

# Analyzing a Model Interpretive Argument

## Answer Key

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.

This is the paragraph’s argumentative claim. The reason to believe that the overall position is true, according to this claim, is that the scene in which Jem and Scout visit the black church proves it. The argumentative claim adds an intensifier – “even if it is difficult” – which functions to deepen the level to which the text is committed to this conception of justice (protection of the weak). The fact that the claim opens the argument makes it typical of the majority of academic arguments, though certainly not all.

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.

These two sentences provide narrative context to the textual evidence that will soon be adduced to support the claim. Quotations or paraphrases from novels and stories require narrational contextualization, so that the reader can be reminded or informed where the passage comes from in the larger story. Evidence should not simply be “dropped in” to the interpretive argument. At the same time, supplying context must be done as concisely as possible, since it by itself doesn’t add to the interpretive argument the writer is making.

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

This sentence performs what can be called “pre-reasoning.” The writer hasn’t yet quoted or paraphrased from the text to support their claim, but this sentence is emphasizing the significance of the incident in the novel that

is central to the claim and the evidence in this argument. One of the essential functions of argumentative reasoning is to show how the evidence not only directly substantiates the claim, but is *significant, especially important*, or (as the legal profession puts it), *dispositive*. In this instance, that function is being performed *prior to* presentation of the evidence.

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.

This sentence opens the provision of evidence to support its claim. The text here is being paraphrased, condensing the narrative into what is essential to substantiate the claim – namely, that the parishioners are taking up a collection to defend Tom and his family, figures that the church understands to be highly vulnerable to what they implicitly understand to be a racist criminal justice system. A higher justice, this episode is suggesting, is one that defends the vulnerable and weak against the powerful and biased.

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

The evidence here continues, building in strength. The narrative paraphrase relates how the stakes are being raised for this largely indigent church community. They are only able to donate \$5 initially, but the pastor insists that they do twice as much to protect and take care of Tom and his family as they have initially committed.

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).

This, of course, is additional evidence for the argument. This evidence contains direct quotations from the chapter, skillfully integrated sentences that make immediate sense of this text. It is important for the writer to remind us that Scout is observing this call to a charitable act for justice. Scout is a kind of stand-in for the American conscience that Harper Lee would like to mold with the novel. The lessons she puts on display for Scout are those that the novel is, in effect, communicating more broadly. These quotations also underscores how difficult the financial goal set by the pastor actually was, and how committed he was to attaining it. This also is representative of how difficult, yet of ultimate moral import, is protecting the vulnerable and weak in the quest for justice.

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.

The paragraph here shifts to the writer's own analytic voice explicitly, and therefore has shifted to reasoning. The writer here is using a fairly light touch to underline the key details in the evidence above: that the church's physical discomforts, and the relatively heavy financial symbolize the labor that is involved in protecting the weak and vulnerable.

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.

The writer's analytical reasoning continues in this sentence-cluster. The writer is making the very important move here from the resonant details in the difficulty of protecting the vulnerable, to the novel's conception of justice. The writer has to be sure that the reader understands that the proper frame in which to read and interpret the episode in the sweltering church is the pursuit of justice for Tom Robinson. Tom is the defendant in a capital court case, and the stakes for him are life and death. The scene's frame implies a means of conceiving

and valuing justice that is alternative to the state of the criminal justice system (certainly in the south) in that period of American history (without implying that it has fundamentally changed since then).

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.

The paragraph concludes with a final sentence-cluster reasoning through the writer's interpretive argument. The writer caps off their point that the scene depicts an alternative conception of justice by contrasting the moral authority of the pastor with the legal authority of the courtroom judge. The novel, this bit of reasoning suggests, is critiquing American criminal justice with a higher moral justice that would be first and foremost concerned with the plight of the nation's Tom Robinsons and their families.