

Straw Into Gold
by Gary D. Schmidt

A Teacher's Guide for Socratic Discussion
by Megan 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 underline.

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QUICK CARD



Reference	<i>Straw Into Gold</i> . Gary D. Schmidt. (2001) ISBN: 978-0547237763
Plot	Drawing on the timeless fairytale of Rumpelstiltskin, in which a peasant girl becomes queen with the help of a strange little man who helps her to spin straw into gold at the cost of her first born child, this story provides the motivation behind the little man's seemingly capricious bargain with the queen. Picking up the story years later when the babe has surely grown to adolescence, the tale begins again with the little man, known as Da, taking his boy, Tousle, to a parade in which captives from a rebel village are led by the victors through the town streets to receive their sentence before their king. The events that occur on this day lead Tousle on a quest to discover the answer to a new riddle upon which the lives of many will depend: "What fills a hand fuller than a skein of gold?"
Setting	The story takes place in early winter in the medieval town of Wolverham. It occurs in the adolescence of the main character, Tousle, and so may be regarded as a coming-of-age story. The story begins after the famous events of Rumpelstiltskin.
Characters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tousle (protagonist) • Innes • Da • Lord Beryn (antagonist) • The King's Grip (antagonist) • The King (antagonist) • The Queen • The Great Lords (antagonists) • The Miller • The Miller's wife • The Sexton • The Sexton's wife
Conflict	<p>Man vs. Self; Man vs. Man; Man vs. Society; Man vs. Providence: Will Tousle discover his identity and his gift?</p> <p>Man vs. Man; Man vs. Society; Man vs. Self; Man vs Providence: Will Tousle and Innes find the answer to the riddle in time to save the rebels, the king, and themselves?</p>
Theme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-Sacrificial Love • Forgiveness • Coming of Age • Honor • Greed

<p>Theme (cont.)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loyalty • Providence/Design • Appearance vs. Reality
<p>Literary Devices</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Imagery – use of evocative word pictures to communicate abstract ideas • Symbolism – the extended use of an image or metaphor, usually associated with major story themes. Look for references to gold. • Similes and Metaphors – comparisons of unlike things in order to establish a resemblance between them. Similes make this comparison using the words “like” or “as”; metaphors without. • Alliteration – repetition of initial consonantal sounds. • Assonance – the repetition of an internal vowel sound in words of close proximity • Aphorisms – pithy observations that contain a general truth • Personification – attributing human qualities to inanimate things • Allusions – referencing another historical event, personality, literary or artistic work or idea for the sake of importing all the ideas associated with the reference to the present text and context • Foreshadowing – hints planted in the text that suggest future plot developments • Dramatic Irony – a literary technique which originated in Greek drama by which the full significance of a character’s words or actions are clear to the audience or reader although unknown to the character

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 this story happen? (1)

This story takes place in the medieval city of Wolverham and its outlying provinces. Though the setting is imaginary, it holds to most of the physical laws of the real world. There are a few exceptions—a sexton can see in the dark, a blind boy can hear the dawn, and a little man with froggy eyes can spin straw into gold; but other than these minor deviations, the world holds to the physical laws of the real world.

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 atmosphere of the story is vibrant and intriguing. Though it is neither wholly cheerful nor wholly depressing, elements of both come into play as the story progresses. The atmosphere of the tale mirrors the shifting aspects of the plot, lending credibility to the actions of the characters. The author paints this setting with vivid language and personification, “The fields were turning their dark selves to soak up the sunlight” (16). “It was high summer, where sunlight gilded the fields the livelong day” (169). Allusions and comparisons to gold sprinkle the text, drawing on the themes of worth and true riches through the tale.

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

In the beginning of the story, winter is clinging to the countryside, unwilling to welcome the next season. While the sun shines brightly in a blue sky, it lends no heat—an empty promise of spring. This lasting chill increases the conflict of the story when Tousle and Innes are cast into the streets, representing yet another antagonist for them to battle.

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

Despite the cold, an air of excitement and a breath of promise lingers in the air of Wolverham. Spring is coming and the world is rapt with expectation. In addition, the contrast of the cold outdoors and the cozy indoors glows pleasantly, drawing readers in.

