

# The Great Fire (Excerpt)

By Jim Murphy

It was Sunday and an unusually warm ending for October eighth, so Daniel "Peg Leg" Sullivan left his stifling little house on the West Side of Chicago and went to visit neighbors. One of his stops was at the shingled cottage of Patrick and Catherine O'Leary. The one-legged Sullivan remembered getting to the O'Learys' house at around eight o'clock, but left after only a few minutes because the O'Leary family was already in bed. Both Patrick and Catherine had to be up very early in the morning: he to set off for his job as a laborer; she to milk their five cows and then deliver the milk to neighbors. . . .

Fifteen minutes later, Sullivan decided to go home. . . . [He sat down to adjust his leg.] It was while pushing himself up that Sullivan first saw the fire—a single tongue of flame out the side of the O'Learys' barn.

Sullivan didn't hesitate a second. "FIRE! FIRE! FIRE!" he shouted as loudly as he could. . . .

The building was already burning fiercely . . .

The barn's loft held over three tons of timothy hay, delivered earlier that day. Flames from the burning hay pushed against the roof and beams . . .

Source: Murphy, J. (1995). *The great fire*. New York, NY: Scholastic.

**[FOR TEACHER  
REFERENCE ONLY]**

**SAMPLE THINK-ALOUD**

Lesson 2. Noticing Key Details:  
Thinking Aloud

**The Great Fire**

By Jim Murphy

*The title is a **call to attention**.*

*So this will be about a fire and a great one, the great one. I like the idea of learning more about disasters. It's an important topic. "The Great" is an intensifier, and I should notice it because it's a **call to attention**.*

*The title is also a **direct statement** because we have a definite article and a judgment. If something is called "The Great" something, then it's being named, and I want to notice names. I happen to know that this fire is the one in Chicago. I also could figure that out from the back cover. But I am wondering what angle Mr. Murphy will take. Lots of rules of notice in play already!*

*OK, I want to go slow now. We know that beginnings are always important and have a **privileged position** and give privileged information. This is a **call to attention**.*

**It was Sunday and an unusually warm ending for October eighth, so Daniel "Peg Leg"**

*I know names are important, especially nicknames. Why this nickname? One leg? That is another **call to attention**: Having one leg is a rupture from the norm.*

**Sullivan left his stifling**

*Connects to title, heat. So this is a **call to attention** using repetition or connection providing a kind of throughline—that is, an idea that runs through the text, is repeated, and connects and develops other ideas.*

**little house**

*So he's poor?*

**on the West Side of Chicago**

*Confirms this is about the Great Chicago Fire and where it started.*

Tell students to mark this call to attention with one of their colored pens or pencils and to label it as "Title, always a call to attention."

Tell students to mark this with the same colored pen or pencil as "Intensifier: call to attention."

Tell students to mark this with a different colored pen or pencil for direct statements and label it as "Naming: direct statement of evaluation."

Tell students to mark this with their colored pencil for calls to attention and label it "Beginnings: call to attention through a privileged position."

Tell students to mark this with a new color and to label it "Unusual: rule of rupture." They could label it as "Names and Nicknames: call to attention" and underline it with the colored pencil for call to attention as well.

Tell students to underline this text with the color for calls to attention and to label it as "Repetition, throughline connections: calls to attention."

Tell students that it's call to attention when details of setting are mentioned, and readers are being asked to infer what that setting might reveal about character and how the setting might encourage or constrain certain behaviors.

Tell students to underline Chicago and note "Repetition, throughline: call to attention."

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## SAMPLE THINK-ALLOUD (CONT.)

and went to visit neighbors. One of his stops was at the shingled cottage

Tell students to underline shingled cottage and note: "Throughline/invitation to infer: call to attention."

*Wood, and we know wood burns. This is another call to attention using repetition and connection.*

of Patrick and Catherine O'Leary.

