



Marguerite de Angeli's
The Door in the Wall

Questions for Socratic Discussion
by Jill Andrews



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THE DOOR IN THE WALL



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QUICK CARD



<i>Reference</i>	<i>The Door in the Wall</i> by Marguerite de Angeli ISBN-10: 0440227798 ISBN-13: 978-0440227793
<i>Plot</i>	Left alone and lame, Robin awaits his parents' return, struggling to overcome his physical handicap and to earn the respect due to a true knight.
<i>Setting</i>	14 th century England during the time of the Black Plague. The childhood of the main character.
<i>Characters</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Robin, the 10 year old protagonist• Sir John and Lady Maud de Bureford, Robin's parents• Dame Ellen, the servant left in charge of Robin when his parents leave• Brother Luke, a friar• John-go-in-the-Wynd, a minstrel
<i>Conflict</i>	Man vs. Himself Man vs. Society
<i>Theme</i>	Every wall has a door. Courage under fire. The nature of true nobility. Coming of age.
<i>Literary Devices</i>	Onomatopoeia Alliteration Personification Simile/ Metaphor Symbolism

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: SETTING



Where does the story happen? (1a-b)

This story takes place in London, England, during the 14th century. The plague rages in the city and war with the Scots threatens on the northern border.

Does it happen in one place or cover a wide area? (1c)

The action ranges from the city of London to the country Castle of Lindsey, 100 miles to the north of England on the Welsh border.

Among what kinds of people is the story set? What is their economic class? (1h)

The story takes place among English nobles, who monopolize the land, money, and privilege in their society. The protagonist is the son of a knight and his lady. The story also deals with other classes of the period such as the clergy, the wanderers, and the peasantry. The clergy is supported by the church, which has money and position, but most monks have taken vows of poverty and simple living. The class of wanderers includes the minstrels, who make their living singing, playing, and entertaining at public gatherings. Most other characters in the story are peasants who live from the produce of the land and work for their noble lords.

Is the setting of the story important in understanding themes of the story? (1j)

The architecture of the medieval period greatly enhances the sustained metaphors of the door and the wall in the story. In those days, walls stood as the first line of defense for families, towns, and governments of all kinds. These were impregnable, just as Robin's handicap seems to be. But doors made a way through these barriers. The portals of these walls were often important scenes of activity. A statement of the main theme in the story promises that, "Thou hast only to follow the wall long enough and there will be a door in it."

Does the story happen in a particular era of the world? Does this historical context help explain the actions of the characters or the mood of the story? (2d)

The medieval period in general, and the 14th century in particular, was a time of social insecurity. The black plague, which struck in 1348, wiped out nearly a third of Europe's population. This disaster added to the problems of this period. There was great disparity between the rich and the poor, and the rule of law was in its infancy. The noble class had certain responsibilities to the people on their land and a man's life was dependent on the

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CHARACTERS



Who is the protagonist in the story? (3b,c,g)

Robin is the ten-year-old son of an English nobleman. He has become lame as a result of an illness. His pride and sense of entitlement, his youth and ignorance make him hard to deal with.

Is the character content with his lot in life or does he long to improve himself? Is he a member of a particular social group? What does he think is the most important thing in life? (3h,l,m)

Robin's lack of character and his frustration with his physical condition cause him to be ill-tempered and rude. He expected to become a knight like his father, but now he can't even walk. He thinks there isn't any hope for a fulfilling life if he can't be a knight. He longs to be able to walk so he can learn to ride horses, joust, use a sword, and do great deeds of chivalry. He fears that his physical condition will not only prevent him from attaining knighthood, but also from attaining his father's respect.

Who else is the story about? Is there an antagonist? (4a)

Other main characters in the story are:

Sir John and Lady Maud de Bureford, Robin's parents. They have to leave Robin to go serve the king and queen. Their servants are to send him with an escort who will take him to Sir Peter de Lindsay for training as a knight.

Dame Ellen, the servant left in charge of Robin when his parents leave. She tries to care for Robin even though she is ill because the other servants have left. Robin's rudeness drives her away and she never returns. Robin later learns that she has died of plague, but not before telling Brother Luke about Robin's plight.

Brother Luke, a wandering friar newly come to St. Mark's (the local abbey). He rescues Robin, both physically and emotionally. He becomes Robin's friend and proves to be a wise, kind, and extremely gifted teacher. Brother Luke essentially leads Robin into maturity and manhood.

