



*The Yearling*  
by Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings

Questions for Socratic Discussion  
by Megan Andrews





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# QUICK CARD



<p><i>Reference</i></p>	<p><i>The Yearling</i>. Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings (1938) ISBN 0-02-044931-3</p>
<p><i>Plot</i></p>	<p>In the “scrub” woods of central Florida, just south of Gainesville, Jody Baxter and his parents struggle to survive in a hostile wilderness. Jody’s father, Penny, has carved a little haven out of the marshland. Aptly named “Baxter’s Island,” their little home is perched precariously but offers Jody a sense of security. Yet for all that, Jody struggles with loneliness. Caught between childhood and manhood, Jody struggles to mature.</p>
<p><i>Setting</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In the “scrub” woods of central Florida, just south of Gainesville, on “Baxter’s Island.”</li> <li>• In Jody’s adolescence. He is caught between childish desires for eternal freedom and friendship and more adult concerns such as peace, easy living, and physical survival.</li> </ul>
<p><i>Characters</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jody Baxter, the protagonist of the story after whom the book might be titled. In the beginning, he is optimistic, having been sheltered from the harsh realities of life. Yet, as he faces loneliness and trials, he begins to understand his father’s struggle for survival.</li> <li>• Penny Baxter, Jody’s faithful and loving father. He is small and weak, but fiercely determined to make a good life for his wife and son.</li> <li>• Ma Baxter, hardened and embittered by hard country life. She is detached from Jody because she has lost so many children before him.</li> <li>• Fodderwing, one of Jody’s only bulwarks against loneliness. He loses his struggle for survival and dies young, leaving Jody behind.</li> </ul>
<p><i>Conflict</i></p>	<p>Man vs. Nature (The struggle for survival: Will Penny and Jody survive?)            Man vs. Himself (Coming of Age: Will Jody become a man?)            Man vs. Fate (Loneliness: Will Jody find permanent relief in a lasting relationship?)</p>
<p><i>Theme</i></p>	<p>Loneliness- Even in his family, Jody feels the crushing weight of loneliness. In the end, after losing all his childish bulwarks against that loneliness, he decides he will be “lonely all his life” (428). Yet this self-professed despair may be representative of Judy’s own immaturity at the end of the book, for throughout the story Penny Baxter remains a constant friend and companion to the boy. Jody has never truly been alone.</p>

<p><i>Literary Devices</i></p>	<p>Imagery is created through:</p> <p>Symbolism- Fodderwing offers Jody the symbol of the Spaniards in the magnolias which come to represent the tantalizing nature of transient things. The spaniard is a symbol of echoes from the past which are passing away forever. When Jody discovers that these Spaniards aren't real, he mourns the knowledge and wishes he could have "gone away believing" in the beautiful fantasy. This recurring image of the spaniards emphasizes Jody's lost innocence.</p> <p>Even the yearling itself is a symbol for Jody himself. Young and free, Jody cannot bear the truths about the world as a "buck" like Penny can. As long as Jody is a yearling, he needs protecting. (196)</p>
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# QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: SETTING



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

This story takes place in Cross Creek, Central Florida. Deep in the marshy “scrub” of the Florida forest, the Baxter family has carved out a homestead despite the hostile forces of nature. Their little clearing, “Baxter’s Island,” perches like a speck of land in the ocean of the wild, affording young Jody a measure of peace and security, fleeting and precarious though it may be.

## **Does the story happen in country or the city? (1b)**

This story happens in the country. Though Jody and Penny take trips to town, these trips are infrequent. The majority of their lives centers in their little clearing and the beautiful, dangerous wild that is ever encroaching upon it. The themes of the story are mediated through country living and directed towards the interests of country people.

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

The opening scene of the story gives readers a vivid picture of the wild beauty of Jody’s world. As he lies on his stomach, watching the flutter-mill with childish abandon, the sights and sounds and smells of the natural world seem to him to be purely wholesome and enchanting. The passage reads:

“A shaft of sunlight, warm and thin like a light patchwork quilt, lay across his body. He watched the flutter-mill indolently, sunk in the sand and the sunlight. The movement was hypnotic...Drops of silver slipping from the wheel blurred together like the tail of a shooting star. The water made a sound like kittens lapping. A rain frog sang a moment and then was still. There was an instant when the boy hung at the edge of high bank made of soft fluff of broom-sage, and the rain frog and the starry dripping of the flutter-mill hung with him. Instead of falling over the edge, he sank into the softness” (6).

