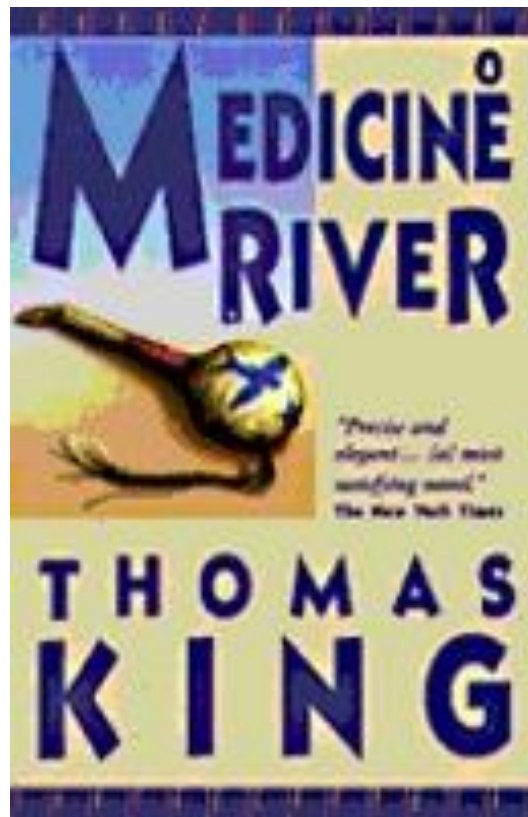


# ***Medicine River***

## **Novel Study**



**“The truth about stories is that  
that’s all we are.”**

**Thomas King**

## Novel Summary

The main character, Will, is a half-Blackfoot, half-White, whose father is a bull-rider in Calgary. He was raised by his mother in Medicine River. He moves to Toronto to become a photographer. When he goes back to Medicine River for his mother's funeral he is persuaded by Harlen Bigbear, the local jack-of-all-trades, to stay and open a photographer's shop. As the book progresses we learn more and more about his life as a child, and about what life is like in the town near a Native reserve he calls home. He joins the basketball team, creates a calendar with pictures of Native peoples, and has many other adventures as the book progresses.

## About the Author

Thomas King was born in Sacramento, CA in 1943. He is of Cherokee, German and Greek descent. King was raised in California, later becoming a photojournalist in Australia. In 1986, he completed his Ph.D. in English and American studies at the University of Utah. He has taught Native Studies at the University of California, the University of Lethbridge, and at the University of Minnesota, where he was also Chair of American Indian Studies. King is currently a professor of creative writing at the University of Guelph, west of Toronto.

King published his first novel in 1989, *Medicine River*. It marked him as an important voice in Canadian Literature. His use of humor, well-crafted dialogue (influenced by his interest in traditional oral literature), and an honest portrayal of day-to-day life of Natives marked the book as an important work of fiction. In 1990, King tried to radically redefine how theorists view Native literature. In the article, "Godzilla vs. Postcolonial," King challenges the view that all Native literature is a reaction to colonialism, rather than an extension of longer Native tradition. The term postcolonial serves, in King's opinion, to reinforce the legacy of colonization.

Thomas King also wrote a series of comic radio scripts for the CBC during the 1990s, *The Dead Dog Cafe*. He has edited a number of anthologies on Native writers.

## Recommended Grade Level: 11/12

### Themes and Issues:

- storytelling
- family and community
- memory
- clichés and stereotypes
- identity
- types of humor

# Pre Reading

1. Anticipation Guide
2. Vocabulary
3. Artifacts
4. Read Drew Hayden Taylor's "What Color is a Rose?" Discuss cultural appropriation and what makes an aboriginal novel.
5. What is Native humor? Excerpt "And Now Ladies and Gentlemen" by Don Kelly.

# During Reading

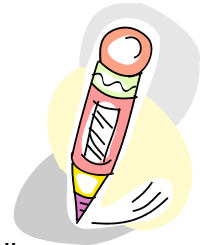
1. Dialectical Journal
2. Literature Circles Discussion Questions
3. Character T-shirt
4. Rumours Silent Write
5. Character Webs
6. Listen Sketch Draw
7. Gallery Walk
8. Additional Activities



# Post Reading

1. Frozen Moments Creative Writing
2. One Pager
3. Oral Presentation
4. Literary Essay topics

# Anticipation Guide



**Directions:** Individually read each statement below and circle agree or disagree. Then, discuss your opinions with a partner.

