

*The Velveteen Rabbit*  
by Margery Williams

A Teacher's Guide for Socratic Discussion  
by Melanie Huff & Missy Andrews



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# INTRODUCTION



CenterForLit’s teacher guide series is intended to assist teachers and parents in conducting meaningful discussions of literature in the classroom or home school. It is important to note that they are **not** intended to be workbooks for the student, but rather models and guides for discussion leaders. Questions and answers follow the pattern presented in *Teaching the Classics*, CenterForLit’s flagship literature seminar. Though the concepts underlying this approach to literary analysis are explained in detail in that seminar, the following brief summary presents the basic principles upon which this guide is based.

The *Teaching the Classics* approach to literary analysis and interpretation is built around **three unique ideas** which, when combined, produce a powerful instrument for understanding and teaching literature:

**First:** All works of fiction share the same basic elements — **Context, Structure, and Style**. A literature lesson that helps the student identify these elements in a story prepares them for meaningful discussion of the story’s themes.

**Context** encompasses all of the details of time and place surrounding the writing of a story, including the personal life of the author as well as historical events that shaped the author’s world.

**Structure** includes the essential building blocks that make up a story, and that all stories have in common: Conflict, Plot (which includes *exposition, rising action, climax, denouement, and conclusion*), Setting, Characters, and Theme.

**Style** refers to the literary devices used by authors to create the mood and atmosphere of their stories. Recognition of some basic literary devices (alliteration, simile, personification, metaphor, etc.) enables a reader not only to understand the author’s themes more readily, but also to appreciate his craftsmanship more fully.

**Second:** Because it is approachable and engaging, *children’s literature* is the best genre to employ in teaching the foundational principles of literary analysis. Children’s books present these building blocks in clear, memorable language, and are thus treasure mines of opportunities for the astute teacher—allowing him to present Context, Structure, and Style with ease to children and adults alike. Having learned to recognize these basic elements in the simple text of a classic children’s story, a student is well prepared to analyze complex works suitable for his own age and level of intellectual development.

**Third:** The best classroom technique for teaching literary analysis and interpretation is the *Socratic Method*. Named after the ancient gadfly who first popularized this style of teaching, the Socratic method employs the art of questioning, rather than lecturing, to accomplish education. Based upon the conviction that the process of discovery constitutes the better part of learning, our program uses well-placed questions to teach students how to think, rather than dictating to them what to think.

The *Teaching the Classics* seminar syllabus supplies a thorough list of Socratic questions for teachers to use in class discussion. The questions are general enough to be used with any book, but focused enough to lead the

student into meaningful contemplation of the themes of even the most difficult stories. Questions on the list are arranged in order of difficulty: from grammar-level questions which ask for the mere fact of a story, to rhetoric-level questions which require discussion of ideologies and transcendent themes. Properly employed, this list can help teachers engage their classes in important discussions of ideas, and can also provide a rich resource for essays and other writing assignments! Used in conjunction with a good writing program, *Teaching the Classics* produces **deep thinkers** at any age.

The questions used in this guide have been taken directly from the Socratic list, and will therefore be familiar to the seminar alumnus.

More information about *Teaching the Classics* may be found at [www.centerforlit.com/teaching-the-classics](http://www.centerforlit.com/teaching-the-classics).

Happy reading!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Adam Andrews", with a long, sweeping underline.

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# QUICK CARD



<b>Reference</b>	<i>The Velveteen Rabbit</i> . Margery Williams. (1922) ISBN: 978-1528720786
<b>Plot</b>	A stuffed Velveteen Rabbit is made real by the love of his Boy.
<b>Setting</b>	The story takes place in the nursery, bedroom, and garden of the Boy's home among the other animated toys and fairies of the garden.
<b>Characters</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The Velveteen Rabbit</li><li>• The Boy</li><li>• The Nurse</li><li>• The Skin Horse</li><li>• The Nursery Magic Fairy</li></ul>
<b>Conflict</b>	The Velveteen Rabbit wants to become real, like the Skin Horse describes, but he cannot imagine how that might occur. After the Boy recovers from scarlet fever, the Velveteen Rabbit is thrown on the trash heap to be burned. Will the Velveteen Rabbit ever become Real? (Man vs. Himself; Man vs. Nature)
<b>Theme</b>	The transformative and animating power of love.
<b>Literary Devices</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Imagery</li><li>• Symbolism</li><li>• Similes</li><li>• Sensory Language</li><li>• Onomatopoeia</li><li>• Personification</li></ul>



# QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CHARACTERS



*The following questions are drawn from the “Characters” section of the Socratic List, found in Appendix A, pages 82-83 of the Teaching the Classics syllabus.*

## **Who is the story about? Is the character a man or an animal? (3a)**

The protagonist is the Velveteen Rabbit, a stuffed rabbit who we first find wedged in the Boy’s stocking on Christmas morning.