Even when Jody wakes from this delicious stream-side nap to find the light fading and the idyllic afternoon delights of the creek bed dwindling, he still describes the evening

sky as “the soft gray breast of a morning dove”(7). These moments of imagery, the water like “kittens lapping” and the evening sky like “a morning dove,” create an idyllic atmosphere at the start of the story. Jody’s perspective on the world in which he lives is innocent, wholesome, and optimistic. He sees the world as a nurturing, gentle place. Yet even in this idyllic scene, Jody is described as “hanging at the edge” of the bank. He is poised in a moment of comfort and peace, but he sits at the edge of an embankment, on the brink of a cataclysmic change of everything he’s known. Even this detail of the physical setting foreshadows the coming test of Jody’s maturity.

Penny Baxter, who is familiar with nature’s more malevolent characteristics, agrees with Jody’s assessment of this wild in which they live as beautiful, captivating, and unearthly. Though survival is difficult in the sheltered clearing, he and Jody share a love of their land.

**Is the setting a real or imaginary place? If it’s imaginary, is it subject to the same physical laws as our world is? (1g)**

Though the little clearing, Baxter’s Island, is fictional, the city of Cross Creek, Florida and the neighboring scrub forest is real. In fact, Rawlings herself lived in Cross Creek for twenty-five years and felt a great connection to the land and the people there. This very scene is the setting for Rawlings other major novel, aptly named *Cross Creek*.

**Among what kinds of people is the story set? What is their economic class? How do they live? Are they hopeful? Downtrodden? Depressed? Why? (1h)**

This story is about country people, common folk whose daily struggle is merely to survive. They bond with one another over the difficulties and hardships of the rural life. Though they are poor, they are proud. They possess an almost ancient sense of wealth and economy. They measure wealth and success by how much food they have, how many sons they have to work the fields, how many animals they have in the barn.

In this ancient economy of survival and tenuous prosperity, the natural elements prove the chief antagonists to a man’s fortune. Facing this common obstacle, the Baxters and their neighbors, the Forresters, maintain a tenuous cordiality. The Forresters are burly and brawny and fond of a fist-fight or a feud. They mock Penny Baxter and his boy, who are slight and frail and peace-loving. But beneath this mockery they hold a secret regard for Penny’s toughness and obstinate efforts to survive and provide for his family. Living just four miles from one another, the two families regard one another with reserved politeness.

But for them and Grandma Hutto and Oliver, who live in town, Penny, Ma Baxter, and Jody are virtually alone in the world.

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

The story seems to happen around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, probably before motorcars. Everything in the story is done by hand, from sewing and reaping to well-digging, house-building, and clothes-making etc.







# QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CHARACTERS



## **Who is the story about? (Protagonist) (3)**

Young Jody Baxter is the protagonist of our story, even arguably the title character. At the beginning of the story, Jody is just twelve years old. A slight, tow-headed boy, he shares his father's wonder at the beauty of the natural world. Hungry for adventure and giddy with the wildness of Spring, he frequently shirks his chores and sneaks to the Glen to dream away the working day. He is selfish and thoughtless of his parents' ceaseless toil to provide for the family. Though he feels pangs of guilt when he discovers his father doing his work for him, he does not yet understand the weight of responsibility which a man must shoulder in a harsh and hostile universe.

As he lies by the stream in the glen, watching the flutter-mill churn merrily, his thoughts reveal his youthful expectations: "the flutter-mill might turn forever. When he was an old man, as old as his father, there seemed no reason why this rippling movement might not continue as he had begun it." (6) Jody's delight with the enchanting April day and the smooth grace of the flutter-mill is merely an illustration of his optimistic perspective on the world in which he lives. Too young to have experienced life's scourges, he sees only its beauty and assumes that this stage of innocence, peace and loveliness will continue on forever.

Yet the events of the story steal this youthful perspective. Already in the evening of that same enchanting first day in the story, a sense of foreboding and nostalgia permeates the scene. As Jody sleeps, the line reads: "A mark was on him from the day's delight, so that all his life, when April was thin green and the flavor of rain was on his tongue, an old wound would throb and nostalgia would fill him for something he could not quite remember" (15). Though the day was lovely and untainted by any conscious foreboding, Jody will look back on it with pain because of the events to come in the story.

## **What do other characters think or say about him? (3k)**

Penny Baxter, Jody's father and closest friend, sees all of Jody's immaturity and selfishness. Yet his perspective on the boy is tempered with deep love and understanding. Familiar with life's bleakness in a way that Jody isn't yet, Penny sees Jody's innocence as a quality to be guarded for as long as possible. He understands that it cannot last forever, but he resolves to protect Jody's childhood just as long as he can. He thinks of his son: "the child stood wide-eyed and breathless before the miracle of bird and creature, of flower and tree, of wind and rain and sun and moon, as he had always stood. And if, on a soft day in April, the boy had prowled away on his boy's business, he could

understand the thing that had drawn him. He understood, too, its briefness” (21). Though Jody’s shirking adds to Penny’s daily labors, he resolves to “leave him build his flutter-mills,” knowing that the day will come when Jody no longer thinks to frolic in the beauty of an April day.

