



George MacDonald's
At the Back of the North Wind

Questions for Socratic Discussion
by Missy Andrews



TABLE OF CONTENTS:
AT THE BACK OF THE NORTH WIND



Quick Card	118
Questions about Structure: Setting	119
Questions about Structure: Characters	123
Questions about Structure: Conflict and Plot	128
Questions about Structure: Theme	131
Questions about Style	133
Questions about Context	135
Story Charts	137

QUICK CARD



<i>Reference</i>	<i>At the Back of the North Wind</i> by George MacDonald ISBN- 10: 0816704708 ISBN-13: 978-0816704705
<i>Plot</i>	In this allegorical exploration of the problem of pain, young Diamond strives to know the character of North Wind, a beautiful, magical woman that only he can see.
<i>Setting</i>	London, England in the Victorian era. A mythical land at the North Wind's back. Diamond's childhood.
<i>Characters</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Diamond, a young boy and the protagonist of the story• North Wind, the strange antagonist• Diamond's parents• Nanny, the poor sweep girl• The drunken cabman and his wife• Coleman's maid• Jim• Mr. Raymond
<i>Conflict</i>	Man vs. Fate/God (Death)
<i>Theme</i>	Childlike faith. The goodness of God/Providence. The problem of pain and evil. The nature of reality. Sacrificial love. The nature of death.
<i>Literary Devices</i>	Simile Metaphor Symbolism Puns Personification Foreshadowing Onomatopoeia Rhyme Alliteration Assonance

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: SETTING



Does the story happen in the city or the country? Does its action unfold across a wide area, or does it happen all in one place? (1b)

The action of this story ranges from city tenements to country estates, and even extends to mythical lands mentioned by Greek historians such as Herodotus. Location is, in fact, one of the major themes of the story, and thus the question is particularly appropriate. At almost any point, the teacher might profitably ask, “Where is Diamond now?”

MacDonald himself seems to be asking the question as Diamond’s travels unfold, delving into the metaphysical to discuss the location of the soul when it is temporarily or permanently absent from the body. Is the countryside we see around us all that exists, he wants to know, or is there a place beyond our senses that is perhaps more real than the world around us?

In what region or country does the story take place? (1a)

This story takes place in Victorian England, that is the England of the late 19th century.

What is the mood or atmosphere of the place where the story happens? (1d)

The overall mood of the story is windy, cold, bleak, and still. Yet, its stillness is contemplative and peaceful. Consider the following passages:

Chapter 1, pp. 1-3, where the author discusses the details of Diamond’s living situation in the hayloft and describes his constant battle with the cold.

Chapter 1, p. 6: “In came a long whistling spear of cold, and struck his little naked chest...”

Chapter 1, p. 14: “...sharp as a knife came the wind against his little chest and bare legs...”

Chapter 3, p. 21: “all that week it was hard weather. The grass showed white in the morning with the hoarfrost which clung like tiny comfits to every blade...”

Chapter 3, p. 28: “The stars were shining clear and cold overhead.”

Chapter 4, p. 33: “...and the wind was roaring along the street as if it had been the bed of an invisible torrent.”

Chapter 4, p. 43: “It grew dusky...”

Chapter 10, p. 91: "...there was plenty of a certain still, rayless light...there was a river there...it sang tunes in their heads..."

Chapter 10, p. 91: "...he felt so still and quiet and patient and contented..."

Chapter 10, p. 92: "...Nobody talks there. They only look at each other and understand everything."

Do you long to climb into the pages of the book to live in its world, or does it repel you? Why? (1f)

The setting is appealing despite its cold conditions because of the placidity of the place, and the calm behavior of the main character who occupies it. His peace, personal warmth, and depth make any place he occupies most welcoming. Besides, there's something universally attractive about a windy, London street.

Follow up questions on this theme might be aimed at identifying ways in which the author communicates warmth and security in spite of the harsh physical conditions he has created. What other types of warmth are present? Do these make the place more attractive to the reader?

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)

Now that's really the question, isn't it? How can we be sure the places Diamond travels to with North Wind are real? Perhaps he has only imagined them in a feverish state, since it seems he has most of his travels with North Wind when he's ill. But this doesn't explain his dreamlike encounter with the poor sweep girl, Nanny, in Chapter 4, and his subsequent meeting with her while with his father in Chapter 5. Again, we are drawn by this discussion of setting to contemplate a central question of the work: what is real, anyway?

Whereas the London of MacDonald's descriptions is subject to the same laws as our London today, the land Diamond visits at the Back of the North Wind is quite different from our world. Time, for example, moves at a completely different pace. Additionally, the physical laws of nature in the story are immaterial to North Wind, neither do they apply to Diamond when he's with her. Together they fly over the streets of London, soar across the sea, drift on icebergs, and wait.

