



A Common Core State
Standards-Aligned
Discussion/Project Guide for
Grades 9 to 12

HOW IT HAPPENS

ISBN-10: 0814348696
ISBN-13: 978-0814348697

Written by Jean Alicia Elster
Published by Wayne State University Press

HOW IT HAPPENS follows the story of author Jean Alicia Elster's maternal grandmother, Dorothy May Jackson. Born in Tennessee in 1890, Dorothy May was the middle daughter of Addie Jackson, a married African American housekeeper at one of the white boardinghouses in town, and Tom Mitchell, a commanding white attorney from a prominent family.

Through three successive generations of African American women, Elster intertwines the fictionalized adaptations of the defining periods and challenges-race relations, miscegenation, sexual assault, and class divisions-in her family's history.

Written for young adult readers, How It Happens carries the heart through the obstacles that still face women of color today and persists in holding open the door of communication between generations.

Guide created by
Debbie Gonzales, MFA



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About the Author: Jean Alicia Elster

A 2017 Kresge Artist Fellow in Literary Arts and a former attorney, Jean Alicia Elster (BA, University of Michigan; JD, University of Detroit School of Law) is most recently the author of the young adult novel HOW IT HAPPENS, published by Wayne State University Press and released in September 2021. She is the author of the novel THE COLORED CAR—for ages 8 and older—published by Wayne State University Press and released in September 2013. THE COLORED CAR was selected as a 2014 Michigan Notable Book by the Library of Michigan. Elster was awarded the 2014 Midwest Book Award in Children's Fiction for THE COLORED CAR by the Midwest Independent Publishers Association. THE COLORED CAR was chosen as an Honor Book for the 2014 Paterson Prize for Books for Young People. Elster is also the author of the novel WHO'S JIM HINES?—for ages 8 and older—published by Wayne State University Press and released in August 2008. WHO'S JIM HINES? was selected as one of the Library of Michigan's 2009 Michigan Notable Books. In addition, the Michigan Reading Association placed WHO'S JIM HINES? on the Great Lakes Great Books Award 2009-2010 ballot for grades 4-5. WHO'S JIM HINES? was also a ForeWord Magazine 2008 Book of the Year Award Finalist in the category of Juvenile Fiction.



Pre-Reading Discussion

- Consider the illustration on the cover of the book. Describe the image that you see there.
- Book cover illustrators strive to create graphics that tell a story. In your opinion, what type of story does this illustration suggest? Who do you think might be the main character in HOW IT HAPPENS? Give reasons why the illustrator chose to accentuate the character's hair style in this graphic?
- Explain what the term race-relations means to you.
- The term *miscegenation* means a mixture of races, especially in marriage, cohabitation, or sexual relations between a white person and a member of another race. Tell all that you know about miscegenation. How do you think miscegenation relates to the image on the cover of the book.
- HOW IT HAPPENS explores miscegenation, race-relations, and intergenerational family relationships as they relate to American history. Make a connection between these terms and the title of the book.



Post-Reading Discussion

***“Tom Mitchell,” Addie said his name quietly and closed her eyes.
“Another baby, Tom Mitchell.” (pg. 2)***

- Describe Addie’s relationship with Tom Mitchell. How did she feel about him? How do you know?
- Examine Tom’s affection for Addie. Did he love her? Explain your answer.
- Later in the story, Tom identifies himself as being Addie’s husband. Is his reasoning justifiable? How so?
- The opening scene on the book occurs in 1890, a time in history when racial segregation, Jim Crow laws, and lynching African Americans were the practices of the day. Discuss how these forms of racial discrimination might have impacted Addie and Tom’s relationship.



So this is how it happens. And now it is happening to me. (pg. 9)

- Consider the word *it* as used in this quote. What is Addie referencing in this statement?
- Synonyms for the word *happening* are occurrence, accident, and incident. Which of these words best describe the circumstances Addie is experiencing in this scene? Explain your answer.
- Addie seems to have previous knowledge regarding the events that are about to occur. Where did her awareness come from? How did she know?
- Explain why she allows Tom Mitchell to have his way with her. Is she powerless to protect herself? Explain your answer.