1. Spreading rumors is always destructive.

**Agree**

**Disagree**

2. Most people look for the negative in others rather than the positive.

**Agree**

**Disagree**

3. People should only make fun of those within their own culture.

**Agree**

**Disagree**

4. Family means a mother, father and children.

**Agree**

**Disagree**

5. Most young people who get into trouble are simply in the wrong place at the wrong time.

**Agree**

**Disagree**

6. Discussing the history of aboriginal people's experience in Canada makes most people uncomfortable.

**Agree**

**Disagree**

# Vocab

Below are some strategies for vocabulary instruction and a list of vocab words.

1. **My Notes about Vocabulary** – see worksheet
2. **Sort and Predict**– write each word on an index card and instruct the student groups to organize the words into 4-5 categories. Groups must then label the categories and then share their categories with another group. Individually, students identify words that they need more information on in order to talk about them with clarity.
3. **Vocab Cards** – students use index cards as directed below. Students can then use the cards to quiz each other and learn the new vocab.

word	definition
Write a sentence using the word.	

front

Draw a picture that illustrates the word.
---

back

4. **Vocab Acting** – Pair students up and give each group a vocab acting worksheet and a vocab word. Instruct students to define the word, use it in a sentence and then determine a way to act out the word for the rest of the class. Each group is then asked to perform their word skits, while the rest of the class guesses the word they are enacting. Write all the guessed words on the board and encourage the students to keep guessing until they have found the correct word.



# Vocab List

## Chapter 1: unpretentious “bottle” Indian

**Chapter 2:** intimidate  
solicitous  
compensate  
chiseled  
bassinet

## Chapter 4: liberation

**Chapter 5:**    straits  
                       divining rod  
                       finesse

**Chapter 6:** prominent  
elaborate  
distinctive  
oppressed  
pseudonym  
delegation

**Chapter 7:** cummerbund  
courtship  
acrid

## Chapter 8: Custer monument

**Chapter 9:** insufferable  
Inconsolable

## Chapter 10: furtive

**Chapter 11:** chinook  
charitable  
girder  
trestle  
abutment

**Chapter 13:** temperate  
admirable  
ultimatum

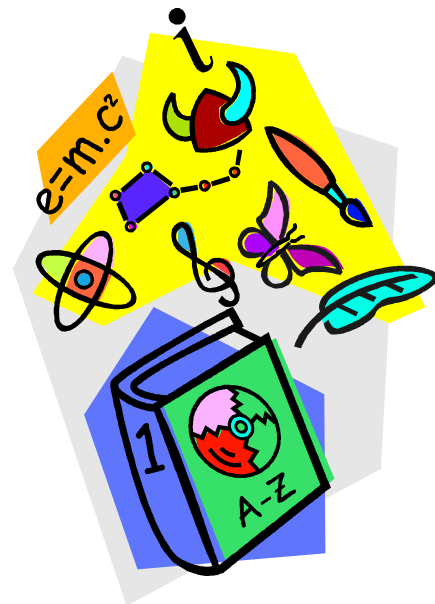
## Chapter 14: emulation anecdotes

**Chapter 15:** vicinity  
coaxing  
trestle

## Chapter 16: formidable analogy

## Chapter 17: efficiency gunwales

**Chapter 18:** contraption  
pathetic



## My Notes About Vocabulary

Word	Know it well—can explain it	Heard it or seen it before	No clue	Notes/Definitions
1.				
2.				
3.				
4.				
5.				
6.				
7.				
8.				
9.				
10.				

Questions I want to ask: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

# Vocabulary Acting Group Worksheet

Group member names (*first and last*)

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---

---

Word: \_\_\_\_\_

Part of speech: \_\_\_\_\_

Word in a telling sentence: \_\_\_\_\_

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---

Describe the act briefly (*who, what, where*): \_\_\_\_\_

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# Artifacts

**Directions:** Collect the following items and display them on tables around the room. Instruct students to look at each of the items and then make a written prediction about what the novel may be about. Share ideas and revisit the predictions after reading the novel.

**Basketball or a basketball jersey**

**Photographs and camera**

**Baby rattle**

**Powwow drum**

**Picture of Custer**

**Dear Rose letter**

**Toy plane**

**Family Portraits**



# Dialectical/Response Journal

Most students and teachers are quite familiar with response journals. Our goal in senior classes is to promote further development of critical analysis through the journal, rather than simply personal. While this connection is still important, we are encouraging students to intensify the depth of their response, pursuing an understanding of the novel's themes as well as the writer's craft.

