



Jeanne Birdsall's *The Penderwicks*

Questions for Socratic Discussion
by Megan Andrews



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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



Reference	<i>The Penderwicks: A Summer Tale of Four Sisters, Two Rabbits, and a Very Interesting Boy.</i> Jeanne Birdsall. (2005) ISBN: 978-0440420477
Plot	The Penderwick family spends the summer at Arundel estate, growing together as sisters and befriending the son of the estate's owner, Mrs. Tifton.
Setting	A little vacation cottage on a sprawling country estate called Arundel which is situated in the Berkshire Mountains in western Massachusetts. The childhood of the four Penderwick sisters.
Characters	The Penderwick sisters: Rosalind, Jane, Skye and Batty; their friend Jeffrey; their Daddy; their dog Hound; Jeffrey's mother Mrs. Tifton; Dexter Dupree, her fiance.
Conflict	Man v. Man (relationship conflicts between characters) Man v. Self (coming of age conflicts)
Theme	Coming of Age; character traits such as humility v. pride; the difference between childishness and maturity; the importance of honest communication in relationships; friendship; family relationships.
Literary Devices	Personification; Allusion; Foreshadowing

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: SETTING



Where does this story happen? (1)

This story takes place in a little vacation cottage on a sprawling country estate called Arundel which is situated in the Berkshire Mountains in western Massachusetts.

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 of the story is bright, cheerful, eager, and free- a perfect representation of a summer vacation seen through the eyes of a child.

Upon seeing the spacious estate which is to be their summer home, the children are awed, exhilarated, and delighted in turns. The rambling gardens and shady walks stretching for miles seem to stand guard over the massive manor house. Mouths open in wonder, the Penderwick family breathes in the scene before them:

“What they saw were two tall, elegant stone pillars, with Number Eleven carved across one and Arundel across the other. Beyond the pillars was a lane winding off into the distance, with double rows of tall poplars on either side. And past the poplars was a beautifully tended lawn dotted with graceful trees. There was no house in sight...finally there was one last curve, the poplar trees ended and Rosalind’s fears were realized. “Daddy, that’s not a cottage.” “No, I agree. That’s a mansion” (p.8-9).

Though the grand mansion and its grounds are somewhat overwhelming to the little family at first, they soon find themselves settled quite comfortably in the Arundel guest house. “Arundel cottage was not only yellow, it was the creamiest, butteriest yellow the Penderwicks had ever seen. It was all a cottage is supposed to be, small and snug, with a front porch, pink climbing roses, and lots of trees for shade” (p.14). From the very first, this sun-splashed story carries vibrant, nostalgic images through to the reader. It recalls a zeal for excitement and adventure which is often dormant in grown-up readers’ minds. It captures the essence of childhood.

Do you long to climb into the pages of the book to live in its world, or does it repel you? Why? (1f)

Each facet of the Penderwicks’ budding adventure bears traces of childhood’s idealism and unfettered joy. As a result, this story is one of the most inviting of its kind. All readers long to crawl between the pages of the book to be absorbed into the happy family depicted there.

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)

This story is set on a country estate, owned by an upper crust family- the Tiftons. As a result, the people inhabiting its pages are from various levels of the social hierarchy. While snooty Mrs. Tifton and her darling son Jeffrey are from the upper class, Churchie the housekeeper, Harry the Tomato Man, Cagney, and the Penderwicks themselves are all from the middle or working class. Regardless of their station in the economy, however, all of the characters are ordinary people concerned with ordinary things and (in most cases) eager to have relationships with one another.

When does the story happen? How long a period of time does the story cover? A few minutes? A single day? A whole lifetime? (2b)

The story covers three blissful weeks in mid-August.

In what time of life for the main characters do the events occur? Are the children? Are they just passing into adulthood? Are they already grownups? Does setting the story in this particular time of the characters' lives make the story better? (2e)

The main characters are children: Rosalind is twelve, Skye is eleven, Jane is ten, and Batty is only four. The nostalgic, idyllic tone of the tale is a direct result of their youthful perspectives. Seen through their bright eyes, the vast estate of Arundel takes on a rosy, Eden-like air. The events of the story seem immense, life-changing, and history book-worthy; for after all, the tales of childhood are made up of summer frolics and afternoon adventures.

NOTES:

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CHARACTERS



Who is the story about? (3a-f)

Choosing a single protagonist out of the four Penderwicks is a difficult task. Each chapter focuses on a different sister, and each sister has her own individual conflict and climax. Because this delightful tale is reminiscent on Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, however, the most logical person to chart as a protagonist would be Skye, who is a reincarnation of the impetuous, lovable Jo March. Though readers can plot any one of the sister's stories with equally acceptable results, we will chart Skye's tale.

Skye Penderwick is a lively, impetuous, rash, young tomboy. She has straight blonde hair, blue eyes as bright as the sky, a wry grin, and a heart of gold. She is eleven years old and inordinately fond of order, clean white rooms, and mathematics. Of all of the sisters, she is the most daring and wild. Even Harry the Tomato Man comments to Rosalind upon first catching sight of our heroine, "You're going to have to keep that blonde one under control, though...I can always spot the trouble-makers. I was one myself" (p.7). In addition, Skye's father's impulsive response when she asks him if she can go explore is, "Quidquid agas prudenter agas et respice finem...look before you leap and please don't do anything crazy" (p.21). These traits echo Jo's irrepressible spirit, giving a respectful nod to Louisa May Alcott's masterpiece.