The white officials honored the occasion and watched the parade, but none had ever accepted an invitation to attend and stand at the head of the receiving line. She chuckled to herself as she watched the ministers almost tripping over themselves rushing to greet Tom and escort him to his place in the line. (pg. 30)

- Explain why the white officials did not fully participate in the parade day activities and, yet, Tom Mitchell did.
- Tell why the ministers were “...almost tripping over themselves” to meet Tom Mitchell. What motivated them to behave in this manner?
- Examine the judgmental reaction of some of the women regarding Tom accepting a drink from Dorothy May. Explain how this act of hospitality differs from the ministers’ exuberance earlier in the scene.



Addie feared for Willie. (pg. 60)

- Are Addie's fears for Willie justified? How so?
- Who is most accountable for the cause of this dangerous situation?
- Examine the phrase "...she belonged to a white man now." (pg. 61) Is this statement true? Explain your answer.



"You and I and Addie. We're just as much a part of the Thomas Mitchell clan as the whole lot of them over on Cumberland Hill. Even Mrs. Mayfield knows that!"
Patsy said. "You hear what I say?" (pg. 80-81)

- Why do you think Dorothy May was unaware of her true paternal heritage? Was it because of her sheltered life after the fire? Was she simply naïve?
- Analyze the complexity of Tom Mitchell's character. Why was he compelled to force himself upon Addie? Define the risks involved for both characters. Determine the motivation behind his commitment to care for his daughters' well-being.
- In this scene, Patsy boldly claims her birthright. Is there a price to pay for her confidence? Do you think Patsy is proud of being Tom Mitchell's daughter? Explain your answer.
- Explore reasons why Dorothy May was Tom Mitchell's favorite daughter. Consider how his affection for her eventually empowered generations to come.



"Gal, no coloreds are allowed to sit on these benches in the park. You get a move on,"
he said, and then hit the tip of her shoe with his nightstick. "Go on, now." (pg. 90)

- In this scene, Dorothy May is being chastised by a white policeman at the same moment she is internalizing the fact that her life-long benefactor has been her father – a white man. Examine the historical and emotional significance of this scene.
- Consider the symbolism of the act of tapping her toe with a nightstick. Discuss the implication of this action.



“Dorothy May, I’ve told you time and time again, you should get on with your life. Get married, start a family. Douglas is a very nice, hardworking man. You could make a good life together. You won’t get many offers like that. Don’t let this one pass you by.” (pg. 107)

- Discuss how matrimony represents “...getting on with your life.” Examine this phrase through the lens of historical context.
- In this scene, Addie wants Dorothy May to have the physical and emotional security that she never had. How did this experience impact Dorothy May’s vision for the future of her own daughters?



“I don’t care what you call them. This is what they wanted when they started that colored school you went to down in New Orleans. They weren’t just educating you. They were preparing you to pass it on to your own children, just like we’ve done.” (pg. 130)

- Tell why Douglas equates Patsy’s scholarship to the educational opportunities provided for May by Tom Mitchell. Is the association logical? Fair? Explain your answer.
- Douglas was an educated man. Explain why then, in this scene, he takes exception to Patsy’s scholarship offer.
- The word *legacy* is defined as being an inheritance, a gift, or tradition. Determine how education can be a legacy.



“Never in this life will we bring that girl home,” May said deliberately. “As far as anyone else needs to know, Laura got a full scholarship to attend the University of Michigan. And I’ll do whatever I have to do to keep her at the school. Whatever.” (pg. 145)

- At this point in the story, May is consumed with concern for Patsy’s well-being. Yet, she is compelled to make any sacrifice to keep Laura at the University of Michigan. What motivates her to care so deeply about education? Identify the source of her commitment to higher education.
- Explain why May seems to be overly concerned about what others think about her decisions. Where does this feeling of apprehension originate?



“And back then, there was nothing a Negro woman could do about it. Or her husband, for that matter, if she was married . . . If a white man took a fancy to a Negro woman, well it was as simple as that.” (pg. 180)

- A *defining moment* is defined as being a moment of truth for an individual. In this scene, Jean is recalling an experience she had when she was very young. The situation she is describing became a turning point for her entire life.
- Make a connection between the symbolism of the scarred tabletop and the historic oppression of African Americans in the United States.
- Predict why Mama responded to Rayleen’s casual comment in such a dynamic manner.



