



Laura Ingalls Wilder's
Little House on the Prairie

Questions for Socratic Discussion
by Alexandre Winston



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INTRODUCTION



This teacher guide is intended to assist the teacher or parent in conducting meaningful discussions of literature in the classroom or home school. Questions and answers follow the pattern presented in *Teaching the Classics*, CenterForLit's two-day 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 him 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 essay 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. Teachers can refer to the numbers in parentheses at the end of each question to find its place in the List.

More information about *Teaching the Classics* may be found at www.centerforlit.com.

Happy reading!



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QUICK CARD



<i>Reference</i>	<i>Little House on the Prairie</i> . Laura Ingalls Wilder. (1935) ISBN: 0-06-440002-6
<i>Plot</i>	The Big Wood is getting crowded, so Pa, Ma, Mary, Laura, and baby Carrie move west into Indian Territory in search of open spaces. There they make a new home for themselves and face the hardships of life on the American plain.
<i>Setting</i>	The story is set on the plains of the Kansas territory. The action covers a year and half in the life of the Ingalls family near the end of the nineteenth century as they struggle to survive on the American frontier.
<i>Characters</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Laura Ingalls Wilder (Protagonist) • Pa, Laura's father • Ma, Laura's Mother • Mary, Laura's older sister • Carrie, Laura's younger sister • Jack, the family dog • Mr. Edwards, a family neighbor • Mr. Scott and Mrs. Scott, family neighbors
<i>Conflict</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Man vs. Nature • Man vs. Society • Man vs. Himself
<i>Theme</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family • Survival and the good life • Man's labor in the face of nature • Cultural conflict
<i>Literary Devices</i>	Imagery and Symbolism

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: SETTING



Where does this story happen? (1)

The story takes place between the Big Woods of Wisconsin and the Kansas territory, far from any white towns (“40 miles from Independence”). Nevertheless, most of the novel concerns the Ingalls’ family life on the Kansas plains.

What is the mood or atmosphere of the place where the story happens? Is it cheerful and sunny, or dark and bleak? What words or phrases or descriptions does the author use to create this atmosphere? (1d)

The mood and atmosphere of the location of the story changes over time—sometimes rather suddenly. The wild plains of Kansas are at times beautiful and calm, warm and peaceful, teeming with life and full of promise; they can, however, very quickly become life threatening, bleak, violent, and dark. The wild and unpredictable mood of the Kansas plain is central to the novel

What is the weather like in the story? (1e)

The weather in the story is inconstant and unpredictable. It represents what is uncontrollable, what is beyond man’s power, and what he must bear. The weather in the story is both the source of man’s life (for example, it allows the Ingalls to farm), and it also opposes man’s efforts, making his work difficult and even threatening his life. The extremes of a beautiful, peaceful, and sunny day and a cold, windy, and dark night represent what is beyond man’s power; they recall both his struggle in life and the good of his existence.

Is the setting a real or an imaginary place? (1g)

The setting is real. The Ingalls live in a real place at a particular moment in history. However, Laura Ingalls Wilder changed her age for the story (she was actually around three when most of the events in the novel would have taken place). Many of the details recounted in the novel are doubtless the product of her own imagination, though she did gather many of her stories from later conversations with her parents and sister.

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 settlers living on the western edge of American civilization. They own little but make do with little as well, and they are able to organize the world around them in order to survive and construct a home for themselves. The Ingalls, Mr. Edwards, and the Scotts are generally cheerful and hopeful people who face the difficulties of the Kansas plains with courage, helping one another, as they look forward to bountiful lives.

Is there anything symbolic or allegorical about the place where the story happens? Is the setting of the story important for historical events that may have taken place there? How does this link help to better understand the story? (1h,j)

The plains of Kansas both represent and *are* the edge of American civilization, where man lives in great isolation and independence *and* does so with many of the material and technological advantages offered him by his cultural heritage. Kansas, moreover, is not far from Minnesota and the site of the Minnesota massacre. This event, which is mentioned on a few occasions throughout the novel, and the Ingalls' proximity to its historical location, helps heighten the growing tension between Indians and the few local settlers in the area.