Senior students are also encouraged to consider these journals as a means of note-taking, in that the quotations selected for response journals may be useful for incorporating into a critical essay later.

## Procedure:

- Students divide their page vertically, leaving a one-third column on the left-hand side of the paper, and two-thirds of the page available for the right-hand side.
- In the left-hand column, students record direct quotations (with page number), summaries and/or clear references to the text. In the right-hand column, students write their reactions to the selected text.
- In the right-hand column, students may make predictions, ask questions, or draw connections between the literature and their personal experiences. They are also required to analyze the work, showing how the passage chosen demonstrates the use of a literary device such as allusion, conflict, characterization, irony, tone, etc. Finally, students are encouraged to draw a connection between the passage chosen and another literary work or piece of art, music or film.

Quote and page #	Personal response to quote.



# Literature Circles

There are several ways that literature circles can be incorporated into this novel study. While younger students need the structure of clearly defined roles such as Discussion Director, Connector, Illustrator and Vocabulary Enricher, older students who are familiar with group discussion may find the roles restrictive.

A literature circle may be held at any time, whether or not the students are reading at the same pace as long as students understand that they must not give away the story. The first student simply shares a quotation selected from his or her response journal and invites contributions from the other students. Discussion can be on any issues raised by the passage, questions, personal connections, etc. Group members are expected to participate fully by taking turns, listening respectfully, asking questions, providing elaboration and encouraging others. Discussion is intended to deepen the understanding of and appreciation for the novel.

Questions may be posted in the classroom if students struggle to maintain the flow of conversation (thank you to Lee-Ann Winters of Sullivan Heights Secondary).

## Initial questions:

- Can someone summarize briefly?
- Is there any unfamiliar vocabulary?
- What questions did you have when you finished this section?
- What are the one or two most important ideas?
- What was going through your mind while you read this?
- Did anything in this section of the book surprise you?
- Did today's reading remind you of anything else you've heard or read or other real-life experiences?
- How did you feel when you were reading this part of the book?
- What are some things you think will be talked about next?

**Option:** If you are uncomfortable with having the students lead their own discussion, you may choose to provide the passage or quotation, or you may use one of the discussion questions provided.



# Discussion Questions

## Chapter 1:

1. Based on his letters, what is your first impression of Will's father?
2. Explain his mom's response.
3. Discuss the term "Bottle Indian".

## Chapter 2:

1. Will's mother said, "Every person born has a talent...stuck up there on their forehead." What is your talent?
2. Granny Pete' describes Will's father's talent. Discuss.
3. Who do you think is telling the truth about Billy? Explain why.

## Chapter 3:

1. Why does everyone listen to Harlen and approach Louise to ask her out to lunch? Why does Harlen send them?

## Chapter 4:

1. Why do you think Will waits in the hospital while Louise is giving birth?

## Chapter 1:

1. Why did Eddie throw a knife at big John?
2. Compare Harlen's description of the event "two friends...trying to kill each other" with the truth of the event.
3. Have you heard of the Bone Game before? What is our local name for it?
4. Discuss Harlen's role in the conflict between Big John and Eddie. Did Harlen help them work it out or not? What does his involvement reveal about Harlen's character?

## Chapter 6:

1. Why does Will lie about his father? Discuss the increasing complexity of his lies.
2. Does Ray commit fraud?
3. Why didn't Ray follow this up? What would you have done?

## Chapter 7:

1. Find a simile in the beginning of this chapter. Discuss its impact.
2. Sketch Harlen based on the physical description provided.
3. Why is Harlen so actively encouraging Will's return to Medicine River??
4. Why do you think everyone believes that Harlen returned to drinking?

## Chapter 8:

1. Why does Harlen think Will is depressed? What is the real issue?
2. Does Harlen really want to see the Custer monument, or is there another reason for the overnight stay?
4. Discuss Will's dream at the end of the chapter.



**Chapter 9:**

1. Do you know anyone like Clyde Whiteman? Is he unlucky?
2. Why does Harlen get so upset with Clyde? What does this scene reveal about Harlen's character?
3. Why does Harlen connect Will with Clyde?
4. Who is Howard Webster?