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 people of Wolverham are grey, worn, and resigned. Ruled more by the cruel Great Lords than by

their greedy, weak-willed king, they live in constant fear and despair. While the hard-working people live in poverty and squalor, their lazy lords enjoy unearned plenty. As a result, the lower classes are downtrodden, depressed, and afraid. The scent of spring in the air brings the people hope not just of warmth and light and growth, but of change as well.

Is the setting of the story important because of historical events which may have taken place there? How does this link help you to understand the themes of the story? (1j)

The story begins after the famous events of Rumpelstiltskin, and, as a result, the setting is pregnant with unspoken scars. The glorious king hides a hungry question in his eyes and cowers before his own lords. He has banished his queen and the young prince has vanished without a trace. All is not right with the world, but no one speaks of it. This heavy silence hides a wealth of history which Tousle and Innes must uncover to solve the King’s riddle.

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

The story begins on a bright, cold day in late winter, the day of a triumphant parade in honor of the king, his great Lords, and their victory over the rebels. The story spans the whole next week in which Tousle tries to solve the riddle.

In what time of life for the main characters do the events occur? Are they 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 character, Tousle, is still a young boy, untainted by the callousness and despair of his elders. The events of the story threaten his innocence and challenge his presuppositions about life and human nature.

His companion, Innes, is a stark contrast to him. While Tousle has led a sheltered life in the wholesome clearing with his Da, Innes has been scarred and jaded by the cruelty of the world. He’s been hardened beyond his years, stripped of his innocence, and calloused by repeated injuries. Yet despite their differences, the two boys learn to understand and love one another as brothers. Their openness about their vulnerabilities and their mutual trust are results of their youth. Their age is essential to the conflict.

NOTES:

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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)

Tousle, a young boy thrilled with thoughts of the world outside his sheltered home, is the protagonist of the story. He is earnest, goodhearted, steadfast, faithful, brave, trusting, and true. Bright-eyed and eager, he expects the world to be picture perfect, like the images his Da conjures for him in history lessons. When he learns the truth—that the world is a dangerous, cruel place—he struggles for a moment with self-pity. Yet when confronted with Innes, a boy his own age with twice as many wounds to his credit, Tousle forgets his own sufferings in compassion for Innes’s.

Though Tousle loves his Da and fondly remembers his years with him in the safety of the clearing, Tousle wonders where he came from and who his true parents are. As the events of the story progress, Tousle begins to long for a family of his own. At the same time, he longs for these same things for Innes. Yet seems that the one may exclude the other. Though Tousle battles selfishness and bitterness at times, he recognizes these traits as failings and truly wants Innes’s happiness. These honest, good-hearted qualities mark Tousle as a very sympathetic character.

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

Throughout the story, Tousle’s actions are marked by a steadfast sense of right. From the first, he instinctively acts the part of a gentleman, a quality which causes other characters to notice him. When Tousle and Da ride from their clearing to the parade in Wolverham, they come upon an old woman who is struggling to carry two full pails of water from her stream to her house. Tousle’s first instinct is to leap from his mount and run to her aid:

‘Da,’ I said, ‘must she carry those herself?’ ‘She must.’ ‘And us sitting here watching her.’ Da said nothing, and I slipped off the Dapple and ran through the stained puddles to her, ‘Mother, let me carry those for you on this fresh morning of the world.’... She stopped and held out her hand as if to touch my cheek. ‘What is it, Mother?’ Her outstretched finger, gnarled and bunched, pulled back. Then she shook her head. ‘An old woman’s fancy. That’s all that’s left. An old woman’s fancy.’ (8)

Tousle is a gentleman, a prince among boys, and his chivalry causes quite a stir among those searching for lost royalty. This old woman, come to find out, is the mother of the queen herself. She has grown weary and hopeless from long years of looking for her lost grandson, but Tousle’s fresh-faced, warm-hearted gentility jumpstarts the fading hope in her breast.

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)

At the start of the story, Tousle wants nothing more than a moment of freedom outside his clearing. As the story progresses, however, deeper longings surface in Tousle's heart. He wants to have his own gift like Innes and the sexton and Da. He longs to find and love his mother and to be loved by her. He wants to belong. He fears the loneliness which prowls ever at the edge of his relationships. All of these desires and fears rise from a single longing: the longing to have an identity. He searches desperately through the whole story to find out who he is—as a son, as a friend, and as a man.