When does this story happen? How long a period of time does the story cover? (2b)

The story takes place in the late 19th century—historically in the late 1860s and early 1870s, but in the novel there is no mention of this. The novel covers different episodes in the life of the Ingalls family over roughly a year and a half.

Does the story happen in a particular year, era, or age of the world? What historical events may have just preceded the period of the story? Do these events help explain the actions of characters, the action of the story, or its mood? (2d)

The story takes place in the age of westward American expansion in the nineteenth century. The story therefore has as its backdrop the conflict between the Indians living on the territories claimed by the American government and the settlers who moved into those lands, tilled the soil, and made homes for themselves. It is an age of exploration and travel, work and expansion.

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CHARACTERS



Who is the story about? (3)

The protagonist of the novel is Laura Ingalls, a little American girl who moves West with her Pa and Ma to the plains of Kansas on a covered wagon. She is around six years of age and the middle daughter of three girls. Her older sister is Mary, her younger sister, Carrie. Laura is brown-haired and Mary blonde. Unlike her older sister who is usually calm and quiet, sometimes fearful (pg.21, 136), and always does what she is told (pg. 46, 136), Laura is adventurous, energetic, and brave (pg. 142, 204). She is sometimes scared, but she tries to do what is right even in her fear and struggles to be good and to help those around her. She is impetuous and is often calmly chastised by her parents for her manners. Still, she is reflective and does try to do what is expected of her even when her inclinations lead her down another path. In this regard, she is like her father, who both strives to do what is good, but also longs to live an independent and more “wild” life away from the hustle and bustle of civilization.

Laura does not “do” much, but rather follows her parents and the decisions they make. She is not herself leading any of the major struggles of the novel, but participates in the life and struggles of the family and tries as best she can to be a good girl, sometimes against her natural inclinations, in order to aid those she loves.

Make up a list of adjectives that describe the protagonist. What words or actions on the character’s part make you choose the adjectives you do? (3f).

Laura is:

Brave: “Then they told her how they had left Jack and had come into the house because they were afraid the Indians would hurt her and Baby Carrie. Ma said they were brave little girls” (pg. 142).

Adventurous: “And one day [Pa] asked Laura and Mary if they would like to see that camp. Laura jumped up and down and clapped her hands...” (pg. 173).

Impetuous but reflective: She immediately wants to let Jack loose when Indians enter the house while Pa is away, and yet she checks herself, listens to Mary, and ultimately decides not to let loose the dog (pg. 136).

Energetic: She wants to be active, to see new things, and to go new places. She plays alone outside even when her sister no longer wants to: “Laura felt a soft warmth on her face and opened her eyes into morning sunshine. Mary was talking to Ma by the camp fire. Laura ran outdoors, all bare inside her nightgown. There were no wolves to be seen; only their tracks were thick around the house and the stable” (pg. 99).

Curious and inquisitive: The narrator recounts Mary’s and Laura’s reaction while crossing the creek: “Mary did not move; she was trembling and still. But Laura could not help wriggling a little but. She did so want to see what was happening... Mary hid her face in the blanket again, but Laura rose up farther.” (pg. 21).

Loving, but sometimes selfish: She struggles to give up her beads to Baby Carrie and continues to covet them even once she has given them away (pg. 180-181).

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

Ma:

“Ma said they were brave little girls” (pg. 142).

““You were a brave girl, Laura,’ she said. But Laura had really been terribly scared.” (pg. 204).

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? (3m)

The most important thing to Laura is to live with her family and be a good girl. This is, however, not something that she always achieves with ease. Often she is confronted with situations in which she very much wants to do the opposite of what is asked of her. Here, she must decide to be obedient over and against her natural inclinations. Her actions, whether instinctive—as when she rushes into the house to pull Baby Carrie and Mary away from the fire—or following upon reflection, are most often ordered towards the preservation and the good of family life.

Is the character a “sympathetic character”? Do you identify with her and hope that she will succeed? Do you pity her? Do you scorn or despise her weakness in some way? Why? Is the character a type or an archetype? Is she an “everyman” with whom the reader is meant to identify? Are her struggles symbolic of human life generally in some way? (3q,p).