**Chapter 10:**

1. Discuss Harlen and Bertha's behavior.

**Chapter 11:**

1. Explain the symbolism of the Chinook.
2. Compare and contrast Joe and Harlen.

**Chapter 12:**

1. Analyze the following quote:

"But those people in Germany and Japan and France and Ottawa don't want to hear all those stories. They want to hear stories about how Indians used to be. I got some real good stories, funny ones, about how things are now, but those people say no, tell us about the olden days. So I do.

**Chapter 13:**

1. Define discretion. When should you use it and when should you avoid it?
2. Agree or disagree:

"The truth of the matter, she told me, was that marriage was always more of a burden on women than on men, that women always had to take on extra weight, while men just fell into marriage as if they were falling into bed."

**Chapter 14:**

1. "A person should do something important with their life. You should that about that." Why does David say this to Will? What is he talking about?

**Chapter 15:**

1. "Run a family portrait special, Harlen said. "Something like that will bring in a lot of people from the reserve. Family is an important thing."

Discuss the concept of family and community in Medicine River.

**Chapter 16:**

1. What does Harlen mean about Louise being formidable?

**Chapter 18:**

1. Reread the last paragraph of the novel. What is significant about this passage?

# Character T-Shirt

**Directions:** Design a t-shirt for a specific character in the novel. The shirt should reflect the character's personality and show an aspect of their individuality.

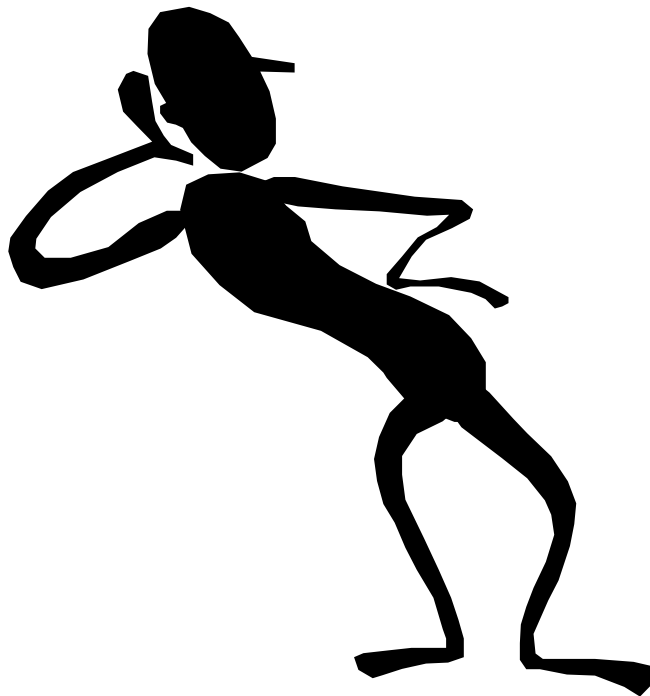


# Chapter 7 Rumours

1. In your group, look up the word rumour in the dictionary and thesaurus. Copy your definitions onto a page.
2. Brainstorm a concept map, or web, to include all your ideas that your group has about rumours.
3. In your group, discuss the following questions:
  - Where do the rumours about Harlen originate?
  - What, if anything, do rumours have to do with identity?