## **Is the character male or female? What does the character look like? (3c, 3d)**

“He was fat and bunchy, as a rabbit should be; his coat was spotted brown and white, he had real thread whiskers, and his ears were lined with pink sateen. On Christmas morning, when he sat wedged in the top of the Boy’s stocking, with a sprig of holly between his paws, the effect was charming.” (13)

## **What does the character say about himself to other people? What do other characters think or say about him? (3j, 3k)**

The Boy is thrilled with the Rabbit in the beginning, but is soon distracted by the arrival of family and the unwrapping of presents. The Rabbit is kept in the nursery with the other toys. He is shy, and feels inferior because he is stuffed with sawdust and has no joints or clockwork like many of the other toys, who often look down on him. The exception is the old Skin Horse, who is wise and kind and tells the Rabbit stories.

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

It is the Skin Horse who tells the Rabbit about nursery magic, and about how toys become Real. He tells the Rabbit that he himself was made Real by the Boy’s uncle many years ago.

*“‘What is REAL?’ asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. ‘Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?’*

*‘Real isn’t how you are made,’ said the Skin Horse. ‘It’s a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real.’*

*‘Does it hurt?’ asked the Rabbit.*

*‘Sometimes,’ said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. ‘When you are Real you don’t mind*

*being hurt.'*

*'Does it happen all at once, like being wound up,' he asked, 'or bit by bit.'*

*'It doesn't happen all at once,' said the Skin Horse. 'You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand.'"*

*(17)*

The Rabbit longs to be Real, even though he fears getting shabby and losing his eyes and whiskers. Later, when the Boy cannot find the toy he usually sleeps with, Nana, in a hurry, gives him the Rabbit instead. At first the Rabbit finds it uncomfortable, for the Boy hugs him very tight and rolls over him in the night, but when the Boy talks to him and makes him tunnels in the bedclothes he begins to enjoy himself. Soon he is so happy that he doesn't even notice how shabby he is getting. One day the Boy tells Nana, "He isn't a toy. He's REAL!" (24) He is absolutely happy with the Boy. Later he meets two live rabbits in the woods who invite him to dance and jump about with them, but he is embarrassed because he has no hind legs and can't jump like they can. On closer inspection, they conclude that he's not real, which confuses him even more. However, he doesn't care too much because the Boy loves him and believes that he is Real, and that is all that matters to him.

#### **Who else is the story about? (4)**

**The Boy:** The Boy is the most important character other than the Rabbit himself. The Velveteen Rabbit becomes Real to the Boy through the transformative power of the Boy's love for him.

**The Skin Horse:** When the Velveteen Rabbit is abandoned in the nursery, it is the Skin Horse who treats him kindly and tells him stories, though he is snubbed by the other toys. The Horse tells him about nursery magic, and about how toys can become Real when children truly love them.

**The Nursery Magic Fairy:** When the Boy is recovering from scarlet fever, and the Rabbit is put in a sack with the other infected toys to be burnt, the fairy comes to him and explains about nursery magic:

*'I'll take care of all the playthings that the children have loved. When they are old and worn out and the children don't need them any more, then I come and take them away with me and turn them into Real.'*

*'Wasn't I Real before?' asked the little Rabbit.*

*'You were Real to the Boy,' the Fairy said, 'because he loved you. Now you shall be Real to every one.'"* (39)

#### **Is there a character (or group of characters) that opposes the protagonist in the story? (4a - 4f)**

While there are no strictly evil characters in the story, there are several characters who present obstacles to the main characters, and so may be seen as antagonists. These are:

**The other toys:** They snub the Rabbit in the beginning and make him feel inferior because he is not made like they are.

**Nana:** "There was a person called Nana who ruled the nursery" (20). Nana is the most obviously antagonistic person in the story, though her antagonism is only that of a busy adult who does not





# QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CONFLICT AND PLOT



*The following questions are drawn from the “Conflict” and “Plot” sections of the Socratic List, found in Appendix A, pages 84-86 of the Teaching the Classics syllabus.*

**Fill in the blank: This story is about the protagonist trying to \_\_\_\_\_. (5a)**

This story is about the Velveteen Rabbit trying to become Real. From the time the Skin Horse first tells him this is possible, the Rabbit longs to become Real, even though he is a little afraid of the process and doesn't quite understand what it means to be Real.