Laura is a sympathetic character. The reader cannot help but love the small but intelligent and brave little girl. She is not perfect, but her struggle to do what is good only makes it easier for the reader to relate to her. As such, her character—isolated and yet surrounded by family, loving yet disobedient, drawn along by the rhythm of life and yet capable of acting and deciding the outcome of many a situation—in some way represents the experience of man in general. In this sense Laura can be considered an “everyman.”

Who else is the story about? (4)

Pa, Charles Ingalls:

Pa is Laura’s father and the leader of the Ingalls family. He is a provider and a comforter, and in his presence, Laura does not fear much. He is brave and cheery. He loves his daughters and his wife very much and tries to provide for them as best he can, showing them affection in small things such as gifts, hugs, songs, jokes, smiles, etc. Still, he longs for a certain way of life, away from the movement and noise of “civilization,” and this leads him to move west and risk the lives and health of the members of his family. Without the intervention of friends and the workings of Providence (pg. 61), who knows what might have happened to the Ingalls all alone on the plain?

Pa believes that if he and his family leave the Indians alone, the Indians will not harm them and will allow them to live on the land they settled. He is strongly opposed to Mr. Scott’s view that the only good Indian is a dead Indian.

Ma, Caroline Ingalls:

Ma is gentle and calm. She is long-suffering and follows Charles where he leads, even into great difficulty, serving him and the family as best she can. She is a fair mother and seeks to raise Laura and Mary well. She is also, like Pa and Laura, very brave. As the story progresses, moreover, the reader recognizes that Ma is also very spirited and witty, though she chooses carefully when to express herself. On a few occasions, she is not afraid to raise her concern about some plan of Charles’s and calmly question the prudence of his decision. She is the only character to directly reference Providence (pg. 61); she also sings a religious hymn in a moment of distress (pg. 220).

Though Ma is not as opposed to the Indians as Mr. Scott, she is nevertheless not as confident of their peaceful intentions as Pa. On several occasions, Indians break into the house while Pa is away, and Ma gives them what they want. She fears that conflict with them is unavoidable, and she does not consider them reasonable people.

Mary Ingalls:

Mary is Laura's older sister. She is "always good" (pg. 46) and is obedient. She is calmer than Laura. Though she certainly shows bravery at times, she is not naturally suited to action and often finds herself paralyzed in frightening situations.

Jack:

Jack is the family dog. He is brave, loyal, and protective. He is Pa's dog through and through. He can run tirelessly and stay up all night if he must defend the house from wolves or Indians.

Mr. Edwards:

Mr. Edwards is the family's neighbor in Kansas. Though a bachelor living in the wilderness on his own, he is always polite to Ma and very kind and loving. He perfectly represents neighborly love, helping Pa build his house and barn, offering Pa nails, checking in on the family when Pa is gone, and braving the creek in the dead of winter in order to bring the Ingalls their Christmas presents. Though there is no single hero in the novel, Mr. Edwards is most certainly an ideal character and central to the story, caring for the Ingalls and bringing them joy as they struggle to survive in the world. The strong association of Mr. Edwards with Christmas and the crossing of the river (which, in certain Biblical passages, represents the overcoming of death and the entrance to the promise land), since he brings the Ingalls life and plenty, is not to be missed.

Mr. and Mrs. Scott:

They are the Ingalls's other neighbors. They are kind and helpful people. Mr. Scott helps Pa build his well, nearly losing his life in the process. Mrs. Scott nurses the Ingalls back to health when they have malaria. When the Scotts receive news that they will be removed from their land by soldiers, they decide to stay anyhow and hope for a better outcome.

They are not well disposed toward the Indians since they live with the memory of the Minnesota massacre. For them, the only good Indian is a dead Indian.

Du Chêne:

He is an Osage Indian chief and warrior. Pa and he meet early in the story and are kind to each other, though both remain respectful and guarded. Ultimately, it is this Indian chief who convinces his tribe at the great jamboree not to massacre the white settlers in the region and to prevent the other tribes from doing so. Since the Osage tribe was composed of great warriors, the other Indian tribes did not wish to fight with them, giving up their war plans and returning home.

