



Jean Lee Latham's  
*Carry On, Mr. Bowditch*

Questions for Socratic Discussion  
by Missy Andrews





TABLE OF CONTENTS:  
*CARRY ON, MR. BOWDITCH*



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Quick Card	98
Questions about Structure: Setting	99
Questions about Structure: Characters	101
Questions about Structure: Conflict and Plot	104
Questions about Structure: Theme	107
Questions about Style	108
Questions about Context	109
Story Charts	110

## QUICK CARD



<b><i>Reference</i></b>	<i>Carry On, Mr. Bowditch</i> by Jean Lee Latham ISBN-10: 0618250743 ISBN-13: 978-0618250745
<b><i>Plot</i></b>	Young Nathaniel Bowditch wants to be a Harvard man but cannot afford it. He works hard and perseveres to gain an education and become an accomplished navigator.
<b><i>Setting</i></b>	Salem, Massachusetts in the 1770s. Sea voyages to and from Salem. The American Revolution. The boyhood and young manhood of Nat Bowditch.
<b><i>Characters</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Nathaniel Bowditch, the protagonist</li><li>• Nat's family: Mother, Father, Granny, Mary, Hab, Lizza, and William</li><li>• Tom Perry, a sailor from whom Nat bought expectations</li><li>• Master Watson, Nat's schoolteacher</li><li>• Dr. Holyoke and Dr. Bentley, educated men whom Nat admired</li><li>• Ben Meeker, and old man who was becalmed as a youth and despaired</li><li>• Sam Smith, a sailor who teaches Nat to sail by ash breeze</li></ul>
<b><i>Conflict</i></b>	Man vs. Himself Man vs. Fate/ God
<b><i>Theme</i></b>	"Sailing by Ash Breeze" Fortitude and Diligence Perseverance and Hope
<b><i>Literary Devices</i></b>	Symbolism: "becalmed"

## QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: SETTING



### Where does this story happen? (1)

The majority of the story takes place at the turn of the 18th century in Salem, Massachusetts, a seafaring community. This is a real place and a real time in history, making this a work of historical fiction. The sea, too, provides a rich setting since the story ranges with Bowditch in his travels to foreign ports. This element of the sea provides immediate conflict for the story since so many of the characters make their living seafaring. Navigational techniques were primitive, and many lost their lives due to errors in mathematical calculations contemporary manuals. The weather, varied and unpredictable, plays a large role in the story's atmosphere as well, producing fear in the characters and increasing the background conflict of man vs. nature.

Even so, the mood of the story is hopeful. America has just won her independence from Great Britain in a David and Goliath contest of strength. Americans hold vigorous confidence in their leaders and a youthful hope for the future. In addition, the industriousness of the main character, Nat, contributes to the story's feeling of optimism and possibility. The people of Salem are patriots, seafaring folks, laborers, educated men, businessmen, husbands, fathers, brothers, sons, wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters. Although oppressed by hardship, they are spirited. They are common men with uncommon courage.

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

The story begins in 1779, four years into America's war for independence. America is making a place for herself among other nations, proving her character through that of her finest men. The war has made supplies scarce, and money isn't worth the paper upon which it is printed. The economy would worsen before it improved. "...one hundred paper dollars would not buy a dollar's worth of food...two thousand dollars would not buy a bushel of corn" (p. 29). Even after the peace is proclaimed in 1783, hard times persist. "But times didn't get better. Prices went right on climbing" (p. 32). This period was a time of severe want.

The story chronicles Nat Bowditch's growing up years, beginning when he is only six and following him into his thirties. Nat's dreams of being a "Harvard Man" are realized in a roundabout series of Providential events. His youthful hopes and expectations lend hope to the mood of the story.

The idea of the common man advancing himself, that is the "American Dream," was developing. The spunk and ingenuity of the nation was forged in lives like Nathaniel Bowditch's.



## QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CHARACTERS



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

The protagonist of the story is its namesake, Nathaniel Bowditch. Nat Bowditch is an historical figure. The story, historical fiction, takes the basic events of his real life and informs them with human drama. The landmark events in the story, his father's death, his apprenticeship, his self-instruction and study, his scholarly accomplishments, his honorary memberships and degrees, his marriages and his work in the field of navigation and astronomy are all historical.

### A list of adjectives describing Nathaniel. (3f)

Diligent	Deliberate
Conscientious	Hopeful
Tenacious	Sympathetic
Inquisitive	Intelligent
Passionate	Patient
Courageous	Gentle
Self-controlled	Humble
Strong willed	Inventive
Mathematical	Industrious

It's important to note that Nat is an American. He and other men like him begin to build the image of the American for the foreigner. He is a self-made man, as educated and intelligent as a college man, as humble and industrious as a field hand.