Skye is a tomboy through and through. She feels clumsy and uncomfortable in the kitchen, "'Why can't we give that boy regular old cookies from the supermarket?' said Skye, poking at a bowl of batter with a wooden spoon" (p.38); she hates almost all dresses with a fiery passion, "of course Skye refused to wear the blue dress" (p.91); and she is a rabid athlete, "(Skye) chose two-on-one slaughter, a combination of cross-country running, guerrilla warfare, and monkey-in-the-middle, perfect for rough terrain like the land around the cottage with all its trees and long grasses" (p.159). She takes increased satisfaction from her role as tomboy among her three sisters, proclaiming, "I won't (be a lady). I will, however, be gentlemanly" (p.154).

Skye has an explosive temper, "Rosalind had gone too far. Skye knew it, and she knew that Rosalind knew it, too, by the look on her face. And Skye knew that Rosalind was about to apologize. But it was too late. Skye lost her temper..." (p.50). And yet, these ferocious qualities prove to be strengths as well as weaknesses. She is fiercely loyal to her friends and family, facing their enemies with stalwart strength.

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

Everyone loves Skye. Though they tease and joke about her obvious flaws and faults, they are truly her biggest fans. Jane delivers Skye's apology speech to Jeffrey on Skye's behalf, mildly joking about Skye's volatile temper. "Skye's always saying exactly the wrong thing to people- it wasn't just special for you. And...she's really nice, sometimes, after you get to know her..." (p.46). Jeffrey soon discovers Skye's strengths for himself, and they become fast friends. All too soon, Jeffrey too is teasing Skye, "I thought this would look nice on Skye." 'Since it's so dainty and ladylike,' said Jeffrey...It was only after a long debate, with Jeffrey continuing to cause trouble with his sly compliments, that she finally agreed to wear a dress at all..." (p.91). He teases her again when she hesitates to learn piano, playing on her determination to be brave in a feat of manipulation. " 'Coward.' 'I'm not a coward.' Skye made a ferocious, uncowardly face at him. 'Then just try it. It'll be fun, I promise'" (p.178).

Is the character a member of any particular religious or social group? If so, what do you know about this group? What motivates this group? What do its members feel to be important? (3l)

The Penderwick sisters have two specific clubs in which they discuss all the important secrets and events in their bright young lives: MOPS- Meeting Of Penderwick Sisters; and MOOPS- Meeting of Older Penderwick Sisters (from which Batty is excluded). In these two clubs, they discuss both past events and future actions, focusing on the standard of the "Penderwick Family Honor" as their moral guideline. Each meeting begins with a solemn oath which goes as follows: "All swear to keep secret what is said here, even from Daddy, unless you think someone might do something truly bad" (p.34), and ends with a solemn reminder of the honor which they are trying to uphold: "This I swear by the Penderwick Family Honor!" (p.34).

Penderwick Family Honor is a code to which all the sisters strictly adhere. It is based on courtly rules such as chivalry, politeness, justice, and nobility. The girls look to their prince of a father and the memory of their mother as role models and shining examples of this Honor in action.

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)

Skye's family is the most important thing in her life. Though she feigns indifference and even irritation towards them at times, she truly considers her sisters her best friends in all the world. She betrays her love through her actions in the story: her violent protection of Batty in the field of the infamous bull, her determination to act with propriety at Jeffrey's birthday party (despite her hatred of formal occasions), and her blazing defense of her family and their honor to the very face of a sneering Mrs. Tifton. (see page 188).

Do the character's priorities change over the course of the story? In what way? What causes this change? Is it a change for the better, or for the worse? (3n)

Skye's fierce loyalty and love for her family doesn't wane, in fact it grows stronger and stronger as the story progresses. In particular, her relationship with Batty,

though rough at the start, blossoms into cautious affection. With Mrs. Tifton's strident insults ringing in her ears, Skye stands up for her little sister. Conversely, she ceases her rant at last only for Batty's sake. Together they walk home in the rain, and Skye's mask of gruff indifference slips for a moment:

“‘I have a question.’ Batty peered up from under the brim of her rain hat. ‘What?’ ‘Am I odd? Is there something wrong with me, like Mrs. Tifton said?’ Skye knelt down on the wet grass and looked right into Batty's eyes. ‘No, you stupid idiot, there's nothing wrong with you. You're perfect. Mrs. Tifton doesn't know what she's talking about...let's get you home to Daddy.’ Skye took hold of Batty's hand and held it all the way back to the cottage” (p.190).

Though Skye hides under a mask of gruff sarcasm, she truly adores her family. They are her first priority in life. This remains constant throughout the story.