Antagonists:

There is no single antagonist in the novel. Still, the “wilderness” opposes the labor of the Ingalls family and threatens to harm or kill them on several occasions. The wilderness is, paradoxically, both the source of the Ingalls’ life—because all they live on flows from the surrounding nature—and is at the same time a constant danger and threat. The Indian tribes in the area, too, eventually come to oppose the Ingalls and the other white settlers. They are, after all, on Indian land. The tribes gather together at the great jamboree and hold discussions over their course of action. Most of the tribes want to kill the local settlers. However, the Osage tribe, led by Du Chêne prevents them from doing so.

The Ingalls also struggle against the civilization to which they belong and from which they are escaping. They leave the Big Woods of Wisconsin because they are too crowded, and Pa has word from Washington that the territory out West will soon be opened for settlement. Pa wants to live in a country where wild animals roam free. It is, however, the same government in Washington which eventually orders Pa off of his land, thus forcing him to return to civilization—at least for a while. The tension between Pa, a particular man, and American society and government as a whole is never resolved. Moreover, this tension in the story points to a deeper conflict within man: the tension between gratifying his particular desires (for Pa, this is to live a secluded, self-sustaining, and independent life; for Laura, this is to say what one wants when one wants and to have pretty things) and doing what is good (for Pa, this is providing for his family; for Laura, this is to be obedient, helpful, and loving for the greater good of the family). To some extent, both Pa and Laura face opportunities to lay down their own desires for the greater good of their family.

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CONFLICT AND PLOT



What does the protagonist want? And why can't he have it? (5, 6)

This story is about the Ingalls trying to build a home for themselves and survive on the wild Kansas plains. As Pa is always saying, they are going to “live like kings” (pg. 315). The Ingalls then are in a struggle for life—both for simple, physical life *and* for the more philosophical and esoteric good life, full and well-lived. Pa is not merely interested in bare survival (although he desires that first!). What he really wants is to provide a comfortable living for his family. He buys presents for Ma and the girls, he puts glass in the windows and builds for comfort and beauty (consider the mantelpiece over the fireplace and the shelves). We must also remember the author’s constant references to Pa’s pipe tobacco, a creature comfort that provides him great joy in his leisure time. Still, material comfort as such is not the ultimate principle behind Pa’s idea of the good life. He also wants to be morally good. For this reason, the Ingalls help their neighbors and one another. They mind their manners even in the middle of the western plains and try to act bravely and uprightly. For example, Pa saves Mr. Scott from the well at the risk of his own life. This desire to act uprightly constitutes an internal, ongoing struggle for the Ingalls, and most particularly for little Laura.

This struggle necessitates that the Ingalls battle both the dangers of the wilderness and their own internal condition. This is therefore a **man vs. nature** struggle, in which “nature” can be taken in two senses: It refers to the natural dangers of Kansas (the harsh weather, the prairie fires, the wild animals, etc.), which are constantly threatening to harm the Ingalls, and to man’s inner state, pointing to his struggle to order himself towards what is good and to live for someone other than himself. In the latter sense, this conflict may be termed more properly **man vs. himself**. When the term “nature” in the man vs. nature conflict means the natural world, the story’s tension could be lessened if the Ingalls were to remove themselves from the wild territory. In the second case, when “nature” refers to man’s inner state, the story’s tension can never really be resolved, as man always struggles to love more perfectly and live more selflessly.

This story is also about the Ingalls trying to live in peace with the local Indians. The long history between the Indians and the white settlers (and the government in Washington), provides the backdrop for the tense relationship between the Ingalls and their Indian neighbors. Pa is convinced that if the Ingalls are kind to the Indians and do not cause trouble, the family will be left alone. He believes that the Indians would not dare attack the settlers because American soldiers are stationed nearby. Still, as the novel progresses, the Indian presence in the area increases and tensions rise till they are nearly unbearable. The Indians' war cries as they discuss the possibility of warring against the white settlers in their camp not far from the Ingalls home prevent the Ingalls from sleeping and terrify the children. Even Pa fears the outcome of their pow-wow. As the Indians become more and more aggressive in their war songs, Pa no longer stays outside working as long and Ma and the girls keep to the safety of the house. Only when the Osage warrior, whom Pa had previously met, argues with his tribe, convincing it not to harm the settlers, do the Indians scatter.