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 story is set among a downcast, poverty stricken people, London's working class. Diamond's parents are warm-hearted folks, but care-worn by their constant battle with physical want. The human setting of this story thus mirrors the physical setting, creating an effective backdrop for the relationship between Diamond and North Wind. It is these two characters that create hope in a bleak environment. Without them, the reader would eventually despair.

Is there anything symbolic or allegorical about the place where the story happens? Is the setting of the story important because of historical events which may have happened there? How does this link help you understand the themes of the story? (1i-j)

The land at North Wind's back is a mythical otherworld mentioned by the Greek historian, Herodotus. It is a place inhabited by people North Wind has drowned. "The people they say I drown, I only carry away to – to – to – well, the back of the North Wind..." Therefore, we imagine that the place has something to do with death.

MacDonald, however, seems at pains to describe the place in a positive light. He quotes three eyewitnesses – an educated gentleman of letters, the Italian Durante, and an ill-educated poor shepherdess – each of whom claims to have been there and returned. But is it a physical place in the natural world? This is uncertain. It seems, rather, a place somewhere between myth and metaphor, fairytale and paradise, and we immediately wonder about the allegorical or symbolic significance of Diamond's journey there. Is he really traveling, or is this MacDonald's way of describing a different sort of experience such as illness, or death?

Does the story happen in a particular era? In what intellectual period is the story set? (2d,f)

The story is set in Victorian England after the Industrial Revolution, an era of great contradictions and uncertainties. Mechanized factories exist side by side with horse drawn carriages; fantastic wealth and desperate poverty are juxtaposed. It is at once an age of philanthropists and an age of child labor. A fairly rigid set of class distinctions divide English society into discreet groups, and upward mobility for working class people is difficult if not impossible. In this context, the desperate position of Diamond's parents and the sweep girl Nanny are more understandable.

Additionally, the steady advance of science during the Victorian period caused many to doubt God's existence. As old mysteries of the universe came one by one into the cold light of scientific explanation, blind faith in an unseen God became more and more unfashionable. In philosophy as well as science, physical explanations came to be prized above spiritual ones, and the question "What is real?" returned more and more the answer, "Only those things that we see and touch." Within the context of such a world, MacDonald's preoccupation with the question of reality and with the unseen otherworld is easily understood.

In what time of life for the main characters do the events occur? (2e)

The story takes place in the childhood of the main character. This is highly significant because of the nature of children: their openness, trust, and simple faith. "Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 18:3). Diamond's reliance on qualities such as these makes it unlikely that this tale would have been effective had it been placed in his adulthood.

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CHARACTERS



Who is the protagonist in this story? (3)

A boy named young Diamond is the story's protagonist.

Is the protagonist a man or an animal? How old is he? (3a,b)

Young Diamond is a cabman's son. He is quite young, perhaps 6 or 7. Certainly he's no older than 9.

What does the protagonist look like? (3d)

Diamond is slight of build, fair haired, blue-eyed and pallid – a sickly child by any measure.

Is the protagonist sane or crazy? (3e)

Your answer, of course, depends upon your perspective. See the following quotes for the opinions of various characters on the subject:

Chapter 13, p. 115: "His mother was frightened, for she thought the fever was coming on again..."

Chapter 19, p. 151 (and again on p. 289): "'Oh no, sir! He's a good boy – quite.' Here she tapped her forehead with her finger in a significant manner... '...He's not right in the head, you know. A tile loose.'"

Chapter 35, p. 287-8: "Thank you Diamond – what a dear silly you are!"

Chapter 35, p. 294: "'He ain't got sense to be frightened,' said Nanny, going up to him and giving him a pitying hug."

Chapter 35, p. 289: "It seemed to me somehow as if little Diamond possessed the secret of life, and was himself...an angel of God with something special to say or do."

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)

Kind, compassionate, loving:

Chapter 4, p. 39: "Oh, please, North Wind," he cried, "won't you help that little girl?..."

Chapter 15, p. 124: “Why, Diamond, child!...You’re as good to your mother as if you were a girl – nursing the baby, and toasting the bread, and sweeping up the hearth!...”

Chapter 17, p. 138-9: “I couldn’t let them behave so to a poor girl – could I, father?” he said.”

Chapter 18, p. 143: “...there came a cry from the woman, and then a scream from the baby. Thereupon Diamond thought it time somebody did something, and as he was the only somebody at hand, he must go and see whether he could not do the something.”

Chapter 19, p.152: “The gentleman walked away, but turning round a few paces off, saw Diamond give his penny to the girl, and walking slower, heard him say: ‘I’ve got a father, and mother, and a little brother, and you’ve got nothing but a wicked old grannie. You may have my penny.’”

