

Lentil
by Robert McCloskey

A Teacher's Guide for Socratic Discussion
by Charles 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.

Happy reading!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Adam Andrews", with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

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QUICK CARD



Reference	<i>Lentil</i> by Robert McCloskey ISBN: 978-0-14-050287-9
Plot	Lentil, a young boy who loves music, learns to play the harmonica since he cannot sing, or even whistle. When the generous and respected Colonel Carter returns to town, Sneep, the town grouch, sucks on a lemon, causing everyone's lips to pucker and ruining the brass band gathered to celebrate the Colonel's return! Since Lentil cannot pucker his lips, he saves the day—and the Colonel's mood—with his harmonica. Everyone is delighted by Lentil's playing and by the Colonel's announcement of his plans to build a new hospital in town.
Setting	The story takes place in the town of Alto, Ohio, during Lentil's childhood.
Characters	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lentil, the protagonist who loves music and plays a harmonica; he is unable to pucker his lips properly to whistle.• Sneep, the antagonist who doesn't like anybody or anything and tries to ruin the Colonel's homecoming.• Colonel Carter, the respected resident and generous donor to the town of Alto, who returns home after years away.• Other members of the town and band.
Conflict	<p>Man vs. Himself: Lentil wants to play music but can't sing or whistle, which is embarrassing.</p> <p>Man vs. Man: Sneep threatens to wreck the music of the celebration by "sucking on a lemon."</p>
Theme	Lentil doesn't give up after the initial humiliation of not being able to sing or whistle, allowing him to save the Colonel's celebration and gain the admiration of the town. He displays determination and resilience despite failure.
Literary Devices	Circumstantial Irony Cliche' Imagery Foreshadowing Onomatopoeia

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.

Where does the story happen? (1)

The story takes place in Alto, Ohio.

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? (1d)

The town of Alto is small and safe, a place where everyone knows everyone else. People “smile and wave hello” to Lentil as he walks around town, suggesting a friendly and non-threatening atmosphere (22). The description of the town also notes that many buildings and monuments are named after Colonel Carter, a generous donor and successful resident of Alto. This foreshadows his importance to the town.

Among what kinds of people is the story set? How do they live? Are they hopeful? Downtrodden? Depressed? Why? (1h)

The people in Alto present a picture of normal, small-town America. Lentil describes each shop as he passes by, suggesting that everyone seems to have a role in a small, tight-knit community. The people are hopeful, particularly because of the Colonel’s generosity in sponsoring much of the town. His return suggests good times ahead for everyone but Sneep, who doesn’t like anybody anyways.

When does this story happen? On what day does the story happen? (2a)

The story is set in Lentil’s childhood, and the plot takes place over a few days, in which Colonel Carter comes back to town after being away for several years.

NOTES:

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? (3)

Unsurprisingly, the protagonist is Lentil, a young boy with a passion for music.

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

Lentil is self-aware, determined, diligent, decisive, and talented. Early in the story, Lentil feels embarrassed that he cannot sing or whistle and is pictured practicing on his own. This suggests his keen self-consciousness about the thoughts and criticism of others. He also saves up money on his own to buy a harmonica, suggesting dedication and hard work. He practices around the clock to become a self-taught “expert.” This shows Lentil’s diligence and talent. All of these qualities lead to Lentil’s shining moment, in which he plays for the Colonel, saving the “grand welcome” from disaster.

Who else is the story about and what do other characters say about him? (3k)

The story describes Colonel Carter as “the town’s most important citizen.” Throughout the story, as Lentil plays his harmonica through different parts of the town, the reader learns that Colonel Carter donated or built several of the town’s buildings. This foreshadows his importance and creates pressure for the townspeople to respect him. This also explains why everyone attends his homecoming celebration. His grand welcome seems infinitely more important in light of the impact of his generosity towards the town.