First, Tousle longs for a gift. He feels that a gift of his own will prove his value as an individual. Yet he cannot find one all his own. This search is the source of much of Tousle's insecurity. When he and Innes are tramping through the darkened woods at dawn with the sexton, they see another God-given gift in action. “‘You're hardly the only one God's giving gifts to. How do you think that I'm able to find my way through the woods on the darkest night?’ ...I felt alone. In all this wide world, was everyone so sure of his gift but me?” (106). The first of Tousle's many longings is for a gift all his own, for a gift may prove his uniqueness and his value.

Second, Tousle longs for a mother with whom to belong. This desire is evident in both his private thoughts and his conversations with Innes. As Tousle thinks, for one blissful moment, that he might be the long lost son of the queen, he realizes just how badly he wants such a connection to exist. He longs for a mother so desperately, but it soon becomes clear that it is Innes and not Tousle who belongs to the queen. Tousle struggles manfully to be happy for Innes, but bitter disappointment hovers in his heart:

I had known even before Lord Beryn arrived that the queen was not my mother. I had known it as soon as I saw Innes's face so close to her own. And there was in me a certain gladness for Innes. There was. But there had been that short moment in time when a place that had never known hunger before had filled. But now that it was empty again, a dull hunger remained. A haunting hunger. (126)

A boy's sense of belonging and identity is closely wrapped up in his relationship with his mother. For one brief moment in the chapel, wrapped in the queen's embrace, Tousle feels whole. He feels that he belongs. Yet all too soon, his newfound identity vanishes. He struggles with jealousy as Innes receives what he secretly longs for. Indeed, when later prompted by Innes, Tousle expresses this hunger aloud:

‘Tousle, do you mind much?’ ‘That you will be king?’ ‘No.’ A long moment passed with no sound but the crackling of the fire. ‘That the queen is your mother?’ ‘That she is not yours.’ I set the bowl of oatmeal down. I had almost finished it anyway. ‘I was happier than I could have thought for those few minutes in the chapel,’ I said. Innes nodded. (130)

Tousle fears the bleakness of a life lived alone. He yearns for a mother and an identity. The longings, both for a gift and a mother, spring from a common source. Beneath his longing for a gift and a mother of his own is the burning desire to have an identity. A gift marks him as a valuable, unique individual. A mother assures him of everlasting love and belonging. Tousle desires above all to have an identity of his own.

Is the character a type or archetype? Is he an “Everyman” with whom the reader is meant to identify? Are his struggles symbolic of human life generally in some way? 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? (3p)

Tousle is an “Everyman,” universal in all his struggles and yearnings. He is a highly sympathetic character, for all readers understand the ache to belong and to feel unique. Readers pity his plight and identify with his insecurities. As a result of this sympathetic quality, Tousle is a deep, realistic character.

Who else is the story about? (4)

The other main character is Innes, the blind boy. Innes is a lithe, starved, young boy, jaded by the world and its cruelties. Despite a certain amount of inescapable bitterness, Innes is a brave, bold, chivalrous, humble, compassionate character. Despite his blindness, Innes often sees more than Tousle does. The eyes of his heart are quick and gentle. While his persecutors tried to make him an example of their power and their might, he stands instead as a testament to their cruelty and the power of forgiveness. He is a noble character and a fabulous example of courage in the face of suffering.

What does the character say about himself to other people? (3j)

Innes is humble to a fault. Even when he learns his true identity, he remains self-effacing. “‘You are a prince,’ I said. ‘A blind fool,’ he answered, and let me lead him down from the loft and into the late golden light of the abbey” (126-27). His humility and his care of Tousle make him a highly sympathetic character. When the first happiness he has ever known is thrust upon him, Innes thinks only of Tousle and his loneliness:

A haunting hunger. And it was Innes who came to try to fill it. Innes shuffling up the loft stairs, his fingertips gliding on the stone walls. It was Innes standing beside me near the window as the cooler air came between us. It was Innes who knew how hot my silent tears felt on my cheeks. It was Innes who knew what it was that I longed for. (126)

Innes is, above all, a thoughtful and compassionate boy.

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 it away? (3m)

The most important thing in life to Innes is finding a place where he belongs and struggling past the bitterness which clings to his heart like a second skin.

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)

Innes is a very sympathetic character. His struggle with bitterness and his craving for love are universal themes which resonate with readers.