Trusting:

Chapter 1, p. 6: “You just believe what I say, and do as I tell you.”

Chapter 4, p. 30: “...he believed like a baby.”

Chapter 6, p. 56: “You may sink as many ships as you like, and I won’t say another word.”

Chapter 9, p.80: “‘Thank you, dear North Wind. I am not a bit afraid,’ said Diamond.”

Chapter 9, p. 84: “North Wind was quite gone; and Diamond would have cried, if he had not trusted her so thoroughly.”

Chapter 18, p. 143: “Her voice would only have lulled him the deeper asleep.”

Wise:

Chapter 17, p. 135-6: “They said he wasn’t all there, meaning that he was half and idiot, whereas he was a great deal more there than they had the sense to see.”

Chapter 15, p. 120: “...and when heart and head go together, nothing can stand before them.”

Chapter 13, p. 105-107: Diamond’s discussion with his mother about hunger, and work, and God’s provision for the sparrows.

Chapter 19, p. 153-155: Diamond’s discussion with his father about friendship.

Chapter 33, p. 271: “‘Love makes the only mynness,’ said Diamond.”

Chapter 35, p. 286: “Any story always tells me itself what I’m to think about it.”

Chapter 35, p. 294: Diamond's exchange with Nanny about whether the lightning can do as it likes and kill him if it wants to.

Chapter 37, p. 312: "I suppose it's only the people in it that make you like a place, and when they're gone, it's dead, and you don't care a bit about it."

What does the character do for a living? Is he educated? (3h-i)

Diamond is the son of a cabman, a calling in which he is perfectly content, but not at all lazy. He is eager to be all that he's supposed to be. He is not educated, though he is perceptive beyond his years. He does learn to read by the story's end.

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

Chapter 19, p. 151: Diamond tells the man what useful things he can do, and is content when they call him God's baby.

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

The drunken cabman's wife says he's the best boy a mother could want (Ch. 18, p. 148).

He's a favorite of the cabbies in the mew (Ch. 17, p. 137).

Old Diamond, the horse, loves him (Ch. 17, p. 137).

His father is proud of him (Ch. 26, p. 207).

Coleman's maid can't forget him (Ch. 26, p. 206).

The drunken cabman fiercely protects him (Ch. 24, p. 186).

His mother adores him (Ch. 16, p. 125).

The narrator speaks fondly and reverently of him (Ch. 18, p. 125; Ch. 38, p. 314; Ch. 35, p. 289).

What Nanny and Jim say: (Ch. 38, p. 314).

What does the protagonist think is the most important thing in life? How do you know? (3m)

Diamond's thoughts and actions demonstrate a deep concern for the well-being and happiness of others. Selfless love is the most important, perhaps even the only, thing of value for Diamond.

How does the character of the protagonist reflect the values of the society or individual that produced the story? (3o)

MacDonald was an amateur philosopher and theologian, “given to metaphysics,” as he might have put it. The story reflects his belief in a world beyond the material, and in a being of infinite kindness and goodness who cannot be fully found out or understood, but who may be fully trusted. The place “at the back of the North Wind” is suggestive of heaven, and MacDonald’s description of it suggests that death, in his view, is merely a passing from one place to a better place. Additionally, the innate wisdom, goodness, and faith of MacDonald’s child protagonist are in keeping with the author’s belief that children may prove worthy of heaven even if they should die before an age of accountability.

Who is North Wind? Is North Wind a man or an animal? (3a)

Most often appearing as a female, North Wind changes form a good deal. At one time, she is a tall and elegant woman. Next she is a small bee. Then still later, she is a wolf. She is variously a spider, a weasel, a cat, a leopard, a jaguar, and a Bengal tiger. In truth, her appearance has only to do with her function or purpose at that moment, it seems. And whatever the character quality of the beast she assumes, that is the quality she embodies at that moment, so that she is at once all of these, and none of them. However, Diamond likes her womanly form best, and it is this form that seems most closely associated with her person. Yet perhaps this is only because as humans, we can only understand things like ourselves. It’s possible her human form was no more her “real” self than any of her other forms. Regardless, Diamond knows her voice before her form and he can trust her completely as long as he keeps his hand in hers.

