

Thank you, Mr. Falker
by Patricia Polacco

A Teacher's Guide for Socratic Discussion
by Clare Kearns



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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.

Happy reading!

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

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QUICK CARD



Reference	<i>Thank you, Mr. Falker.</i> Patricia Polacco (1944-). ISBN: 978-0-399-25762-9
Plot	Trisha struggles to learn to read until her fifth grade teacher, Mr. Falker, discovers her learning disability. He teaches her new reading skills, as well as confidence.
Setting	The story transpires over several years of Trisha's life, from when she turns five to when she is in fifth grade. During this time her family moves from Michigan to California.
Characters	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Trisha, the youngest girl in the family• Trisha's loving and inspirational grandfather and grandmother, who both pass away during her childhood• Trisha's mother and older brother• Eric, a boy who bullies Trisha at her school in California• Mr. Falker, her fifth grade teacher in California
Conflict	Man vs. Self: Will Trisha overcome her difficulty in reading and become confident? Man vs. Man: Will Trisha avoid the bullying of her classmates?
Themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The influence of a gentle, loving, and perceptive teacher• Love of knowledge• Compassion• Confidence and the beauty of uniqueness• Gratitude
Literary Devices	Simile Metaphor Repetition

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: SETTING



The following questions are drawn from the “Setting” section of the Socratic List, found in Appendix A, pages 80-81 of the Teaching the Classics syllabus.

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

The story begins when Trisha’s family lives in Michigan, and ends with them at their new home in California. Trisha associates the Michigan family farm with her grandparents, who loved and encouraged her, and both of whom pass away before they move to California. Trisha doesn’t want to move to California, increasing the tension and anxiety she experiences when she is bullied there. However, the move to California allows her to meet Mr. Falker, leading to the story’s climax and happy conclusion.

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

The story is warm and peaceful during the scenes that occur at home, particularly the scenes that are associated with Trisha’s grandparents. This mood is accentuated by the warm color tones and, on several pages, the starry sky. Pages 2, 8, and 9 in particular contain gentle dialogue and positive adjectives like “sweet,” “warm,” and “safe” (8).

During the school scenes, particularly when Trisha is bullied, the mood is dark and tense, emphasized by the dark illustrations. The most prominent words on these pages are the harsh insults shouted at her by her classmates, and words like “afraid,” “alone,” and “dark” appear in contrast with the earlier descriptions.

In what time of life for the main character does the events occur? Is she a child? Is she just passing into adulthood? How does setting the story in this particular time of the character’s lives affect the story? (2.e)

Trisha is five years old at the beginning of the story, and in fifth grade at the end. The duration of time covered in the story lets us watch Trisha grow and learn and become herself. In first grade, she begins to doubt her abilities and wonders if she is “dumb” or “different” (6). In the years that follow, she wrestles with this fear and experiences moments of deeper doubt about herself before she finally experiences the joy and freedom of being loved and discovers her own abilities.

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.

What does Trisha think or say about herself? (3.j)

Trisha feels “different” and “dumb” (6). She asks her grandmother what she thinks about her, and the older woman’s loving affirmation makes Trisha feel better temporarily. As Trisha continues to struggle in school, however, “she just knew she was dumb” (11). When her classmates bully her, Trisha feels alone and begins to believe the terrible things they say about her. But Mr. Falker’s kindness makes her feel loved, and on the day she finally learns to read she begins to believe in her own abilities.

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

Trisha’s grandmother tells her that she is “the smartest, quickest, dearest little thing ever” (8). But the other kids at her new school call her “dummy” and look down on her for her inability to read (15). Eric especially looks down on her and calls her terrible names. Mr. Falker, on the other hand, calls her “talented” because of her artwork (20). When he discovers how she struggles to read, he calls her cunning, smart, and brave to have hidden her difficulty for so long.

Trisha asks her grandmother whether she is “different” because she isn’t sure what she thinks about herself (8). Throughout the story, she looks to others to learn about herself and her identity. Her grandparents make her feel unique and loved. Later she listens to what her classmates say about her, and believes for a while that she is dumb and incapable. When Mr. Falker treats her gently and compassionately, she learns to listen to him and see herself the way he sees her, as smart, brave, and talented. The more she listens to the words of those who love her, the more she is enabled to develop the good qualities they see.