Who else is the story about? (4)

Tousle's Da, the little man with froggy eyes and spindly fingers, is a key character in the story. From the first page, he is wise, merry, and loving. Yet there are sparks of sadness in his eyes. As if foreseeing pain ahead for Tousle, he hesitates to let him go to Wolverham. But he releases him, saying, "Nothing is ever quite by chance." Da struggles to decide whether the world runs on chance or design.

What does the character say 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 in Da's life is Tousle, undoubtedly.

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)

Surprisingly, Da is also a sympathetic character. Though readers cannot identify with his magical skills and his uncanny wisdom, they can identify with his love for Tousle and his struggle to believe in design.

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

There are two main groups of antagonists: The Great Lords (led by Lord Beryn) and the King's Grip. Both groups directly oppose the protagonists.

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

The Great Lords try to keep Tousle from solving the King's riddle. They seek to kill both Tousle and Innes. The King's Grip threatens the boys' lives as well, but for dastardly purposes other than those of the Great Lords.

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)

The Great Lords are barbaric and boorish. They bully their king into complying with their wishes and desires, yet they have no dastardly designs in their slow minds. They think only of the next meal and the next source of entertainment. "The Great Lords laughed. They seemed no longer to be the lordly statues who had processed to the castle; now they were red and fleshy, their jowls leaping with their merriment, two or three sputtering out the wine from their mouths" (35).

Lord Beryn, the leader of the Great Lords, is not such a petty villain. Cruel, calculating, and wicked to the core, he seeks to usurp the king's authority. He is a gigantic man, a bearded bear towering over the king. "I was amazed at how large he was. His shoulders topped the king's head, and the black hair that bearded him made the king look almost like a boy" (36). Massive and threatening, Lord Beryn rules the king through fear, and, as a result, threatens the boys under the king's protection.

The King's Grip is an entirely different kind of villain. Unconcerned with the politics surrounding the king and his lords, the Grip seeks merely to line his own pockets. This simple greed, however,

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)

Tousle wants two specific things. His outward desire is of course to solve the riddle and save the rebels’ lives. However, his inward desire is much stronger. He longs, above all, to have an identity. Innes wants to save the rebels, to find and be accepted by his family, and to forgive his enemies. Da wants to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that “Nothing is ever quite by chance.”

Does he attempt to overcome something—a physical impediment, or an emotional handicap? (5b)

Tousle must overcome the malice of the Great Lords and the King’s Grip to save the rebels’ lives. These obstacles are physical. However, the obstacles to his desire to discover his identity are emotional in nature. He must discover who he is and what makes him unique.

Innes must fight past the physical obstacles of armed enemies and lost family, but he must also struggle through the emotional battles of bitterness. He has been scarred deeply by the violence in his past, but if he is to have peace he must find a way to forgive.

Da’s struggle is mostly internal. He argues with himself, trying to decide whether the world floats on the whims of chance or stands firmly designed.

Why can’t he have it? (6)

Tousle cannot have the lives of the rebels because of the sharp swords of the Great Lords, the wickedness of Lord Beryn, the weakness of the King, and his own ignorance of riddles. These are largely Man vs. Man conflicts. He cannot decipher his identity, however, because of his own insecurities. He must fight through his circumstances bravely to prove to himself what kind of a boy he is. This is a Man vs. Self conflict.

Innes cannot save the rebels, because he is merely a blind boy. He is too small and weak to fight the Great Lords by himself, and he does not know the answer to the riddle. This is a Man vs. Man struggle and a Man vs. Self struggle all in one. Innes also cannot find his family, because the Designer ripped it apart. This is a Man vs. God conflict. Lastly, Innes cannot escape his bitterness. He cannot forget that Lord Beryn and the King’s Grip destroyed his life. He cannot bring himself to forgive. This is a Man vs. Self conflict.

Da struggles with Chance vs. Design—a Man vs. God or a Man vs. Fate conflict.

Is the character racing against time? (6e)

Tousle and Innes race time to solve the riddle before the week's end. Da raced time at the beginning of the tale to save the young prince before Lord Beryn tried to murder him. These races heighten the tension and increase the conflict.