Is the character a “sympathetic character”? Do you identify with him and hope he will succeed? Do you pity him? Do you scorn or despise his weakness in some way? Why? (3q)

Skye is a highly sympathetic character. She is down-to-earth and certainly not lacking in flaws, but even her faults evoke sympathy in readers' hearts. As Skye fights her way through various scrapes and blunders, caused invariably by her own indiscretion and impulsive temper, readers can't help but laugh out loud.

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

As Skye's highest priority is the welfare of her family and friends, anyone who threatens their happiness opposes her. Mrs. Tifton scorns the entire Penderwick family, wounding both Skye's pride and her sisters'. This offense alone sets her up as an antagonist. Yet, in addition, Mrs. Tifton's pending decisions for her son's future prove increasingly troubling to Jeffrey, Skye's dear friend.

Mrs. Tifton's slimy, two-faced fiancée, Dexter Dupree, is the other antagonist. Eager to marry Mrs. Tifton and ship her son off to military school at Pencey Academy, Dexter is utterly absorbed in his own selfish ambitions. His blatant disregard for Jeffrey and his feelings makes him Skye's enemy from the very start. In addition, Dupree is snide, smug, and cruel to Jane, earning him Skye's eternal hatred.

In what way is he antagonistic? What goal of the protagonist is he opposed to? (4b)

Mrs. Tifton is uncomfortable with the very thought of her son associating with the likes of the lowly Penderwicks. She asserts all of her power as a parent to keep Jeffrey from spending too much time with them. Skye, however, is delighted with her newfound friend and indignant at his mother's disdainful treatment of her and her sisters. As these two goals are mutually exclusive, Skye and Mrs. Tifton do not get along.

Mr. Dupree aims to whisk Mrs. Tifton away to see the world on a honeymoon, leaving Jeffrey to suffer through military school when he'd much rather attend Juliard school of music. Skye, loving Jeffrey as she does, holds his dreams and ambitions close to her heart. Dupree's goals directly contradict Jeffrey's and therefore, Skye's.

Is the antagonist out to do physical harm to the protagonist, violence to his reputation, his memory, his work, or his family? How do you know? (4d)

Neither Mrs. Tifton nor Dexter Dupree aim to do physical harm to Skye and her loved ones. Yet, inadvertently, they slander both the Penderwick's family honor, and the cherished memory of the Penderwick's mother. Mrs. Tifton rages at her son, assuming that Skye and Batty are out of earshot, criticizing every member of the family. "It's all of them. They're uncouth, rude, and conceited. This is what happens when parents don't do their jobs. The father's a pushover, and who knows where the mother ran off to. I suppose she got tired of caring for all those girls. I certainly would..." (p.189). However, since she didn't know that the Penderwick sisters were actually listening to her rush of invective, her abuse can't be termed truly vicious and so proves forgivable.

How does the author's description of the character inform you of his antagonism? Does he have any physical attributes or personality traits that mark him as antagonistic? (4e)

Mrs. Tifton is introduced as a snooty woman, cursed with a singularly unpleasant, affected voice and condescending, imperious manners. Harry the Tomato man refers to her, offhandedly as a "beautiful woman, snooty as all get-out too" (p.24). Skye finds this to be a very accurate description from her own first encounter with the lady of Arundel. "The voice was sharp and impatient. It reminded Skye of her second grade teacher, the one who'd accused her of cheating when she did long-division, because second graders were only supposed to add and subtract. Along with the unpleasant voice came an annoying tap tap tapping noise on the flagstones. Mrs. Tifton must be wearing high heels. Snooty high heels" (p.24).

Dexter Dupree is a perfect match for Mrs. Tifton. Though handsome enough, Dexter is too stuck up to be truly good-looking. "Dexter was handsome- the girls agreed on that later- dark-haired, with just a touch of gray at the temples and a distinguished looking mustache. But unfortunately, he looked like he knew exactly how handsome he was" (p.103). His smirking, blasé complacency paints a perfect picture of his true nature.

Is the antagonist truly evil, by definition, or is he merely antagonistic to the protagonist by virtue of his vocation or duty? (4m)

Mrs. Tifton is not truly evil. In fact, she loves Jeffrey with all her heart, and it is this twisted love which makes her so vigilant about monitoring the company that he keeps and deciding on his future for him. Though her decisions are misguided and often rooted in selfishness, she does in fact love Jeffrey and want the best for him.

Dexter Dupree however, is simply awful through and through. His only slightly redeeming trait is his love and care for Mrs. Tifton, but even this goodness is sullied with his own ambition and selfishness. He loves her perhaps, but he loves her high position in society too...Dupree is a despicable character.

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CONFLICT AND PLOT



What does the protagonist want? (5)

At the very beginning, Skye simply wants an exciting family vacation. However, as readers get to know her, they find her rather a deep character. She struggles with her relationships with her sisters. Although she wants to be a loving sister and an honorable Penderwick, her tomboyish, gruff personality gets in the way. In addition, she meets Jeffrey (under less than cordial circumstances) and begins to want desperately to win his friendship and help him in his predicament too.

Is this 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)

While the first conflict (between Skye's love for her family and her own vices) is internal, her desire to befriend and help Jeffrey is largely external.