John-go-in-the-Wynd, a minstrel, who makes his living traveling around singing and playing his instrument. He accompanies Robin and Brother Luke on the trip to Castle Lindsay and plays a part in saving the castle.

There are several antagonists in the story but none are specifically opposed to Robin. Neither the robbers who try to steal the money purse when they are traveling, nor the

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CONFLICT AND PLOT



What does the protagonist want? Is the battle against a physical impediment or an emotional one? (5b,e)

Robin battles against his lameness, which keeps him from his desire to be a great knight. His physical battle brings out the flaws in his character, however, and the battle becomes an emotional one as well. He is proud and cannot accept his situation, his frustration spilling out in anger against those who try to help him. He is scornful of Dame Edith (who has a whiskered wart and coarse speech) and sweeps the porridge bowl from her hand. When he makes a false cut while whittling a cross, he throws the chisel, nearly hitting Father Matthew in the head.

Why can't he have what he wants? (6a,c,k)

From Robin's immature point of view, the only impediment to his knighthood lies in his useless legs. In a poignant "man vs. himself" conflict, a broader definition of knighthood, which includes gentle courtesy, strength of heart, and self-sacrifice, becomes apparent. In this kind of knighthood, useless legs are not prohibitive. Robin will suffer much to learn this broader definition.

What other problems are there in the story? What other people distract the protagonist from his goal? (7a)

Robin's problems begin when his father, Sir John de Bureford, leaves him to go to war against the Scots. His mother makes arrangements for him to be taken to Sir Peter de Lindsay's castle and trained to be a knight. At the same time, she responds to an emergency summons to attend the ailing Queen and leaves Robin before his escort arrives.

Losing both parents at one time stretches Robin emotionally. When, after they leave him, he becomes ill and permanently loses the use of his legs, it is more than he can bear. "Tears of vexation started to his eyes, but he held them back, for he remembered that a brave and 'gentil' knight does not cry."

Unfortunately, the promised escort does not arrive. The servants all leave him and Robin is alone and helpless.

What happens in the story? What major events take place? (8a,c,d)

Brother Luke comes to rescue Robin, taking him to the St. Mark's abbey, which Sir John had generously supported in the past. Brother Luke teaches Robin to read and write; so, Robin writes a letter to his father telling him about his situation.

Sir John responds, explaining the delay in coming for him. His escort was taken ill and his benefactor, Sir Peter, was wounded in battle. He instructs the friar to bring Robin to Castle Lindsay.

Robin, Brother Luke, and John-go-in-the-Wynd start on their journey. They lose their way and have to spend one night outside, which Robin thinks is a great knight-like adventure. Another night they stay in an "ill-looking" inn where Robin overhears some thieves planning to rob them. He alerts his companions and they flee. Robin saves them all because he has strengthened his arms by learning to swim.

Robin fears his reception by Sir Peter because of his handicap, but they arrive at the castle and are received "like emissaries of the king." John-go-on-the-Wynd points out his mother's house in a distant town and tells Robin how to get there, then leaves to go see her. Robin loves Castle Lindsay and thinks it impregnable. He explores it thoroughly, learning how to maneuver anything on his crutches.

A thick fog arises; everyone is on edge. The Welsh use the fog as a cover to attack the town. Everyone moves into the castle. As the Welsh storm the castle, food and water dwindle until they face starvation. Someone must go for help, but who will volunteer?

Robin asks, "What can I do?" They tell him to keep the children safe and he obeys without a complaint. Yet as the fog holds and days pass, he realizes that he is the perfect one to go for help. He volunteers. His assets for the job are all the things that seemed to be his liabilities before. He is young and small, but he can act stupid; he can't walk except on crutches, but he can swim strongly in cold water; he knows how to get to John-go-in-the-Wynd; and, best of all, he is not afraid! No one will ever suspect that he is a brave knight on a mission for the castle.

What events form the climax of the story? (9d)

Robin leaves the castle by a "door in the wall." He navigates the river bank on his crutches, swims the river, fools the Welsh sentry (who thinks he is a shepherd boy who fell into the river) and finds John-go-in-the-Wynd. John, true to his name, swiftly alerts the surrounding nobles who gather and await a signal. John and Robin proceed to the church tower (entering by a "door in the wall") where they sound the alarm. The nobles defeat the Welsh and save the castle. Robin begins to cry, and John, realizing that he is exhausted, says, "Thou'lt be carried on my shoulders for thou'rt the hero of this victory!"

Does the protagonist solve his own dilemma or does another party help him? (9e)

Robin does solve his own problems eventually, but not without the invaluable help of his teacher. Brother Luke rescues Robin and cares for him like a little child, rubbing his legs, bathing, and dressing him. He takes him home to live in his own room and feeds him his own food.

