

*The Bee Tree*  
by Patricia Polacco

A Teacher's Guide for Socratic Discussion  
by Missy Andrews



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# 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](http://www.centerforlit.com/teaching-the-classics).

Happy reading!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Adam Andrews", with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

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# QUICK CARD



<b>Reference</b>	<i>The Bee Tree</i> by Patricia Polacco ISBN: 978-0698116962
<b>Plot</b>	A young girl struggling with reading goes with her grandfather on a wild chase for a bee tree and discovers the sweet rewards of patient persistence along the way.
<b>Setting</b>	The story begins and ends in Mary Ellen's Grampa's cozy study, but it bounds throughout the rural area that surrounds Grampa's farm – colorfully named places like: Dietz Junction, the St. Joe River, Bird Talk Fellow Ridge, Bishop's Meadow, Dead Man's Tree, Bird Talk Hollow, and Dunks Woods. Most significantly, the story takes place in Mary Ellen's childhood.
<b>Characters</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mary Ellen (protagonist)</li> <li>• Grampa</li> </ul> <p>A series of community members, who join the hunt for the bee tree:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mrs. Govlock and her baby Sylvester</li> <li>• Einar Tundevold</li> <li>• Olav Lundheigen</li> <li>• Petra and Dorma Hermann</li> <li>• Klondike Bertha Fitzworth, Yukon explorer</li> <li>• Feduciary Longdrop, the goat herder</li> <li>• Three Traveling Musicians</li> </ul>
<b>Conflict</b>	Mary Ellen struggles to apply herself to the difficult task of learning to read; so, Grampa takes her on an adventure to teach her the joy of persistence. (Man vs. Self; Man vs. Nature)
<b>Themes</b>	The reward of patient persistence. The sweetness at the end of the journey.
<b>Literary Devices</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Metaphor of Honey and Books</li> <li>• Sensory Language</li> <li>• Alliteration, Assonance, Consonance, Onomatopoeia</li> <li>• Allusion</li> <li>• Neologism: Polacco invents words in order to communicate the noises made by the characters such as “tweddle-tweddle” and “fump.”</li> </ul>

# 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.*

## **Where does this story happen? (1)**

The story begins in the study of young Mary Ellen's Grampa, where Mary Ellen struggles to focus on her reading assignment. Grampa takes her on a wild chase through the Michigan landscape to find a bee tree and its sweet, golden treasure. The journey ranges throughout the countryside surrounding Grampa's farm. Places like Dietz Junction, the St. Joe River, Bird Talk Fellow Ridge, Bishop's Meadow, Dead Man's Tree, Bird Talk Hollow, and Dunks Woods offer colorful and evocative impressions of the local landscape.

## **When does this story happen? (2)**

The story occurs in a single day of Mary Ellen's childhood.

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# 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)**

The story features a child, Mary Ellen, who is tired of her reading efforts. She longs for action and adventure and finds her reading dull.

## **Who else is the story about? (4)**

Mary Ellen’s Grampa, who whets Mary Ellen’s appetite for reading with a creative and dynamic, living metaphor: a Bee Tree adventure that sweetens her penchant for patient persistence.

The story also includes community members who join the bee chase:

- Mrs. Govlock and her baby Sylvester
- Einar Tundevold
- Olav Lundheigen
- Petra and Dorma Hermann
- Klondike Bertha Fitzworth, Yukon explorer
- Feduciary Longdrop, the goat herder
- Three Traveling Musicians

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# 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.*

## **What does the protagonist want? (5)**

Mary Ellen wants to do something more active than sitting with a book. She wants to be outside and playing. What she really needs, however, is perspective. Grampa knows that all the adventure his granddaughter is looking for (and more) lies within the pages of her book; she just hasn't the patience to dig for it.

## **Why can't she have it? (6)**

Mary Ellen not only lacks perspective, but also patience and perseverance. It takes time to acquire the skill of reading. Only persistence will reward Mary Ellen with the adventure she seeks. She is young and childish and wants instant gratification. (Man vs. Self)

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

Grampa supplies Mary Ellen with the adventure she desires in order to model for her the character qualities necessary to obtain the greater adventure available through books. He takes Mary Ellen on a great chase to find a honey tree. This means following a series of bees in flight back to their hive. Bees move fast and are hard to follow. The pair must move quickly. (Man vs. Nature)

Furthermore, as they race through the local countryside, they are joined by friends. Soon a huge posse follows them. Grampa and Mary Ellen release one after another of the bees they have collected in their mason jar until the final bee leads them to the hidden hive in a tree in Dunks Woods. Once they have located the tree, they must smoke the bees out of the hive and gather the honeycomb. (Man vs. Nature)

## **How is the main problem solved? (9)**

Mary Ellen and Grampa find the bee tree by diligently pursuing the bees they release on the trail. The story ends with a community effort to smoke the bees out of the hive and collect the honeycomb. Each community member participates in this activity. Together, they return to Grampa's farm to partake of their sweet reward.

