



Evaline Ness's
Sam, Bangs & Moonshine

Questions for Socratic Discussion
by Missy Andrews



TABLE OF CONTENTS:
SAM, BANGS & MOONSHINE



Quick Card	32
Questions about Structure: Setting	33
Questions about Structure: Characters	35
Questions about Structure: Conflict and Plot	37
Questions about Structure: Theme	39
Questions about Style	41
Questions about Context	42
Story Charts	43

QUICK CARD



Reference	<i>Sam, Bangs & Moonshine</i> by Evaline Ness ISBN-10: 0805003150 ISBN-13: 978-0805003154
Plot	Young, motherless Samantha is left alone daily with only her wild imagination and her pet cat, Bangs, to entertain her. Her neighbor friend, Thomas, relishes and believes her fantastic stories. Her fisherman father encourages her to forsake such “moonshine” for reality and truthfulness. Still, Sam persists in telling whoppers. When her falsehoods nearly cost Thomas and Bangs their lives, she learns a mighty lesson.
Setting	A small island near a large harbor. A fishing village.
Characters	Samantha – the daughter of a New England fisherman, this motherless child invents wild stories to comfort and entertain herself in her father’s absence. Samantha’s father – a New England fisherman whose wife’s death has left him solely responsible for rearing his small, imaginative daughter. His gentle yet stern manner leads his daughter to thoughtfully contemplate her lying and its gravity. Bangs – Sam’s loyal and wise cat Thomas – Sam’s faithful, believing friend
Conflict	Man vs. Nature Man vs. Himself
Theme	– Lies are dangerous and harmful to you and others. The truth, however plain or painful, is always better. – Lying vs. Imagination – Moonshine/ Flummadiddle
Literary Devices	Imagery Irony

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: SETTING



In what country or region does the story happen? (1a) Does the story happen in one spot, or does the action unfold across a wide area? (1c)

The story takes place on an island near a large harbor in a fishing village.

What is the mood or atmosphere of the place where the story happens? Is it cheerful and sunny, or dark and bleak? (1d)

The atmosphere, influenced by the unpredictable and somewhat violent weather patterns, is foreboding and brooding.

Is the setting a real or imaginary place? If it's imaginary, is it subject to the same physical laws as our world is? (1g)

Although the author never names her town, countless towns like it exist both in New England and Canada.

Among what kinds of people is the story set? What is their economic class? How do they live? Are they hopeful? Downtrodden? Depressed? Why? (1h)

The people in this town work hard for their living. These old salts are realists, who pit their strength and wit against nature regularly. They haven't the luxury of vain imaginations since their livelihood depends upon overcoming the realities that nature deals them.

When does the story happen? (2) How long a period of time does the story cover? A few minutes? A single day? A whole lifetime? (2b)

The story covers a single day in Sam's life.

In what time of life for the main characters do the events occur? Are they children? Are they just passing into adulthood? Are they already grownups? Does setting the story in this particular time of the characters' lives make the story better? (2e)

In particular, the story takes place in Sam's childhood. This is significant, since Sam's fertile and unrestrained imagination is indicative of childhood.

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CHARACTERS



Who is the story about? (3)

The protagonist is Sam, the daughter of a New England fisherman. A motherless child, she invents wild stories to comfort and entertain herself in her father's absence.

What does the protagonist look like (hair, eyes, height, build, etc.)? (3d)

She is small, perhaps 7 or 8 years old. She carries more responsibility than most her age.

Is the character kind, gentle, stern, emotional, harsh, logical, rational, compassionate or exacting...? Make up a list of adjectives that describe the protagonist. What words or actions on the protagonist's part make you choose the adjectives you do? (3f)

Sam is: imaginative, sad, creative, heedless, isolated, lonely, fanciful, self-absorbed, and shortsighted at various points in the story.

What does the character say about herself to other people? (3j)

Sam says she is "special." She claims to have a mermaid mother. She fancies herself a magic carpet rider and believes her pet cat, Bangs, can talk.

What do other characters think or say about her? (3k)

Thomas, her wealthy and naïve neighbor friend, thinks she's all she claims to be. He believes her utterly. Her father says she's full of moonshine and flumadiddle.

