

Analyzing a Model Interpretive Argument

Name _____ Period _____ Date _____

The best literary interpretation makes claims about text that are non-obvious, beneath the surface, newly insightful, to show the underlying ideas embedded in and communicated by the work. One strategy that literary critics use to generate these sub-surface interpretations is by making connections, close and near, as they read.

Critics ask questions like:

- 1. What happened explicitly in this passage/scene/chapter?*
- 2. How does what happened explicitly in this passage relate to other passages?*
- 3. How does what happened explicitly in this passage relate to larger ideas in the text?*
- 4. How does all of this relate to the debatable or central question(s) that I think the text is asking or that critics are asking about the text?*

Read the interpretive argument model below, focusing on Chapter 12 of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Analyze and explain the function of each sentence or sentence-cluster below. How do all the parts relate to the whole? How do they relate to what comes immediately before or after? Be more specific and explanatory than simply identifying claim, evidence, and reasoning, although it is useful to start with these three categories. In your explanations be specific in citing the words the writer uses.

The debatable issue that this interpretive argument responds to is: What does justice mean in *To Kill a Mockingbird*? The interpretive position the writer is arguing for is that in *To Kill a Mockingbird* justice means protecting the most vulnerable.

Jem and Scout's visit to the black church demonstrates that justice means sticking up for the most vulnerable in a community—even if it is difficult.

In Chapter 12 Atticus is called to a special session in the capital. Cal decides to bring Scout and Jem to her church on the outskirts of town because she doesn't trust them to be left on their own.

This event is significant because it is Scout's first direct experience with the black community.

At the church, the parishioners take up a collection for Tom Robinson's wife and children, in order to try to help provide for Tom's defense and his family's well-being.

They collect \$5, but the pastor insists that they collect \$10 and locks the church doors until they do.

Scout realizes, "the church became stuffy and it occurred to me that Reverend Sykes intended to sweat the amount due out of his flock," (163). He even shames parishioners by name until finally, "slowly, painfully, the ten dollars were collected," (163).

Scout describes this process as painful because the church is physically hot and the members of Cal's congregation are poor and have very little money to donate to others in the first place.

But the pastor makes an implicit appeal to justice: we may not have much, but Tom Robinson is the most vulnerable among us (he may be executed if he is wrongfully convicted), and therefore we must push ourselves hard to protect him. The cost if we do not act is injustice, is the way the pastor frames this act of charity.

It is important that it is the church's authority figure, the pastor, who almost coerces this charitable giving and protecting from his flock. His actions carry a moral authority parallel to the magistrate in a court room, when it comes to understanding how justice is to be understood.