“Indian blood covered up a multitude of sins back in the day,” she said to Jean. (pg. 201)

- Explain the reference of *Indian blood* as justification for a child’s ‘bright’ or ‘swarthy’ skin tone. Why is this important?
- Compare and contrast the terms *Indian blood* and *miscegenation*. Examine the similarities and differences between the two.
- A sin is defined as an immoral action, a transgression, or disobedience. Identify the sin Indian blood covers up, according to Carrie in this scene.
- Why does the presence of a bright-skinned child suggest that a sin has occurred?
- Define the *Negro burden* (pg. 206) from both historical and contemporary perspectives.



“I heard her say – your Professor Caldwell – I heard her say she didn’t want any of your classmates to think that a darkie was capable of doing a project like that. That in all her years teaching at the university, she’d never had a student do a project like that – put her own music to a whole set of nursery rhymes!” (pg. 204)

- Analyze Professor Caldwell’s reasoning for giving Jean a failing grade for her project. Determine her motivation to do so.
- Consider how Carrie Sue’s concealed racial identity is both a blessing and a curse.
- Jean did not pursue recourse against Professor Caldwell in this situation. Predict what might have happened if she did.



“You have choices.” (pg. 221)

- To have a *choice* means determination, power, and free will. Explain the significance of the word *choices* in this passage.
- Identify the origination of Jean’s ability to choose. Is it from determination? Power? Free will? Or is it from something else entirely? Explain your answer.
- HOW IT HAPPENS is a fictionalized story inspired by the author’s family history. Predict how the characters of Addie, May, and Jean might have influenced her determination to write the novel.



A novel for
young adults
inspired
by true family
stories.



Written by Jean Alicia Elster

Learn more about Jean, her books, and her many fascinating projects by accessing jeanaliciaelster.com.



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ISBN-10: 0814348696
ISBN-13: 978-0814348697

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Character & Theme Analysis Overview

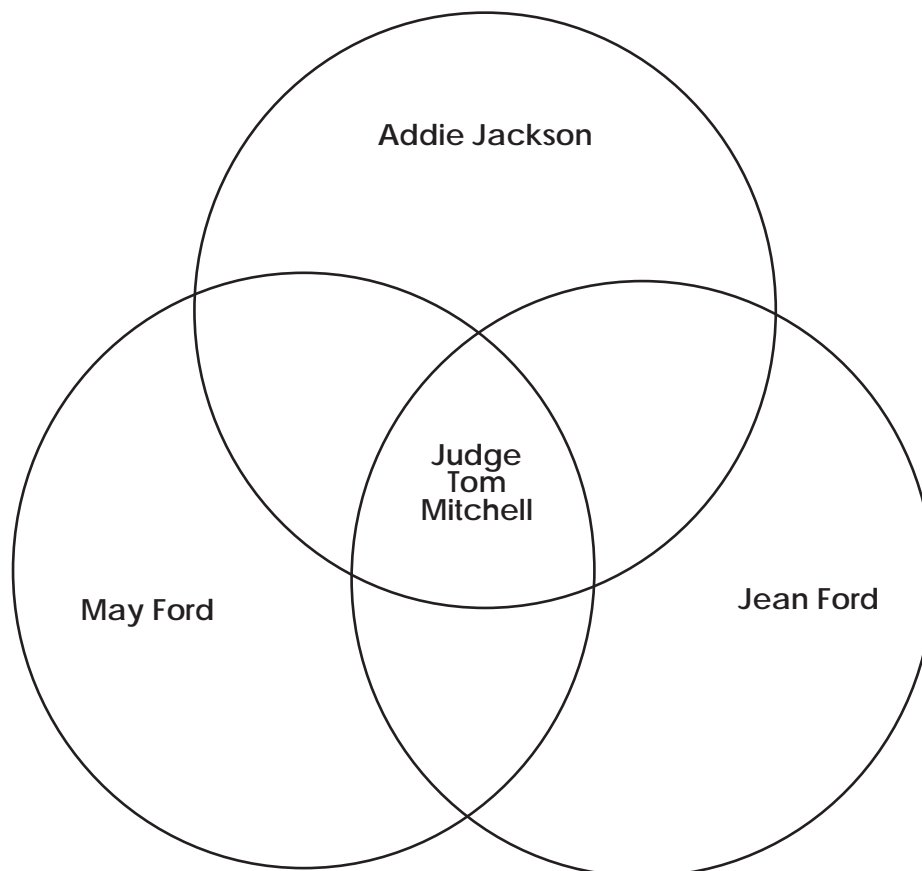
Objective: Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