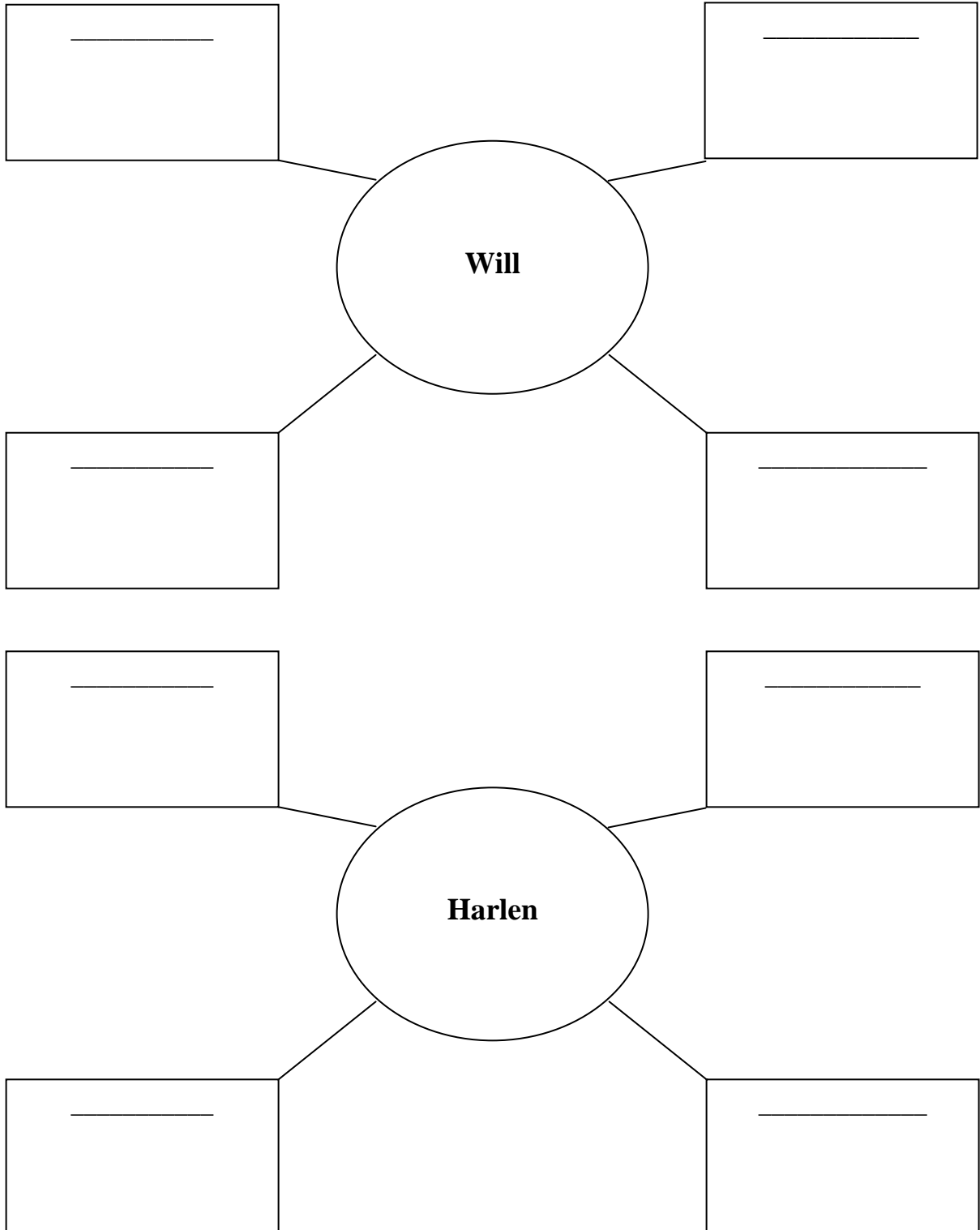
## **Silent Write:**

Think of a time when you participated in/repeated a rumour, have been a target of a rumour or know someone else who had been hurt by a rumour.