Compose a list of adjectives to describe North Wind (3f)

Forms aside, characters are best known by their deeds and words. North Wind is:

Beautiful (p. 9 & 11)	Righteously indignant (p. 47)
Scary (p. 9 & 27)	Able (p. 45, and p. 62)
Loving (p. 10 & 28)	Kind (p. 45, 54, 63)
Protective (p. 10, 61-62, 27,30)	Respectful of authority (p. 47)
Good (p. 11, p. 54)	Playful (p. 47)
Ugly (p.11)	Fierce (p. 27)
Just (p. 27, 63)	Empowering/Helpful (p. 48, & 62)
Nurturing (p. 30)	Gracious (p.52)
Wise (p. 44, 45, 79)	Tender (p. 52)
Patient (p. 44)	A Created Thing (p. 63)
Finite in knowledge (p. 63, 303)	Maternal (p. 95, 29, 30, 52, 53, and 300)
Honest (p. 94)	True (p. 304)
Unpredictable (p. 299)	Trustworthy (p. 89)

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CONFLICT AND PLOT



Who is the protagonist of this story?

Note: the protagonist of a story is the main character, whose struggles form the basis of the story's action. In this case, the protagonist is young Diamond.

What does the protagonist want? (5)

Diamond wants three things in this story:

1. He wants to go to the place at the back of the North Wind.
2. He wants a good "position" for his father so that his family may be happy and well-provided for. He also wants his friends to be safe and happy.
3. He wants to believe in North Wind, that she is real and not just an imagining, that she is good and not evil.

Does he attempt to overcome something within or without himself to achieve his objects? (5b,c)

As for Diamond's first desire, he cannot go to the back of the North Wind since it is a place for the dead, and he is quite alive. As for his desire for a good position, his father loses this quite early in the story. The family is forced to live in the mews while father works as a cabbie for meager wages. When father becomes ill and can't work, Diamond sets about providing for the family by working like a man. Eventually, Mr. Raymond gives Diamond's family a new position, and they are well and happy.

To explain the conflict created by Diamond's third and deepest desire, however, the reader must examine the character of North Wind. Is she friend or foe? She is too fantastical to be believed: too powerful and magical and mystical. She speaks with wisdom, but she also speaks in riddles. She is kind and soft like a mother, and yet harsh and exacting. She never vents rage, but always teaches, directs, and causes good.

Diamond longs for North Wind to be real, because she is the sum of goodness and larger than he in every way. He is safe with her, although she is in no way safe, and he knows that she loves him. She knew him before he knew her and she knows his family. She sought him out. She is patient with him. She doesn't underestimate the largeness of his heart, though he's small and young. She always seems to come to him at night (and so she might be a dream), or during illness (and so she might be a feverish hallucination). No one else seems to believe in her or know her. When Diamond speaks of her to others, they believe he is addled. This struggle to believe in North Wind, to experience her as a

part of true reality, forms the basic conflict of the story, and creates a tension that compels the reader to ask questions about the nature of reality.

Why can't Diamond have the things he wants? Do physical or geographical impediments stand in his way? (6a)

Yes, in a way they do. Diamond must find a way to get to the place that lies at the back of the North Wind. In some real sense, this is another country, and the question is one of travel or journey. Only those absent from the body may go to the North Wind's back, and this creates a basic Man vs. Nature conflict.

Does the protagonist lack strength or some other necessary thing to obtain his desire? Does he lack self-confidence, etc.? (6b,c)

Diamond must overcome the doubts in his own heart and mind concerning the substantial reality of North Wind and of the place at her back. He lacks full faith, and thus struggles within himself to believe in the person whom North Wind represents, for she is only a shadow of someone more like her than she herself is. This is a Man vs. Himself conflict.

Is the conflict a man v. man struggle? (6g)

The conflict is somewhat a struggle between men, but only in that the doubts of others feed Diamond's own doubts and fears. He struggles to believe in North Wind against the opinions of doubters and scoffers.

What other problems are there in the story? Are there other things in the story (people, responsibilities, etc.) which distract the characters from their main goals? (7a)

The circumstances of Diamond's family provide the other main source of conflict in the story. His family's great need of him distracts him from his larger goal. At the same time, however, Diamond's interactions with his mother and father become a means to maturity and deeper wisdom, allowing him to see the effects of North Wind in other people's lives. His faith in North Wind is strengthened as a result.

What external impulses heighten the conflict – weather, war, summer break, separation, sickness, etc? (8d)

There are two primary external sources of conflict in this story. First, the cold weather heightens tension from the very beginning of the story. In addition, there is the issue of Diamond's fragile health and frequent illness. These intensify the conflict in the story by continually raising the specter of death.

How is the main problem solved? Does the protagonist get what he's after? (9a)

Yes. At last, Diamond understands the reality of which North Wind is a picture. He accepts her as an image of the Real Good for which he longs, and understands that the place she's taken him is a similar sort of image. He experiences the real he's been seeking when he comes to know North Wind's unnamed name: Death.

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: THEME



Is the protagonist changed in his mind or heart by the events of the story? (11a)

There are two good answers to this question. On the one hand, Diamond makes an important journey from doubt and fear to faith. By the story's end, he is capable of believing in something beyond his physical experience. This development in Diamond's character allows MacDonald to emphasize the idea that reality is more than what we see and touch.