Materials:

- HOW IT HAPPENS, the book
- The Character Analysis Template (Guide, pg. 10)
- Writing materials

Procedure:

- Define and discuss the terms featured below as they relate the the story.
- Use the Venn diagram on page as a guide to analyze the intergenerational connections between Addie Jackson, May Ford, Jean Ford, and Judge Tom Mitchell by choosing a term and analyzing its impact on each character.
- Examine the influence Judge Mitchell had on each character's life individually, intergenerationally, and historically.
- Write an essay describing your analysis.
- Share your work with the class.



Character & Theme Analysis Template

- Race relations

Miscegenation

History

Love
- Commitment

Duty

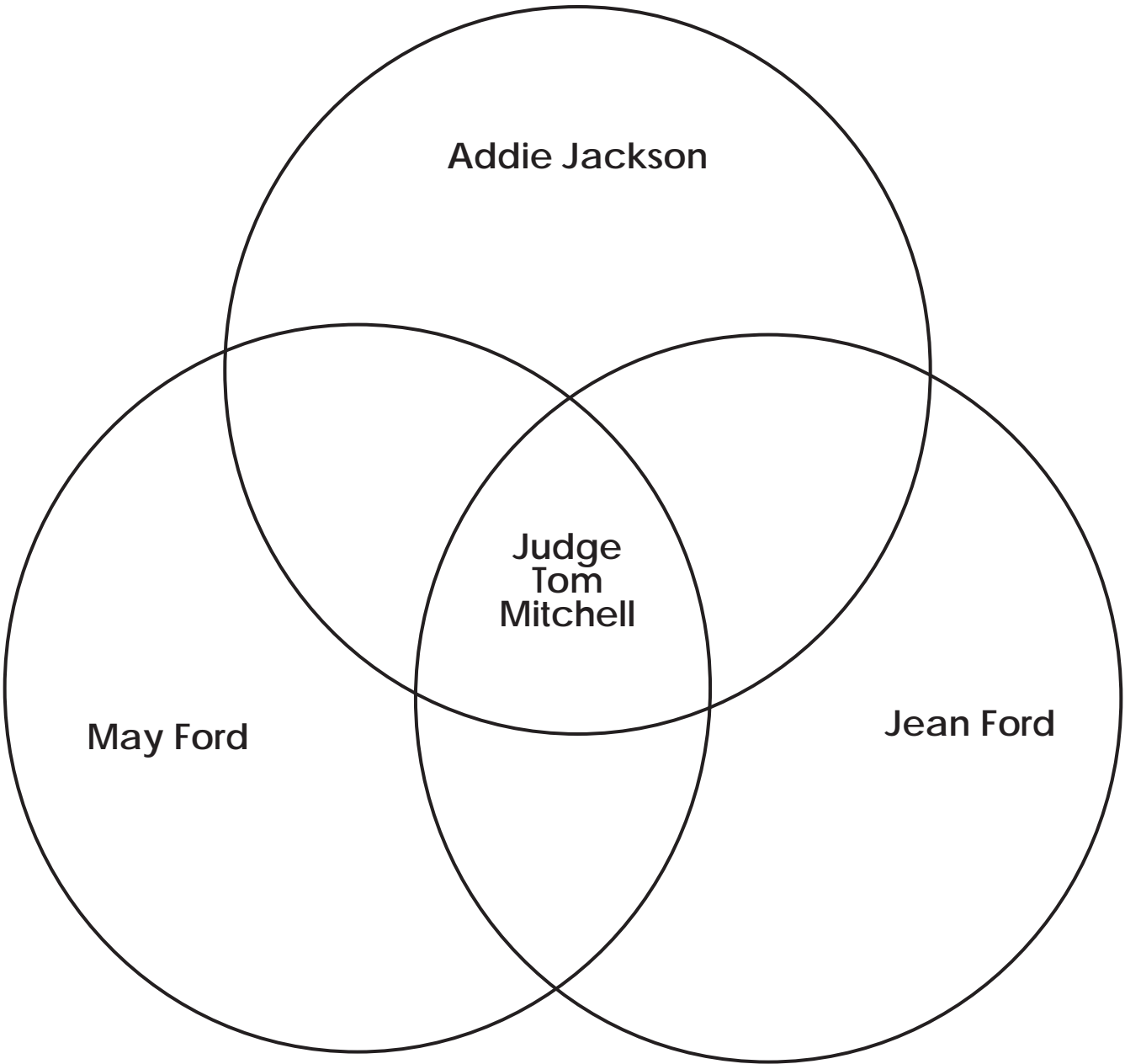
Community

Destiny
- Control

Independence

Determination

Family



Historical Timeline: Plot Point References

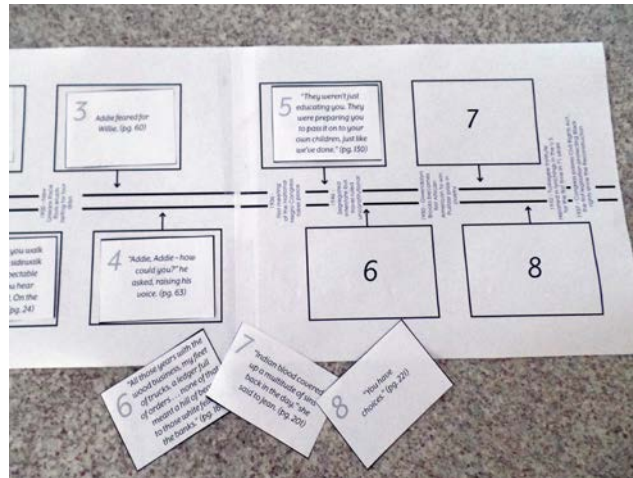
Objective: Cite specific textual evidence to support historical analysis of plot points in story.

Materials:

- HOW IT HAPPENS, the book
- Timeline Template (Guide, pgs. 12-13)
- Story Cards (Guide, pg. 14)
- Historical timeline resource (African American History Timeline. BLACKPAST. <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history-timeline/>)
- Cardstock
- Tape
- Scissors

Procedure:

- Print copies of the Timeline Template. Tape sheets together.
- Print Story Cards on cardstock. Use scissors to trim around the border of each card.
- Using HOW IT HAPPENS for citation references, arrange the cards on the timeline in a sequential manner.
