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!

Adam Andrews, Director

New Gledres

The Center for Literary Education

3350 Beck Road

Rice, WA 99167

(509) 738-6837

adam@centerforlit.com

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	Sophia's childhood, ages 7 and 8.California and Greece				
Characters	 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	 Identity and heritage The importance of places Home Generational family relationships Memory 				
Literary Devices	 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.

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 grown up? How does setting the story in this particular time of the characters' lives affect the story? (2e)

The story occurs in Sophia's childhood. On her seventh birthday, she receives an olive tree, still rooted in the family's homeland of Greece, from her grandfather. Sophia, however, does not understand the gift she has been given. She would have preferred a skateboard like those of her friends in the family's new Southern California home in the United States.

After a year passes, grandfather's dying wish sends Sophia and her mother to the Greek island of her mother's youth. There Sophia finally sees her birthday olive tree in its native location. This encounter with her family's history brings Sophia (and her mother) to a new and more mature understanding of the significance of her heritage.

Sophia's acceptance of the olive tree gift marks a step into a new stage of her life. The gradual maturation accomplished by this symbolic gift stands in contrast to the confusion of Georgios, Sophia's younger brother. Georgios does not understand the gift of an olive tree, questioning how an olive tree can be a symbol of something (3) and blurting out that "Sophia really wanted a skateboard" (5). Grandfather and Mama have a greater understanding of the significance of this heritage. Grandfather explains the symbolic nature of the olive tree, and Mama gradually remembers her love for the island of her birth. The mother's and daughter's shared experience creates a unique bond, connecting them one to another and both to their Greek forebears.

NOTES:	

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 Frandmother 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' 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.

Grandfather: Grandfather is old, wise, and reflective. He prizes his family and his Greek heritage. Aware of the symbolic importance of objects, he gives Sophia the olive tree in the yard of his old home in Greece and charges her with the task of returning her Grandmother's beads to the island.

Mama: Sophia's mother is also deeply impacted by her trip to Greece. Mama remembers her childhood in her homeland, and as she visits the places of old, she translates this experience to Sophia. Like Grandfather, Mama prizes memory and family; she is devoted to her parents and remembers fondly Grandmother's skill for picking olives (and husbands!).

How old is the character? (3b)

At the beginning of the story, Sophia, the story's protagonist, celebrates her seventh birthday. She has never lived in her family's Greek island home; she knows only their new home in California. The expatriate family's distinctive culture is threatened by the very present culture of their new home. Sophia's Grandfather, who is very old, sees that his culture will die with him if he fails to impress the beauty of their heritage upon Sophia and to redeem it for her mother—his daughter. Thus, the characters in the story represent three generations within a family: youth, middle age, and old age.

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)

At the beginning of the story, Sophia's priorities are somewhat shallow. While she does not reject her Grandfather's strange gift of the olive tree, she does note that she "had wanted a skateboard, and ... didn't want an olive tree" (5). She asks, "What would I do with it?" (5). Yet Sophia matures through her journey to Greece. Her visit to her mother's native island home and the memories her mother shares of her childhood cause Sophia to appreciate Grandfather's olive tree gift in new ways. Through her journey, Sophia learns her family's history and gains a better understanding of her family and herself. By the story's conclusion, Sophia values her ownership of the olive tree and cherishes the places and its values as her Grandfather had hoped.

NOTES:	



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

of the island to the family's old home and the tree that grows in the yard, Sophia is overwhelmed by emotion. When she and her mother finally arrive at the old family home to hang the colorful glass beads in the branches of the olive tree, Sophia and her mother are struck by their beauty, sparkling in the sunshine of that place. Dazzled by the sight, Sophia finally understands the intention behind Grandfather's gift, which was far greater than the tree or the beads. Sophia suddenly knows that their journey to Greece to that birthday olive tree is a journey home for her mother and an effort to transplant the family's heritage and identity into the soft soil of Sophia's heart. Sophia promises herself that she will never forget the significance of that place to her family, and vows that she will return to the island herself one day. Touching the gnarled and rough trunk of the tree, she remembers her grandfather and learns to love her olive tree.

How is the main problem solved? (9)

As her mother guides her to the olive tree, Sophia experiences the local color of Greece. She is fascinated by its beauty as well as its strangeness. Placing the beads in the tree, Sophia reflects that her grandfather would be pleased; she recognizes the intention behind his gift of tree and trip: "[I]t had to do with Mama and me and all of us being part of the island. He wanted Mama to remember again, and he wanted me to know. I did know" (29). Sophia comes to understand her Grandfather, her heritage, and the gift of the olive tree. Taking them into her heart, she proudly declares at the story's conclusion: "I have an olive tree" (30).

NOTES:	



QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: Theme



What does the protagonist learn? Does he draw upon any motifs or symbols to deepen his explanation of these events? (11, 11f)

Sophia learns to value her heritage. She grows to understand the importance of family and memory. The olive tree that Grandfather gives her is a significant symbol of this identity.

What do the other characters learn? Do they look at their surroundings or situations differently? (12, 12d)

Sophia's mother remembers her roots; for her, the trip represents a kind of homecoming. As Mama travels through Greece, the sights and sounds of her homeland stir her to reflect that the island remains a part of her.

Does the story seem to deal with a universal theme? (13a)

Everyone comes from somewhere. This story contemplates the significance of family roots. *I Have an Olive Tree* considers themes of love, loss, memory, gratitude, and family heritage. Author Eve Bunting suggests that although people are often forced by circumstances to leave the people and places they call home, their roots remain, calling them back in memory to the forces that shaped them. Bunting's story signifies the tremendous power of place and culture and the very important work of renewing and transmitting those shaping influences from generation to generation.

NOTES:			

,	

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 comparions 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).

Does the author use the characters and events in the story to communicate a theme that goes beyond them in some way? (17)

Symbolism: The story depends upon symbolism to communicate its theme. Grandfather directly addresses the importance of Sophia's olive tree as a symbol: "When we left the island, we sold everything...But the new owners let us keep the tree. It was a symbol." When Sophia and Georgios do not understand what it means for the tree to be a symbol, Grandfather further explains, "The olive tree was something of ours that was rooted in Greek earth" (3). The olive tree becomes important as a symbol of Sophia's Greek heritage, as well as a link between her and the family that has gone before her.

NOTES:	

QUESTIONS ABOUT CONTEXT



The following questions are drawn from the "Context" section of the Socratic List, found in Appendix A, pages 91-92 of the Teaching the Classics syllabus.

Who is the author? (18)

Eve Bunting is a Northern Ireland-born American writer. She has authored over 250 books, spanning everything from novels for children and young adults to non-fiction books to the text for picture books. She is known for her diversity of settings and themes. Her books cover characters of many different backgrounds and social spheres, and she embraces difficult topics. She sets many of her works in Northern Ireland, where she grew up. Some of her most famous stories are the 1995 Caldecott Medal winner, *Smoky Night*, *Fly Away Home*, and *A Day's Work*.

While Eve Bunting is not Greek, elements of her own story become visible in *I Have an Olive Tree*. Like Sophia's grandparents, Bunting immigrated to California as a married adult with children. While she was raising her young children in America, Bunting felt a desire to reconnect with her heritage. This desire prompted her to begin writing stories, and indeed, many of her stories feature characters struggling to understand themselves and navigating new environments.

NOTES:		

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