Extremely gifted in mathematics, Nat hopes to go to Harvard. Yet his father's financial problems cause him to be apprenticed as a chandler. Although this seems a setback for him, it proves providential. He begins his nautical career here. At the chandlery, he pursues his interest in mathematics, taking advantage of his time and resources (a library made available to him by educated friends in the community) to advance his knowledge. In addition to nautical knowledge, he gains experience in surveying and navigation. Nat longs to improve himself and sets about it in earnest. He has an insatiable curiosity of mind.

Nat was pulled from school at an early age, yet he earns an honorary degree from Harvard. Because of his contributions to the science of navigation, he is also invited to become a member of the Royal Astronomers of England. All this he accomplished alone through diligent study and personal effort. Not only did Nat educate himself, he also offered the knowledge he gained to the men who served under him, believing that any man can learn. Consequently, we see Nat's education in his abilities, achievements, teaching, publications, editing work, and his awards.

Even so, Nat's not self-aware. To others, he declares himself a shipman. He always sees himself humbly because of his path to greatness. By others, he is called an astronomer, a scientist, and a mathematician.

### **Who else is the story about?**

Other characters include:

- Mary, Nat's eldest sister
- Hab, Nat's older brother
- Lizza, Nat's older sister
- Sammy, Nat's brother who is later lost at sea
- William, Nat's little brother
- Granny, Nat's paternal grandmother
- Mother
- Father
- Tom Perry, the sailor from whom Nat bought expectations as a young man
- Master Watson, Nat's elementary schoolmaster (antagonistic)
- Dr. Holyoke, educated friend of Nat and founder of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in Boston
- Dr. Bentley, new pastor of East Church, who knew 20 languages. The smartest man in Salem
- Ben Meeker, an old man at Ropes and Hodges who was "becalmed" as a youth through apprenticeship. He is the voice of despair and hopelessness. He offers Nat only discouragement (antagonistic)
- Sam Smith, an encourager who tells Nat to sail by ash breeze. He teaches Nat all he knows of sailing, ships, navigation (logkeeping), and surveying



- Nathan Reed, apothecary, inventor, and Harvard graduate
- Mr. Jordy, a friend who helps Nat learn French
- Captain Prince, Nat’s friend and the captain under whom he sails when he begins to take lunars and edit Moore’s *Navigation*.
- Lem Harvey, one of the uneducated and malcontent ship hands Nat teaches to take Lunars.
- Mr. Blunt, a scientist and publisher who wishes to include Nat’s work in his American navigation book.
- Elizabeth Boardman, the girl with “eyes in the back of her heart” with whom Nat falls in love. She eventually becomes Nat’s first wife.
- Polly, Nat’s second wife who was Elizabeth’s cousin.
- Mrs. Boardman, Elizabeth’s mother and Polly’s aunt.

No single character opposes Nat. Even so, a few characters represent obstacles of some sort to him. For example, Nat meets Ben Meeker at Ropes and Hodges. Like Nat, he too was apprenticed as a young man. He too had hoped to go to school. Unlike Nat, he gave himself to self-pity and blamed others for his lack of advancement and learning. He calls himself “becalmed.” Nat is tempted to pity himself when he hears Ben’s story, especially when Ben discourages him from his dreams. Consequently, Ben serves as an antagonist.

Lem Harvey enters the story in an antagonistic role, but becomes a valuable friend and shipman as a result of Nat’s influence.

The real antagonists in this story are not human. One is natural and the other supernatural. Nat’s apprenticeship and the circuitous route by which it led to his education clearly suggest the work of a Providential Planner who knows His long range plans for Nat’s knowledge. Nat cannot see that far. He isn’t aware that his work in the chandlery and his time aboard ship, even his personal experience with his father in his own family, would conspire to direct him to his contributions in navigation. A normal education through the normal routes as the son of a wealthy landowner wouldn’t have done this for Nat. The other antagonistic force is represented by the sea and the weather that plays upon it. Neither Providence nor Nature are truly antagonistic to Nat. They only seem to oppose him in his objects. In fact, they are the pressures that propel Nat to the very things he most desires.

## QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CONFLICT AND PLOT



### **What does the protagonist want? Does he attempt to overcome something? (5a,b)**

This story is about the protagonist, Nat, trying to become educated in the face of poverty and apprenticeship.