This is, then, a **man vs. society** struggle. The outcome of the struggle does not ultimately depend on the Ingalls. While they play their part and remain prudent, careful not to offend the Indians, it is the Indians' decision that will ultimately decide the Ingalls's fate. In the end, the Ingalls's survival depends upon the Osage Indians. Pa's small friendship with Du Chêne together with the nobility of the Osage tribal culture—much is made of their superiority to the other Indians—allow the Ingalls to hold onto their lives and land.

In addition, the story chronicles the Ingalls's efforts to live independent lives far from the hassle of society. Pa finds the Big Woods too crowded and noisy, and he longs for open and calm country where he can work and live quietly: “[H]e liked a country where the wild animals lived without being afraid” (pg. 2). Hearing that the land in the west might be opened to settlers soon, he moves his family west to Kansas, where the family attempts to live in the wild plain. The Ingalls try to live a “wilder” life. Still, this comes at a cost: they must face many hardships on their own, without the help of a town or even close neighbors. On the prairie, their closest neighbors are distant. Nevertheless, even while Pa longs for a wilder life, he does not live like an animal. Instead, he struggles to preserve family life and its comfort in the middle of the wilderness with the cultural tools he has at his disposal, carving out an inhabitable space on the plains of Kansas. He, therefore, desires to escape civilization, even as he depends upon it for his and his family's survival. (For example, he must travel to Independence for supplies at regular intervals.) Moreover, it is only through the presence of a few other settlers in the family's region that the Ingalls survive at all (for example: Mr. Edward's help, the care of Mrs.

Scott). The Ingalls never fully escape society. In fact, such an escape might not be desirable.

Ultimately, the tension between man's need for civilization and man's desire for a free life (man vs. society) drives the novel forward. It first leads the Ingalls to leave their home in search of new land. Once on the plain, however, the Ingalls's life remains unstable, not only because of their struggle against the natural elements, but also because of the need for society this struggle entails. It is this need for neighbors and the added threat of the neighboring Indian communities which creates the major story conflict.

In the end, the Ingalls are forced from their land, in spite of the fact that they had just completed their home with the addition of a farm. Right as they reach an unprecedented degree of material independence, they are made to return to where they started: "Everything was just as it was before they built the house" (pg. 332). Still, they are never downtrodden, nor do they give up hope. It is this ultimate human freedom that shines through even at the end of the book, as the Ingalls are forced to leave what they cared for so long. Indeed, one of the book's final scenes involves an encounter with a man and woman whose horses have been stolen from their wagon, but who are not willing to give up their material possessions in order to live. These people cannot and do not consider the future in all its possibilities, but are instead crippled, clinging to their possessions in the moment. The Ingalls offer to give them a ride, but the couple refuses.

Whatever imprudence may have guided the Ingalls's original decision to move west, they do not cling to their material wealth. Their ultimate freedom lies in their ability to grow with each development and look hopefully toward the future. In this way, the author suggests that to wander hopefully with other men is the strength of a man: "[R]ow the boat lightly, Love, over the sea; Daily and nightly I'll wander with thee" whistles Pa as they leave their house behind (pg. 335). Ma's ultimate hope, moreover, does not lie *in* the world in which she wanders, but beyond it: "There is a happy land, far, far away, where saints in glory stand, bright, bright as day. Oh, to hear the angels sing, Glory to the Lord, our King—" (pg. 220). The hope and joy that she knows as she travels and lives in *this* world are grounded on her hope in another world, where "the angels sing." Her final hope is in this "happy land, far, far away," and not in the temporal world, under the sun.