**Does he attempt to overcome something – a physical impediment or an emotional handicap? Do physical or geographical impediments stand in the character's way? (5b, 6a)**

When the Boy's love makes the Velveteen Rabbit Real, the bunny is perfectly happy. When he meets the wild rabbits in the woods, however, he begins to realize that he is still different from them. He longs to jump about and dance with them, but he can't because “the back of him was made all in one piece, like a pincushion”(29). This represents a kind of obstacle or handicap for the Velveteen Rabbit in his quest to become Real.

**Is the conflict a Man vs. Nature struggle? (6h)**

The story represents both Man vs. Himself and Man vs. Nature conflicts, as it focuses on the Rabbit's struggle to understand and embrace the process of transformation (Man vs. Himself) and the natural impossibility for a toy stuffed with sawdust to become an animated creature (Man vs. Nature).

**Does the protagonist achieve his object? Is the situation pleasantly resolved, or is it resolved in a terrible way? (9a, 9c)**

In the end, the Velveteen Rabbit gets all that he hoped for and more when he is transformed into a living, jumping rabbit by the Nursery Magic Fairy. He achieves this, however, after a great deal of pain and discomfort. The Boy plays with him so much that he rubs the rabbit's fur off in patches, soils him, and leaves him quite shabby in appearance. This, however, is just what the Skin Horse explained as the process of being made Real, and just as the Skin Horse predicted, the Velveteen Rabbit hardly noticed these things at all for the love he enjoyed with the Boy.

**What events form the highest point or climax of the story's tension? Are they circumstantial events, or emotional ones? Is the climax a spiritual or physical one? Does the protagonist solve his own dilemma? Is it solved by some external source or third party? Is he helpless in the end to achieve his goal (like Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings*), or does he triumph by virtue of his own efforts (Sherlock Holmes)? (9d, 9e)**





# QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: THEME



*The following questions are drawn from the “Theme” section of the Socratic List, found in Appendix A, page 87 of the Teaching the Classics syllabus.*

**Is the protagonist changed in his mind or heart by the events of the story? Is he ennobled? (11a, 11c)**

In the beginning of the story the Velveteen Rabbit, though he longs to become Real, is afraid of the process of becoming Real. Later he learns the truth of the Skin Horse’s words to him: “When you are Real you don’t mind being hurt” (17).

When the Boy tells Nana, “He isn’t a toy. He’s Real!...,” the Rabbit is very happy. “So much love stirred in his little sawdust heart that it almost burst” (24).

When the Boy has scarlet fever, the Rabbit stays with him because he knows the Boy needs him. He stays hidden under the bedclothes, encouraging and cheering the Boy though the time passes slowly and the Boy’s feverish touch burns him.

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

The Rabbit has learned to love another better than himself; moreover, he has learned to sacrifice his comfort for the good of his beloved Boy. Whereas the Rabbit hasn’t the power to make himself Real, the love of the Boy for him plants the seeds of a miracle in him. These germinate when the Nursery Magic Fairy makes tangible what was unseen, transforming the Rabbit’s sawdust body into a living creature. The Rabbit learns that Reality transcends the natural world—that “faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen.” He learns that “hope does not disappoint.” There exists a supernatural goodness that rewards love.

**Are other people in the story ennobled, changed, saved, improved or otherwise affected by the story’s events? (12a)**

In the story of *The Velveteen Rabbit*, the Rabbit and the Boy teach each other about love. It is far from being one-sided. The Boy comes to love the Rabbit almost as much as the Rabbit comes to love him, though without such drastic effects. Though he seems to go happily away to the seaside after his illness without a thought for his old bunny, when the Rabbit (now Real to everyone and living with the wild rabbits) comes back to look at him the following Spring, the Boy sees the likeness: “Why, he looks just like my old Bunny that was lost when I had scarlet fever” (44). This suggests that the loss of the Velveteen Rabbit had been deeply felt by the Boy.



# QUESTIONS ABOUT STYLE: LITERARY DEVICES



*The following questions are drawn from the “Literary Devices” section of the Socratic List, found in Appendix A, pages 88-90 of the Teaching the Classics syllabus.*

## **Does the author use sound words to tell his story? (14a, 14b)**

Throughout the story of *The Velveteen Rabbit*, Williams uses sound words which add depth to the story elements of both setting and character. The excitement of opening packages on Christmas morning is communicated in the “rustling of tissue paper” (13), while Nana is described as “swooping about” (20) when she cleans the nursery. These are examples of *onomatopoeia*.