## **How does the story end? (10)**

When the party is over, Grampa takes a bit of honey and spreads it on the cover of Mary Ellen's book. "Taste," he says. "There is such sweetness inside of that book too! ...Such things...adventure,





# QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: THEME



*The following questions are drawn from the “Theme” section of the Socratic List, found in Appendix A, page 87 of the Teaching the Classics syllabus.*

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

Through the power of generational wisdom, Mary Ellen learns that diligence and patience yield sweet results and that the laborious process of chasing words for a story, like that of chasing a bee to its hive, is worth its reward. The story depicts the power of loving family relationships in inspiring children to desire things most worth having. Grampa passes on knowledge that he gained from his father and grandfather, making Mary Ellen’s experience a significant rite of passage and a family tradition, and the story as much a meditation on family relationships as it is about reading. Polacco’s brilliance is in depicting the connection between loving relationships and a child’s education. Themes of perseverance, patience, and wisdom combine with those marking the value of intergenerational family relationships for education and wisdom.

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# 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.*

## **14. Does the author use the sounds of our language to create interest in her story?**

Polacco utilizes **onomatopoeia** and **neologisms** to appeal to the senses of her reader. Words like “buzzed,” “bumped,” “honk,” “slap,” and “chortled” are onomatopoeic and evoke the sense of their meaning by their sound, drawing the reader into the chaos and activity of the story. Extending this mechanism, Polacco invents some new words as well, like “tweddle-tweddle-squeeeeeeeek” and “fump.”

The author uses **assonance** when she writes of a “stampede of goats, buggies, people, and bikes coming straight for them!” “Stampede” and “people” share a common internal vowel sound. And again, when she writes, “‘You say you’re after a bee tree?’ she shrieked. ‘Zounds, that won’t be easy, but eureka what an adventure!’” The repetition of the inner long “e” sound with the words “bee,” “tree,” “shrieked,” “be,” “easy,” and “eureka” creates a pleasant assonance.

Polacco uses **alliteration** as well in lines like “Bounding billies, this will be great!” and “Baby Sylvester laughed out loud as his carriage bumped and bounced through the rows of corn.” The repetition of hard initial consonants like the “b” in “bounding,” “billies,” and “baby,” “bumped,” and “bounced,” the “l” in “laughed” and “loud,” and the “c” in “carriage” and “corn” make the sentences interesting to the ear.

In the latter sentence above, the ending consonantal “d” in “laughed,” “loud,” “bumped,” and “bounced” create a kind of **consonance**.

All of these auditory repetitions are forms of **rhyme** that delight the ear and add to the rompus fun of the chase for the bee in flight.

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

Polacco’s concept for the story hinges on a **metaphor** that compares the contents of books with Mary Ellen’s bee tree adventure. Grampa suggests that the wisdom and delight found in the pages of books is comparable to the golden honey he drips upon the cover of Mary Ellen’s book. “Taste! he said, almost in a whisper.” There’s something sacred in the honey ceremony Grampa and Mary Ellen share, an exchange of generational wisdom. Grampa speaks in their common tongue, making reading a sensory experience, a shared adventure that benefits the entire community.

This idea of reading as a sensory experience and the communal and relational benefits it brings to the



# 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)**

Author and illustrator Patricia Polacco lives and works in the rural Michigan farmland that serves as a persistent setting within her beloved children’s picture books. Her combined Russian and Ukranian Jewish and Irish heritage contribute to the storytelling tradition and the family and religious values she depicts so warmly in her stories. Though the author struggled with dyslexia as a child, she has written and illustrated over 115 books for children. Many of these have received awards in her field, including the 1988 Sydney Taylor Award for *The Keeping Quilt*, a 1998 Story Book Award for *Thank You, Mr. Falker*, a 1992 Golden Kite Award for *Chicken Sunday*, and several Body of Work Awards such as the 1996 David McCord Children’s Literature Citation and Award. Ms. Polacco encourages the merit of loving relationships, family values, good teachers, and reading through her many stories.