**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)**

Initially, Jody’s greatest desire is a full belly and a peaceful, lazy life. As he begins to experience the threats of the forest, he appreciates ever more fully that his little life on Baxter’s Island is a sheltered one, “ringed round with hunger.” Wild animals and fierce famine threaten his existence in the clearing and disturb his boyhood. Yet in the initial chapters of the story, even as Jody realizes these threats for the first time, he sees them distantly. Between him and the darkness, Penny stands as a bulwark. Jody whimpers in fear and Penny pulls him close to warm and comfort him. Jody falls asleep, sure that his father is “the core of safety.” Though the evils in the forest trouble his sleep, Jody assures himself that “the clearing is safe,” since “his father fought for it, and for his own.”

As the story progresses, however, Jody begins to long for more than just a peaceful life and a full belly. He feels pangs of loneliness and longs for companionship. He expresses this longing to his father one night saying, “I wish I had me a coon or a bear cub or sich as that” (84). A little later in the story he distills this longing to its essence. He declares: “I jest want something all my own. Something to foller me and be mine... I want something with dependence to it” (98). Aware of his loneliness for the first time, Jody begins to search for people or creatures which might fill the void.

This desire for companionship as a bulwark against loneliness is a driving force in the story. In each of his relationships, with Oliver Hutto, Fodderwing Forrester, and even Penny, Jody is hoping to discover someone he can count on to provide a constant relief from his loneliness. But one by one, these comforting presences dissolve and disappear. In the end, Jody faces the world alone.

**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)**

Jody’s priorities certainly do change over the course of the story. As he faces the realities of manhood and maturity and the real threats of starvation and death, he is forced to reexamine his boyish perceptions of the world. We will discuss this change in Jody’s character later on in this guide.

**Is the character 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)**

Jody is a very sympathetic character. Young and fresh-faced, his foibles are relatable and even nostalgic. He embodies every boyish spirit, irked by a day’s work and hungry for the freedom of a romp in the woods. Readers stand with Penny as he watches Jody live carefree and remembers his own youth. As conflict threatens to overturn Jody’s

idyllic world, readers are meant to cry out with him at the injustice of the universe. We pity Jody for the loss of innocence which must necessarily occur in the story. And in pitying him, we pity our own lost innocence anew.

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

There are two characters in particular who stand with Jody in this isolated backwoods and become an integral part of his story.

Foremost, Penny Baxter, Jody's father, is a curious character. Slight and underdeveloped in stature and unassuming and quiet in personality, he manages to fill the story with his presence. Though he is small and thin and weak physically, he is a rock psychologically. With a quiet tenacity, he establishes his family in the backwoods plot. Despite the mockery of the Forrester men, he buys a portion of their land, a safe four miles from their homestead. The only drawback of his safe little island in the scrub is a lack of a well or a spring. The only water source on his land is a sink hole which gathers a pool of clean water at the bottom of the hill each day. Satisfied with this meagre water source, Penny builds a cabin and clears the land in eager expectation of the family he and his wife Ora have planned. Though the babies come, however, they do not thrive. One by one, they sicken and die until their little cemetery is a large fenced plot. Just when Penny and Ora have almost despaired of having children, Jody arrives and thrives: their miracle child.

While Ora Baxter remains detached from her son, too scarred from previous losses to bond with him, Penny loves him desperately. Rawlings describes this love with an interesting phrase: "Penny's bowels yearned over the boy. He gave him something more than his paternity" (20). Despite the harshness of the life he's found in the scrub, Penny has retained a surprising depth of tenderness. He sees Jody as a gift, a salvation against "loneliness of the place that had begun to frighten him a little" (20). He understands Jody and sees in him a kindred spirit, one that loves the land and will continue to fight for Baxter's Island even after Penny is gone. He is a bulwark of safety and companionship for Jody, and his heart bleeds with Jody's when the struggles of maturity appear to strip away his childhood. Honest, moral and steadfast, Penny is unquestionably reliable. Jody thinks of him with confidence: "His father, of course, stood as unchangeable as the earth" (138).

One minor character who proves an important companion in Jody's journey to maturity is Fodderwing Forrester, the youngest son of the family and Jody's sole friend at the beginning of the story. He acts as one of Jody's chief bulwarks against loneliness initially, sharing his fascination with life's beauty. Yet Fodderwing meets the realities of life far sooner than Jody. Deformed from birth, Fodderwing has always been sickly and weak. But he falls ill and dies in the first half of the novel, leaving Jody friendless and struck by the cruelty of the natural order. His death is a silent demonstration of nature's crueller side. Fodderwing loses the war for survival which all of the characters are quietly waging throughout the story and which Jody has scarcely considered yet in his young life.