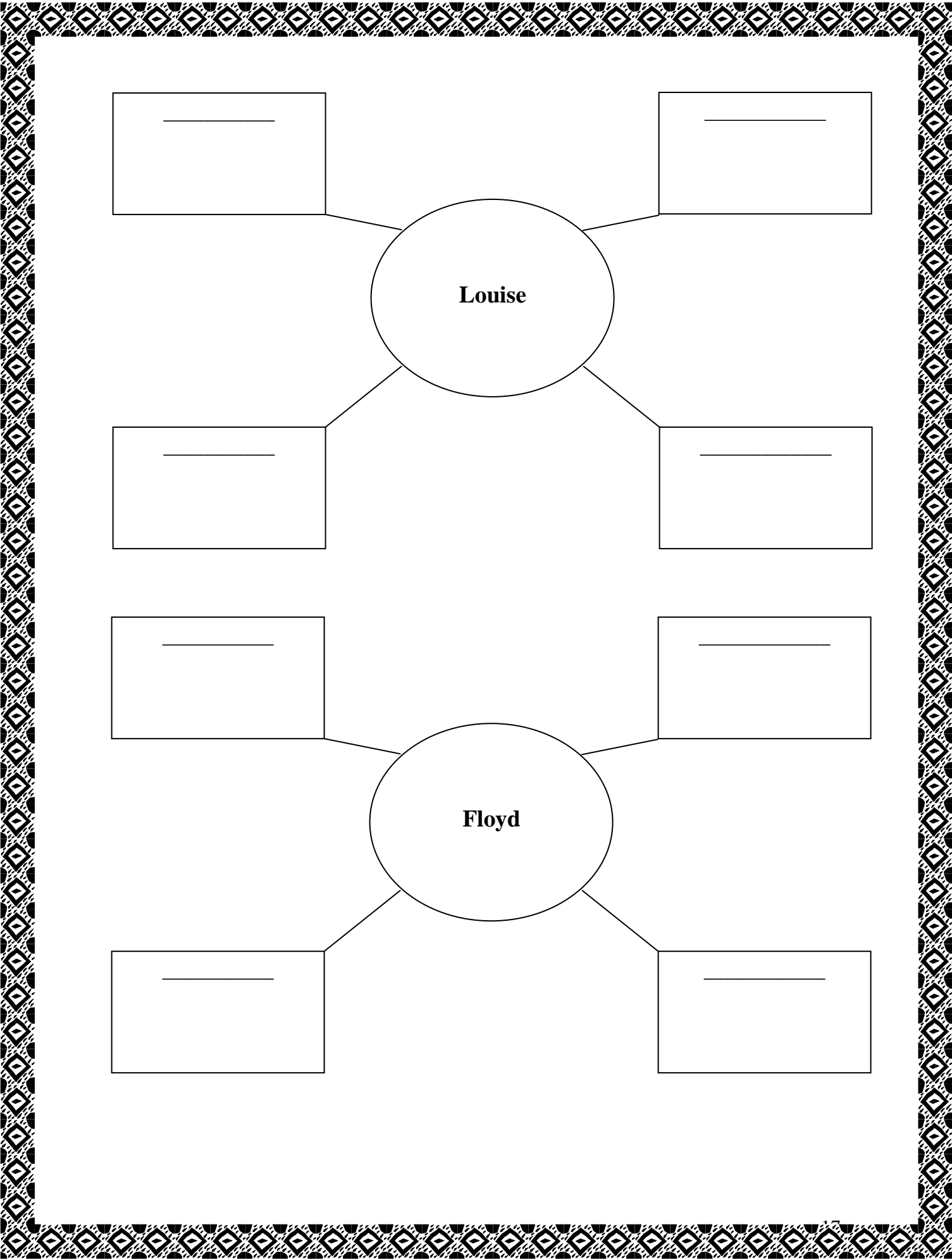


# Character Webs

**Directions:** In each box, write one adjective that describes the character and support each character trait with a direct quote from the novel.