Is there a single character or group of characters that opposes the protagonist in the story? In other words, is there an antagonist? (4.a)

Trisha’s classmates, especially Eric, bully her and look down on her. Before she moved to California, she hoped that no one would find out that she was struggling in school. But her classmates do see her struggle and tease her about it, making her believe more than ever that she is dumb and incapable. In this way, they oppose her goal of learning to read by undermining her confidence in herself. They also oppose her deeper goal of discovering her identity and believing that she is intelligent and loved.

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.

Is the conflict an external one, having to do with circumstances in the protagonist’s physical world, or is it an internal conflict, taking place in his mind and emotions? (5.e)

The main conflict is an internal one (man vs. himself), taking place in Trisha’s mind and heart as she struggles to overcome her difficulty learning and the shame and insecurity she feels as a result. However, there is also an external conflict between Trisha and the classmates that bully her (man vs. man).

What events form the highest point or the climax of the story’s tension? (9.d)

The climax of the story occurs when Mr. Falker discovers Trisha’s learning disability and responds with gentleness and encouragement. His compassion enables her to see herself as he does, helping her gain confidence. After this conversation, Mr. Falker gives Trisha special reading lessons, resulting in the moment when she feels as if “light poured into her brain” and she is suddenly able to read (31). While some might point to the moment Trisha learns to read as the climax, there is a lot of evidence that it is actually her earlier conversation with Mr. Falker. First, this scene follows the most tense bullying scene and the resolution of the Man vs. Man conflict, in which Mr. Falker speaks to Eric and stops his bullying for good. Further, in this scene, Mr. Falker discovers Trisha’s real problem for the first time and reveals that it isn’t so insurmountable after all. Trisha and the reader learn that Trisha is not “dumb,” but actually very inventive and brave, because she has been working to hide her learning disability for years. This revelation resolves Trisha’s underlying struggle in the story: her fear that she is dumb and “different” in a bad way. Mr. Falker affirms her unique “smartness” and “bravery” even as he recognizes her learning disability, revealing that she is smart and loveable whether she can read or not (30). Trisha is no longer alone in her struggle, and receives new hope that she will overcome it. The tension begins to diffuse after this scene, suggesting that the moment Trisha learns to read is part of the denouement.

Does Trisha solve her own dilemma? Is it solved by some external source or third party? Is she helpless in the end to achieve her goal, or does she triumph by virtue of her own efforts? (9.e)

Trisha needs Mr. Falker to teach her in a new way so that she can learn to read. She also needs his kindness and encouragement to give her confidence when she has been feeling so rejected and alone. However, Mr. Falker’s help ultimately gives Trisha the tools to use her own intelligence and strength.

Mr. Falker also resolves the conflict of the classmates who bully Trisha. He asks Trisha’s classmates,

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 the sounds of our language to create interest in her story? (14)

Does she intentionally repeat words or phrases? (Repetition)

“She dreamed more and more, and drew more and more, and she hated, hated, hated school” (17).

This repetition illustrates how Trisha absorbs herself more and more in dreaming and drawing to distance herself from her struggles in school. The repeated words emphasize how much her dislike of school grows. There is also a sad irony highlighted in the fact that school seems to be an obstacle to Trisha’s dreams, when it should instead aid and encourage them.

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

“The honey is sweet, and so is knowledge, but knowledge is like the bee who made the honey, it has to be chased through the pages of a book!” (34)

This simile (from Trisha’s family) compares knowledge to honey, because both are “sweet.” It also compares knowledge to a bee that makes the honey, because you have to “chase” knowledge through a book like you might chase a bee to find the sweet honey. Another picture book by Patricia Polacco, *The Bee Tree*, builds an entire story out of this simile. In this other story, the main character learns the importance of pursuing knowledge through a book as she and the other characters literally pursue bees to their hive to get the honey.

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

“Trisha’s grandma used to say that the stars were holes in the sky. They were the light of heaven coming from the other side” (9).

Trisha’s grandmother’s metaphor compares the stars to holes in the sky that let in the light of heaven. Her grandma says that “someday she would be on the other side, where the light comes from” (9). When her grandma passes away, this metaphor helps Trisha imagine how her grandma is alive in heaven, as she pictures that “she went to where the lights were, on the other side” (9).

This methapor is not dissimilar from the one comparing books to honey. In both cases, that which is worthwhile is hidden and requires faith and struggle to grasp. Significantly, the same stars in the

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. Why does Trisha hate school?
2. How do other people's opinions of Trisha shape the way she thinks about herself throughout the story? How do these opinions change her behavior?
3. Why does Trisha's grandpa drizzle honey on the cover of a book at the beginning of the story? Why does Trisha repeat this action at the end of the story?
4. Why does Trisha hide her struggles with reading? How does Mr. Falker's reaction to her learning disability help her overcome it?
5. Trisha asks her grandma whether she is "different," and her grandma responds that "[t]o be different is the miracle of life" (8). What does she mean? How does Trisha's understanding of "being different" change throughout the story?