- Examine the historical events listed on the timeline impacted the experiences, motivations, or emotional connection of the various characters's reactions to the themes and events occurring in the story line. (To gain a deeper awareness of the historical aspects of the plot, research key events in African American history as it relates to the span of time referenced in HOW IT HAPPENS.)
- Consider how history impacted the women in this intergenerational story. What opportunities and experiences were different as the result of the passage of time? What aspects of their lives remained the same? Explore reasons why this is so.
- Write an informative essay examining the discoveries and observations made. Share it with the class.



1862 – The
Emancipation
Proclamation is signed

1866 – Congress
approves the
14th Amendment

1892 – A record
number of 161
African Americans
were lynched in
that year

1900 - New
Orleans Race
Riots erupts
lasting for four
days

1

2

3

4

1936 -
First meeting
of the National
Negro Congress
takes place

1946 -
Segregated
Interstate bus
travel ruled
unconstitutional

1950 - Gwendolyn
Brooks becomes
first African
American to win
Pulitzer prize in
poetry

1952 - Tuskegee Institute
reported no lynchings in the
U.S. for the first time in 71 years

1957 - Congress passes Civil Rights Act,
the first legislation protecting Black
rights since the Reconstruction

5

7

6

8

Timeline Labels

1 So this is how it happens. And now it is happening to me. (pg. 9)

2 “You see me, you walk by me on the sidewalk like any respectable woman, you hear me?” he said. “On the sidewalk!” (pg. 24)