Nat must overcome disappointment, financial poverty, family obligations, discouragement, self-pity, and natural disasters to reach his goal.

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

Because of damaging storms and insufficient navigational information, Nat's father loses his fortune when his ship is wrecked (Man vs. Nature).

Unable to recover from his dire financial situation, Nat's father indentures Nat to a chandler, making it impossible for Nat to enter Harvard and pursue a degree (Man vs. Man and Man vs. God).

### **What other problems are there in the story? (7)**

In addition to Nat's primary desire to obtain an education, Nat's experiences with the sea and his relationships with other characters who have lost family and loved ones to the sea inspire him with urgent desire to remedy the navigational errors in the manuals. This spurs him to work harder and longer, to produce an accurate manual for navigation for the "man behind the mast."

Nat's personal relationships add drama and conflict to the story. His sister Mary loses her husband to a fever after a sea accident. Nat loses his brother, Sammy, to the sea. His wife, Elizabeth Boardman, lost her father to the sea, and later dies while Nat is on a voyage. In addition, Nat loses one of his own sailing vessels to shipwreck (Man vs. Fate, Man vs. Nature).

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

Major events that take place in the story as a result of the conflict include:

Nat begins to sail by Ash Breeze. He keeps notebooks to educate himself and studies incessantly. He learns navigation, surveying, chandlery, algebra, mathematics, and languages.

At home, Nat begins to fall in love with Elizabeth Boardman. This increases the conflict when he goes to sea.

Nat is invited to use the library of the Salem Philosophical Society with no fees. These are the books that came from the ship Nat had bought an interest in so long ago (again underlining the providential elements of the story).

Lizza dies from a fall. Nat comforts himself with more study.

Elizabeth's father dies.

Nat determines to stay with the Hodges when his indenture runs out.

Nat does a survey job (land navigation).

Nat's brother dies at sea.

Nat takes his first post as a berth clerk on Prince's ship, the *Henry*. He begins to teach the men the art of navigation. He begins his book for the "man at the mast."

Nat finds mistakes in Moore's *Navigation*.

Nat develops a new way to take a lunar.

Nat takes a second voyage on the *Astrea* with Captain Prince to Manila. Nat teaches the men, taming those who would stir up trouble with education, engaging their minds.

Mr. Blunt approaches Nat about the errors in Moore's *Navigation*. He wants to include Nat's new method for taking lunars in his American Navigation book.

Nat joins the Philosophical Library formally.

Nat marries Elizabeth Boardman.

Nat goes to sea again. While away, Elizabeth dies of consumption.

Nat is elected Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. This is an honor for a scholar of merit.

Nat is chosen to sail the *Astrea* with Prince to Batavia.

Mr. Blunt engages Nat to edit the 2nd edition of Moore's that he is publishing.

Nat's brothers Hab and William are lost at sea. Lem, too, is lost at sea. This increases urgent need for good navigation book. (Polly articulates this on page 210.)

Nat marries Polly.

Nat continues work on his navigation book.

Nat invests in a sealing ship, which is lost at sea.

Nat finishes the book and sends it to Mr. Blunt and the East India Marine Society of Salem.

Nat's book is printed in England.

Nat goes to Sumatra as master of a new ship, the *Putnam*. He's a Captain now.

In Boston, he attends Harvard's Commencement by chance. There, he finds himself awarded an honorary degree for his work in the science of navigation.

**How is the main conflict solved? (9)**

Nat finally gets what he's after, but not in the way in which he had planned. Nat gets his Harvard degree without ever attending a single Harvard class. The circumstances of his life, far from keeping him from arriving at his destination, steer him to his port, making him a blessing to others all along the way. His education becomes a treasure not only to him, but also to the world.

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

In the book's final pages, Lem Harvey, believed lost at sea, returns safely as a result not only of Nat's book, but also his personal work educating Lem. Nat's work is applied, saving many lives, and Nat is satisfied. The characters with whom he lives and loves profit from his life's work.

**NOTES:**

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## QUESTIONS ABOUT CONTEXT



### Who is the author? (18)

Author Jean Lee Latham's life spanned the 20th century. Born in 1902, Latham grew up in West Virginia to attend West Virginia Wesleyan College where she earned her A.B. in 1925. In the business world, Latham held jobs as a journalist, editor, playwright, and educator. During WWII, Latham worked for the U.S. Signal Corps Inspection Agency, teaching electronics, radio maintenance, and repair. Her work earned her a Silver Wreath for civilian service from the U.S. War Department. Latham began her writing career in earnest in 1945, publishing biographical stories for children in installment magazines. *Carry On, Mr. Bowditch* was one of more than 30 stories she wrote for children. It received the notable Newbery Medal in 1956. Mrs. Latham died in 1995 at the age of 93.