The friar plans a course of study for Robin which includes reading, writing, history, astronomy, carpentry, music, serving in the abbey, and swimming. Brother Luke, a wise and patient man, teaches Robin with compassion and firmness. He rebukes him quietly, without disapproval, and confronts his anger with a calm, steady gaze.

This excellent personal care, teaching, and training helps Robin grow from a petulant little boy into a young man who is self-confident, capable, and self-controlled, ready to face the responsibilities of a nobleman. Brother Luke essentially trains Robin to be a knight.

How does the story end? Does the resolution offer a perspective on the story's themes? (10a)

John-go-in-the-Wynd and Robin return to the castle amidst cheering crowds. Sir Peter de Lindsay solemnly proclaims Robin “conqueror and son of thy noble father.” John earns the rewards of land, sheep, and privileges, while Robin earns only honor, since his actions are expected of a nobleman.

At Christmas, Robin’s parents return to Castle Lindsay with the King and Queen. At a Christmas celebration, the King honors Robin with a golden collar of jewels. Robin asks his father if he minds his being a cripple, and Sir John tells him that all his shining qualities make so bright a light that he can’t see any crippled legs. Both mother and father love him and are proud of him. They plan to return to London and take Brother Luke with them as his tutor.

It is nearly dawn when Brother Luke takes him to bed and he sleepily asks, “Where am I?” Brother Luke says, “Thou’rt here, Sir Robin, safe with all thy loved ones. It’s Christmas, and thou hast found the door in thy wall.”

NOTES:

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: THEME



What does the protagonist learn? Is he changed in mind or heart by the events of the story? (11a)

Robin learns that being a knight requires more than a whole body. He learns that any deficit may be overcome by the development of an asset; for instance, his legs are useless, but his arms can be made strong by learning to swim. Even his legs can be made to work with the help of crutches. More importantly, he learns that what is within him is more crucial than these physical attributes. He learns patience, contentment, and perseverance through Brother Luke's tutelage.

He changes from an ill-tempered, demanding nobleman's son who feels entitled to the life he wants, to a young man with character and accomplishment. The greatness of heart, courage under fire, and the self-sacrifice that he demonstrates in crisis are what make him a true knight.

Is the protagonist ennobled or sacrificed in some way? Is this part of the climax? (11c-d)

To save Lindsay Castle, someone has to go get help. The danger of being killed looms over the volunteer. Robin, because of his handicaps, provides a perfect solution. He is young, small, and lame. No one will ever suspect that he is a spy. He volunteers to go through enemy lines to get help, possibly sacrificing his life for the castle. The story comes to a climax in his actions to save the castle.

He makes it through the Welsh lines to alert John-go-in-the-Wynd of the crisis. John gathers the surrounding lords who come together to save Lindsay Castle. Robin's bravery and self-sacrifice identify him as a true knight and win the hearts of the people and his own heart's desire.

What is the main idea of the story? Is there a universal theme? What does the story suggest for the question, "What is a good life?" (13a,d)

The story deals mainly with the theme, "Every wall has a Door." (Every challenge has a solution.) When Robin's illness leaves him lame, the question for him becomes, "What are you going to do about it?" Tears of vexation are his first reaction, followed by anger and temper tantrums. With the wise and long-suffering help of Brother Luke, he learns to control his anger and strengthen his body.

Brother Luke teaches him that the good life involves living every day to the best of your ability, learning from whatever happens. He learns to overcome difficulties by working hard, finding new solutions, and developing his skills. He serves in whatever way he can and believes that God will take care of the outcome. In Robin's case, he becomes a true

QUESTIONS ABOUT STYLE



Does the author use the sounds of our language to create interest in her story? Does she use onomatopoeia? (14a-b)

the “s-s-sh-shing” sound of feet on stone (p.18)

with a “whoosh” he was in the water (p.36)

he loved to hear the “snick” as the knife took hold (p.40)

“hissssst” said the big thief (p.59)

crutches carried him across the field, “swing-step, swing-step, swing-step” (p.93)

the “tramp, tramp” of the sentry (p.103)

“Bongggg, bongggg, bongggg” the great bell rang (p.106)

Assonance: Does the author use words that have the same internal vowel sounds? (14c)

the first letter he had received and indeed he could read it (p.45)

God willing and your health permitting (p.45)

the boat is somewhat awry and aslant from the stern but it hath an air (p.21)

rising high against the racing clouds stood a town with a church tower (p.67)

glints of light on lance and pennant (p.100)