**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).**

Having fought for survival all his life, even going to war for four years and coming back battered in body in spirit, Penny values peace, quiet, and ease more than anything. Even before the war, he was drawn to the isolated country life because of its silence and vastness. Sensitive to the evils in mankind, he sought to escape the bickering and watchfulness of a town society. He had “been bruised too often” by encounters with society to relish close-living and child-rearing with such an audience. Instead, he was drawn to the beneficent silence of the scrub. Rawlings describes Penny’s inscrutable move: “Something in him was raw and tender. The touch of men was hurtful upon it, but the touch of the pines was healing...the clearing was peculiarly his own” (18). After the war, he retreated to Baxter’s Island, grateful anew for its peace and isolation.

At the end of the story, Penny admits his life-long longing for an easy life. He tells Jody, “I’ve been uneasy all my life... I wanted life to be easy for you. Easier’n ‘twas for me”(426). In creating a home for his family away from meddling society, Penny attempted to offer his son a quieter life than he himself had experienced.

**Is there a single character (or group of characters) that opposes the protagonist in the story? In other words, is there an antagonist? (4a)**

Both Penny’s admission and Fodderwing’s death emphasize the existence of an antagonistic force that is outside all of the characters in the story. This universal struggle of mankind to survive in a hostile universe is the central preoccupation which propels the plot. Penny longs to shield Jody from this struggle, but he realizes that it is Jody’s necessary inheritance if he is to mature into a man.

Even from Jody’s limited, youthful perspective, Nature’s own forces conspire against him. It is the nature of things to grow old and die, to grow apart and leave others behind, to face the world alone as a mortal creature. And Jody rails against this natural way of things. Remembering the doe he found dead in the forest, Jody cries and thinks with pity of the fawn left all alone. He is “torn with hate for all death and pity for all aloneness” (158). This is no physical, flesh and blood antagonist. Rather Nature itself opposes Jody’s goals and longings.

**Is the antagonist out to do physical harm to the protagonist, violence to his reputation, his memory, his work or his family? How do you know? (4d)**

The natural world threatens Jody’s very life from the beginning of the story. Though it can wear beautiful and enchanting faces on a lovely April day, the natural world is dangerous and vicious. Jody sees a glimpse of this when he goes hunting for Ol’ Slewfoot in the swamplands. Later that evening, he thinks of Penny’s words about the hunger plaguing not only men in the forest, but all the beasts as well. He tries to explain Ol’ Slewfoot’s persistent pestering of their crops and livestock to Jody.

“A creetur’s got his livin’ to make and he makes it the best way he kin. Same as us. Hit’s panther nature and wolf nature and bear

nature to kill their meat. Country lines is nothin' to them, nor a man's fences. How's a creetur to know the land's mine and paid for? How's a bear to know I'm dependin' on my hogs for my own rations? All he knows is, he's hungry" (43).

Penny understands the true antagonist to their simple lives in the woods. But Jody, young and impressionable, must find out for himself that the natural world itself is out for blood. Old Starvation, soon personified in the story as a scourge upon all living things, seeks to strangle Jody and his family. Jody realizes this external antagonism as the story progresses.

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# QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CONFLICT AND PLOT



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

Consciously, Jody wants two things: to be happy and free as a child forever, and never to be lonely. Yet these desires prove contradictory as Jody begins to understand the nature of life. In order to survive, Jody must deny himself the luxuries which belong to children and take his place with his father and the other men in the community in the struggle to survive. Unfortunately, this universal struggle of all men to survive is a solitary one. Each man must stand alone in the face of Old Starvation and fight for his own life. Thus, the two propelling questions of the story become: Will Jody survive and come to maturity? And: Will Jody find permanent relief in a lasting relationship?

## **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)**

Jody's conflict is both external and internal. As the natural world actively opposes his most basic desire to survive and live happily and easily, Jody must learn to survive the physical threats of the elements and the wild creatures just as his father did before him. In addition, his desire for friendship is continually thwarted by death, distance, and disease. Yet a subterranean conflict accompanies this physical struggle as Jody wrestles with loneliness. He is hungry for love and companionship, but no relationship can truly guard against the loneliness of life. No relationship can last forever and in the end, Jody will stand alone. He wrestles in his heart with this unfulfilled longing.

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

Jody faces physical limitations, living remotely and out of reach of many relational prospects. Yet his age also proves a barrier to his goals. He wants to remain a child forever, but he is growing up with each day and the calls of manhood are pressing upon him more urgently all the time. These conflicts fall into three categories. Penny and Jody's struggle to survive in a hostile wilderness is a Man vs. Nature conflict. Yet Jody's painful journey to maturity is a Man vs. Himself conflict as he resists the heavy mantle of manhood. Lastly, Jody's battle with loneliness is a Man vs. Fate conflict. He desires permanent relief in a lasting relationship, but no relationship is destined to last forever. All men must die and, necessarily, they face death alone.