On the other hand, Diamond's constancy in relationships with the other characters makes him a catalyst for change in their lives. His unfailing generosity, cheerfulness, and concern for mankind actually ennoble the characters around him and remind them of eternal truths. In this sense, Diamond is a picture of God's unchanging goodness. He is a Christ type.

Is the protagonist sacrificed in some way? (11d)

It may be productive to ask older students how they would characterize Diamond's death. Is it a tragedy? One could certainly argue that the death of a child is always tragic, and the death of such a powerful force for good as Diamond must be doubly so. However, Diamond's conversations with North Wind lead us to the conclusion that there are no tragedies in the world, because North Wind is good above all things.

Is Diamond's death a sacrifice? That is, does his death produce a benefit to the people around him (or to the reader) that could not have been obtained any other way? Try the question this way: do you think MacDonald could have made his point about the nature of faith and the goodness of God without having Diamond die? Perhaps the story would have been more pleasant, but consider two things that are resolved by Diamond's death.

First, Diamond himself is finally relieved of all his doubts about the character and identity of North Wind and the wisdom of trusting in her. The verification code for this resource is 529975. Enter this code in the submission form at www.centerforlitschools.com/dashboard to receive one professional development credit. He finally journeys to the land at her back, and this is what we have wanted for him since the beginning of the story. His death thus represents the only possible resolution of one of the story's main conflicts.

Second, the power of Diamond's confession of faith is emphasized when we realize that it was made in the face of death. Diamond was, in a sense, believing in the goodness of the one who was coming to kill him. This might be counted as folly by a casual observer (such as Nanny or Jim), but Diamond's joy and peace and constancy give the lie to the argument of insanity. Two interpretations: Diamond believed in North Wind's goodness and had peace only because he was crazy; she was coming to kill him. Or, Diamond believed in the goodness of North Wind by faith, and his peace came from the fact that

she really was good. Reality is more than living and dying; it stretches beyond the boundaries of what we see and feel.

So, the question of Diamond’s sanity comes back around, and remains crucial to a sound interpretation of this story. Diamond was not at all crazy; he understood something real, something eternal, and had to die so that MacDonald could make his point about the nature of that reality.

Does the story seem to deal with a universal theme? (13a)

It is common in good discussions of literature for thematic questions to come up from the very beginning, when the class is still discussing plot, setting, and characters. In fact, if the discussions have gone particularly well, a separate set of questions on theme is often unnecessary. Remember that theme is the most important component of the author’s story, and it is therefore embedded in every aspect of his work.

This discussion has already touched on several important themes in *North Wind*, two of which are emphasized in the story charts below. What follows is a rather more complete list of the universal ideas present in MacDonald’s story.

A reminder: themes are not the same as morals. It is often not the author’s purpose to answer life’s questions; sometimes he just wants to ask them. One of the joys of literature is participating with the author in asking eternal questions, and then searching for answers in conversation with those around us.

- The Faith of a Child
- The Goodness of Providence
- The Nature of Reality (How do we know what’s real?)
- The Unseen World
- Sacrificial Love
- Generosity
- Insanity (What’s the difference between sane and crazy?)
- Family Relationships
- The Problem of Evil (If God is good, why do people suffer?)
- Child Mortality
- The Nature of Death (Where do we go when we die?)

NOTES:

QUESTIONS ABOUT STYLE



Simile – Does the author use “like” or “as” in making comparisons between two or more dissimilar things? (16d)

“As they flew, so fast they went that the sea slid away from under them like a great web of shot silk, blue shot with gray, and green shot with purple” (Ch. 12, p. 99).

“Dishonesty...makes[s] a man of no value...like a bit of a broken basin, or a dirty rag” (Ch. 12, p. 102).

“...our Selves are like some little children who will be happy enough so long as they are left to their own games...” (Ch. 16, p. 125).

“The little boy was just as much one of God’s messengers as if he had been an angel with a flaming sword, going out to fight the devil. The devil he had to fight just then was misery” (Ch. 18, p. 144.).

Metaphor – Does the author make comparison of dissimilar objects or things without the use of the words “like” or “as”? (16h)

“I think there must be a big cupboard somewhere, out of which the little cupboards are filled, you know, mother” (Ch. 13, p. 106).

Symbol – Are any metaphors extended throughout the whole story, so that they sound like themes? (16l)

An obvious example of this device is the Land at the Back of the North Wind, an extended metaphor for death, or heaven. Thinking about the nature of that place (Where is it? How do you go there? Is it real?) sets the reader on the path to contemplation of MacDonald’s main themes.