What happens in the story? (8)

The Ingalls move west in search of wilder lands. On the plains of Kansas, they build a house. Pa hunts, and they get water from the creek. In time, Pa builds a barn, digs a well and begins to plan for a farm. Wild animals and bad weather, however, constantly threaten the family's livelihood, and the Ingalls escape death on more than a few occasions thanks to friends and Providence (pg. 61). They begin to meet Indians, too, and tensions with the local tribes rise. Eventually the local Indians gather near the Ingalls' house to discuss what to do with the white settlers. Thanks to the intervention of a noble Indian, the Ingalls and their neighbors are spared. Soon after, however, they receive word that soldiers are coming to remove them from their land, as they settled three miles across the American border with the Indian tribes. Pa does not want to wait for the soldiers; he packs the family's belongings, leaves the house, and sets off in the direction of Independence, the closest neighboring town.

How is the main problem solved? (9)

The growing tension with the Indians (man vs. society) is solved thanks to the goodwill of the local Osage chieftain. Peace is preserved, but the Ingalls are soon after driven from their land. Nevertheless, the basic tension between the Indians and the white settlers is not eliminated, but simply pushed off until a later time. The Ingalls do not solve their own problem. They only unknowingly made a solution possible: Pa had treated the Osage chieftain with respect when they met, and though the two never became close, this civil encounter was perhaps enough to convince the Indian chief that Pa and the local settlers ought not be harmed.

The conflict with nature (man vs. nature) is never resolved. The Ingalls simply return to a less wild region. The little family, so long as it lives, will always have to contend with the unpredictability of the natural order.

Pa, therefore, also does not ultimately escape the more crowded society he sought to flee (man vs. society). He must finally set off toward Independence with his family in search of new prospects.

Thus, many of the problems are left suspended.

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: THEME



What do the characters learn? (11,12)

Because Laura is such a little girl, she does not herself directly participate in many of the major conflicts which drive the novel. She is more of a spectator whose limited role is to help her Ma and Pa as best she can and be obedient. The importance of her good behavior and obedience is present throughout the novel.

Moreover, as the Ingalls leave their house on the prairie, their basic attitude is unchanged from what it had been at the beginning of the book. The narrator remarks, “everything was just as it used to be before they built the house” (pg. 332). They are still hopeful, looking forward to future goods, and thankful for what they have received: “Anyway, we’re taking more out of Indian Territory than we took in” (pg. 334). Pa is able to focus on what has been gained rather than lost. Pa is therefore able to think constructively and, in his thankfulness, put the resources he has at his disposal to good use for the future of his family. The Ingalls have been through much, *and yet* their lives have come full circle. They are free, yet limited by forces much greater than themselves (nature, the character of society, the decisions of government, Providence). According to Wilder’s tale, there is nothing new under the sun. Man labors in hope and enjoys life, but he cannot escape his finitude

Still, Pa learns that the wild country is perhaps not as hospitable as he once thought. Maybe it is best that the Ingalls leave after all—at least for a while. He says to Ma as they are preparing to leave, “It’s a great country, Caroline... But there will be wild Indians and wolves here for many a long day” (pg. 325). The Ingalls survived on the plain thanks to friends and family. Perhaps, the story suggests, they ought to live closer to these.

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

As has already been discussed above, the novel deals with the theme of survival and ultimately asks the question, “What is the good life?” Family life and friendships are central to the book. These are the heart and soul of the goods enjoyed by the Ingalls, and they are what Laura loves most. Mr. Edwards most perfectly incarnates these goods. Nevertheless, the tension at the heart of the good life between man’s independence and his attachment to society is not definitely and explicitly resolved. There seem to be benefits to both: because the Ingalls are independent they can make their own decisions and live according to what they believe to be good; nevertheless, they depend upon society for the goodness of their lives and they survive only due to their few neighbors. The book, indeed, never suggests one element of this tension is preferable *over* the other. If anything, a middle course is suggested. On one hand, complete seclusion and independence would be impossible; on the other hand, too great an attachment to society and “city life” would harm man’s ability to recognize the beauty of the world and man’s own proper place in it. (Laura is constantly marveling at the vast world around her, and the reader cannot escape her awe in the face of the, rather frightening, beauty of nature.) The author seems to suggest that both extremes are to be avoided, and a “middle position” must constantly be sought.