## **What other problems are there in the story? Do the characters' actions provoke further conflict in the story? (7b)**

The plot in this story progresses very slowly. There is no sharp conflict at the beginning, only the constant pressure of survival in a precarious situation. In addition, the rising action is very long, leading to a climax near the end of the story and a relatively short (though powerful) denouement. There are a few moments, however, which highlight the conflicts, thereby increasing the tension and propelling the story forward.

For example, when Penny explains to Jody why he's never managed to install a well on their property he admits: "Twenty years, but always somethin' interferin'. And the war – And then the land to be cleared all over agin.'" (83). Hidden in this rumination, Penny gives Jody a hint about the life which seems to Jody to be wholesome and good. He intimates that the natural order of things, life itself perhaps, is working against man all the time and preventing him from prospering. This moment highlights the survival conflict.

When Oliver Hutto offends Lem Forrester by stealing his girlfriend, Twink Weatherby, he starts up a family feud between Forresters and Huttos (and anyone else friendly to the Huttos, including Jody and his father). Siding with Oliver, Jody and Penny jump into the fray and take a brutal beating. As a result of this tussle, all "neighboring" with the Forresters ends abruptly and Oliver leaves town, abandoning Jody to his growing loneliness. This creates a Man vs. Fate struggle against loneliness which is heightened still further when Fodderwing dies.

At this point in the story, Jody has discovered a creature which might save him from the loneliness at last: an abandoned fawn, which Fodderwing names "Flag" before he dies. Delighted by the fulfillment of his boyhood wish to have "a creetur with some dependence to it," Jody gives his heart fully to the creature, little knowing what trials it will bring to his family. Considering the comfort which the little fawn brings to him, Jody wonders: "It did not seem to him that he could ever be lonely again" (177). All too soon, however, Flag becomes a nuisance, eating up the precious crops and defying all efforts to contain him. As the year goes on, Flag continues to pester the family and Ma Baxter's patience wears thin. Meanwhile, Penny struggles with his health. Rheumatism and weakness and finally a hernia force him to bed and it seems as if he too is losing his struggle to survive, just as Fodderwing did before.

**Are there larger issues, (a larger context or frame) in which conflict exists and forms a background for the story (A war setting for example)? (7f)**

In late summer, there are a series of natural calamities which put extra pressure on the bread-winners out in the scrub. First a flood damages the countryside and disturbs the game. Just as Penny has recovered from the flood and determined a way to survive in spite of it, the animals in the area get a disease called "Black Tongue." As the summer turns to fall, there is less and less game to fill the Baxter table. As provisions dwindle, it becomes less feasible to keep a pet, and Jody worries about Flag.

**What happens in the story? (8)**



Having survived the winter, Penny is in high spirits at planting time, determined that they will have an excellent harvest and maybe even get a step ahead of that life which is always setting him back. Yet his comments to Jody about Flag set the boy on edge, filled as they are with concern and doubt. He remarks to Jody one day, “You think a heap of him, don’t you...well, we’ll wait and see” (389). Though he hesitates to deprive Jody of his only companion, Penny notes with growing concern the consequences of Flag’s untamed nature. He keeps Ma Baxter from killing the fawn, for love of Jody. But when Flag jumps even the six foot fence which Jody has built to keep him out of the new corn, Penny no longer has any choice in the matter. Laid up in bed with a hernia, he issues a terrible command. He orders Jody to shoot Flag.

**How is the main problem solved? Is the situation pleasantly resolved or is it resolved in some terrible way? (9c)**

The climactic scene in this story is difficult to pinpoint, as it is really a set of scenes, beginning with Penny’s order to shoot Flag and continuing all the way through Flag’s eventual death. Jody’s agony during this time, when his last hope for relief from loneliness is wrenched away, is the point of highest tension if we are considering the Man vs. Nature struggle as the central conflict in the story. At this moment, Jody realizes that in a very real sense he must always be alone. He thinks back to this moment in the final pages of the story, concluding the following: “He did not believe he should ever again love anything, man or woman or his own child, as he had loved the yearling. He would be lonely all his life”(428). Readers should mourn with Jody at this conclusion. His quest for a relationship which will permanently relieve his loneliness has drawn to a close and been answered with a heart-rending negative. Yet this little resolution only heightens the tension in the other areas of Jody’s life.