Does the author use alliteration, words close together with the same initial consonant sound? (14e)

“Farewell, my son,” his father said, “forget not to be brave....Farewell.” (p.8)

he took it to the scriptorium to seal it before he sent it (p.31)

art finding fish for fasting? (p.36)

the sound of his soft shoes on the stone floor (p.42)

Scots are so fierce in fighting (p.42)

refuge from sudden showers under a spreading beech (p.47)

a treat to my thirsty throat (p.47)

Jenny the jennet (a small, Spanish horse)

farmers gathered their gear before going home (p.49)

I see no inn and the night is nigh (p.51)

suddenly great scuffling and shouting began and John scrambled out and slid to the ground (p.60)

by my beard the birds have flown (p.61)

they took tables from the trestles and transferred everything (p.82)

glints of light on lance and pennant (p.100)

down the long dark aisle to the door (p.104)

Does the author use “like” or “as” in making comparisons between dissimilar things? Are there similes in the story? (16d)

Robin describes his legs as being like two long pieces of uncooked dough (p.10)

as if they were logs of wood (p.15) and as useless as two sausages (p.31)

His room was chapel-like (p.11)

The sky above was like a garment of our Lady: blue and gold (p.28)

The strings of the harp hummed as if they had been voices (p.48)

The big one snores like a braying jack (p.56)

The wood looked as if it had been a cathedral (p.65)

Mist so thick it was like a white blanket (p.67)

Wayfarers met as if they had appeared by magic (p.67)

Castle stands on a mound ringed with hills like a pudding in a saucer (p.68)

Received as if they were emissaries of the King (p.68)

A hail of arrows were like dark rain (p.106)

Does the author represent inanimate things as being lifelike or human? Does she use personification? (16e,g)

Fingers searched out the tune and danced on the strings (p.48)

Windmill swung its arms in slow obedience to the wind (p.47)

Spits of rain warned them...the wind was searching (p.50)

Sounds screamed to be let out (p.7)

An inn had its thatch pulled down over its eyes (p.55)

His knife obeyed his thoughts (p.22)

The plague, that enemy that has slain more men than battle (p.45)

Are there examples of the use of metaphor in the story? (16h)

His face was a black cloud of anger (p.28)

The swimming hole became a boatyard (p.38)

Are there metaphors extended throughout the story as symbols so that they sound like themes? (16l)

The title of the book, *The Door in the Wall*, names the story's main theme. Brother Luke also expresses the theme when he says to Robin, "Thou hast only to follow a wall far enough and there will be a door" (p.16).

The wall represents a barrier and the door a way through that barrier. Throughout the narrative there are references to this metaphor. For example:

In the first paragraph of the story, Robin pulls his covers over his head in frustration and turns his face toward the wall. Life has presented itself to him as a hopeless situation. Again, after throwing his porridge at Dame Edith, he turns his face to the wall, still in despair.

When Brother Luke takes Robin to the Abbey, as the gate clangs shut, Robin fears being trapped there by the wall. Robin does not understand about walls and fears them. He hasn't yet learned about doors.

Robert begins to understand what Brother Luke is saying when he tells him that they must teach his hands to be skillful and his mind to go about where his legs can't go. He says, "Reading is a door in the wall" (p.29).

When Robin fears his father's expectations and his mother's pity, Brother Luke says, "Remember, even thy crutches can be a door in the wall" (p.38).

QUESTIONS ABOUT CONTEXT



Who is the author? (18a-c)

Marguerite de Angeli was a bestselling author of 28 children's books. Also an artist, she illustrated more than three dozen books, magazines, and articles. At 46, she published her first book, and at 61 she received the Newberry Award for *The Door in the Wall*. During her writing career, de Angeli received numerous awards for both writing and illustrating, publishing her final book when she was 92 years old!

What kinds of relationships did the author have? (18e)

The author was one of six children and she had six children of her own. The family was surrounded by art, literature, and music. Marguerite sang and her husband played the violin. She began her art career six years before her last child was born and her writing career seven years after. Her husband died only eight months before their 60th anniversary.

Where did the author live? (19a-c)

An American author, de Angeli lived mostly in the Midwest; however, there were forays into both the American and Canadian West. During her lifetime, her family moved frequently, finally settling in Pennsylvania. Even there they lived at many different addresses. This constant moving around possibly influenced her writing of a semi-autobiographical account of a Great Depression era family.