What other problems are there in the story? Are there larger issues, (a larger context or frame) in which conflict exists and forms a background for the story (a war setting for example)? (7f)

The backdrop for the greater part of the story is the peasants' rebellion against the Great Lords. From the very outset of the story, the most recent outbreak of the rebellion has been quelled. The rebels are the primary reason for the parade in Wolverham and the crowd's response to their defeated fellows processing in chains emphasizes the tension and unrest which dominates the politics of the time. The tension between the people and the Lords only grows as the plot progresses.

What happens in the story? (8)

Tousle and Innes find the queen and in so doing discover the answer to the riddle. Together with the queen, they escape from the Great Lords and sneak into the courtyard of Wolverham on the morning of the seventh day, saving the rebels and the king.

How is the main problem solved? (9)

Tousle saves the rebels and reunites Innes and the Queen, yet this weaving of Innes' story leaves Tousle lonely. Still uncertain of his worth and his gifts, he struggles with emptiness. This loneliness comes to a peak when Innes and the queen are reunited with the miller, the queen's father, and Tousle is left waiting at the edge of the wood as the happy family greets one another across the field.

And so I stood alone. Absolutely alone. Perhaps it was no accident that the sun faded at that moment, but with its going, loneliness fell over me like an avalanche, and I was startled by the hurt of it. I did not envy Innes. I did not. But the knowledge of how little I had froze me, and though I tried, I could not even drag up memories of Da, memories that might have carried a thaw with them. So I stood alone. (143)

Tousle fears that at the end of the day, he will be left utterly alone. Yet his fears are groundless. When the Grip kidnaps Tousle, Innes comes running to save him.

On one [horse] was the miller, his bow strung behind his back. On the other rode Innes. Innes, for all love!.. 'Are you alone out here, then?' I looked up at him. This was Innes's grandfather—his grandfather. I had never known before what a grandfather could be. 'All alone,' I said.... He crushed me to his chest, then hefted me up and onto Innes's horse. 'Not alone now,' he said. (150)

Innes's grandfather picks Tousle up as easily as a sack of grain and crushes him to his chest. With this, part of Tousle's fear and insecurity dies.

This experience lends Tousle a new sense of security and belonging. When the Queen asks him softly, "What fills a hand fuller than a skein of gold?" Tousle answers from the depths of his newfound understanding: "Another hand." Over the course of the story, Tousle has realized that the most im-

portant thing in life is fellowship and love. With this new realization firmly flourishing in his heart, he acts without a second thought when Innes's life is threatened. He steps in front of the spear meant for Innes, unconsciously laying his life down for his friend. At this moment, when he lays down all worry for himself, he finds his gift and his identity. This climax is reinforced by his conversation with Da:

'He has found his gift.' 'My own gift?' 'A king's son can hear the dawn, a sexton can see in the dark, a funny little man with froggy eyes and spindly fingers can spin straw into gold. And his, his is the best of all.' 'But what is it?' The room glimmered, then began to fade. Soon all there was left to see was Da, standing alone, still smiling. 'He has the gift of giving himself. (166)

This is truly the climax for Tousle, when he realizes that he too has a gift all his own. He too has an identity.

Innes' climax is twofold. His internal struggle to forgive is resolved in the mill with the King's Grip. As the two boys stand apart, helpless in the clutches of the King's Grip, who plans to drag Tousle off to find his Da and leave Innes alone in the loft, the King's Grip snarls a taunt at Innes. To the shock of both the King's Grip and Tousle, Innes responds by confessing his struggle with bitterness aloud, and conquering it:

'See if they will take pity on someone the King's Grip has blinded.' And he [King's Grip] turned me to the ladder. That was when Innes said the one thing that neither the Grip nor I could have ever expected. He said it quietly and evenly, standing with his hands held open. He said it like a benediction: "I've forgiven the blinding." And as he stood, his arm held a bit crooked, his body covered with the dust and sweat of the last days, I thought with a start how much he looked like the golden king. (93)

The King's Grip is stunned by this proclamation. He is stunned and strangely wild with amazement. "'As if I had need of your forgiveness,' the King's Grip whispered. 'Perhaps not. The need to forgive was my own,' answered Innes" (93). At this moment, Innes states simply his forgiveness and declares himself free from his bitterness. In the wake of this triumph, he is more of a prince than ever before.