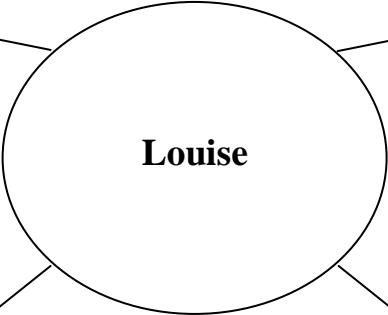






\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_



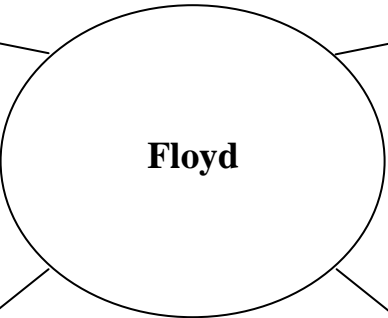
**Louise**

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

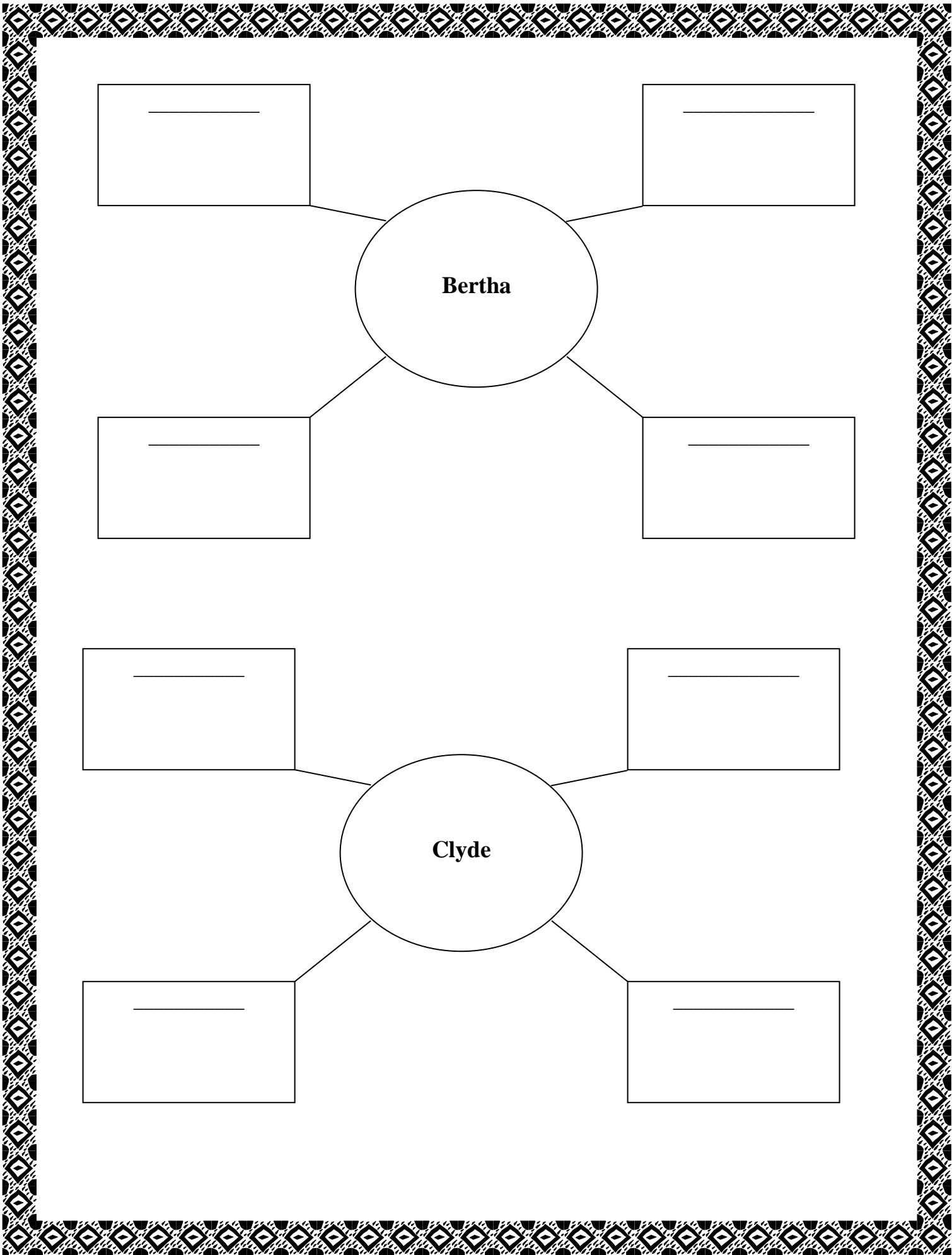
\_\_\_\_\_



**Floyd**

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_



**Bertha**

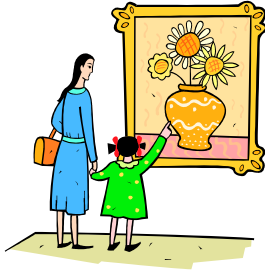
**Clyde**

# Listen, Sketch, Draw

## Directions:

1. Distribute 8 1/2 X 14 paper and instruct students to fold the sheet into 9 equal squares. See below.
2. Choose an important scene (perhaps the bridge scene in Chapter 11) Divide it into 9 sections.
3. Read each section aloud to the students. As you read, the students should sketch any aspect of what they are hearing – characters, setting, symbols, key words, phrases, etc.
4. Stop for 3-4 minutes after each section and allow the students to finish their drawing.
5. After reading the entire passage, instruct students to share what they have sketched and talk about what is important to remember from each part of the text.

1	2	3
4	5	6
7	8	9



# Gallery Walk

**Directions:** Write one quote on the top of each piece of chart paper and post papers around the classroom. Give each student a different colored felt and instruct students to stroll around the room, responding to each quote. Students may make predictions, connections, questions, comments, etc. Encourage students to read and add to what others have written. When everyone has had a chance to respond, have a class discussion about the issues that these quotes bring up.

## Quotes:

"Helping was Harlen's specialty. He was like a spider on a web. (Ch. 3)

I began thinking about Louise... clean and strong... baby and all." (Ch. 3)

"Nobody calls me an apple." (Ch. 5)

"I suppose if you don't like someone, you're willing to go looking for faults that most people wouldn't ever see." (Ch.6)

"Why do you think he does it, Will?"....

