

*The Mouse
and the Motorcycle*
by Beverly Cleary

A Teacher's Guide for Socratic Discussion
by Joshua Rice and Missy 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>The Mouse and the Motorcycle</i> . Beverly Cleary. (1965) ISBN: 978-0380709243
Plot	By teaching him to ride a toy motorcycle, Ralph's friend Keith seems to offer him the life of adventure he has always wanted, but the mouse's own recklessness threatens both his dreams and his new friendship. Will Ralph take a risk for someone else's benefit?
Setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Mountain View Inn• California• Fourth of July weekend• The adolescence of Ralph and Keith
Characters	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Keith Gridley• Ralph• Mrs. Gridley• Ralph's mother• Matt the Bellboy• The Maid with the vacuum cleaner
Conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Man vs. Fate• Man vs. Himself• Man vs. Nature
Theme	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Coming of Age• Friendship• Selflessness
Literary Devices	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Onomatopoeia• Imagery

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: SETTING



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

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

The whole book takes place in the Mountain View Inn, an old hotel in California. For the human characters in the story, this place represents one particular location in the broader world (for example, Mr. and Mrs. Gridley are stopping there briefly during their vacation; Matt and the maid only work there). For Ralph, however, the hotel is the whole world. Initially Ralph’s world is only room 215 (where the story begins), but as time and the book go on Ralph’s world expands: “Now that he had seen the hall he could no longer be satisfied with room 215. It was not enough. He longed to see the rest of the world—the dining room and the kitchen and the garbage cans out back” (57).

Is the setting a real or imaginary place? If it’s imaginary, is it subject to the same physical laws as our world is? (1g)

Although the setting for the story is certainly not a fantasy world, the author employs three fantastical elements.

The first of these is the personification of Ralph and his mouse relatives. This is a very common trope in literature, particularly children’s stories. By making Ralph a sentient animal, afflicted with the same sorts of difficulties human adolescents experience, Cleary can tell a story of growth and maturation that might otherwise feel didactic and preachy.

The second—and related—fantastical element is that Ralph and Keith and Matt all speak the same language. This is never explained except when Cleary writes, in the scene where Ralph and Keith meet, “Neither the mouse nor the boy was the least bit surprised that each could understand the other. Two creatures who shared a love for motorcycles naturally spoke the same language.” Later, when Ralph is trapped by the two young school teachers and tries to communicate with them, he realizes, “It was no use. Young women could not speak his language.” The important thing to note here is that, for Cleary as well as Ralph and Keith, it is “natural” that the language of those who love the same things be universal: mutual love gives birth to understanding. As Ralph and Keith’s friendship is tested in the book, it will continue to be their common love that allows them to understand one another deeply. (38-39, 128)

The third element of fantasy in the book is the means by which the motorcycle is powered. When Ralph admits he does not know how to start the motorcycle Keith says, “You have to make a noise ... These cars don’t go unless you make a noise.” Ralph apprehends this explanation at once, just as he does the fact that he and Keith share a common language. The world of imagination that Ralph and Keith participate in together is a world in which there are more possibilities than the “realistic”

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.

Is the character a man or an animal? (3a-c)

Ralph: An adolescent mouse.

Keith: An adolescent boy.

What does the character look like? (3d)

Ralph is first described as “a hungry young mouse.” “Hungry” here might very well be intended to convey more than just physical hunger, for example the desire for more freedom and adventure that characterizes Ralph. Not much physical description is given for Ralph besides general “mouse-y” characteristics: whiskers, tail, alert ears, etc. (19)

Keith’s physical appearance is not described in much detail either.

Is the character kind, gentle, stern, emotional, harsh, logical, rational, compassionate or exciting...? Make up a list of adjectives that describe the protagonist. What words or actions on the character’s part make you choose the adjectives you do? (3f)

Ralph is described as “greedy,” ready to display “bravado” and “rude.” Ralph is also “reckless” and cocky, as shown on the occasion when he teases the dog on pages 55 and 56 (a situation that also demonstrates how rude he can be for his own pleasure). In general Ralph begins the story as both selfish and discontented with life, given the attendant restrictions that his world and age necessitate. (37, 39, 22)

Though Keith is also inclined to be discontent with childhood (on pages 152 and 153, he and Ralph have a lengthy conversation during which they commiserate on the subject), he is, in fact, much more mature than Ralph at the beginning of the book. He is apologetic when he has made a mistake, empathetic, thoughtful, forgiving, happy for others (especially Ralph), not envious, and responsive to Ralph’s mistakes and broken promises with continued kindnesses even to the point of giving him the motorcycle in the end. Furthermore, Keith understands the importance of parental authority. (39, 40, 43, 44, 45, 47, 62-63, 97, 157)

What does the character think is the most important thing in life? How do you know this? (3m)

On page 20, while Ralph is being introduced, Cleary writes:

Ralph experienced still another emotion; this time food was not the cause of it. Ralph was eager,

excited, curious, and impatient all at once. The emotion was so strong it made him forget his empty stomach. It was caused by those little cars, especially that motorcycle and the *pb-pb-b-b-b* sound the boy made. That sound seemed to satisfy something within Ralph, as if he had been waiting all his life to hear it. *Pb-pb-b-b-b* went the boy. To the mouse the sound spoke of highways and speed, of distance and danger, and whiskers blown back in the wind.