After receiving Penny’s order to kill Flag, Jody can’t bring himself to shoot the fawn. He comes back to the house with Flag still at his side only to find his mother at the door of the cabin with a gun. Under orders from Penny, she wounds Flag and Jody has no choice but to mercifully end Flag’s suffering. Far from peaceful with this final acceptance of manhood’s heavy mantle, Jody screams at his father: “You went back on me! You told her to do it! I hate you! I hope you die!” (410) With this quivering cry, Jody runs blindly into the scrub to wrestle with life’s ugliness alone. There in the forest, he rages against his parents, fights loneliness anew, and faces despair and horror at life’s cruelty. But in the midst of this indignant tirade, Jody meets Old Starvation face to face. As he begins to starve, he understands true hunger for the first time and realizes why they could not keep Flag. Even as this knowledge and understanding dawns on him, Jody cannot bring himself to make peace with such a harsh, adult world.

He returns to the Glen, scene of his childhood delight from that first April afternoon. He searches feverishly for the flutter-mill, hoping against hope that “if he found it, he would discover with it all the other things that had vanished”(423). Instead, he finds that his emblem of eternal childhood has been washed away by the flood. In vain he tries to build another flutter-mill and force his childhood to return to him with the toy’s enchanted turning, but “there was no magic in its motion.” He throws himself on

the ground, sobbing in despair for “There was no comfort anywhere.” And in this moment, he thinks at last of Penny.

This final turning of the boy’s heart to his father is arguably the climactic moment of the story. In this turning, Jody makes peace with the harsh reality of life. He understands at last what Penny has been trying so gently to explain: that a man must face the cruelties and savage truths of the world and battle for his survival in the face of them. He shoulders the mantle of responsibility which befits a man at last. And in so doing, he finds that he is not so lonely after all. There is another man in this scrub who understands the depth of Jody’s struggle and loves him and desires to stand beside him in the daily toil against a grim life. With a swell of homesickness, Jody runs back to Baxter’s Island, penitent and hungry for his father’s forgiveness and love. He calls out as he runs, “Pa, wait for me!” (423) This turning point is the climax of Jody’s Coming of Age journey, his Man vs. Self conflict. In addition, it calls into question Jody’s final conclusions about loneliness. While Jody declares at the end of the story that he will be “lonely forever,” he enters into manhood with his loyal father by his side. Penny remains Jody’s best friend and constant support, a true bulwark against the loneliness which Jody fears. It is of Penny that Jody thinks when his need for comfort is greatest.

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

Jody returns home, guilty and broken, scarcely recognizable as the boy who left in hateful tears just a few days before. In a scene that echoes the parable of the Prodigal Son from the Bible, Penny receives Jody with tears of joy and an open-heart. He reassures Jody that he is wanted and that he belongs. As the son explains his sojourn in the wilderness to his father, Penny understands far more than Jody can express. Hearing of Jody’s encounter with Ol’ Starvation, he whispers, “I’m sorry that you had to learn it that-a-way.” He studies Jody and remarks, “You’ve done come back different. You’ve taken a punishment. You ain’t a yearlin’ no longer” (426). If any reader wondered as to the placement of the climax before, this statement of Penny’s proves it beyond a shadow of a doubt. Jody has traded in his childhood for new maturity in his forest vigil and he can now converse with his father as a fellow man.

Their conversation drives home both the coming of age theme and the universal struggle of all men against nature. Penny lets Jody in on his own lifelong struggle, warning him of the difficulties that he too must face. He declares, “Boy, life goes back on you.” Echoing Jody’s angry accusation that his father had betrayed him and “gone back on him,” Penny tries to explain the truth about the world in which they live. He murmurs:

“Ever’ man wants life to be a fine thing, and a easy. ‘Tis fine, boy, powerful fine, but ‘tain’t easy. Life knocks a man down and he gits up and it knocks him down agin. I’ve been uneasy all my life...I’ve wanted life to be easy for you. Easier’n ‘twas for me. A man’s heart aches, seein’ his young uns face the world. Knowin’ they got to git their guts tore out, the way his was tore. I wanted to spare you, long as I could. I wanted you to frolic with your yearlin’. I knowed the lonesomeness he eased for you. But ever’

man's lonesome. What's he to do then? What's he to do when he git's knocked down? Why, take it for his share and go on" (426).

Knowing that Jody has experienced the first of many of Life's bruising, Penny attempts to welcome him into a great fellowship of survivors. He identifies with Jody's loneliness and in affirming his struggle he becomes a friend and companion. But he goes on to explain why Jody could not remain in that easy, gratifying stage of childhood. Jody must become a man in order to survive in face of a Life which will "tear his guts out." His innocence must be sacrificed if he is to live. And so, Penny offers him a new kind of companionship. Speaking as a man to a man, he offers Jody a place among a great community of men who face Life's buffetings, "take it for their share," and go on.