"Just bad luck, like you said"

"Nothing to do with luck, Will." (Ch. 9)

"People who keep secrets... generally got something to hide." (Ch. 13)

"That's just the way things are." (Ch 18)



# Additional Activities

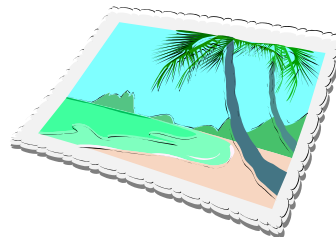
1. Pretend you are Rose and respond to Will's father in a letter.



2. Draw a story map of the basketball road trip.



3. Create a postcard from James to his brother Will.



# Frozen Moments Creative Writing

What happens when you freeze a moment in time? – people see things differently, both what is in the photograph and what is not. This assignment will help you explore the concept of perception, identity and family – issues that are important in *Medicine River*.

1. Look at the photograph and read the poem “Getting Down to It” by Bronwen Wallace.
2. Discuss the images and themes that the poem presents. Does the photograph add to the understanding of the poem? How?
3. Sometimes a picture tells us more about people by what it doesn’t show than by what it does show. Bring in one or two of your favorite photographs from different stages of your life and complete the following activity:
  - a. Look at your picture and list everything you can see (pet, family members, eating cake, no one smiling, etc.)
  - b. Now write a list of everything you can’t see in the picture (I am not talking to my brother because he called me names, my cat scratched me, etc.)

What does this suggest about perceptions?

4. Now read the poem, “The Photograph 1969,” by Katy Barber.
5. On a piece of paper, make a table. On one side of the table, list everything you can “see” by reading the poem; on the other side of the table, list things that you cannot see. Discuss the ability to create images with words instead of with pictures. How does Thomas King create “photos” and identities in *Medicine River*?
6. Finally, write your own poem about a photograph you treasure or a photograph you wish you had. See the attached examples, “Like the Wings of an Angel,” and “Dad.” Try to be honest about yourself and write from your heart.

# One-Pager

A one-pager is a written and graphic interpretation of what you have just read presented on a single sheet of paper. It may be literal (based strictly on the facts presented) or it may be a symbolic representation of the piece. The one pager helps you visualize what you are reading.

## Guidelines

- Use standard (8 1/2 x 11) unlined paper.
- Fill the entire page.
- Written work must be in ink (no pencil) or typed.
- Use colored markers for illustrations (unless black and white would be more in keeping with the theme).
- Include ALL of the following (arranged on the page any way you choose):
  - Title and author
  - Three or more excerpts from the reading (passages you like or think are especially important)
  - A personal response to each passage you selected (an interpretation/explanation of its significance)
  - One or more graphic representations (illustrations, magazine pictures, or computer-generated graphics that are related to the story and to the passage you selected)
  -
- Add a border—and you're done!



# Oral Presentation



Choose a passage from the novel *Medicine River* to read aloud to the class. You may select a short chapter or part of a chapter that you think is important to the novel as a whole.

Before you begin reading, identify the passage that you are reading – chapter and page number. Also, set up your reading by providing a context for your audience. – let them know what precedes your passage.

After reading your selection, explain to the class your reasons for choosing this particular passage and explain its significance in **a 3-5 minute presentation**. You may use the following focus questions as a guideline, but please do not simply read and answer them aloud.

1. Why did you choose this particular passage?
2. What occurs after your selection? Why is it important?
3. Does the author reveal anything new about the characters in your selection?
4. Pay attention to the narrator of the story. What does the author reveal about the narrator in this passage?
5. Is there a strong focus on or development of a particular theme in this passage?
6. Do you notice anything interesting about word choice, images, character names, etc.?
7. Can you point out any literary techniques – irony, satire, metaphors, allusions, etc.?



# Literary Essay

Senior English demands a focus on theme and the literary essay. This format for a literary essay offers a fantastic way to include a formal written component that rises naturally from the response journal and the group discussion.

All the work has already been done: students bring their novels and their response journals to class. They write an in-class essay, integrating the quotations from their response journals, and using their writing as the basis for the examination of the novel's themes. By this stage, they will have analyzed theme through their response journals and literature circle discussion will have enhanced their understanding. The timed write aspect should not be undue pressure, as all the material they need is at their fingertips: they simply choose the quotations and responses that support the evident theme.

Below are some other essay topics to consider:

1. How does knowledge of culture help you access humor?
2. Discuss how memories shape identity.
3. Is *Medicine River* an aboriginal novel? Why or why not?