Innes's other climax coincides with Tousle's. Even when Innes stands before the king in the courtyard, the king doesn't publicly accept him as his son. Yet when Tousle takes the spear meant for Innes, the king realizes how important Innes is to him. He leaps forward to protect and claim him. At that moment, Innes's conflict is resolved. With the rebels safe, the queen's hand in his, and the king's hand on his shoulder, he is safe and well for the first time in his life. The pattern of his life has woven itself together once again.

Da's conflict is also resolved with Tousle's. In his conversation with an unconscious Tousle, he repents for his past mistakes which caused Tousle so much pain. He explains his actions and admits his struggles to Tousle. "'At first I kept him to spite chance, to teach it that it was not as powerful as it thought. But soon I kept him for another reason. And I knew that nothing, nothing is ever quite by chance.' He came close to me and placed his hands in mine. 'I came to love him,' he said quietly" (165). With a glorious joy, Da sees the pattern of Innes, Tousle, the queen, and the king's lives. He sees in the folds of the pattern an intricate design.

Does the big conflict develop into a larger battle? (9f)

Tousle's sacrifice marks the end of the tyranny of the Great Lords. There are no more battles to be won. Peace is restored to Wolverham.

How does the story end? After the climax of the story, did you wonder how it would end? How does it end? How are the "loose ends" tied up? Were all of your questions answered? (10a)

As Tousle heals, the king, queen, and Innes take their first faltering steps towards reconciliation. The queen forgives the king and puts her hand in his. The king learns to laugh at himself. Innes forgives the king and learns the love of his father. Yet all this weaving leaves Tousle lonelier than ever before. Though he will always have a place with them, he does not belong to the royal family.

Then one day, Innes and the king come barreling into the palace courtyard calling for Tousle. They tell him excitedly that they have found his Da! Suddenly, Da himself appears in the warm castle kitchen. Before he can open his mouth to confess and repent, the queen lifts her hand in understanding. "'Mistress Queen, I never meant—' 'You meant to save my son,' she said quietly; and with slow grace, she curtsied to him, as noble in that kitchen as any queen might hope to be" (171). With her weaving finished at last, the queen looks to Tousle:

'And is the design finished now Tousle?' 'No, no, no,' cried Da. 'Not finished. Just one tiny part curled into itself.' He turned back to me. 'And now it is for him to decide the path of the next curl.' 'The next curl?' He held out empty hands. 'If it were not for me, his father and his mother, they would not have died. No, no, he must not deny it.' 'I do not deny it.' I looked at Innes, then back to Da. 'I have forgiven it.' (172)

At peace with his past at last, Tousle considers the design of his future and finds it open, thrillingly open. At last, he knows who he is and who he belongs with. "I filled Da's hand with mine, and he looked up into me. 'Da,' I said, 'are the Dapple and the Gray saddled?' A long silence, and then such a cry of weeping joy as this old world has not heard in many a long year. Many, many a long year" (172). With this glorious, joyful ending, the story closes.

Were you satisfied with the resolution? If not, why not? (10b)

This resolution is utterly satisfying. All the characters are settled and content, all the conflicts are resolved, and all the questions are answered.

What does the protagonist learn? (11)

Da learns that there is a great design to the weaving of all lives. He learns to trust the Designer. Innes and the Queen learn the importance of forgiveness. And Tousle, Tousle learns that he is unique and irreplaceable. He learns the importance of forgiveness and the unspeakable gravity of love.

Is he sacrificed in some way? (Was this part of the climax or resolution?) (11d)

In the climax, Tousle sacrifices himself for his best friend, Innes. In the process, he realizes that he has his own gift: the gift of giving himself. No one can take this gift from him, and with this knowledge, he gives his gift freely.

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: THEME



The following questions are drawn from the “Theme” section of the Socratic List, found in Appendix A, page 87 of the Teaching the Classics syllabus.

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

This tale is full to bursting with universal themes. Love, Forgiveness, Coming of Age, Honor, Greed, Loyalty, Design, and the Nature of God are just a few. Tousel’s experiences illustrate these themes to perfection.

Does the story offer an answer to a particular problem associated with one of those themes? (13b)

The question repeated throughout the text is, “What fills a hand fuller than a skein of gold?” Schmidt answers this question with the phrase, “Another hand.” This simple answer is pregnant with meaning. In it, Schmidt exchanges the empty lust of greed for the full, richness of love and companionship. This riddle embodies one of the universal themes in the story.

What answer does the story seem to suggest for the question, “What is a good life?” (13d)

A good life, according to Schmidt, is a life lived with one you love, or a life led by design.