Is the character a member of any particular religious or social group? If so, what do you know about this group? What motivates this group? What do its members feel to be important? (3l)

Since her father's livelihood and safety depend on clear thinking (i.e. realism), truth is most important to her father.

What does the protagonist think is the most important thing in life? How do you know this? Does the protagonist say this out loud, or do his thoughts and actions give him away? (3m)

Sam considers her imagination, her dad, and her pet cat, Bangs, most important.

Do the protagonist’s priorities change over the course of the story? In what way? What causes this change? Is it a change for the better, or for the worse? (3n)

Over the course of the story, Sam’s priorities change. People become more important than her daydreams. Since their well-being depends upon her truthfulness, the truth becomes more valuable to Sam, as well.

Is the protagonist a sympathetic character? Do you identify with him and hope he will succeed? Do you pity him? Do you scorn or despise his weakness in some way? Why? (3q)

The child is a sympathetic character. Readers pity her loneliness and understand her need to create a fantasy world.

Who else is the story about? (4)

Thomas – Sam’s wealthy and naïve neighbor friend. Younger than Sam, he believes everything Sam says and idolizes her.

Bangs – Sam’s pet cat. Sam is sure he speaks to her, sometimes comforting, sometimes upbraiding, but always loving. Bangs acts like Sam’s conscience.

Father – A New England fisherman and a single father, he is both gentle and stern. He wants Sam to speak sense instead of moonshine. Capable and strong, he saves Thomas.

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QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CONFLICT AND PLOT



What does the main character want? (5)

Sam wants:

- To entertain and amuse herself in her loneliness
- To “be” someone special
- To rise above and beyond her condition and circumstances
- To escape reality
- To achieve freedom, peace, contentment, relationship

Why can't she have it? (6)

In her attempts to escape her loneliness, Sam fails to appreciate the good in her life. She pities herself. (Man vs. Self)

No one can escape reality. Despite her attempts to live in a fairytale, Sam cannot evade the real circumstances of her life or the real consequences of her actions. (Man vs. God or Fate)

She won't be honest with herself or others. Her lies lead Thomas into danger and produce the plot-driving action of the story. (Man vs. Self, Man vs. Man)

What other problems exist in the story? (7)

The conflict that propels the plot is Sam's lie to Thomas. She sends him out to a rock to find her “mermaid” mother just before high tide submerges it. Her cat stalks off after him. Both are endangered when a storm blows up. Will Sam's father reach them in time to save them? This crisis presents Man vs. Man and Man vs. Nature conflicts.

Are there other characters who don't understand the protagonist's motives and ambitions? (7d)

Sam's father struggles against her actions, although he tries to understand and must guess at her loneliness. Thomas probably can't understand her reticence to befriend him. He seems to live a “normal” life (i.e. two parents, a big house on the hill, a new bike). He probably can't fathom Sam's loss and loneliness. Even Sam herself may not understand

why she does what she does. Most children aren't self-aware enough to consider their deeper intentions. They just act and react in response to their unnamed feelings.

Are there larger issues, (a larger context or frame) in which conflict exists and forms a background for the story (A war setting, for example)? (7f)

The conflict within Sam's heart (her dissatisfaction with reality) is the conflict beneath her lie to Thomas and his ensuing danger.

What happens in the story? (8)

Sam's lie sends Thomas into danger.

Sam ignores the implications of her lie at first, but when Bangs follows Thomas and the weather turns, she begins to fear.

Her father's disapproval intensifies her discomfort.

How is the problem solved? (9)

The circumstantial conflict is resolved when Sam's father rescues Thomas and Bangs turns up at Sam's window. The deeper conflict, Sam's reluctance to accept and live in reality, begins to be healed when she sees the danger of her "moonshine" and decides to live in truth. Her loneliness is addressed when she gives Thomas her new "baby kangaroo," an overture of friendship.

How does the story end? (10) Were you satisfied with the resolution? If not, why not? (10b)

It is hard to be entirely satisfied with the story's resolution. It is good that Sam has learned to tell the truth. However, her forced entry into reality provides no real happy ending. She will continue to be alone much of the time. She will continue motherless. She will probably still want much. She has learned to embrace the real, but her reality is somewhat wanting.