3 Addie feared for Willie. (pg. 60)

4 “Addie, Addie – how could you?” he asked, raising his voice. (pg. 63)

5 “They weren’t just educating you. They were preparing you to pass it on to your own children, just like we’ve done.” (pg. 130)

6 “All those years with the wood business, my fleet of trucks, a ledger full of orders . . . none of that meant a hill of beans to those white fellas at the banks.” (pg. 164)

7 “Indian blood covered up a multitude of sins back in the day,” she said to Jean. (pg. 201)

8 “You have choices.” (pg. 221)



Correlation: Then & Now

Objective: Analyze and summarize how key plot points relate to historical events of the past and present.

Materials:

- HOW IT HAPPENS, the book
- The Historical Analysis Template (Guide, pg. 16)
- Historical timeline references (books or digital)

Procedure:

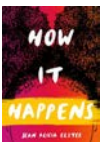
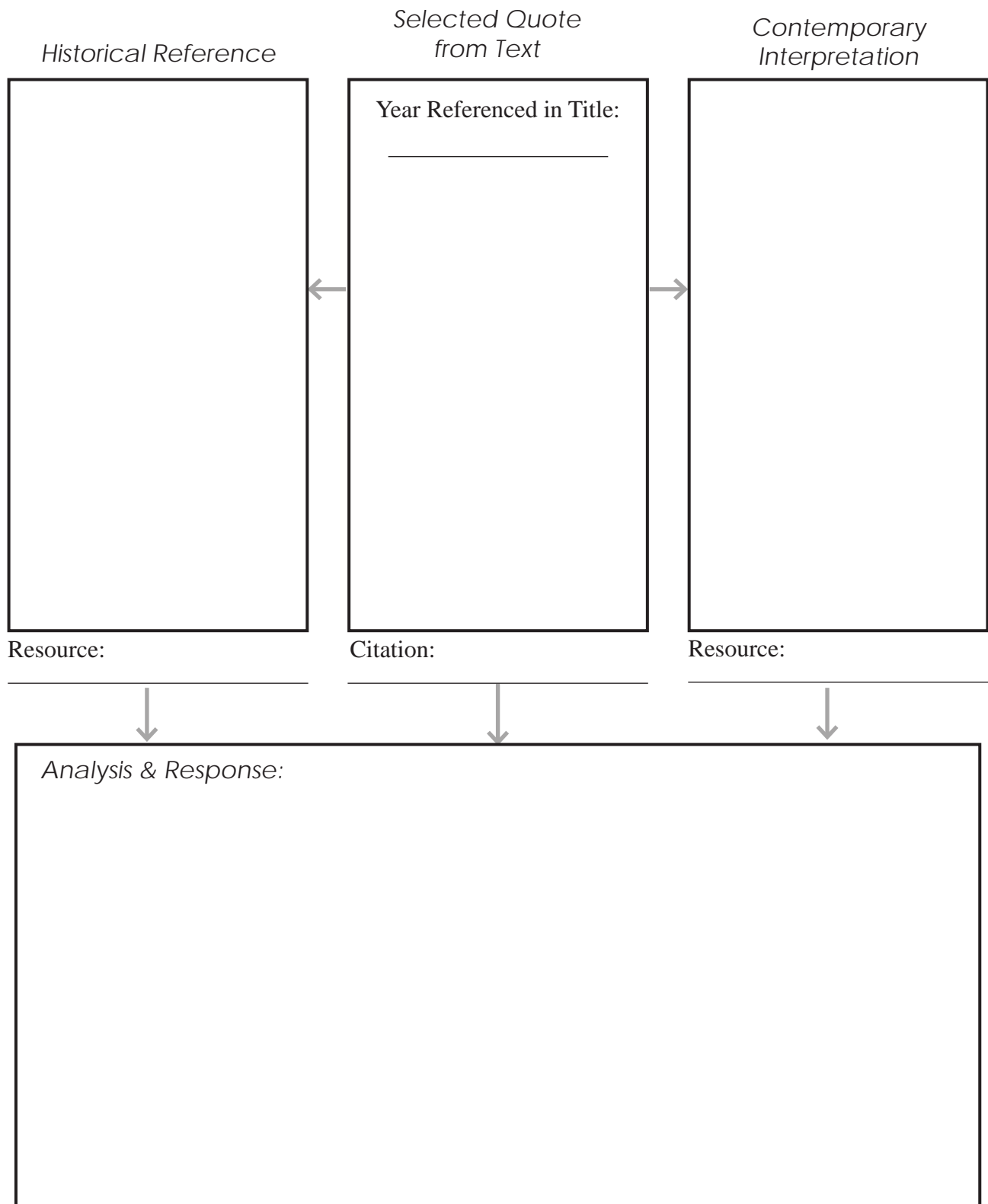
- Print copies of the **Historical Analysis Template**.
- Instruct students to choose a passage from the text to analyze. Note the year referenced in the chapter title. Record their selected quote, cite the year, and page number in the space labeled *Selected Quote From the Text* provided in the center of the template.
- Use the space labeled *Historical Reference* to research the historical events that transpired during the cited year. Instruct students to choose one event that best correlates with their selected passage and cite the reference.
- In the space provided on the right labeled *Contemporary Interpretation*, research and record how the issue is observed in contemporary times. Cite references.
- Using the space labeled *Analysis & Response*, interpret the historical significance of key events represented in HOW IT HAPPENS – both in the past and in present day. Examine ways that this piece of historical fiction literature communicates the emotional realities and consequences of events that transpired.
- Instruct students to write an essay communicating their observations and insight.
- Encourage students to share their work with the class.