A little while later we are told that Ralph's mother worries about him because he wants to go exploring, and immediately after this description Ralph gets into his first predicament of the book while trying to ride the motorcycle. It is also significant that every interaction Ralph has with his family involves them trying to exert control over him, treating him as though he were young, inexperienced, and untrustworthy, which, for most of the story, is true. This is especially evident on page 68 and during Ralph's family reunion. (20-21, 25-27, 87-90)

The principal thing readers learn is that most of all Ralph wants to explore and have adventures, and the motorcycle is the most obvious means to this end. Thus the motorcycle comes to symbolize for Ralph the life he does not have: a life of freedom from his family's control and the rules that govern other mice.

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)

At the beginning of the story Ralph is a selfish mouse. He is not interested in anything but himself and his adventures—adventures to which the motorcycle is the key. On page 78, Ralph, who has already escaped from the vacuum cleaner, breaks the promise he made to Keith (not to ride the motorcycle during the day) purely in order to find out whether the motorcycle or the vacuum is stronger. Ralph becomes trapped as a result, and he eventually has to abandon the motorcycle—Keith's prize possession. Ralph also mistakes certain grown-up privileges for actual maturity. For example, his ability to order "room service" for the mice as well as come up with a plan for how they can avoid traps and poisons leads him to "acquire" a "grand way" around his family by the end of chapter nine. He has, however, yet to do any real maturing.

In chapter ten everything changes: on page 107, Ralph is worried that because Keith feels sick, there will be no dinner for the mice. A few pages later we find him sitting in the window where he can "dream about the lost motorcycle," while the increasingly ill Keith languishes behind him. For the first time in the book Ralph is drawn out of himself as he listens to Keith's parents talk: "Ralph was shocked. The boy was sick. It was not too many peanuts or too much hiking. The boy was really and truly sick....Ralph watched anxiously, but this time he was not selfishly concerned about room service. He was concerned about Keith." From this point on all of Ralph's actions are motivated by concern for Keith and a need to get him an aspirin. Rather than wanting the motorcycle so he can recklessly explore, he "wished he had the motorcycle so he could travel faster" in search of the pill. He also, when tempted early on in his journey to search for his motorcycle, resists: "The aspirin tablet seemed a very small thing to find in such a vast place. It would be much easier to find the motorcycle. No, thought Ralph, I must not even think about the motorcycle." It is significant that Ralph does not use the motorcycle to retrieve the pill, but an ambulance instead. This is, of course, practically because the motorcycle has been lost, but it suggests an important aspect of the story, since Cleary has taken away even this vestige of Ralph's selfishness. He must rely on less-exciting modes of transportation, but it doesn't matter because he is no longer seeking thrills. Even the dog he teased becomes, instead of a means to spiteful fun for Ralph, rather a means to help him aid Keith.

On page 151, Keith explains to Ralph that by doing this Ralph has “proved [he] could be responsible.” (113, 114, 119, 123)

And although the focus of the book is not fixed on Keith’s development, the boy also learns the value of responsibility and what it means to “grow up.” Already much more mature than Ralph, he is not really sure what it means to be grown up until near the book’s end: “Just getting bigger isn’t enough. You have to learn things like not taking off down a steep hill on a bicycle when you aren’t used to hand brakes. Stuff like that” (153).

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? (3p)

Both Ralph and Keith embody the human desire to grow up, present in all of us—particularly children—as well as the universal necessity to understand maturity, responsibility and selflessness through experience.

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)

Ralph, a type of what it means to be young and immature, is an eminently sympathetic character.

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

Ralph has many potential or small foes in the book: the maid, the dog down the hall, even the vacuum cleaner. For Ralph, however, the chief antagonist—the force that holds him back from his desires—is his family.

In what way are they antagonistic? What actions do they take to oppose the protagonist? (4b,c)

It is important to note two things before answering this question. First, Ralph’s family is primarily a passively antagonistic entity. They do not try and harm or often even prevent him from pursuing his object; they merely seek to curb his adventurous spirit. Second, although his family does not act as kindly toward Ralph as they might and frequently patronize him, they are correct in their assessment that he is immature. Yet, rather than helping him grow wiser, they add to his immaturity by emphasizing it (see, for example, the difficulties Ralph has making them agree to his quite sensible plan about how to avoid detection on pages 100 to 105).