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QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: THEME



Does the main character explain to the reader his perspective on the events that have transpired? (11e)

Sam's heart is changed when her lies threaten to take the only real relationships she has. Moonshine is flumadiddle. Real is Bangs and Father and Thomas.

Is he sacrificed in some way? (was this a part of the climax or resolution?) (11d)

In a sense, Sam's childhood is abandoned when she forsakes moonshine for reality.

What do the other characters learn? (12)

No other characters are changed. In particular, her father remains unchanged. It would perhaps have been more satisfying if he had seen and met his daughter's need in some way.

What is the main idea of the story? (13)

Sam, the young daughter of a New England fisherman, spends her days in lonely solitude. Since the death of her mother, she keeps house for her father and entertains herself during his long absences with wild imaginings and heart-to-heart conversations with her beloved cat, Bangs. Occasionally, she is visited by Thomas, the little neighbor boy who lives in the large house on the hill. Younger than Sam, Thomas naively believes every idle word Sam utters. Because she favors the landscape of her imagination over the sometimes bleaker substance of her life, Sam invents fantastical stories to tell Thomas.

On a particular day, one such story sends Thomas to a lonely strip of beach in search of Sam's "pet kangaroo" and "mermaid" mother. Bangs "speaks" to her, voicing the complaint of her conscience, and wanders off in Thomas's direction. When a fierce storm and an early tide trap Thomas on a rock, Sam's father goes to his aid. Alone, Sam waits anxiously for their return. However, even in the face of such possible catastrophe, Sam's heedless and selfish thoughts are filled only with concern for her cat. Although Thomas is retrieved, Bangs is declared lost. Faced with the painful consequences of her own lies, Sam is encouraged by her father to learn the difference between reality and moonshine.

While Sam's difficult circumstances create a man vs. nature conflict within the story, a larger struggle exists within Sam's heart, mind and conscience. Sam must decide if she will embrace real life, or live in a fiction. Her father, whom she trusts, and her conscience, which voices itself through her cat, nudge her towards reality. Yet, she resolutely resists this until her circumstances become more fearful than her fiction.

While retaining her vivid imagination, she gratefully acknowledges the friends, family, and favored pet that compose her real world, counting them more important than the loss her fictions mask.

This decision to embrace a real cup only half-full in lieu of a brimming cup of fantasy represents an intensely human dilemma. The ability to choose reality is a mark of maturity. Yet, the courage required to choose the real and forsake fancies often comes only when the “real” is threatened. In this manner, averted trauma replaces the heart’s fear and misgivings with gratitude, the substance of acknowledged reality and the cornerstone of peace.

What answer does the story seem to suggest for the question, “What is a good life?” (13d)

According to this story, a good life is a life lived in reality.

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QUESTIONS ABOUT STYLE



Does the author use the characters and events in his story to communicate a theme that goes beyond them in some way? (17)

Irony: One of the central themes of the story is to forsake “moonshine” and live in reality. This is ironic in light of the fact that the author was the wife of Eliot Ness, the famous Prohibition agent.

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QUESTIONS ABOUT CONTEXT



Who is the author? (18)

Evaline Michelow Ness was born April 24, 1911, in Union City, Ohio. Initially intending to become a fashion artist, she attended Ball State Teachers College (1931-32) and Chicago Art Institute (1933-35). Shortly thereafter, she married the renowned FBI agent, Elliot Ness. She obtained additional schooling at Corcoran Art School and at Academia di Belle Arte in Rome. In 1960, Mrs. Ness illustrated her first children's book, *The Bridge*, by Charles Osborn. Three years later, she wrote and illustrated *Josephina February*. However, it was her sensitively written portrayal of a lonely, imaginative girl in *Sam, Bangs, and Moonshine* which won her a Caldecott Medal in 1967. Two other books by Mrs. Ness, *Tom Tit Tot* ('66) and *A Pocketful of Cricket* ('65) also won the Caldecott Medal. Intent to create the appearance of texture on the printed page, Mrs. Ness used woodcutting, serigraphy, rubber-roller, ink splattering, and spitting techniques. Mrs. Ness died in New York in 1986.