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

Warmed by his father's words, Jody goes off to bed and thinks of the coming day, full of adult responsibilities. As he falls asleep, he concludes that he will "be lonely all his life." Though this thought accurately captures the nostalgia of lost innocence and passing childhood, Jody's conclusion flies in the face of the moment of solidarity he has just experienced with his father. Far from lonely, Jody has just found a companion whose sole desire in life is to be a help and a friend to him. This forlorn ending seems short-sighted/incomplete or unsatisfying somehow, given Penny's demonstration of love and friendship to his son.

Yet a closer look at the scene reveals an element at work which may account for this incomplete conclusion. Jody himself, tired, resolute, freshly-maturing as he is, delivers this final nostalgic scene. Small wonder then that his perception of the events which have just transpired (as well as his predictions of the future) are young and immature-sounding. Considering how young he still is, even after his experiences in the forest, his mournfulness at the passing of his childhood seems natural and good. He reminds himself of his father's words as if to comfort his own heart when he resolves, "But a man took it for his share and went on." The boy and the yearling are gone forever, but in their place stands a new man, ready to take his place beside his father and face the world.

**Does the resolution offer any particular perspective or understanding of the story's themes? (10f)**

The resolution fairly trumpets the story's themes. Penny's final address to his son is shot through with definitions of manhood, the necessity of coming of age, and the universality of man's struggle to survive in a hostile natural world. Jody's final farewell to Flag and to his former self further confirms these themes.

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# QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: THEME



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**What does the protagonist learn? Is he sacrificed in some way? (Was this part of the climax or resolution?) (11d)**

Jody learns what it is to be a man in a hostile world. In his efforts to survive and join his father as a man, however, his innocence and childishness must be sacrificed. When he is required to shoot his beloved Flag, he is in essence sacrificing his innocence and childhood in order to pass through to maturity. He is sobered, changed, and forever marked by this sacrifice.

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

This story deals with a number of universal themes, all having to do with Coming of Age, maturity, and the nature of true manhood. According to Rawlings, a good man is one who takes the buffetings and beatings which life delivers and continues undaunted to battle for survival. In the spirit of Hemingway's "grace under pressure" mantra, Penny Baxter models for his son a determined, indomitable zeal for life. Despite the rotten twists of Fate which thwart his plans, he continues to fight for his peaceful life on Baxter's Island. With his father's example before him, Jody learns to face the world with the same kind of dogged toughness.

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# QUESTIONS ABOUT STYLE: LITERARY DEVICES



**Does the author use the characters and events in his story to communicate a theme that goes beyond them in some way? Does the author use any objects, persons, pictures, or things to represent an idea in the story? For example, darkness may be used to represent wickedness. Light may be used to represent truth and goodness. In the allegorical play, *Everyman*, the main character represents or symbolizes sinful man. The symbol of the dove represents the Holy Spirit. (16k)**

The yearling is an obvious symbol in the story, representing childhood, innocence, or fleeting youth. Penny Baxter emphasizes this symbol when he likens Jody himself to a yearling. He cautions Jody not to carry too heavy a load, due to his slight, boy's strength. He says, "Don't tote them water buckets plumb full. A yearling ain't got a buck's strength." (196) When Jody adopts the yearling fawn this symbol is drawn out still further. In the very last scene, Jody dreams of Flag. He sees his child-self frolicking with the fawn under the trees and vanishing, two yearlings gone forever.

The yearling is not the only symbol in the story, however. Fodderwing, Jody's young Forrester friend, introduces the idea of the Spaniards under the magnolia trees. This legend of ancient Spaniards roaming the backwoods of Florida enchants the boys and they hope that perhaps they'll catch a glimpse of a Spaniard in his legendary helmet and chainmail one day. One day Jody thinks he sees just such an apparition in the forest, but upon further investigation he finds nothing but an optical illusion in the magnolias. Disappointed, he muses, "It would have been better not to have known, to have gone away believing" (217). In a small way, his discovery of the truth about the Spaniard is a sort of loss of innocence. Jody feels it keenly, foreshadowing the pain he will experience when his other childish dreams are challenged. The Spaniard is a symbol of things passing away, of echoes from the past which is gone forever. In light of this symbol, Jody's final vision of his childhood self under the magnolia trees with the yearling harkens back to this vision of the Spaniard under the magnolias. All together then, these three vanish, like ghostly visions or echoes of a past that is gone forever.

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# QUESTIONS ABOUT CONTEXT



## Who is the author? (18)

Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings was born in 1896 in Washington D.C. to an attorney, Arthur Frank Kinnan, and his wife Ida May. Marjorie was interested in writing from the early age of 6. She submitted many stories to children's sections of newspapers, eventually winning a prize at the age of 16 for her short story, "The Reincarnation of Miss Hetty." She attended the University of Wisconsin-Madison and earned her Bachelor of Arts in English. It was there that she met her first husband, Charles Rawlings. They were married for 14 years. In 1928, Rawlings received a small inheritance from her mother and purchased a 72 acre orange grove in Cross Creek, Florida.