What aspect of the human condition is brought to light and wondered at in the story? (13e)

Man’s greed and lust for power is emphasized in the characters of the king, the King’s Grip, and Lord Beryn. While the king worships his gold above all in the prologue of the story, he soon learns that wealth is cold and empty without someone to share it with. Yet the King’s Grip does not grasp this principle as the king does. He loses himself in his ambition and lust for riches. Greed is not fulfilling as love is.

NOTES:

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 descriptions and comparisons to create pictures in the reader’s mind? Does the author use snapshots of images in the mind of the reader for the sake of enhancing meaning, creating setting or mood, or developing character? (16a)

Schmidt’s text is rich with *imagery* and *allusions*. He often uses personification, metaphors, and similes to create atmosphere, enhancing the beauty of his tale. For example, in Da’s cottage, everyday objects such as buckets, milk pitchers, and loaves of bread, are animate and obedient, testaments to Da’s magical nature. “Down in the kitchen the buckets of water were just hovering beside the cooking pot. At Da’s wave, they tipped their water in and then stacked themselves by the side door, the top one lying slanted for a moment until Da’s frown eased it right” (8-9).

The old mill is personified as well, groaning at its turning and withered with age and use. “It was a yard full of puddles and yellow mud. The stone walls of the mill beside it were covered with white ice, and the mill wheel groaned at its turning as if it could barely make its way through the river water” (17).

Similes and metaphors also enrich the text. As Innes trudges along with the rebels, shielding his two young friends manfully, the howls of the crowd “fly at him like demons” (26). Later, on the run from the King’s Grip, Tousle and Innes see the lights of the village “lay before them like blowzy stars” (85). They skate on the river, “a glass highway” (76), and the nurse’s laughter “is a cascade” (48). These images enhance the setting of the story.

There is an extended metaphor which illustrates the theme of the book. The answer to the king’s riddle, “What fills a hand fuller than a skein of gold?” is implied throughout the text. Love fulfills as all the riches of the world cannot. In a sense, love is gold-precious and coveted above all else. This metaphor is so constant in the story that it becomes a symbol to Tousle and the others. Love is wealth.

Does the author use the characters and events in the story to communicate a theme that goes beyond them in some way? Does the author provide any clues early in the story of things to come in the plot? (17)

In the very beginning, Tousle’s conversation with Da is shot through with elements of *foreshadowing*: “‘He [the King] has a victory to celebrate. There will be trumpets, and horsemen, and Lord Beryn’s Guard, and the king himself.’ At this, Da’s face darkened. ‘Well,’ he said, ‘he’ll have to hope it will be a brave new day after all’” (9). This ominous statement darkens the jovial mood of the morning and hints at the turmoil to come. This is an example of foreshadowing.

QUESTIONS ABOUT CONTEXT



The following questions are drawn from the “Context” section of the Socratic List, found in Appendix A, pages 91-92 of the Teaching the Classics syllabus.

Who is the author? (18)

Gary D. Schmidt was born on January 1, 1957 in Hicksville, New York. Though he was raised Baptist, he attended a school which was primarily Catholic and Jewish. Now a Professor of English at Calvin College, Schmidt specializes in medieval and children’s literature. He lives on a cozy farm in Alto, Michigan, with his wife and six children. Schmidt’s experience as a husband and a father influences his writing. The young protagonists in his tales live and breathe, their qualities no doubt drawn from his own children. For, as a father, Schmidt understands the struggles of childhood and coming of age. In addition, Schmidt’s Christian beliefs influence his works, lending hope and redemption to each of his plots. For example, in *Straw into Gold*, Schmidt’s theme of Design is rooted in Christianity. As a result of his authentic, inspiring books, Schmidt has won two Newberry Honor Awards and the Printz Honor Award. His writings are stirring, eloquent, and accurate representations of the world, and blessings to his readers.

NOTES:

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. Innes struggles with bitterness because of his blindness in the story. Where is the climax to this conflict? What theme or universal truth does Schmidt communicate through the events of this climax?
2. How does Schmidt use the gold imagery in this story? Give some examples of where “gold” or “golden images” show up in the text and explain how they help emphasize Schmidt’s main theme.
3. What is Tousle’s main character flaw? How does he overcome it? When does he “come of age?”
4. At the end of the story, Da says that “nothing, nothing is ever quite by chance.” Support his conclusion using details from the events in the story. Where is Design at work in the plot?
5. What fills the hand fuller than a skein of gold? Support your answer using details of conflict and climax for any one of the main characters.