Who else is the story about? (4)

The antagonist of the story is Sneep. Sneep is an old man who “didn’t like much of anything or anybody” (23). He appears to be jealous of Carter’s fame, stating that the two were boys together and the Colonel could stand to be “takin’ down a peg or two.” His sour attitude is imaged perfectly when he sucks on a lemon to thwart the Colonel’s grand welcome. The sound he makes causes all the musicians’ lips to pucker, rendering them helpless to play for the Colonel—except Lentil, of course. Sneep consistently appears whittling a stick, suggestive of his bad temper, which chips away at the otherwise friendly atmosphere of the town.

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.

What does the protagonist want? (5)

Lentil wants to play music and become an expert at the harmonica. He does not want to be embarrassed by his inability to sing or whistle. In the end, he wants to celebrate the Colonel’s return with the rest of the town.

Does he overcome a physical impediment? (5c)

Lentil tries and tries to sing and whistle, but he cannot. When he sings “only strange sounds come out” (6), and he can’t even pucker his lips in order to whistle! Despite this handicap, Lentil learns to play music by buying and studying the harmonica. He even finds his weakness is a strength when Sneep sucks his lemon and he cannot pucker his lips.

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? (5e)

The conflict is both external and internal. It is external in the sense that Lentil’s physical inability to sing or whistle keeps him from playing music, and the antagonist’s actions stand in the way of one of his motives. On the other hand, it is internal in the sense that Lentil faces a decision about the attitude with which he will approach his own weaknesses.

Why can’t Lentil have what he wants? (6)

Lentil can’t pucker his lips to whistle or sing well enough to hold a tune. This makes playing music seem impossible!

Is the conflict a Man vs. Himself struggle? (6g-k)

The conflict is Man vs. Himself since Lentil has to overcome his own musical deficiencies to play his harmonica. There is also a Man vs. Man conflict when Sneep tries to ruin the celebration.

What major events take place in the story as a result of the conflict (8a)

Because he’s embarrassed that he can’t sing or whistle, Lentil buys a harmonica and plays it often enough to become an expert. Everybody loves his music, except Old Sneep. One day the great Colonel Carter decides to return to Alto, and the people of the town plan a great welcome for him. Sneep has other plans, however, and decides to sit on a roof and suck on a lemon as loud as he can,

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)

Onomatopoeia: Onomatopoeic words are words that sound like the thing they are describing. These are mainly seen in the illustrations wherein Sneep’s lemon “slurps and shlishes” and Lentil croaks out “Ahrk!” when he tries to sing.

Does the author use figures of speech or expressions that are common and overused? (15d)

Cliché: Clichés are expressions or metaphors that are overused. For example: “There sat old Sneep, sucking on a lemon”(34). Not only is the phrase “sucking on a lemon” a cliché, but in this case it is also a pun, as Sneep is sucking on a lemon both literally and metaphorically.

Does the author describe things by showing them to the reader via word pictures, rather than merely telling the reader about them? (16c)

Imagery:

“Clouds began to gather on the Colonel’s brow...” (41)

“Lentil’s wind began to give out...” (49)

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

Circumstantial Irony: This kind of irony occurs when the significance of a circumstance turns out to be opposite of what the reader initially supposes. A great example is Lentil’s not being able to pucker his lips becomes a great strength for him when Sneep sucks on his lemon. Since his lips could not pucker, he was able to play for the Colonel. This shows us a theme that is underlying the whole story: some things in life that seem like obstacles can actually turn out to be great strengths, if you are resilient enough in the face of them.

Does the author provide any clues early in the story of things to come in the plot? (17a)

Foreshadowing: Early in the story, the author notes that Lentil walks through the Carter Memorial Park, past the big house of “the great Colonel Carter,” past the library which was a gift from Colonel Carter, and around a memorial that the Colonel had built. All of this foreshadows the importance and influence of Colonel Carter even before the reader meets him or learns of his homecoming. This

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. Describe Lentil's attitude towards his musical handicaps. How does he overcome these setbacks?
2. Describe how the climax reveals Lentil's character. Why is this moment important to the story?
3. On the last page of the story, Lentil remarks, "you never can tell what will happen when you learn to play the harmonica." How does this statement encapsulate the main themes of the story?
4. Compare and contrast Lentil to the two adult characters in the story, Sneep and Colonel Carter.