Pun – Does the author use common words and phrases in uncommon ways? (15)

“He ain’t a Hansom horse,” said Diamond’s father indignantly.

“Well, you’re right. He ain’t handsome, but he’s a good ‘un,” said his owner.

“Who says he ain’t handsome?” (Ch. 14, p. 118)

Personification – Does the author represent inanimate objects as being lifelike or human? (16e)

“...with gay flowers about his feet, and solemn sun-filled trees over his head” (Ch. 15, p. 120).

“Diamond had done all he could to keep out of the misery that was trying to get in at the doors and windows...” (Ch. 16, p. 124).

“Away before them stretched the sparkling waters of the ocean, every wave of which flashed out its own delight back in the face of the great sun, which looked down from the stillness of its blue house with gloriously silent face upon its flashing children” (Ch. 13, p. 104).

“South Wind was moaning round the chimneys, to be sure, for she was not very happy that night...” (Ch. 18, p. 143)

Foreshadowing – Are there any hints of coming doom, disaster, excitement, blessing, or action?

“But I don’t quite understand, father. Is nobody your friends but the one that does something for you?” (Ch. 19, p. 155). This scene foreshadows the one on p. 186 when the drunken cabman comes to Diamond’s aid.

Onomatopoeia, rhyme, alliteration, assonance are found in abundance in the poems that Diamond creates for Baby. They are found on pages, 109-15, 126-7, 133-4 and 177-9.

NOTES:

QUESTIONS ABOUT CONTEXT



Who is the author? What did the author believe? (18, 21)

Best known perhaps for his profound influence on the modern Christian philosopher and author C.S. Lewis, Victorian novelist George MacDonald was born in 1824 in Aberdeenshire, Scotland. Although his father was a simple farmer, MacDonald pursued an education, graduating from Aberdeen University in Chemistry and Natural Philosophy. With these unlikely credentials, he embarked not on a scientific career, but rather a ministerial calling, taking up a pastorate in a small, Congregationalist Church in England in 1850. After three unsatisfactory years, during which MacDonald was frequently at odds with his congregation over various theological matters, he resigned his post and resolved to become a professional author.

MacDonald published his first poem, “Within and Without,” in 1855, and gained a literary reputation in the 1860s with his novels of Scottish country life, *David Elginbrod* (1862), *Alec Forbes* (1865) and *Robert Falconer* (1868). He also wrote several charming children’s stories, including *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871), *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872) and *The Princess and Curdie* (1883). His work eventually attracted the attention of the Victorian literary community, and he made friends of some of the most famous authors of his day: John Ruskin, Matthew Arnold, Thomas Carlyle, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Lewis Carroll, and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

MacDonald’s writings are famous for their depth and theological content, yet one might not call him a theologian. His own upbringing and experience made him shy away from a human effort to systematize the Divine. Rather, he was a deep, Christian thinker who self-confessedly believed in the Truth in Jesus Christ. In keeping with this idea, MacDonald held that sacrificial love was the nearest expression of divine love that humans could achieve, an idea expressed in much of his work.

MacDonald’s adult life had its share of joy and sorrow. He enjoyed fifty years of marriage with his wife Louisa, who bore him eleven children. However, he lost four of these in their early adulthood to tuberculosis and ill health, which he himself also battled throughout his life. In each bereavement, however, MacDonald was shored up by his firm faith in the kindness and love of his Father God, whom he believed ordained suffering and adversity to strengthen the soul.

MacDonald’s faith in a loving Heavenly Father found its source not only in the Reformed Calvinist catechism of his youth, but also in a strong relationship with his earthly father, with whom he enjoyed a loving intimacy and security uncommon in today’s world. So formative was this relationship to MacDonald’s thought that he came to believe that fatherhood was at the center of all existence. The character qualities MacDonald’s father consistently demonstrated and the unconditional grace and acceptance he communicated to his son influenced MacDonald’s perception of God. He refused to believe that God

possessed lesser qualities of goodness. Consequently, in spite of the hardships, disappointments, and sufferings that MacDonald endured during the course of his life, he met his circumstances with sincere and certain confidence in the loving Father that ordained everything for his good. As a result, his sermons are infused with abiding joy that doesn't neglect the darker issues of life, but meets them with solid faith. This kind of faith is central to MacDonald's work, and when he gave up preaching to pursue a literary career, he merely shifted the mode of delivery of this faith message from sermon to story.

Indeed, MacDonald believed that "sacred story" was a superior means of influencing people in the things of God. He felt that stories stimulated the Imagination, a crucial component of God's image which all humans share, and that when properly stimulated, Imagination can guide us to biblical faith. He noted Jesus' use of story, recognizing that it often served to touch the conscience and transform the listener. Sacred story, meaning not only Biblical stories, but also extra-biblical stories in keeping with biblical truths, was then a vehicle to "wake things up that are in [people]; or say, make [one] think things for himself."