This passive antagonism manifests itself in the general state of Ralph’s home-life. His mother is introduced in chapter two as a worrier. In chapter six we meet his “squeaky bunch of little brothers and sisters” (an adjective that is often used of them). Cleary provides a clear look at the dynamics of the family in chapters eight and nine: Aunt Sissy “thought she was better than the rest of the family,” Uncle Lester “had a way of saying the wrong thing at the wrong time,” Aunt Dorothy dismisses motorcycles out-of-hand as “foolhardy” and Ralph’s cousins are “sulky” and even doubt the motorcycle’s existence. (67, 87, 88, 89)

In general, we can see that the domestic responsibilities Ralph has (to help provide food for the younger mice) and the way he is looked down on as immature by his older relatives conspire to make him feel resentful and trapped

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.

Fill in the blank: This story is about the protagonist trying to _____. (5a)

In the beginning of the story Ralph seeks to have all the adventures on the motorcycle he can. At the story’s climax, Ralph sets aside his own interests in order to search for an aspirin for Keith. The interplay between Ralph’s desire to have adventures and to be “grown up” facilitates the overarching plot/character development of Ralph’s inner journey toward responsibility.

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

The string of difficulties Ralph must overcome while searching for an aspirin for Keith are primarily physical: in the course of chapters eleven and twelve he is captured under a glass and must escape by climbing down the vines outside the hotel. After this, he must concoct a scheme to get the pill he finds downstairs back up to Keith’s room—a scheme that ultimately involves both acquiring a new vehicle (Keith’s ambulance) and some clever manipulation of the terrier who resides in Room 211. Ralph also must suppress his internal desire for the motorcycle so that he will not be distracted by attempting to hunt for it instead of the aspirin. (123)

What kind of struggle is the character’s conflict? (6g-k)

There are three chief struggles in this book.

The first—and most important—is Ralph’s inner struggle: a Man vs. Himself type of conflict, best understood as “Ralph-against-his-own-immaturity.” This conflict pervades the whole story and facilitates its chief theme.

The second (and secondary) struggle is Man vs. Man, and takes the form of Ralph “against” his family. Ralph must overcome his family’s reticence to believe that his plan will actually work and that he is capable of executing it.

Finally, the last conflict that makes up the events of the climax is Man vs. Nature. Ralph struggles with his physical limitations and the sheer size (not to mention the rampant dangers) of his surroundings.

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

The Man vs. Himself conflict first causes Ralph to accidentally ride the motorcycle into the garbage

can in Keith's bedroom and then later to test it against the vacuum cleaner, resulting in its loss. (25-27) As the climax—the search for the aspirin and that quest's inherent dangers—dawns, Ralph finally overcomes his own desires. The climax is produced by outside factors, but the internal conflict is decisive in determining how Ralph responds to the climactic night.

How do the interactions of the characters heighten the tension of the conflict that already exists? (8c)

Once Keith falls ill with no available aspirin, the story's tension builds through a series of scenes of physical duress for Ralph and two principle scenes of character interaction. Right away, Ralph must convince his family that he is responsible enough to venture out into the hotel to search for the medicine. (120-122) Later he has to borrow Keith's ambulance in order to retrieve the pill. (136) The response of both his family and Keith are the same: Ralph is too young, too immature. Thus the point of the climax is set up: not only must Ralph overcome the physical odds to retrieve the pill, but in so doing he must also bring closure to the book's larger issue.

Does the protagonist get what he's after? (9a)

Ralph achieves his end—he finds, retrieves, and leaves for Keith an aspirin tablet. He also, in so doing, proves to his family, to Keith, and to himself that he is beginning to mature.

Is the climax a spiritual or a physical one? Is the protagonist changed in his mind or heart by the events of the story? Does he begin to act differently? In what way? (9d, 11a-b)

The climax of the book turns on physical events; however, these events prove to be a vehicle for conveying the deeper changes of maturity and selflessness in Ralph.

Does the main character explain to the reader his perspective on the events that have transpired? (11e)

In Ralph and Keith's final conversation (pages 151 to 157), Ralph says to Keith: "You grow a little bit every day....You wait long enough and you will be a grownup....I grew up, didn't I?...You said yourself I had become a responsible mouse" (152).

Do the other characters look at the protagonist differently at the end of the story? (12b)

Keith's opinion about Ralph changes throughout the story. Although he is always kind to Ralph (a truly charitable character—giving even after Ralph has broken promises and lost the motorcycle), he doesn't trust him to make responsible choices and is even reluctant to loan Ralph the ambulance the latter needs to get the aspirin. Later, after the story's climax when Matt returns the motorcycle, Keith tells him: "I don't know any irresponsible mice....Only one responsible mouse" (149).