Tell students to underline O'Leary and to note "Names/invitations to infer about character: calls to attention and to underline as well with a new color and label: 'Activation of prior knowledge: rule of reader's response.'" You might also remind students that even the most expert readers don't notice everything—if they notice half of what an author wants them to notice, then they will be very successfully reading.

*Sullivan and O'Leary—both Irish. This calls to attention names as well as connections. I bet they are in the Irish part of town. I know that the Irish came to this country after the potato famine, and often lived together in the same parts of cities like New York, Boston, and Chicago. They were hard workers and famous for their fighting in the Civil War. And O'Leary: O'Leary's cow, who kicked over the lantern! I've heard about this! This is my reader's response: a personal connection to prior knowledge.*

The one-legged

Tell students to underline one-legged with the colors both for rupture and for call to attention and to label it "Unusual: rupture" and "Repetition, connection to throughline: call to attention."

*One-legged—so I'm right about the nickname. That's unusual. Given the time period, could he be a Civil War veteran? So it's a rupture and an invitation to infer. It's also another call to attention using repetition and connection.*

Sullivan remembered getting to the O'Learys' house at around eight o'clock,

Tell students to underline remembered and label it as "Reference to pretext: call to attention."

*Ah, so someone asked him his memories after the fire—reporters? Investigators? This call to attention is a reference to the pretext—that is, a reference to something that must have happened before the text begins in order for the text to make sense.*

but left after only a few minutes because the O'Leary family was already in bed.

Tell students to underline eight and already in bed and label the text as "Unusual: rupture."

*This is a rupture: Eight is pretty early for bed. They must be hard workers.*

Both Patrick and Catherine had to be up very early in the morning: he to set off for his job as a laborer; she to milk their five cows

Tell students to underline with the colors for both reader response and call to attention and label the text as "Activation of prior knowledge: reader response" and "Character activity: call to attention about character."

*There's that cow. Another reader's response to prior knowledge, plus a call to attention: a character inference about these two being working class.*

and then deliver the milk to neighbors. . . . Fifteen minutes later, Sullivan decided to go home. . . . [He sat down to adjust his leg.] It was while pushing himself up that Sullivan first saw the fire—a single tongue of flame

(Continued)

## SAMPLE THINK-ALOUD (CONT.)

*I have to notice all figures of speech, comparisons and contrasts, and exaggerations in this case as they are all **calls to attention**.*

Tell students to underline with the color for call to attention and label the text as "Figures of speech, comparisons, hyperbole: all calls to attention."

shooting out the side of the O'Learys' barn. Sullivan didn't hesitate a second. "FIRE! FIRE! FIRE!"

*Here the **calls to attention** are repetition and emotional charge.*

Tell students to underline with the color for call to attention and note: "Repetition, exclamation marks, emotional charge: all calls to attention."

he shouted as loudly as he could. . . .

*Another **call to attention**: intensity.*

Tell students to underline with the color for call to attention and note: "Intensity: call to attention."

The building was already burning fiercely . . .

*And another **call to attention**: repetition, emotional language.*

Tell students to underline with the color for call to attention and note: "Repetition and intense emotional language: calls to attention."

The barn's loft held over three tons of timothy hay, delivered earlier that day.

*Hay would burn like . . . well, wildfire! That connection is a **call to attention**. I should notice causality.*

Tell students to underline with the color for call to attention and note: "Connection, throughlines, articulated or implied causality: all calls to attention."

Flames from the burning hay pushed against the roof and beams . . .

*Here's a **call to attention** that is intensely visual and personal—we know the people involved. Now, I notice this is a story. It involves real people. I'm wondering at the pace. It meanders. Why did Murphy start this way? To get us into the personal aspects and effects?*

Tell students to underline this phrase with the color for call to attention and note: "Visual; personal connection: calls to attention." Encourage students to mark this as well as a reader's response if they have an intense visualization or personal reaction to the scene.

Source: Murphy, J. (1995). *The great fire*. New York, NY: Scholastic.