Why can't he have it? Is the conflict a Man vs. Man; Man vs. Nature; Man vs. God; Man vs. Society; or a Man vs. Himself struggle? (6g-k)

In terms of developing healthy relationships with her sisters, a variety of different obstacles stand in Skye's way. As she struggles to communicate, her very personality proves a stumbling block. When Rosalind reprimands her a little too harshly for burning the cookies, she throws self-control to the winds with an outburst. Indeed, this outburst is merely an example of the common occurrence which plagues Skye in her attempts to convey her love to her sisters:

"Rosalind had gone too far. Skye knew it, and she knew that Rosalind knew it, too, by the look on her face. And Skye knew that Rosalind was about to apologize. But it was too late. Skye lost her temper. 'You promised you'd come back inside and help me, and you didn't, so it's your fault as much as mine. Besides, these stupid cookies weren't my idea in the first place. They were yours and Jane's!'" (p.50).

As Skye truly loves her older sister and doesn't want to hurt her, it is obvious that she struggles against herself and her own vices. This is a man vs. himself conflict.

In the same way, Skye loves Batty, but her instinctive reaction to her is annoyance and harshness. For example, when exploring the mansion's gardens, she would welcome either Rosalind or Jane's company, but the thought of Batty's presence makes her wince.

"I'm going exploring. Do you want to come?" "Not now, I'm still getting settled. Can Batty go with you?" said Rosalind. "No," said Skye and Batty together. Skye left before Rosalind could try to change anyone's mind" (p.19).

Her struggle to extend herself to Batty is also a Man vs. Himself struggle. Though Jane's flights of fantasy often drive her wild with impatience and frustration, Skye gets along with Jane best, but these imperfections and impulsive mannerisms muddy the waters between her and her sisters. Skye is constantly fighting back the urge to blurt out something rash or sarcastic. These internal struggles form Man vs. Self conflicts.

In terms of her second goal: to help Jeffrey, Skye faces some fairly insurmountable obstacles, namely Mrs. Tifton and Dexter Dupree. Their ominous scheming and smirking and their plans for Jeffrey's future stand in the way of his own goals, and therefore Skye's. This is a Man vs. Man conflict; both Mrs. Tifton and Dexter Dupree directly oppose Skye's efforts.

What other problems are there in the story? Do Character's actions provoke further conflict or unrest in the story? (7b)

As Jeffrey grows closer and closer to the Penderwick sisters, his mother becomes more and more infatuated with her gentleman caller, Dexter Dupree. After accidentally eavesdropping on the adults' romantic conversation at Jeffrey's birthday party, the Penderwicks and Jeffrey learn that Jeffrey is to be shipped off to Pencey early (if Dexter gets his way). This accident increases the tension in the story; for Jeffrey and the girls are miserable with the knowledge of Jeffrey's upcoming fate.

Helpless in the face of impending doom, Jeffrey resorts to spending every available moment with the Penderwick sisters, taking out his frustrations on the Pencey soccer ball.

'Listen,' said Jane, her nose still in the pamphlet. 'At Pencey, we build strong moral character through hard work, strict discipline, and rigorous physical activity.' 'I can't stand any more of that.' Jeffrey snatched the pamphlet and threw it onto the porch. 'Let's play soccer.' ...Jeffrey was a wild man that day, attacking the balls with a fury the other two had not yet seen. He gained control of the Pencey ball every chance he got and slammed it into trees, over rocks, anything he could find, until the girls thought the ball would explode (p.159).

Skye suffers with Jeffrey, feeling his desperation and misery as acutely as if it were her own. "Her (Skye's) blood was boiling over Jeffrey's possible fate, and while she couldn't punish Dexter for his part in it, she certainly could punish the Dexter ball" (p.159-160). While this maniacal game of soccer relieves their stress momentarily, it increases the tension between them and Mrs. Tifton; for she looks disapprovingly on Jeffrey's relationships with the Penderwicks.

What happens in the story? (8)

On a rainy day soon after the fateful birthday party, Jeffrey and Skye find solace from their worry in a piano lesson. Caught up in the ensuing hilarity, they fail to hear Mrs. Tifton's signature step until it's too late. With a withering glare and a biting exclamation, Mrs. Tifton banishes Skye and Batty from her house. On their way out the door, Mrs. Tifton lets fly a few sharp remarks concerning her opinion of Batty's "oddness" and Skye's unruly, unladylike behavior. Surprisingly, Skye exits the scene

with admirable self-control and composure. In the hallway, she tries her best to comfort a sobbing Batty.

“Don’t. Not now.’ Calming Batty wasn’t one of Skye’s talents. She wished Rosalind were there or even Jane. ‘It’s all my fault.’ Batty’s wings drooped and her tears flowed like waterfalls. ‘I shouldn’t have come, Skye, like you said.’ There was no comfort in saying I told you so, not with Batty already crying like her heart would break... ‘I’m the OAP,’ she (Skye) said. ‘I should have been paying more attention” (p.184).

In this awkward little interlude, readers catch a glimpse of Skye’s true love for Batty. She takes responsibility and tries her best to protect and comfort her little sister, no matter how annoying she may think her at times. This scene is, in itself, a little climax for the conflict between Skye and Batty.

