

The Little House
by Virginia Lee Burton

A Teacher's Guide for Socratic Discussion
by Mattis Belloncle

TABLE OF CONTENTS



Introduction	3
Quick Card	5
Questions about Structure: Setting	6
Questions about Structure: Characters	8
Questions about Structure: Conflict and Plot	10
Questions about Structure: Theme	12
Questions about Style	14
Questions about Context	16
Suggestions for Writing Assignments	17
Story Charts	18

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.

Adam Andrews, Director
The Center for Literary Education
3350 Beck Road
Rice, WA 99167
(509) 738-6837
adam@centerforlit.com

QUICK CARD



Reference	<i>The Little House</i> . Virginia Lee Burton. (1942) ISBN: 978-1-328-74194-3
Plot	A Little House in the countryside is slowly abandoned as a city grows up around her, but the caring great-great-granddaughter of the house's builder restores the Little House by moving her out of the city to a new location in the country.
Setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A rural area that becomes a city over decades• A new country location
Characters	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Little House, a small countryside home• The builder of the Little House• The builder's kind great-great-granddaughter
Conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Man vs. Man: The city builders strip away the natural beauty that surrounded the Little House.• Man vs. Nature: The Little House struggles to reconcile herself to her changing surroundings.• Man vs. Self: The Little House must overcome her curiosity about city life
Theme	The Little House crumbles in a changing environment but is restored once she returns to her roots. The story is concerned with: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The passage of time• Urbanization• Change• The city vs. the countryside
Literary Devices	Repetition Foreshadowing Personification

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: SETTING



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

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

Despite all the changes the Little House witnesses, most of the story takes place in the same spot. The story only moves to a new physical location at the end, when the builder’s great-great-granddaughter has the Little House moved. She cannot count on her surroundings changing for the better; instead, she has to change surroundings altogether before she can be happy again.

Does the story happen in the country or the city? (1b)

The country and the city both appear in the story. The Little House is built in the country, but the city spreads over the country. In the end, the Little House is moved back to the country. Although Burton distinguishes the characteristics of country and city, she also shows how the country can become the city. Burton seems skeptical of this process of urbanization. The city that springs up around the Little House is crowded but never personable, and Burton draws a contrast between the natural beauty of the countryside and the cramped artificiality of the city.

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

The exact duration of the story is unclear. We know that the Little House is moved by her builder’s great-great-granddaughter, so the story must span at least five generations. Having the story cover such a great expanse of time is important for its consideration of the passage of time.

Does the story happen in a particular age of the world? (2d)

The Little House watches the transition from carriages drawn by horses to the “horseless carriage” (14). Later, she sees an “elevated train” (24) and a “subway” (26). Consequently, we know that the story occurs during a period of rapid technological growth, likely at the end of the 19th century and into the early and middle 20th century. Setting the story in this time period allows Burton to physically show the passage of time since each new invention adds another step between the past and the present.

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)

The Little House is the story’s protagonist. She is a “pretty,” sturdy, country house, “strong and well built,” who perches cheerfully on her rural hillside and contentedly watches the seasons change and the days turn into nights. Far off in the distance, she can see city lights, which arouse her curiosity to wonder what a life in the city might be like. From her perch, she watches as “horseless carriages” create roads that connect the country neighborhood to the nearest, sprawling metropolis, which in time swallows the countryside around the Little House.

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

The Little House is initially happy and content. At the story’s outset, she enjoys her surroundings, where the natural rhythms of the seasons dictate the activities of the country folk. The illustrator signifies the Little House’s satisfaction and pleasure by depicting her with two twinkling-eyed windows, a nose-like door, and front steps, whose upward curves suggest an open smile. This smile changes, however, as the city encroaches and the Little House’s view is obstructed by “more houses and bigger houses...apartment houses and tenement houses... schools... stores... and garages” which crowd the Little House until no one cares for her anymore. She becomes lonely and isolated in the growing cement jungle. She misses the quiet nights and the lovely scenery of the past. She misses the family that had once occupied her. She misses the gentle rhythm of the changing seasons.

Do the Little House’s priorities change over the course of the story? In what way? What causes this change? (3n)

Though the Little House is initially “curious about the city” (4), as the city springs up around her this curiosity morphs into uncertainty, finally yielding to sadness and loneliness. The Little House grows to dislike the unpredictable novelty and isolation of the city; instead, she prefers the comfortable country cycles of day and night and the regularly changing seasons. We are told that “never again would she be curious about the city” (40). Her curiosity about new things is replaced by a longing for the familiar landscape and natural beauty.

Is the Little House a type or archetype? Is she an “Everyman” with whom the reader is meant to identify? Are her struggles symbolic of human life? (3p)

The Little House symbolizes the problem of industrialization, which swallows up not only the landscape surrounding the Little House, but the natural beauty of the agrarian lifestyle it represents.

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 is the Little House trying to obtain? (5d)

The Little House wants to be cared for and to be able once again to watch the natural cycles she remembers from her early years. Her goal is contentment—a happy existence surrounded by comforting familiarity. Moreover, the matter of her survival transcends her physical circumstances to suggest the survival of a way of life, a family vision, and all the natural affinities these suggest.

Do physical or geographical impediments stand in the character’s way? (6a)

At first, when the Little House expresses curiosity about city life, her distance from the city lights prevents her knowledge. After the city expands around her, the Little House realizes she does not like the city. Physical impediments become the Little House’s greatest obstacle: she cannot recover her old life.

What other problems are there in the story? (7)

The Little House has to rethink what she wants—a version of the “Man vs. Himself” conflict. Her initial desire to live in the city is satisfied, but she realizes that she wanted the wrong thing. Hemmed in by skyscrapers, the Little House waits and watches. Readers watch too. What will happen to her beloved way of life? Will it survive? Will she?