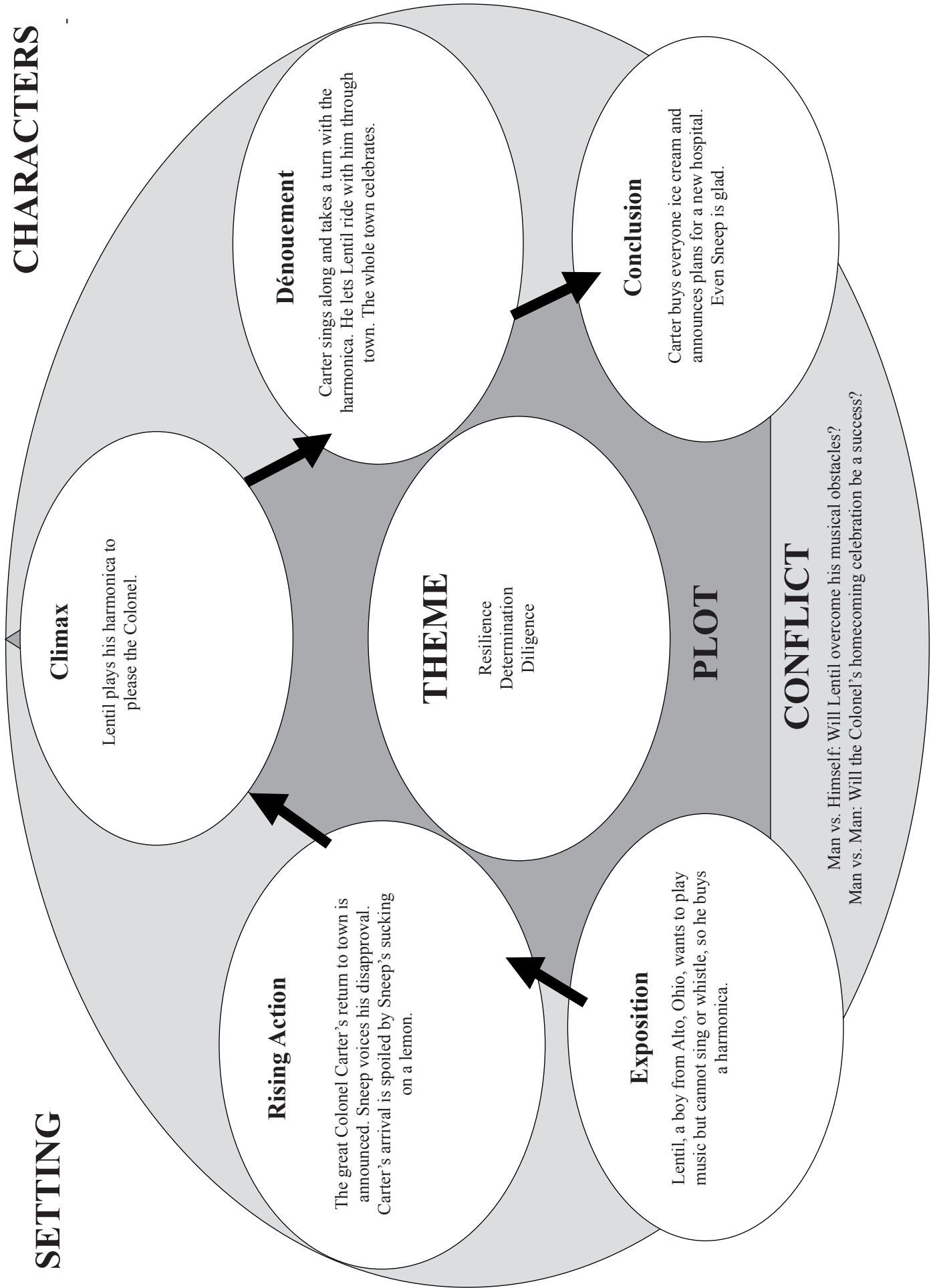
STORY CHARTS



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: *Lentil*



Story Chart: *Lentil*

SETTING

CHARACTERS