Yet, Skye, desperate to know that Jeffrey isn’t being too horribly punished, goes back to the door and eavesdrops. To her lasting horror, she hears Mrs. Tifton slandering her name and the names of each one of her family members. In an instant, Skye throws caution to the winds. With the honor of her beloved family members at stake, she throws back her shoulders and bursts into the library to do battle with the enemy.

“To hear Mrs. Tifton criticize her father and, worse- oh, much worse- spew out nasty ideas about her mother. It was unbearable. Skye felt a red rage building inside her. Her hands tightened into hard fists. Her ears rang so that she could just barely hear Jeffrey’s reply...Skye knew she shouldn’t go in there. It wasn’t gentlemanly, and it would only give Mrs. Tifton more reason to hate her. Yes, she knew all that, and even Batty was tugging at her arm to keep her from doing it. But it didn’t matter. The family-her mother’s- honor was at stake, and she had to defend the people she loved the best. She took a deep breath, girded herself for battle, and threw open the door and charged across the room toward Mrs. Tifton” (p.188).

In the words of the incomparable Mark Twain, let us draw the curtain of charity over the rest of this scene. Having defended the honor of her loved ones, Skye exits the house with valiant dignity.

On the rainy walk back to the cottage, Skye overcomes her awkwardness towards Batty, gruffly providing the love and encouragement that her little sister needs. “Is there something wrong with me, like Mrs. Tifton said?’ Skye knelt down on the wet grass and looked right into Batty’s eyes. ‘No, you stupid idiot, there’s nothing wrong with you. You’re perfect. Mrs. Tifton doesn’t know what she’s talking about.’ ...Skye took hold of Batty’s hand and held it all the way back to the cottage” (p.190). This tumultuous experience with Mrs. Tifton proves a catalyst to resolve one of the two major conflicts in the story, that of Skye vs. her own rash, gruff nature. She overcomes her discomfort and finally communicates the love she’s felt for Batty all along.

How is the main problem solved? (9)

The second conflict however, between Skye and Jeffrey, and Mrs. Tifton and Dexter, is steadily worsening. Provoked by Jeffrey’s “inexcusable” display the previous evening, Mrs. Tifton shoves him in the car and whisks him off to Pennsylvania to see the

dreaded Pencey School as a prospective student. Wildly remorseful for her outburst the previous evening, Skye feels responsible for Jeffrey’s current predicament. Wringing her hands, she counts the sluggish hours until his return. But when he does return, it is with a packed bag and a firm resolve to run away from home. Jeffrey assures Skye that this last drastic step is not her fault. “It wasn’t your fault. Besides-“ he looked down at the ground and shuffled his feet. ‘You stood up for yourself. You have courage” (p.223). Jeffrey is soon in need of Skye’s bravery; for his mother soon discovers his absence and comes flying over to the Penderwick’s house in search of him.

Here, at last, the conflict between Jeffrey and his mother begins to heal. With Mr. Penderwick, Skye, and the others standing behind him, supporting him and believing in him, Jeffrey finds the courage to talk to his mother. He convinces her at last that the Pencey plan is utterly repellent to him. Blindsided by the news, Mrs. Tifton proves to be the loving parent Mr. Penderwick predicted. She truly does want what’s best for her son. She just hasn’t known what that was. Jeffrey’s valiant confession resolves the last of the two conflicts.

How does the story end? (10)

This last conflict somewhat resolved, the Penderwicks prepare to return home. They learn that though Dexter Dupree is to marry Mrs. Tifton, Jeffrey is not to go to Pencey after all. He is bound for boarding school in Boston, where he will attend classes at a music conservatory. Overjoyed at this blessed turn of events, the sisters smother Jeffrey with effusive good-bye hugs and kisses, begging him to come and visit them in Cameron. Having learned to communicate her love to her family and having helped Jeffrey to communicate with his mother, Skye is happy at last. Birdsall ties up the loose ends of her story neatly with Jeffrey’s parting call, “Good-bye for now!”

NOTES:

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: THEME



What is the main idea of the story? Does the story seem to deal with a universal theme like the ones listed in this syllabus? (13)

While at the beginning of the tale, Skye’s actions betray her youth, immaturity, and relatively carefree attitude, her experiences with Jeffrey and her sisters force her to face her shortcomings. Humbled by her own faults and ennobled by her longing to protect her loved ones, Skye begins to mature into quite an admirable young lady. The story of her growth is thematically rich, emphasizing the importance of friendship and family and the strength of love, loyalty, and humility. Above all, this is a Coming of Age story. Though Skye doesn’t become an adult in this story (she is, after all, only eleven), she does grow and mature into a young lady, capable of thinking of others before herself. Conversely, this story pin-points the vices of rashness, selfishness, and short-temperedness, emphasizing their pitfalls and dangers specifically in the area of relationships.