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# 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. How does Grampa's response to Mary Ellen's boredom and restlessness create the teachable moment that occurs in the story's last pages?
2. What is the connection between the chase for the bee and the difficulties Mary Ellen seems to be having with reading in the opening scene of the story?
3. How do names, both for persons and places, serve to develop atmosphere in the story?
4. How does Polacco's use of sensory language contribute to the story's action?
5. How does Polacco's invention of a story frame intersect with the story's plot to convey its larger theme?
6. How does the author's metaphor and story device communicate the story's thematic content?
7. How might this story serve as a visual illustration of the teachable moment?
8. According to this story, what attributes create a good teacher? A good reader?
9. According to this story, what good is a book?
10. According to this story, what role do families have in the education of children?



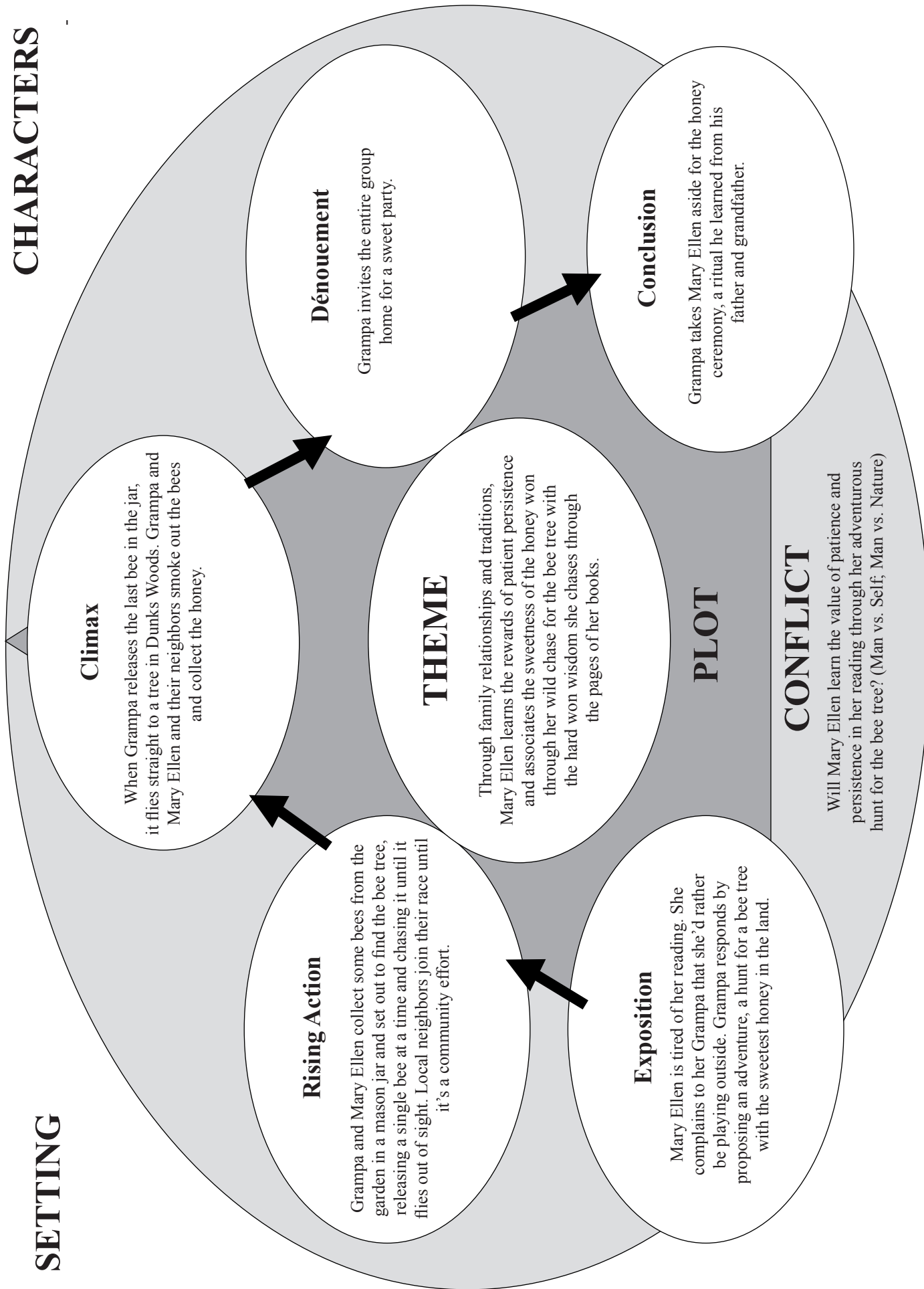
# STORY CHARTS



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: *The Bee Tree*



# Story Chart: *The Bee Tree*

