

The Story of Ferdinand
by Munro Leaf

A Teacher's Guide for Socratic Discussion
by Adam & Missy Andrews

TABLE OF CONTENTS



| | |
|--|----|
| Introduction | 3 |
| Quick Card | 5 |
| Questions about Structure: Setting | 6 |
| Questions about Structure: Characters | 7 |
| Questions about Structure: Conflict and Plot | 9 |
| Questions about Structure: Theme | 11 |
| Questions about Style | 13 |
| Questions about Context | 14 |
| Suggestions for Writing Assignments | 16 |
| Story Charts | 17 |

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 Story of Ferdinand.</i> Munro Leaf. (1936) ISBN: 978-0448456942 |
| Plot | A young and gentle bull, Ferdinand, reacts with uncharacteristic violence when he is stung by a bee; he is mistaken for a fierce bull and taken to the bullfights in Madrid, where he prefers to sit in the arena sniffing the fragrant air than to fight the matadors. |
| Setting | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A Spanish meadow• A bullfighting arena in Madrid |
| Characters | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ferdinand and the other young bulls in his meadow• Ferdinand's mother• Five men in funny hats• The Bumblebee• The Banderilleros, who thrust decorated darts called banderillas into the bull's shoulders and neck during a bullfight• The Picadores, bullfighters on horseback who prick the bull with a lance to weaken it for the matador• The Matador, the bullfighter who must ultimately kill the bull |
| Conflict | Man (Ferdinand) vs. Nature (what it is to be a bull) |
| Theme | Things are not always what they seem. Pacifism |
| Literary Devices | Dramatic irony – The reader knows more about Ferdinand than the men in the funny hats. Circumstantial irony – Ferdinand is not what one expects of a bull. |

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: SETTING



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

Where does the story happen? (1)

The Story of Ferdinand happens in Spain, the land of matadors, bullfights, and men with funny hats. Bullfighting is a sport in which a fierce bull is enclosed in an arena with an armed sportsman—the Matador. The two, bull and man, fight to the death in an elaborate and theatrical contest.

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

This setting is significant in light of the story’s historical context: a civil war, which broke out in Spain in 1936, just before the publication of this story. The link between this event and the story’s theme of pacifism would have been obvious to Leaf’s contemporaries.

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

The story ranges from the country to the city of Madrid. It is interesting to note the contrasts between the two, both in Leaf’s text and in Lawson’s illustrations. The peaceful pasture Ferdinand calls home puts the noise and violence of the bullfighting arena in Madrid in stark relief. We can easily see why Ferdinand prefers the quiet beauty of the flowers in his cow pasture.

When does this story happen? (2)

The story is set in Ferdinand’s youth.

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)

Ferdinand is the story’s protagonist, a young bull who lacks the virile and violent nature of his kind. Ferdinand is a peace loving young bull, who lives in a country meadow with his mother and the other bulls. He is gentle and retiring, a consummate introvert. While the other bulls like to jump and leap and butt their heads together, Ferdinand prefers his solitary seat under the cork tree where he can enjoy the fragrant flowers. While the other bulls vied to be selected to compete in the bullfights in Madrid, Ferdinand preferred his peace.

Who else is the story about? (4)

- Other young bulls in Ferdinand’s pasture whose bucking bravado remains intact.
- Ferdinand’s mother, who, being of an understanding nature, leaves her son to his own quiet pursuits.

Antagonists:

- Five men in funny hats – Newly arrived from Madrid, these scouts are seeking the fiercest bull in the region to participate in the bullfights for which Spain is most famous.
- A Bumblebee – This unwitting bumbler becomes the source of all of Ferdinand’s trouble.
- The Banderilleros – The first of the peaceful Ferdinand’s disappointed public.
- The Picadores – Later participants in the bullfight, who also fail to arouse Ferdinand’s anger.
- The Matador – A proud buffoon, frustrated to tears by Ferdinand’s peaceful temperament.

It is productive to compare Ferdinand with his main human antagonist, the matador. While Ferdinand seeks peace and quiet, the matador seeks victory and the accolades of the crowd. While Ferdinand cares little for his public reputation, the matador worries about his reputation continually. Ferdinand accepts life as it comes to him and remains true to his nature; the matador frets and worries, going all to pieces when things don’t go his way.

In the end, Ferdinand’s quietness in the face of provocation and his innate love of peace contribute to his enduring happiness. The matador, on the other hand, retires from the field defeated. All of the matador’s hopes are pinned on a “military” victory, but disappointment and defeat prove to be his lot. Ferdinand, on the other hand, behaves as he always has and remains entirely unaffected by the furor around him.

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)

Ferdinand is happy with his quiet, rural life. His mother knows that what he most wants is to be left alone to sit under his favorite tree and smell the fragrant meadow flowers in peace.