NOTES:

QUESTIONS ABOUT STYLE: LITERARY DEVICES



Does the author use descriptions and comparisons to create pictures in the reader’s mind? Does the author represent inanimate objects as being lifelike or human? (16E – Personification)

From the first, Birdsall establishes the family pooch, Hound as much more than a pet. He is Batty’s very best friend in all the world, a true and equal member of the Penderwick family. In this spirit, Birdsall provides him with many human qualities. He is sympathetic, opinionated, loyal, and childish. We catch little glimpses of these traits in the very first scene of the story when the Penderwick family is driving along towards the vacation home. The sisters are arguing.

“We need to find a helicopter that can airlift us out of here,” said Skye. “And keep your stupid wings to yourself!” She was talking to Batty, who, as always, was wearing her beloved orang-and-black butterfly wings.

“They’re not stupid.” Said Batty.

“Woof,” said Hound from his place among the boxes and suitcases in the very back of the car. He took Batty’s side in every discussion (p.5).

From this point on, Hound participates in every family discussion, an active and supportive character in the plot.

Does the author use the characters and events in his story to communicate a theme that goes beyond them in some way? Does the author refer to other works of literature, historical events, works of art, or well-known ideas in his work? (17f – Allusion)

Birdsall intentionally patterned her novel after Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*. The four Penderwick sisters loosely resemble the four March girls and other similarities can also be traced between the two works. Birdsall draws attention to this correlation when she depicts Jane’s feelings on entering her room in the rental house for the first time.

Her eyes shining, Jane said, “Look at this wonderful bedroom. It was meant for an author. I know I can write the perfect Sabrina Starr book here. I can feel it. Can you feel it?” Skye looked around the tiny room with its sloped ceiling and one round window on the wall. Already there were books all over the floor. “No. I don’t feel anything.”

“Oh, try harder. The feeling is so strong. I’m sure that some famous writer has been here before me. Like Louisa May Alcott or Patricia MacLachlan” (p.20).

CHARACTER IDENTIFICATION



Skye Penderwick-

Skye is the second oldest Penderwick sister. A ten year old tomboy, she loves mathematics, clean, tidy rooms, and soccer. Though she struggles with a terrible fiery temper and often lashes out at her sisters in frustration, she is a fiercely loyal and protective sister. She is a frank, blunt, pessimistic, strong young lady.

Rosalind Penderwick-

Rosalind Penderwick is the eldest Penderwick sister. She is a gentle, capable, responsible young lady who has acted as a “mini-Mother” to the youngest sister, Batty, since the death of their mother about five years previous to this story. Rosalind is sweet, good-natured, resourceful, and mature, but she needs her sisters to remind her every once and a while that she is still a child and she can relax and play accordingly.

Jane Penderwick-

Jane Penderwick is the second to youngest sister. Lively, imaginative, and dramatic Jane dreams of one day becoming a famous author. She keeps the sisters laughing with her flamboyant displays of artistic genius. She is quick-witted, innocent, hopeful, optimistic and genuine. She looks out for Skye, her strong optimism countering Skye’s spurts of pessimism.

Batty Penderwick-

Batty Penderwick is the youngest of the sisters. She is shy to a fault, almost incapable of meeting new people. In the safety of her family, however, Batty evidences a lovely sweetness, plaintive curiosity, and innocent naivete. At four years old, she’s already evidencing signs of a feisty sense of humor and a compassionate heart. She loves animals and dreams of one day becoming a veterinarian.

Daddy-

The Penderwick patriarch is gentle, understanding, patient, and wise. A knight in shining armor to his adoring daughters, he lives to love his children and to study botany and Latin. He is a bit of an absent-minded professor, but with four capable daughters to keep the house running, he can safely hole up in his office from time to time to scratch his academic itch.

Hound-

Hound is the Penderwicks’ trusty dog who accompanies them everywhere and stands as an honorary member of the family. Faithful and steadfast, Hound protects the family

(most especially Batty) and eats whatever he sees. He is Batty's best friend and play mate.

Jeffrey-

Jeffrey is the son of Mrs. Tifton, the owner of Arundel. A musical genius, Jeffrey dreams of attending Julliard school of music, but his mother intends to send him to Pencey Military School where his grandfather attended. Jeffrey is a sweet-natured, talented, lonely boy, who is desperate for some fun. The Penderwick sisters are dreams come true for Jeffrey.

Mrs. Tifton-

Mrs. Tifton is the owner of Arundel, the mother of Jeffrey, and the antagonist of the story. An over bearing, obnoxious character, Mrs. Tifton really does love her son and want what's best for him, but she will not listen to him long enough to find out what that is. She is a snooty, intolerant and generally arrogant and unpleasant individual.

Dexter Dupree-

Dexter Dupree is Mrs. Tifton's fiancé. If possible, he is even worse than Mrs. Tifton in the area of arrogance, conceit, and unpleasantness. An editor for a car magazine, Dupree seems shady, slimy, and distasteful to all of the Penderwick sisters save Jane, who's holding out hope for the possibility of his being a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde kind of a man with dual personalities.

Churchie-

Churchie is Mrs. Tifton's cook at Arundel and practically Jeffrey's surrogate mother. She loves Jeffrey like a son and watches out for him and his friends the Penderwicks with a motherly eye of concern. She is a plump, dear, sweet woman.