The wild rabbits, with their quick movements which puzzle the Velveteen Rabbit, are described as “twitching” and “whirling” until they make the Velveteen Rabbit “quite dizzy” (28-29). When the rabbit is transformed by the fairy, he is amazed because his ears “twitched by themselves” and he is able to go “springing” and “whirling” across the grass with the others (41).

## **Does the author create snapshots of images in the mind of the reader for the sake of enhancing meaning, creating setting or mood, or developing character? (16a)**

Williams uses *imagery* throughout the story to create effective word pictures in the reader’s mind, with carefully placed adjectives, descriptive phrases, similes, and personification.

The Rabbit himself is described in the beginning as “fat and bunchy...his coat was spotted brown and white, he had real thread whiskers, and his ears were lined with pink sateen” (13). He is new and shiny, very much in contrast to the passage near the end when “his coat had worn so thin and thread-bare from hugging that it was no longer any protection to him” (36).

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

Williams enhances the story and characters through *simile*:

*“...she went swooping about like a great wind...” (20).*

*“...the Boy...made nice tunnels for him under the bedclothes that he said were like the burrows the real rabbits lived in” (21).*

*“The back of him was made all in one piece, like a pincushion” (29).*

*“...a blossom like a golden cup” (37).*







# QUESTIONS ABOUT CONTEXT



The following questions are drawn from the “Context” section of the Socratic List, found in Appendix A, pages 91-92 of the Teaching the Classics syllabus.

**What is the author’s name? Is the author male or female? How old was the author when he wrote the story? What kinds of relationships did the author have? Did he have a family? Was he an orphan? Did the author suffer any hardships in his life that might have made him think or feel a certain way about his subject? (18a, 18b, 18c, 18e, 18f)**

Margery Winifred Williams was born in 1881, in England. Her father was a classical scholar with an enduring love for books, and he encouraged both Margery and her sister to become readers. His death when Margery was only seven years old had an enduring effect on her life and work. Margery became a professional author at the age of nineteen, but *The Velveteen Rabbit*, her most famous work, was not published until 1922, when she was forty-one. She found great inspiration in the writings of Walter de la Mare, whom she called her “spiritual mentor.”

**In what country did the author live? In what city or state? Did the author live in the city, or in the countryside? In what year was the author born? When did he die? What events took place in the world during the author’s lifetime? Did the author know about them? Was he involved in them? (19a, 19b, 20a, 20b)**

Though Williams was born in England, her family moved to the United States in 1890, when she was only nine. After living in New York for a year, they moved to a rural farming community in Pennsylvania. When Margery was nineteen, while visiting London to submit some of her stories to a publisher, she met the Italian Fransisco Bianco; the couple married in 1904. They had two children. Eventually they settled in Turin, Italy.

When WWI struck, Fransisco fought in the Italian army. After the war, the family returned to America, where Williams continued her writing. Though she wrote and published many stories for children, *The Velveteen Rabbit* remains her most beloved work. Margery Williams died in 1944 at the age of 63.

## NOTES:

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# ESSAY QUESTIONS FOR WRITING ASSIGNMENTS



*Hints for effective writing assignments can be found on pages 73-74 of the Teaching the Classics syllabus and Chapter 6 of Reading Roadmaps.*

1. What does the term “Real” mean within the story? According to the process described by the Skin Horse and the experience of the Velveteen Rabbit, what makes an individual “Real”?
2. How does the Velveteen Rabbit’s experience with the Nursery Magic Fairy develop the meaning of the term “real”? What does the addition of this portion of the story suggest about the true nature of reality?

# 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.

# Story Chart: *The Velveteen Rabbit*

CHARACTERS

SETTING

## Climax

When the Boy recovers, the doctor insists that all the toys and books he played with must be burned. The Velveteen Rabbit never imagines that the doctor's words apply to him since he has become so much more than a toy; he has become "Real."

## Rising Action

The Boy begins to love the Rabbit and insists to Nana that he isn't a toy, but is Real. The boy grows ill with scarlet fever.

## THEME

The power of love  
The nature of "reality,"  
Self-sacrifice  
Life after death

## Exposition

The Velveteen Rabbit is given to the Boy as a Christmas gift. The Skin Horse tells him about nursery magic and how toys become Real.

## PLOT

## CONFLICT

Will the Velveteen Rabbit become "Real" by learning to love someone better than himself? (Man v. Self; Man vs. Nature)

## Dénouement

In the sack behind the fowl-house, the Rabbit remembers his time with the Boy and mourns its end.

## Conclusion

The Nursery Magic Fairy arrives and transforms the toy into a real rabbit.

# Story Chart: *The Velveteen Rabbit*

**SETTING**

**CHARACTERS**

