left behind in the city.

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

The story deals with universal themes of mortality, regeneration, and fellowship. As Marly’s father confronts despair and death, he finds comfort in the common miracles of nature and in the relationships he develops with his family and neighbors.

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

The story suggests that a good life is twofold. It is a life spent close to nature, observing the miracles of each new season. In addition, a good life is a life lived in community with others. Each individual grows stronger as his life intertwines with the lives of his neighbors.

What aspect of the human condition is brought to life and wondered at in this story? (13e)

The author wonders at man’s frailty and his strength. The irony of the fact that the resolution of conflict comes from nature, the very source of the conflict in the first place, is pronounced. Also ironic is the fact that society is simultaneously the source of father's disease and its remedy.

NOTES:

QUESTIONS ABOUT STYLE



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

The story is replete with similes and metaphors, employed to create images in the reader’s mind. For example, buckets hang around maple trees during the sugaring season “like charm bracelets” (p. 19). The little brown house that is the sugar camp is “like the old witch’s house in Hansel and Gretel” (p. 20). Crusted snow shines “like Christmas cotton,” (p. 21) and trees on the hillside are “huge and bare, like skeletons” (p. 22).

Some of the story’s images serve to underscore its larger themes. Such an example occurs when Mr. Chris comments on the natural threat of mortality. “If all us old folks stayed around,” he says, “we’d soon fill the world up, like mice” (p. 50). Mr. Chris is referring to the creatures Marly found in her dresser drawer and mourned when father exterminated them. His comments suggest that he considers death necessary and useful.

Are any metaphors extended throughout the whole story, so that they sound like themes? (16l)

The motif of miracles underscores the thematic content of the story. Miracles of life and renewal abound in the landscape of Maple Hill. This becomes a metaphor for restoration in human lives. When Mr. Chris suggests that Marly and her family are one of Maple Hill’s miracles, he recognizes that they have been renewed, like the earth in spring. They participate with the rest of nature in the miracles of life and renewal.

Foreshadowing: Does the author provide any clues early in the story of things to come in the plot? (17a)

When Mr. Chris and Marly discover a blood root, Marly worries that contact with it will stop Mr. Chris’s heart (p. 59). This foreshadows the incident of the heart attack later in the story. Foreshadowing occurs again when the author casts a shadow over the joy of early sugaring with the words, “on such a day, it is hard to believe how quickly every feeling, every goodness, can change and go away. None of them knew how quickly as they sat around that night...” (p. 148).

NOTES:

QUESTIONS ABOUT CONTEXT



Who is the author? (18)

Virginia Sorensen (1912–1991) was born in Provo, Utah. A Mormon, she often used her adult stories to explore issues related to Mormonism and spirituality. This interest is somewhat evident in the story's central themes of the strength and healing power of fellowship. Sorensen's views on religion are more prominent in her adult literature, where she deals with issues such as the problems associated with polygamy in Mormon culture.

Sorensen once asserted that “the real dilemma of the novelist in our time and place...[is] to balance the importance of the individual...with the importance of the great events that wash people into vast groups and crowds, into anonymous armies.”

Mrs. Sorensen was awarded two Guggenheim fellowships to research and write. In addition, she received the Newbery Award in 1957 for *Miracles on Maple Hill*.

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.

Miracles on Maple Hill by Virginia Sorensen: Story Chart

SETTING

CHARACTERS

Climax:

Father improves. The family decides to stay at Maple Hill; Mr. Chris suffers a heart attack at sugaring time. Father helps.

Rising Action:

Marly wonders whether Maple Hill can heal her wounded family, whether father will recover. They witness the cycles of nature.

Denouement:

Marly's family and the community bring in the syrup for Mr. Chris, saving the harvest.

THEME:

Miracles are all around us.
Death and resurrection; Renewal.
The healing effects of nature.
The importance of community.

Exposition:

Marly and family leave the city in search of renewal at Grandmother's old farm. They meet Mr. Chris and his wife, old family friends.

Conclusion:

Mr. Chris observes that Marly and her family are one of the miracles on Maple Hill. They have been healed by the very things that harmed them.

PLOT

CONFLICT

Man v. Nature – Will the characters overcome various types of death? Will they be renewed? Will they get the sugar harvest in on time?
Man v. Society – Will Marly's father overcome the effects of his war experience? Will Marly's family find peace in a community of neighbors?

Miracles on Maple Hill by Virginia Sorensen: Blank Story Chart