When did the author live? (20a-b)

Marguerite de Angeli was born in March 1889 and died in June 1987, living almost a century. Born only 24 years after the Civil War, she lived through both the World Wars and the Great Depression. This wealth of experience influenced her work as she wrote about common people who were frequently overlooked or faced hardships. *Bright Angel*, written in 1946, was one of the first books to explore the divisive issue of racial prejudice, a daring move at that time.

NOTES:

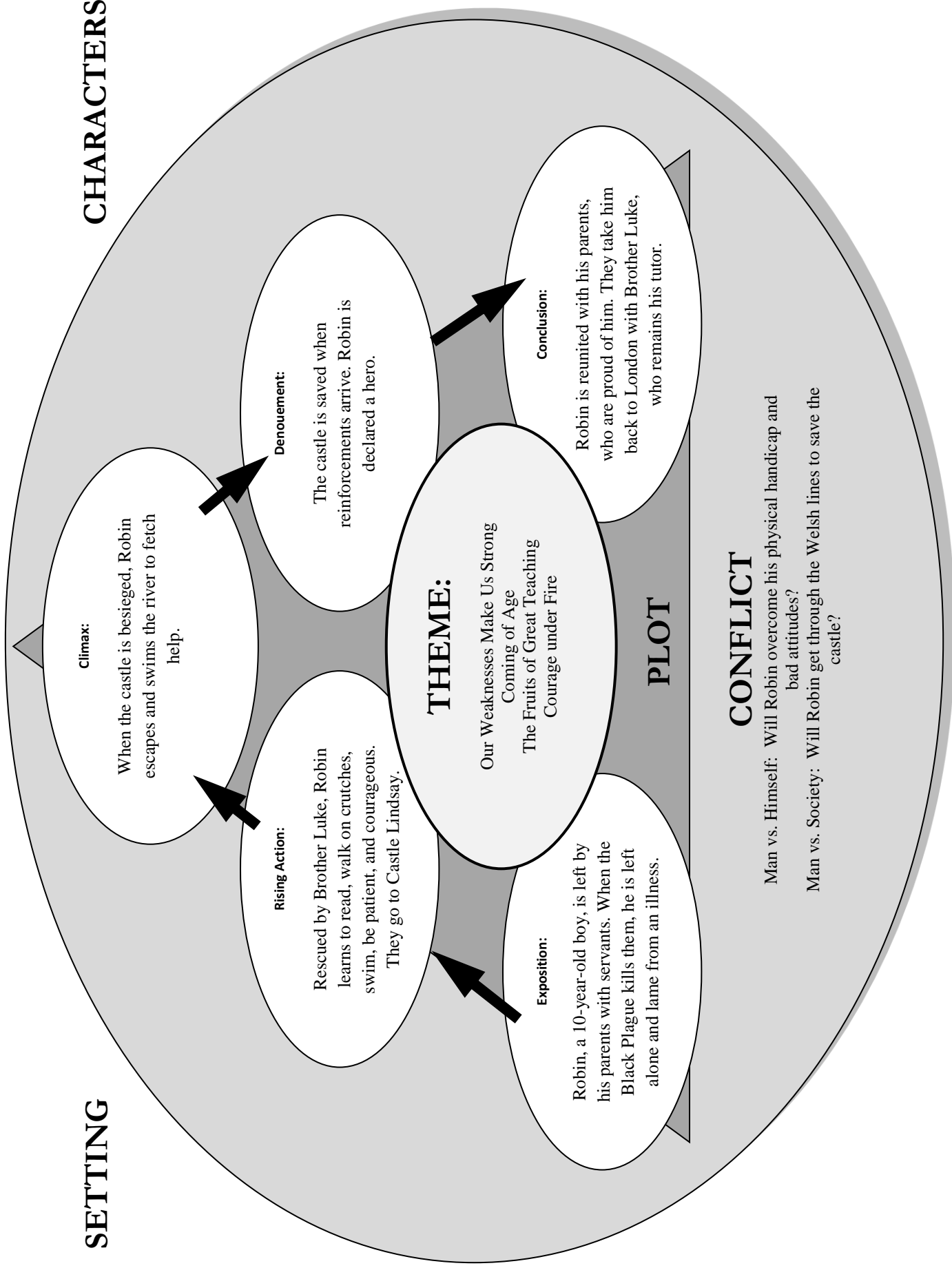
STORY CHARTS



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.

The Door in the Wall by Marguerite de Angeli: Story Chart



The Door in the Wall by Marguerite de Angeli: Blank Story Chart