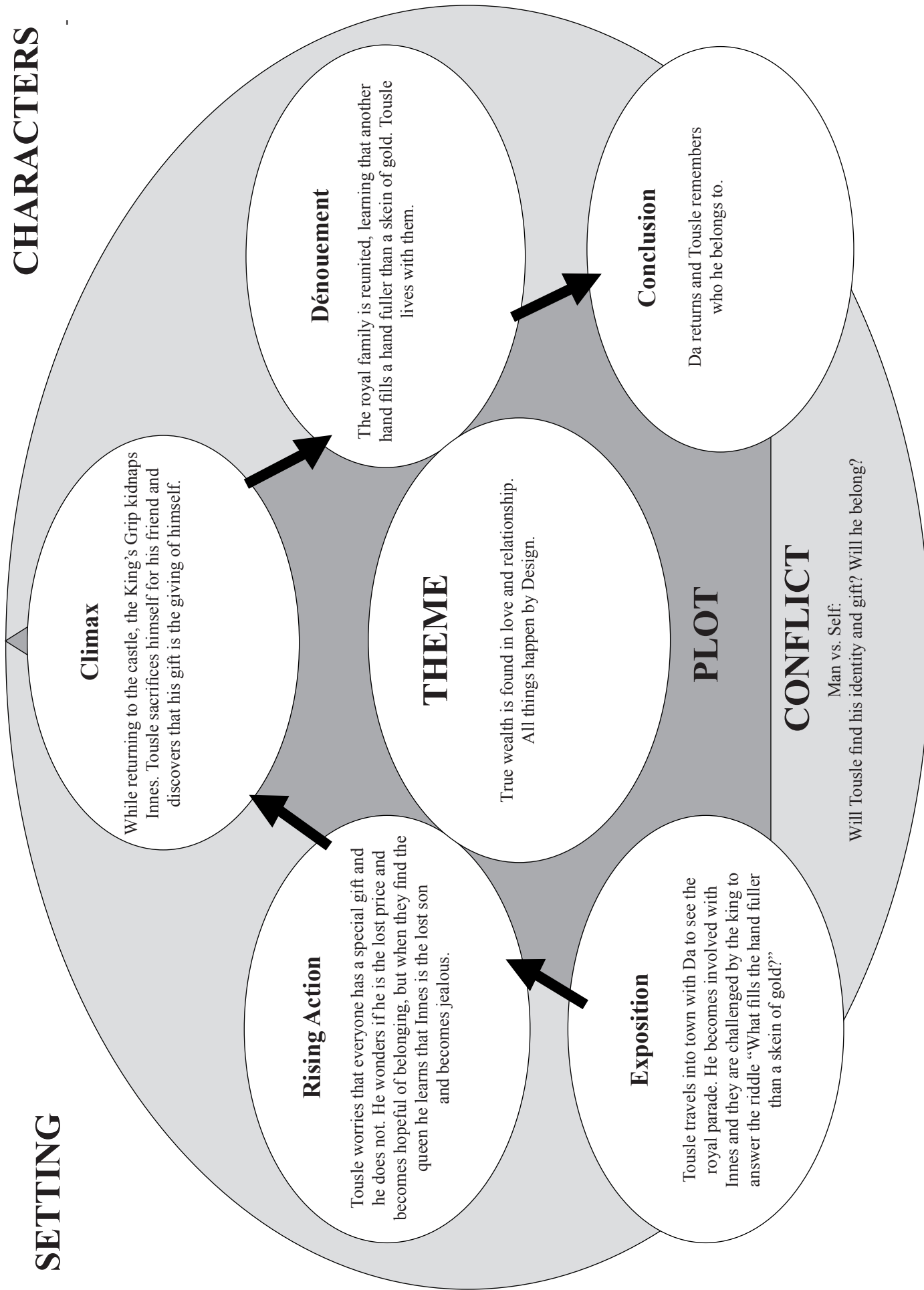
STORY CHARTS



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: *Staw Into Gold*



Story Chart: *Straw Into Gold*

SETTING

CHARACTERS