Ralph's family recognizes that Ralph has shown responsibility and maturity in formulating a plan and setting it into action in order to help Keith. Contrast the scene on pages 120-122 with this scene from 144:

"Our Ralph is growing up," said Aunt Sissy.

"Yes, Ralph is growing up," agreed his mother.

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. What is the climactic moment of this story's plot, and what underlying conflict does it resolve?
2. What word best describes Ralph's character at the beginning of the story? Does this word still describe him at the story's end? What has happened to bring about this change?
3. Who or what is the main antagonist in *The Mouse and the Motorcycle*? Which of Ralph's goals does this antagonist oppose, and why?
4. According to *The Mouse and the Motorcycle*, what ingredients make up a good life? A good friendship?

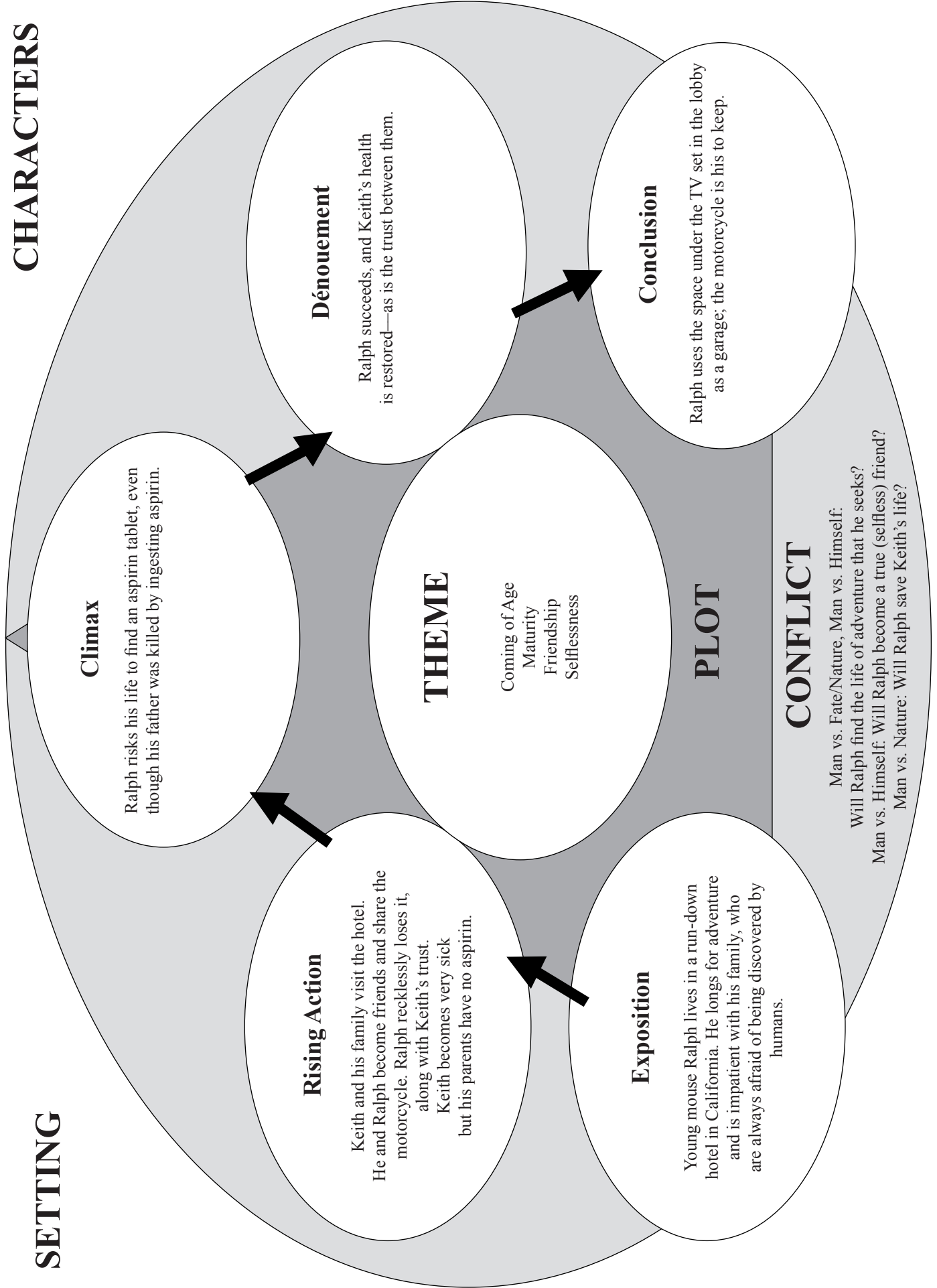
STORY CHARTS



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 Mouse and the Motorcycle*



Story Chart: *The Mouse and the Motorcycle*

SETTING

CHARACTERS