In light of the high place accorded to stories in MacDonald's world view, we must not see his children's stories as mere playthings, but serious attempts to communicate important truths about the nature of God and men. Because he believed the unseen life of faith to be more real than the tangible universe, MacDonald felt that the unseen world of fairytales provided a perfect setting for such truths to be acted out. He believed that fairytale was at the heart of all reality, and that it must be laid bare to expose all that was truly Real. By touching the imagination of his readers, he hoped to inspire them towards selfless love, causing them to grow in "empathy, creativity, and courage..." and making "godly living believable and attractive." In this respect, MacDonald's stories and the story of his life serve a common purpose.

When did the author live? What events took place during the author's lifetime? (20a)

George MacDonald lived from 1824 to 1905, during the reign of Queen Victoria. Since this story is set during the author's lifetime, some of the questions in the section on Setting are applicable to this question as well.

NOTES:

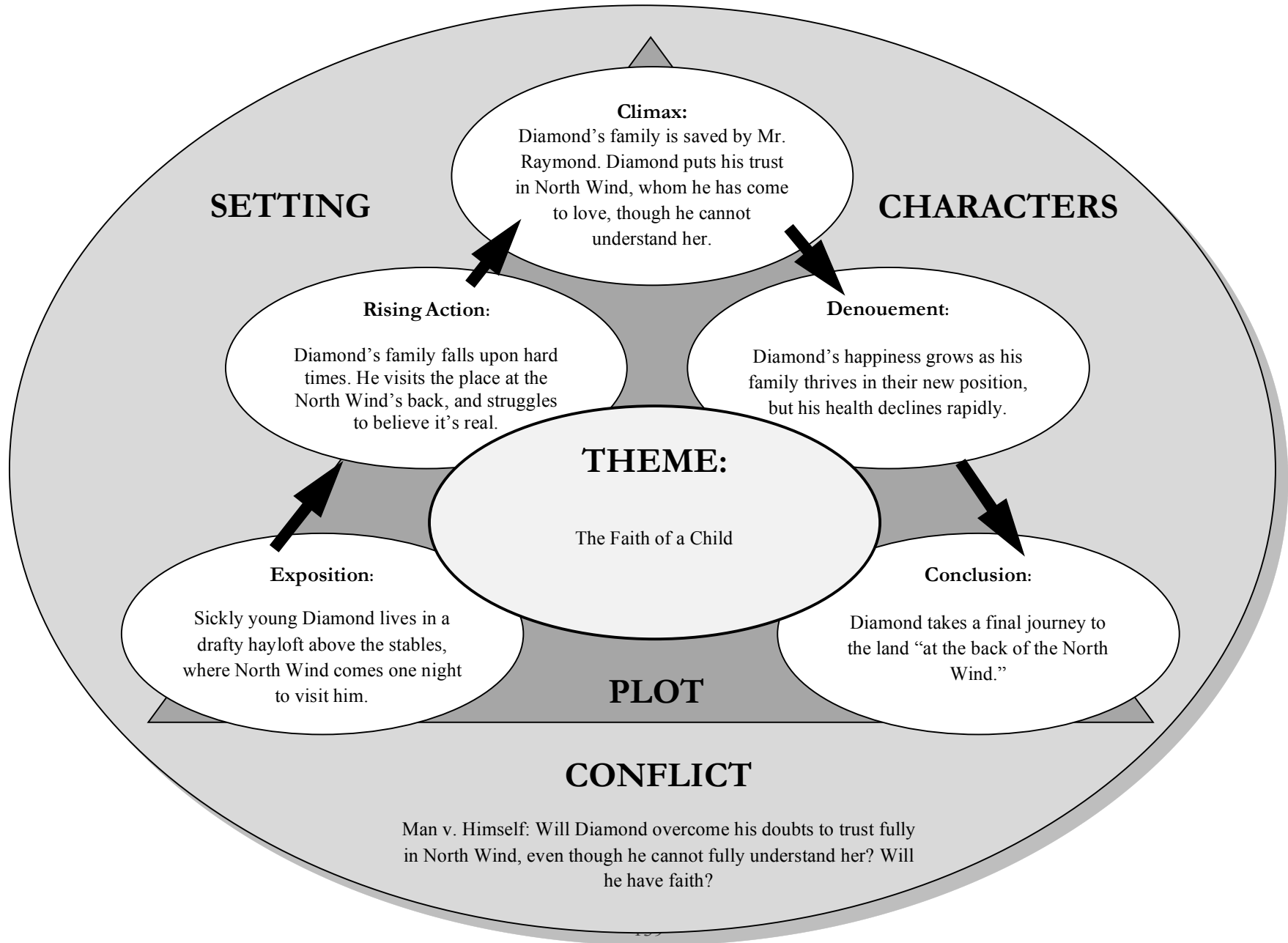
STORY CHARTS



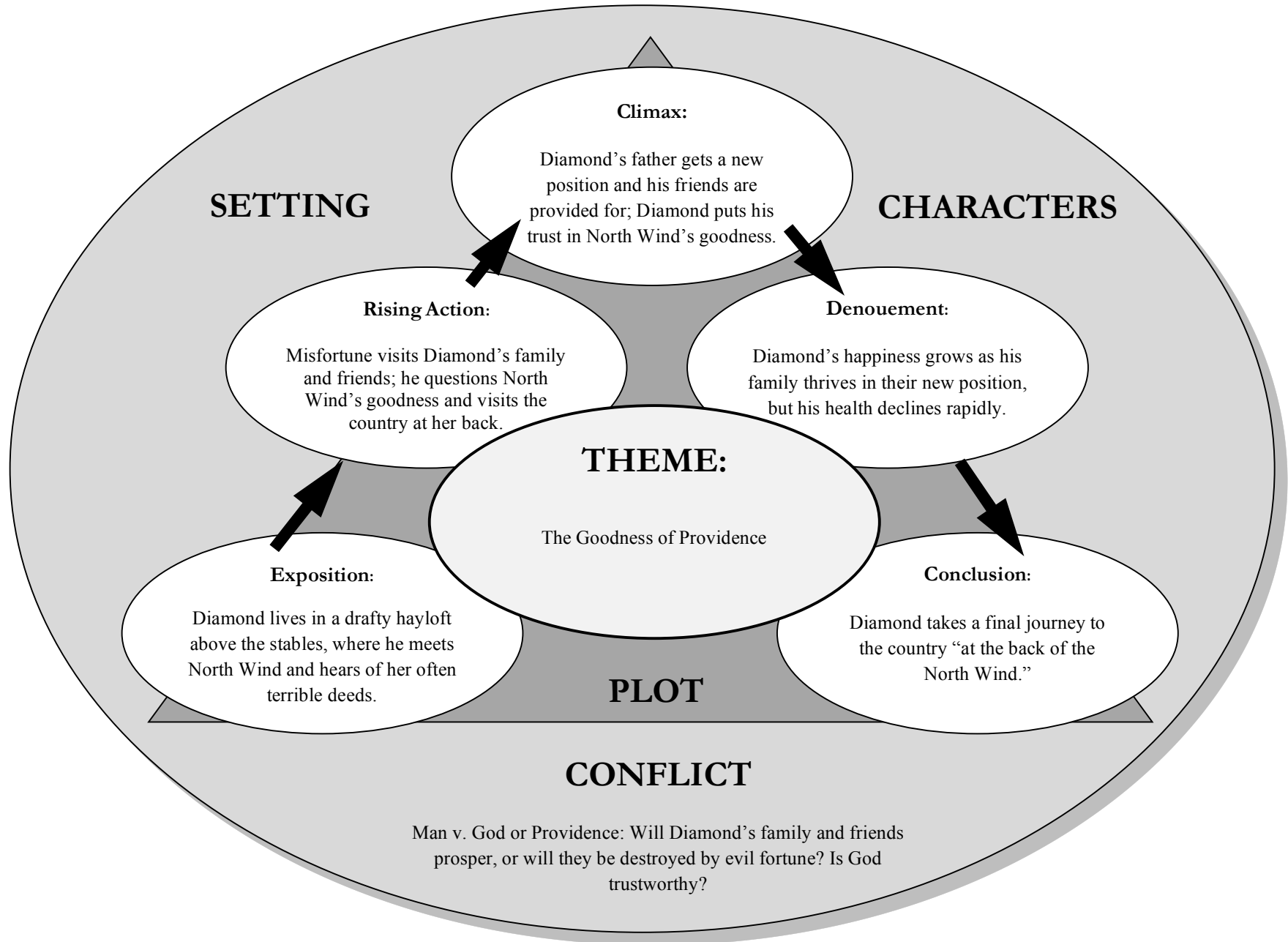
The following pages contain story charts of the type presented in the live seminar *Teaching the Classics*. As is made clear in that seminar, a separate story chart may be constructed for each of the conflicts present in a work of fiction. In particular, the reader's decision as to the *climax* and central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

At the Back of the North Wind by George MacDonald: Story Chart



At the Back of the North Wind by George MacDonald: Story Chart



At the Back of the North Wind by George MacDonald: Blank Story Chart