Fascinated by the lives of the Cross Creek residents, the "Florida crackers," Rawlings began researching the area and the history of the simple country people. This area in the woods around Cross Creek inspired her best works, among them *South Moon Under*, *Cross Creek* (her autobiography), and *The Yearling* which made Rawlings famous and earned her the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1939. Though the world at large loved Rawlings's works, her simple neighbors (who were the inspiration for *Cross Creek* in particular) sometimes took issue with the manner in which she portrayed them. In fact, she once faced a libel suit filed by a needled neighbor.

All libel suits aside, Rawlings loved the Cross Creek region of Florida dearly. When labeled a "regional" writer, however, she retorted, "I don't hold any brief for regionalism, and I don't hold with the regional novel as such...don't make a novel about them unless they have a larger meaning than just quaintness." This larger meaning which she thought necessary in each of her novels shines through clearly in *The Yearling* in particular. The themes she offers (of fathers and sons, coming of age, and courage in the face of life's challenges) strike universal chords in readers, making her work a timeless classic. Perhaps the power and universality of her works comes from her own longing for children of her own. Though she was married twice, Rawlings never had children and always longed for a son in particular. Her preoccupation with relationships between parents and sons may be a result of this longing.

Rawlings died in 1953 in St. Augustine of a cerebral hemorrhage. She was buried near her farm in Cross Creek. She bequeathed her beloved property to the University of Florida in Gainesville, where she taught creative writing. Her land is now a historic state park. In 2008, the USPS created a stamp bearing her image in her honor. In addition, she was named a Great Floridian by the state of Florida in 2009, because she had "made contributions to the progress and welfare" of the state.



# ESSAY QUESTIONS FOR WRITING ASSIGNMENTS



1. Examine the significance of the Yearling motif. Is it deepened by the events of the story? How is Jody like a yearling?
2. Penny Baxter provides Jody a definition of manhood at the end of the story. Jody has many models of manhood to look to in the community. How does Penny's definition compare with the other models of manhood? What sort of a man is Penny Baxter? What sort of a man does he want his son to become?
3. Examine Jody's final assertion that he will "be alone forever." Is this true? If not, why not? If so, how?
4. Why does Rawlings personify "Old Starvation" in the story? How does this personification help to further our understanding of the antagonistic force in the story?
5. In his struggle against loneliness, Jody clings to a few different characters as bulwarks against the solitude. Who are they? Is he successful?

# 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.

# The Yearling by Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings: Story Chart

## SETTING

Cross Creek, Florida.  
Baxter's Island, a remote homestead in the scrub just outside of Gainesville.  
In the childhood of the protagonist, Jody is twelve years old, right on the cusp of maturity and manhood.

## CHARACTERS

Jody Baxter (pro.): innocent and free-spirited, as yet untouched by life's hardships  
Penny Baxter: Jody's loving father who understands better the toll life will take on his boy. He tries to protect Jody as long as he can.  
The Forresters: rough, calloused neighbors who scorn the Baxter men as weaklings  
Fodderwing Forrester: Jody's only friend  
The fawn: Jody's pet, the symbol of his innocence and childhood

### Climax:

Despite Jody's desperate attempts to keep the fawn out of the crops, Flag is a nuisance and a threat to the family's survival. Penny orders Jody to shoot Flag. When Jody can't, Ma Baxter does and Jody is forced to finish the job. Jody runs away into the scrub to face Old Starvation and realize the love of his father.

### Rising Action:

Jody and his family encounter Nature's harsher side in the form of a flood, a disease called The Black Tongue that kills off game, and then a harsh winter. Meanwhile, Jody's friend Fodderwing dies, but Jody finds comfort in his newfound pet fawn. Yet the fawn threatens the family crops.

### Denouement:

Jody returns home only to discover that his father understands, has forgiven him, and loves him still. They discuss the cruelties of life, which necessitate a loss of innocence. They speak man to man for the first time.

## THEME:

Coming of Age  
Loneliness  
True manhood

### Exposition:

Young Jody lives contentedly with his father and mother in the Florida scrub, heedless of the cares of adults, drunk on the beauty of the April day. His only desire is for a friend.

### Conclusion:

Jody goes to bed, considering the coming day of man's work to be done. He dreams of his former childish self, frolicking in the forest with the fawn. Together, they vanish into the shadows of the past.

## PLOT

## CONFLICT

Jody wants:  
To survive (Man vs. Nature)  
To have a pet with "dependence to it" (Man vs. Fate/Man vs. Nature)  
To be a man (Man vs. Himself)  
To conquer loneliness with lasting relationships (Man vs. Fate)

***The Yearling* by Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings: Story Chart**