NOTES:

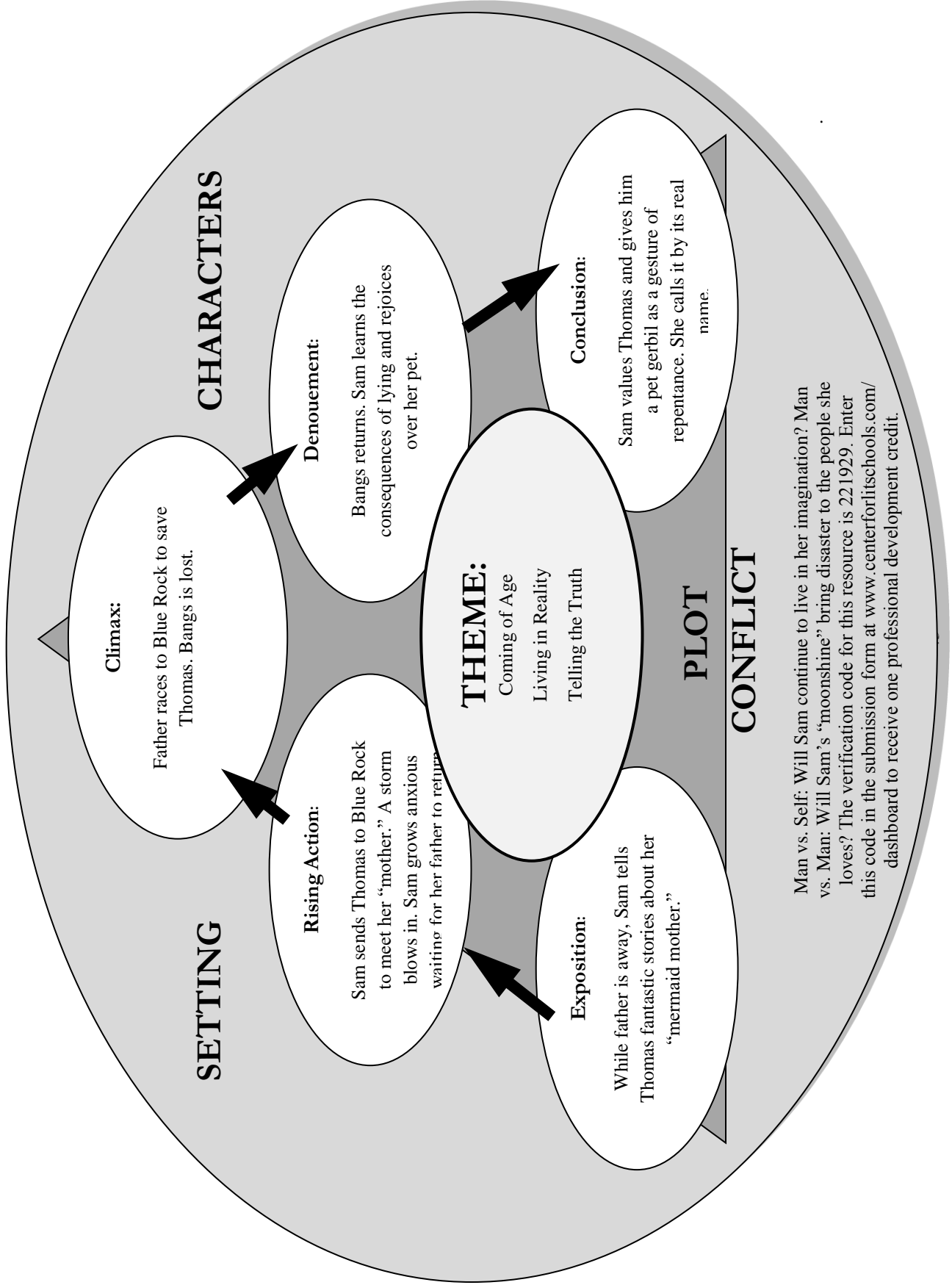
STORY CHARTS



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.

Sam, Bangs & Moonshine by Evaline Ness: Story Chart



Sam, Bangs & Moonshine by Evaline Ness: Blank Story Chart