The other two major themes, man’s work under the sun and the conflict between cultures, fall within the larger theme of the search for the good life, family, and friendship and can be considered with the material treated above.

NOTES:

QUESTIONS ABOUT STYLE: LITERARY DEVICES



Does the author use descriptions and comparisons to create pictures in the reader's mind? (16a)

The author's descriptions of the prairie leave the reader with an idea of the isolation the Ingalls experienced and a sense of the vastness of the world that completely encompassed them. This backdrop is central to the themes and conflicts in the story.

“Day after day they traveled in Kansas, and saw nothing but the rippling grass and the enormous sky. In a perfect circle the sky curved down to the level land, and the wagon was in the circle's exact middle. All day long Pet and Patty went forward, trotting and walking and trotting again, but they couldn't get out of the middle of that circle. When the sun went down, the circle was still around them and the edge of the sky was pink. Then slowly the land became black. The wind made a lonely sound in the grass. The campfire was small and lost in so much space. But large stars hung from the sky, glittering so near that Laura felt she could almost touch them” (pg. 13).

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

The character of Mr. Edwards is directly associated with Christmas, and so with joy and plenty and a full life. He brings the Ingalls their Christmas gifts and much joy at great risk to himself. In the middle of winter he crosses the creek, holding his clothes and the gifts up over his head. This can be taken as an Old Testament allusion to the overcoming of death and to the entrance into the Promised Land, summed up in a particular understanding of New Testament baptism. Mr. Edwards, who is the most perfectly jovial, friendly, and loving character in the novel is therefore a sort of Christ-figure. Though Christ is never explicitly referenced in the novel, Providence is mentioned on one occasion (pg. 61) and it is clear that Ma has Jesus at the back of her mind when she sings her heavenly hymn while Pa (the father figure and comforter) is away (pg. 220). The presence of Mr. Edward's character and his association with Christmas and redemption, along with Ma's faith, shape the mood and direction of the novel and ground the Ingalls' hope and joy in something beyond the material world.

QUESTIONS ABOUT CONTEXT



Who is the author? (18)

The author is Laura Ingalls Wilder. *The Little House on the Prairie* is one volume in a multivolume work that retraces Laura’s childhood on the American frontier. She wrote these books later in life with help of her daughter, Rose. It seems that the Great Depression and several deaths in the family first led Laura to set her memories to paper. These original efforts were then eventually turned into what is now the series of books often gathered under the title *The Little House on the Prairie*—though this title really only refers to *one* of several books.

Where did the author live? (19).

Laura lived all over the United States in many different conditions. She began life in the woods of Wisconsin before moving to the plains of Kansas. She also lived in De Smet, South Dakota and Mansfield, Missouri. Laura lived on the frontier and in or near small towns for most of her life. She was a frontier and farmer girl and, in her own words, married a “farmer boy,” Almanzo Wilder. Her life involved a series of turns from relative poverty to material prosperity, and many of these can be read about in her books. Her writing is shaped by the tension between material prosperity and the risks and uncertainties inherent in its pursuit.

NOTES:

ESSAY QUESTIONS FOR WRITING ASSIGNMENTS



1. Compare Laura and Pa Ingalls. In what ways are these characters similar? Consider both their flaws and strengths.
2. Reflect on the author's nature imagery, or the way in which she describes her surroundings. How does this imagery mirror the story's main theme?
3. According to Laura Ingalls Wilder, what is the role of the family in a good life? Defend your answer with textual evidence.
4. At the beginning of the novel, Pa desires to remove his family from the crowded society of The Big Wood. Where does the author place the climax to this man vs. society conflict, and in what way is the tension resolved? How does this comment on the theme of the story?
5. The main antagonist in this story is nature. According to the author, what is man's role in the face of a natural world he cannot control? Use details of character and conflict to defend your answer.

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.