### NOTES:

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## STORY CHARTS

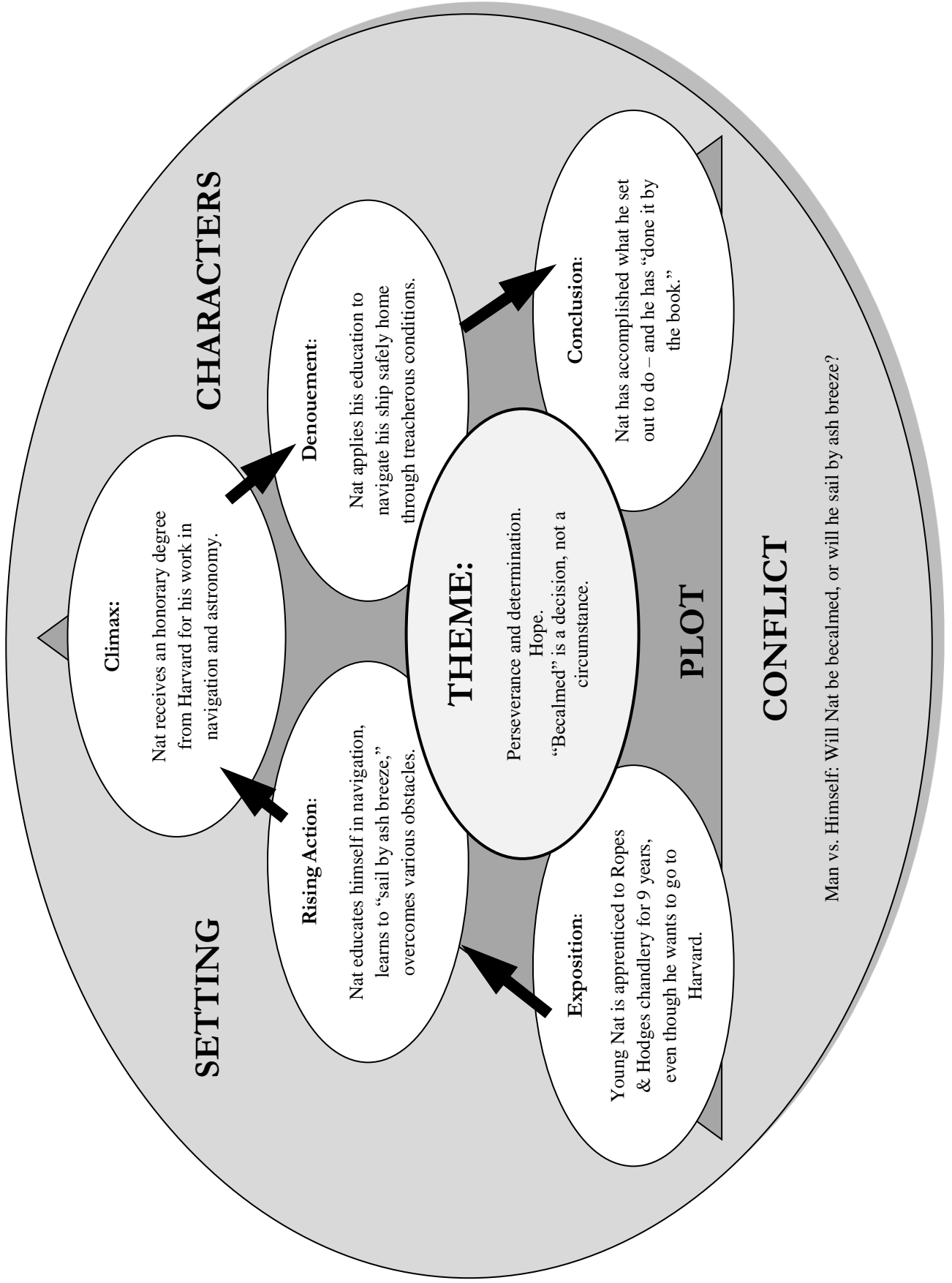


The following pages contain story charts of the type presented in the live seminar *Teaching the Classics*. As is made clear in that seminar, a separate story chart may be constructed for each of the conflicts present in a work of fiction. In particular, the reader's decision as to the *climax* and central *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.



# Carry On, Mr. Bowditch by Jean Lee Latham: Story Chart





*Carry On, Mr. Bowditch* by Jean Lee Latham: Blank Story Chart