Harry the Tomato Man-

Harry the Tomato Man is a tomato salesman who happens to be a friend of Churchie's. He gave the Penderwicks instructions to Arundel in the very beginning of the story and takes an interest in all of their subsequent adventures.

ESSAY QUESTIONS FOR WRITING ASSIGNMENTS



1. Which of the Penderwick girls is the real protagonist of this story? Whose goals and desires play the most important role in the story's action?
2. What category of conflict best describes the story's themes: Man v. Man, Man v. Nature, Man v. God/Fate, Man v. Society, or Man v. Himself?
3. What event marks the climax of *The Penderwicks*? Why is this event so significant? What major conflict is resolved at this moment?
4. How does the setting of *The Penderwicks* help the author emphasize her main themes? In particular, what about the physical location of the story and the time of life for its main characters underscores the main idea?
5. According to the world of *The Penderwicks*, what is a good life?

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.

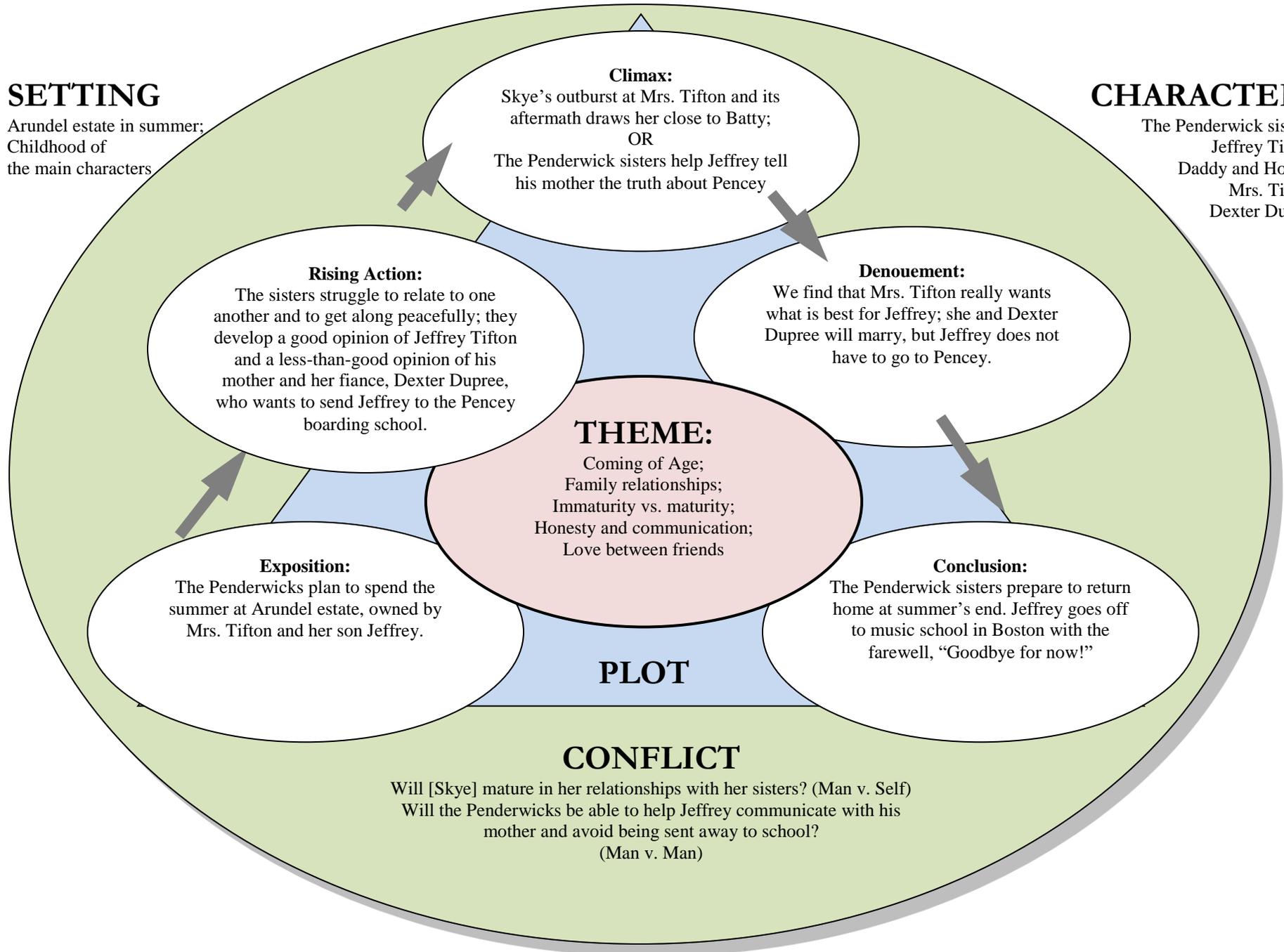
The Penderwicks: Story Chart

SETTING

Arundel estate in summer;
Childhood of
the main characters

CHARACTERS

The Penderwick sisters;
Jeffrey Tifton;
Daddy and Hound;
Mrs. Tifton;
Dexter Dupree



THEME:

Coming of Age;
Family relationships;
Immaturity vs. maturity;
Honesty and communication;
Love between friends

PLOT

CONFLICT

Will [Skye] mature in her relationships with her sisters? (Man v. Self)
Will the Penderwicks be able to help Jeffrey communicate with his
mother and avoid being sent away to school?
(Man v. Man)

Rising Action:

The sisters struggle to relate to one another and to get along peacefully; they develop a good opinion of Jeffrey Tifton and a less-than-good opinion of his mother and her fiance, Dexter Dupree, who wants to send Jeffrey to the Pencey boarding school.