Does the Little House achieve her object? (9a)

She does. By the end of the story, the Little House is content again, surrounded by a “quiet and peaceful” countryside (40).

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

The story problem is resolved by an ironic plot twist when the great-great granddaughter of the builder of the Little House discovers her, neglected and forsaken in the midst of the city. Seeing her, the woman recalls her great-great-grandmother’s home and investigates. This recognition indicates the great-great-granddaughter’s warmth and love for the Little House and the values she represents. The woman’s investigations prove the house to be the very one her mother’s grandparents had built. She recovers the Little House, and with her, the lifestyle she symbolizes. In this way, the original builder’s dreams come to fruition.

QUESTIONS ABOUT STYLE: LITERARY DEVICES



The following questions are drawn from the “Literary Devices” section of the Socratic List, found in Appendix A, pages 88-90 of the Teaching the Classics syllabus.

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

Repetition:

“She watched the sun rise...she watched the sun set” (2).

“She watched the moon grow...she watched the stars” (4).

“She watched the grass turn green. She watched the buds on the trees swell...She watched the children” (6).

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

Personification:

Burton represents the Little House as having emotions and fears, which are uniquely human characteristics. She can be “sad and lonely” (31) or “frightened” (37) and she can “smile happily” (38).

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

Foreshadowing:

The Little House wonders what city life would be like, then watches as the city grows closer and closer:

“The Little House was curious about the city and wondered what it would be like to live there” (4).

“...now at night the lights of the city seemed brighter and closer” (12).

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. Is the Little House a likable character? Why or why not?
2. Describe how the Little House responds to the changes around her.
3. How and why does the Little House's opinion of the city change?
4. What does the Little House learn?
5. Why does the Little House not like living in the city?

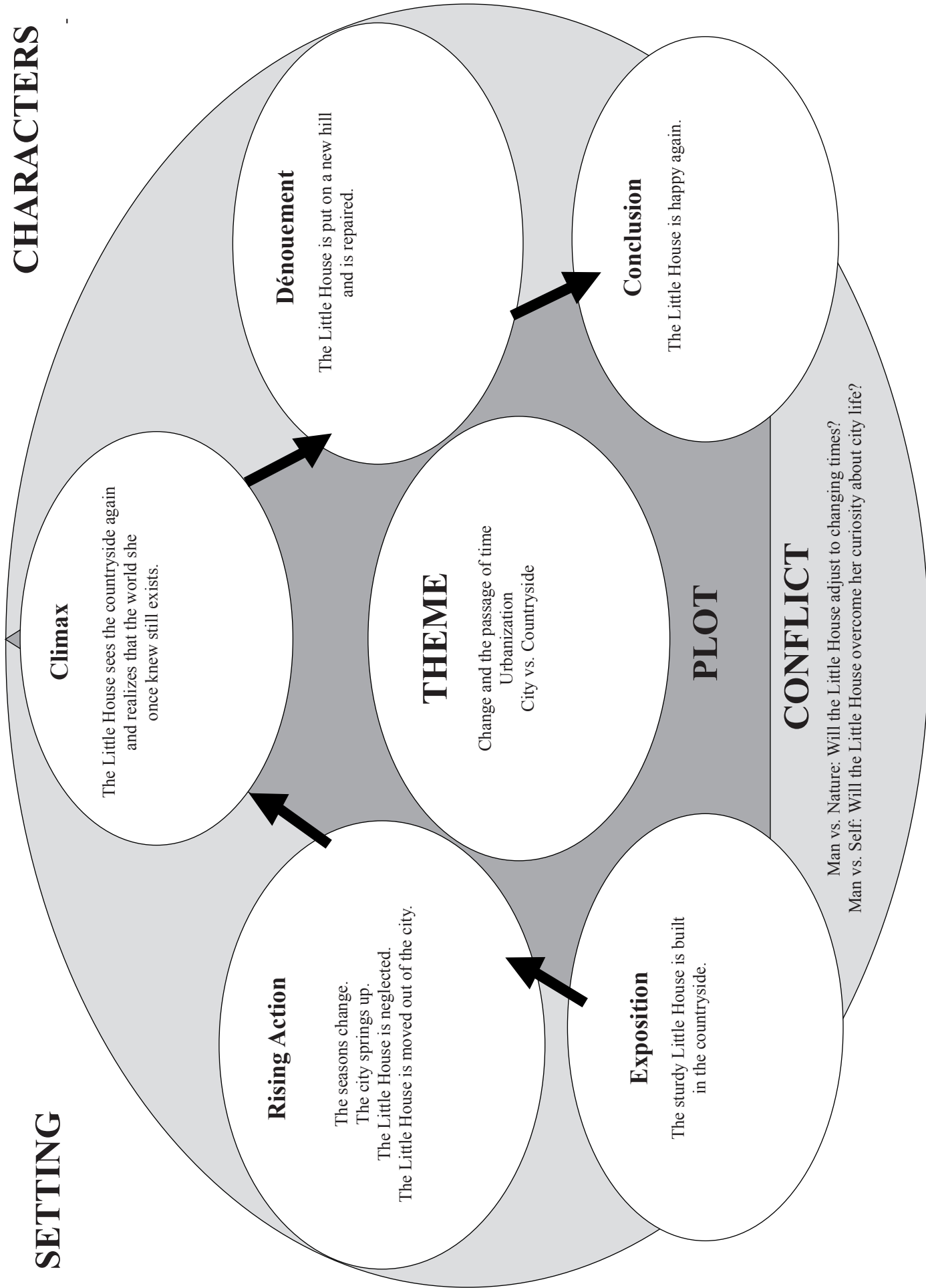
STORY CHARTS



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: *The Little House*



Story Chart: *The Little House*

SETTING

CHARACTERS