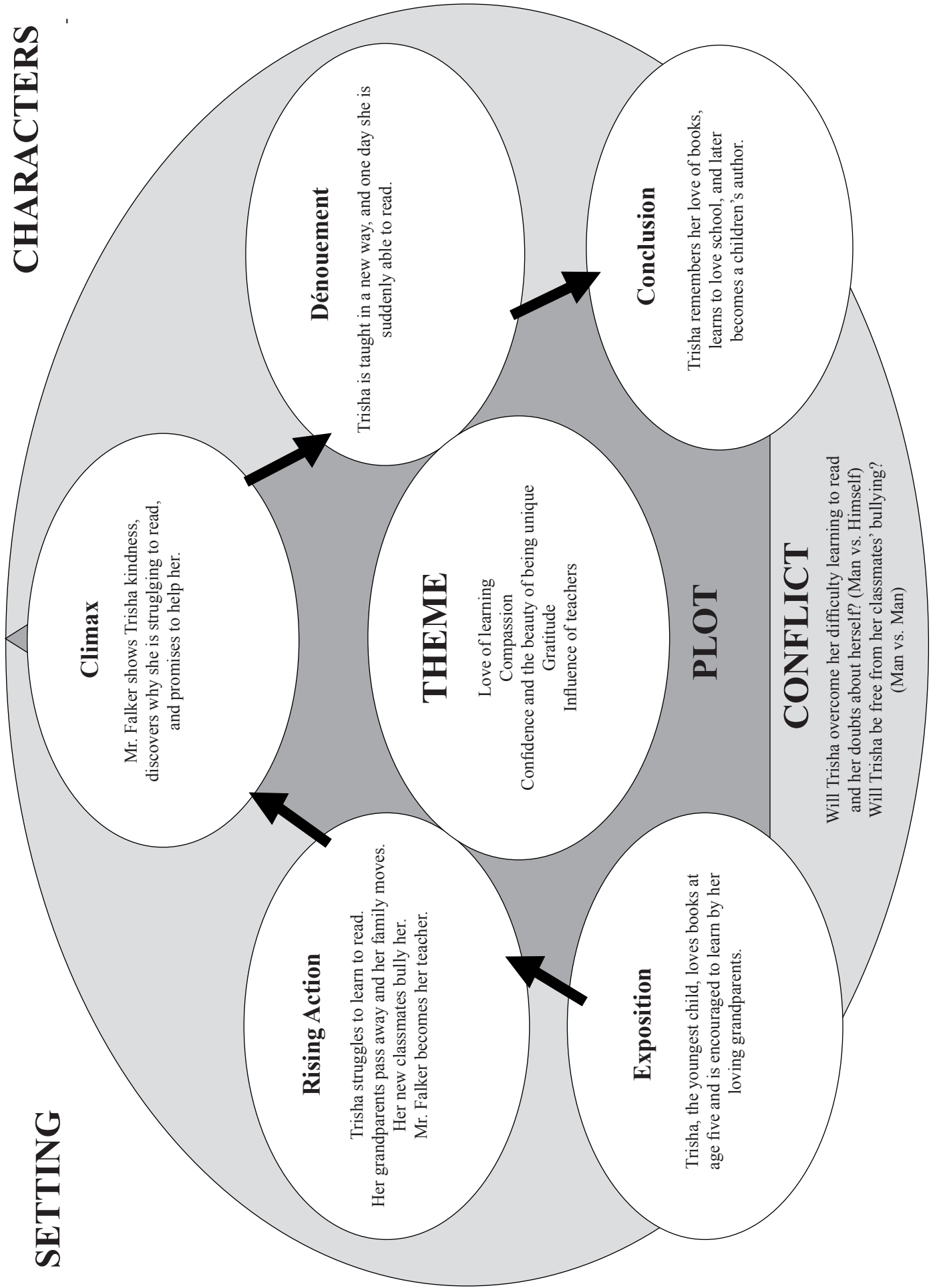
STORY CHARTS



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: *Thank you, Mr. Falker*



Story Chart: *Thank you, Mr. Falker*

SETTING

CHARACTERS