Exposition:

The Penderwicks plan to spend the summer at Arundel estate, owned by Mrs. Tifton and her son Jeffrey.

Climax:

Skye's outburst at Mrs. Tifton and its aftermath draws her close to Batty;
OR
The Penderwick sisters help Jeffrey tell his mother the truth about Pencey

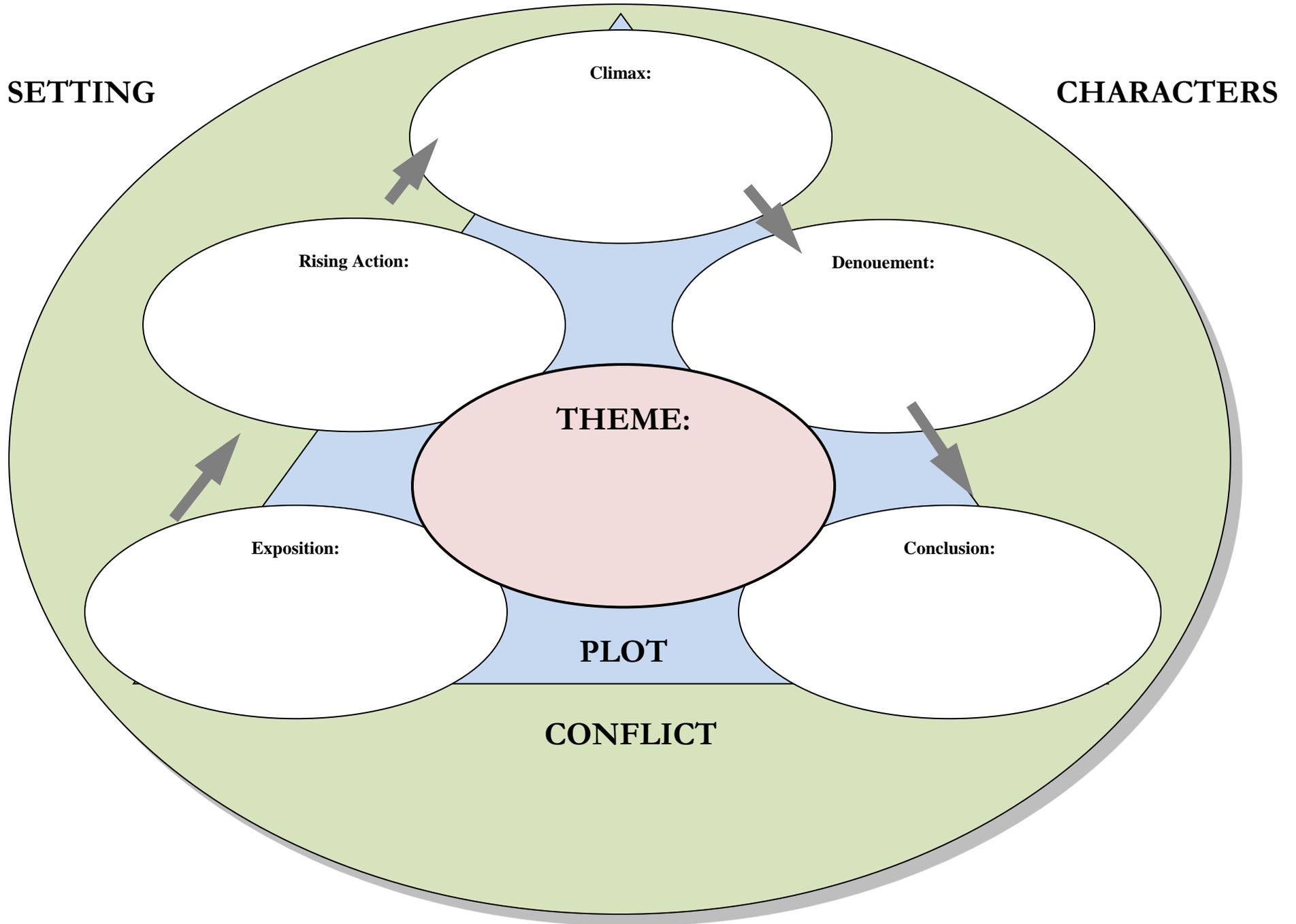
Denouement:

We find that Mrs. Tifton really wants what is best for Jeffrey; she and Dexter Dupree will marry, but Jeffrey does not have to go to Pencey.

Conclusion:

The Penderwick sisters prepare to return home at summer's end. Jeffrey goes off to music school in Boston with the farewell, "Goodbye for now!"

The Penderwicks: Story Chart



The Penderwicks: Story Chart