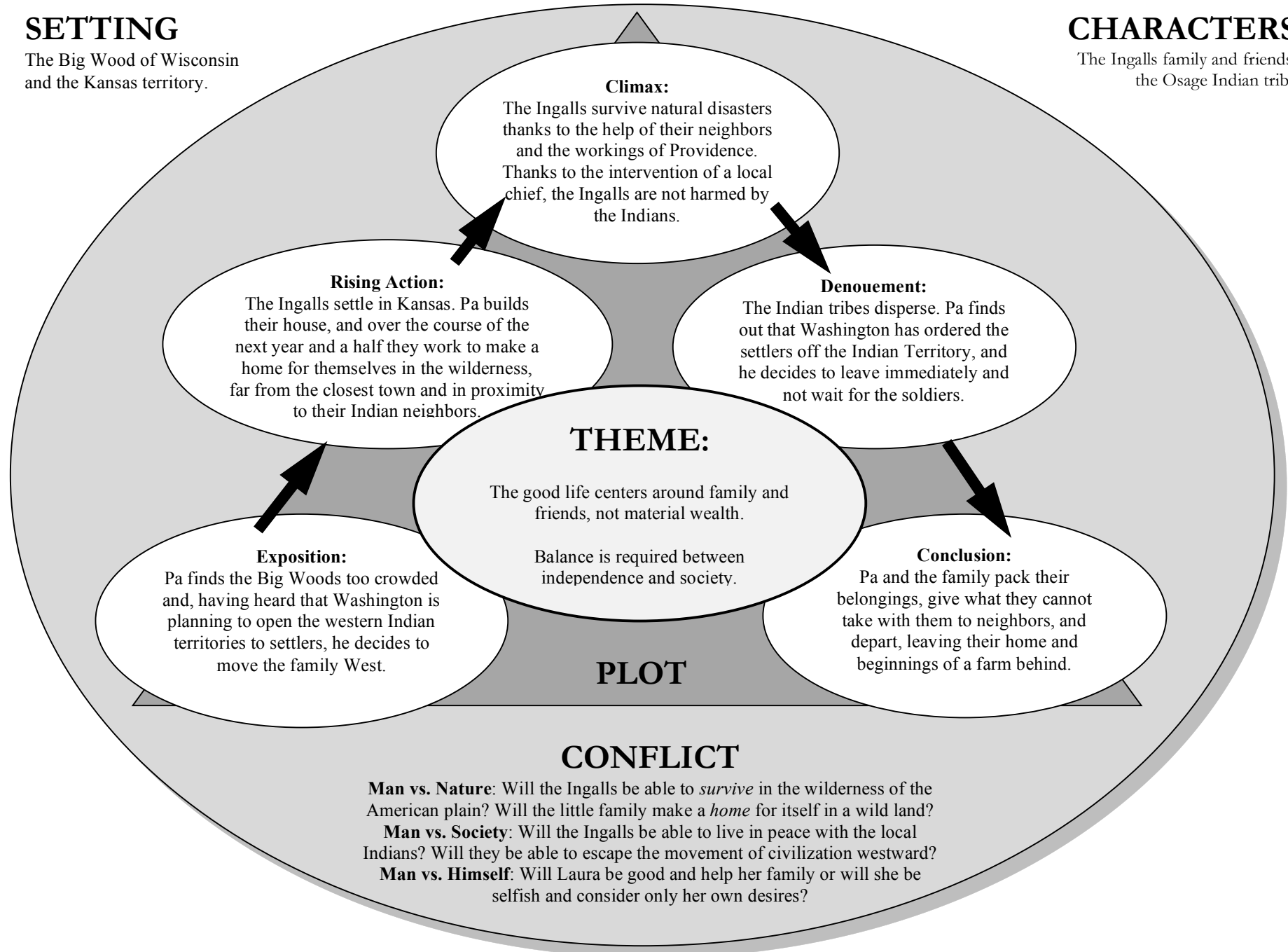
Little House on the Prairie by Laura Ingalls Wilder: Story Chart

SETTING

The Big Wood of Wisconsin and the Kansas territory.

CHARACTERS

The Ingalls family and friends; the Osage Indian tribe



Little House on the Prairie by Laura Ingalls Wilder: Story Chart