Correlation: Then & Now Template

Historical Reference	Selected Quote from Text	Contemporary Interpretation
	Year Referenced in Title _____	
Resource: _____	Citation: _____	Resource: _____
Analysis & Response:		



Correlation: Then & Now Template



Common Core State Standards Alignment

		Discussion	Character Analysis	Timeline	Then & Now
English Language Arts Standards » Reading: Literature					
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1	Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.	•		•	•
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2	Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.	•	•	•	
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.3	Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.	•	•	•	•
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.6	Analyze a particular point of view or cultural experience reflected in a work of literature from outside the United States, drawing on a wide reading of world literature.	•	•		
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.10	By the end of grade 9, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 9-10 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.	•	•	•	•
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.10	By the end of grade 10, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, at the high end of the grades 9-10 text complexity band independently and proficiently.	•	•	•	•
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1	Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.	•		•	•
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.2	Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.	•	•		
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.10	By the end of grade 11, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 11-CCR text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.	•	•	•	•
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.10	By the end of grade 12, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, at the high end of the grades 11-CCR text complexity band independently and proficiently.	•	•	•	•
English Language Arts Standards » Writing					
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2	Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.		•	•	•
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.4	Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.		•	•	•



		Discussion	Character Analysis	Timeline	Then & Now
English Language Arts Standards » Writing (cont.)					
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.6	Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products, taking advantage of technology's capacity to link to other information and to display information flexibly and dynamically.		•	•	•
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.7	Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.		•	•	•
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.9	Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.		•	•	•
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.2	Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.		•	•	•
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.4	Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.		•	•	•
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.6	Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products in response to ongoing feedback, including new arguments or information.		•	•	•
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.7	Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.		•	•	•
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.8	Gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources, using advanced searches effectively; assess the strengths and limitations of each source in terms of the task, purpose, and audience; integrate information into the text selectively to maintain the flow of ideas, avoiding plagiarism and overreliance on any one source and following a standard format for citation.		•	•	•
English Language Arts Standards » Speaking & Listening					
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1	Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.	•	•	•	•
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.2	Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source.	•	•	•	•
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.4	Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task.	•	•	•	•



		Discussion	Character Analysis	Timeline	Then & Now
English Language Arts Standards » Speaking & Listening (cont.)					
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.5	Make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual, and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence and to add interest.	•	•	•	•
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.6	Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.	•	•	•	•
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1	Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.	•	•	•	•
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.2	Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) in order to make informed decisions and solve problems, evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source and noting any discrepancies among the data.	•	•	•	•
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.4	Present information, findings, and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed, and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and a range of formal and informal tasks.	•	•	•	•
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.5	Make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual, and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence and to add interest.	•	•	•	•
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.6	Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, demonstrating a command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.	•	•	•	•