Why can’t he have it? (6)

Well, nothing lasts forever! Two things conspire to rob Ferdinand of his quiet, solitary existence. First, chance has it that a small, unobtrusive bee perches upon a clover in the very spot Ferdinand chooses to sit. “If you were a bee,” says Leaf, “and a bull sat on you, what would you do?” You would probably do just what this bee does: sting Ferdinand with a mighty vengeance! The pawing and stamping this shock provokes from Ferdinand are marvelous to behold. This is a Man vs. Nature conflict, in the sense that the goals of the protagonist (the “man”) are opposed by natural forces (the bee). Ferdinand can’t sit quietly because the bee stings him. Due to this interaction with the bee, Ferdinand is loaded into a cart and taken away from his lovely meadow and favorite cork tree to the city, where he is mistakenly lauded as the most ferocious bull of all time. (6h)

Second, there is the conflict between Ferdinand and those who produce the bullfights in Madrid. These include the scouts in funny hats, the matador, his helpers, and the crowd that comes to witness the bullfight. It so happens that five men in funny hats have just arrived at the field to scout out fierce bulls for the bullfights in Madrid. They take one look at Ferdinand in his pain-induced frenzy and decide that their search is over. Surely, this must be the fiercest of all the bulls in Spain! Unfortunately, they have misperceived everything. There is a case of mistaken identities. While bulls are supposed to want to fight in the bullfights, Ferdinand doesn’t fit the cultural stereotypes. This is Man vs. Society conflict, in the sense that the goals of the protagonist are opposed by the desires and expectations of the culture in which he lives. (6j)

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

The second conflict produces the story question: Will Ferdinand remain free to pursue his happiness and remain himself? For young readers, this can be put in much simpler language: will the men in funny hats force Ferdinand to fight the matador, or will Ferdinand get to return to his field and smell the flowers?

Once Ferdinand arrives at the bullfighting arena, however, gentle Ferdinand remains true to his nature. The Banderilleros stick Ferdinand with their long, sharp pins to try to make him mad. The Picadores stick long spears in him to provoke him. The Matador appears in his red cape to try to

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? How does the story answer the problem associated with that theme? (13b)

You might answer this question several ways. This story certainly seems to have a “moral”—that is, a theme that comes across as advice for living well:

- Violence is not the answer.
- Pursue peace with all men.
- Be true to yourself.
- Looks can be deceiving: things are not always as they seem.
- He who lives by the sword will die by the sword.
- He who sows in peace will reap a harvest of righteousness.

Not every story has a moral, however. Even a moralistic story deals with broader themes as well. Some examples of universal ideas touched upon in Ferdinand include:

- The nature of happiness
- Pacifism
- Constancy
- The nature of peace
- Individualism

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

The story seems to suggest that a good life is a quiet life, far from the raging crowds, in a peaceful place of isolation where it is possible to pursue individual happiness according to one’s preferences and nature.

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 represent inanimate objects as being lifelike or human? (16e)

The bull Ferdinand and his mother are depicted with *anthropomorphism*—with human personality. Ferdinand is depicted as a classic introvert. He and his mother speak to one another in conversation.

Does the author use the words “like” or “as” in making comparisons between two or more dissimilar things? (16d)

When the bee stings Ferdinand, he behaves as if he were crazy. This *simile* depicts Ferdinand as a fierce bull in nature, rather than as the pacifist he is.

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

Leaf uses *circumstantial* and *dramatic irony* to produce humor in his story. The audience, who knows Ferdinand to be a peace loving bull, knows more than the five men in funny hats, who think he’s fierce and cart him off to fight in the bullfights in Madrid (dramatic irony). Ferdinand only behaves like a fierce bull because of the unfortunate bee sting. On any normal occasion, the men would have seen that he was the last bull they would choose to take to the arena (circumstantial irony).

NOTES:

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)

Munro Leaf, a.k.a. Wilbur Monroe, is best remembered as the author of two memorable works of children’s literature: *Wee Gillis* (1938) and *The Story of Ferdinand* (1936). Born in Hamilton, Maryland, in 1905, Monroe graduated from the University of Maryland in 1927, and from Harvard University with a master’s degree in English literature in 1931. Monroe claimed to have written *Ferdinand* as a vehicle for his friend and illustrator Robert Lawson’s artistic talents. “I wrote ‘Ferdinand’...in the hope it would amuse [Robert Lawson] enough to create pictures that would provide a quiet laugh,” he said. Munro Leaf died in 1976 at the age of 71.

When did the author live? (19)

Monroe lived during the mid-twentieth century, the era of two World Wars. His most famous book, *The Story of Ferdinand*, was first published in 1936, during the Spanish Civil War. Later, during World War II, he and Theodore Geisel (a.k.a. Dr. Seuss) worked together on the pamphlet, “This Is Ann,” about a mosquito who spread malaria to men who failed to take precautions. It is fair to say that the experience of war had a great impact on Monroe, as his choice of subject matter for *The Story of Ferdinand* clearly suggests.

What did the author believe? (20)

Released at the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, *The Story of Ferdinand* was seen by many supporters of Spanish dictator Francisco Franco as a pacifist tract. For this reason it was widely condemned by the right wing and was banned in Nazi Germany. At the same time and perhaps because of this suppression, it was eagerly promoted by those on the political left. In India, for example, Gandhi declared it to be his favorite book.

Lost in this whirlwind of worldwide acclaim and condemnation were the political views of the author himself. Perhaps he preferred, as his famous character did, to “just sit quietly” off to the side of all the commotion. “I believe in laughter,” he once said. “There is no better passport through the world than a smile and a laugh.”

Parents and teachers may have a productive discussion with older students about this issue regarding Monroe’s views. On the one hand, his work seems to tout the virtues of pacifism, even non-involvement in current affairs. On the other hand, the act of publishing to a worldwide audience is a direct form of cultural engagement, as the book’s mixed reception clearly demonstrates.

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 does Ferdinand most want, and how does this desire develop his character?
2. How does the author use circumstantial and dramatic ironies to develop the story's conflict and themes?
3. How does the story's context affect your understanding of the story's themes?

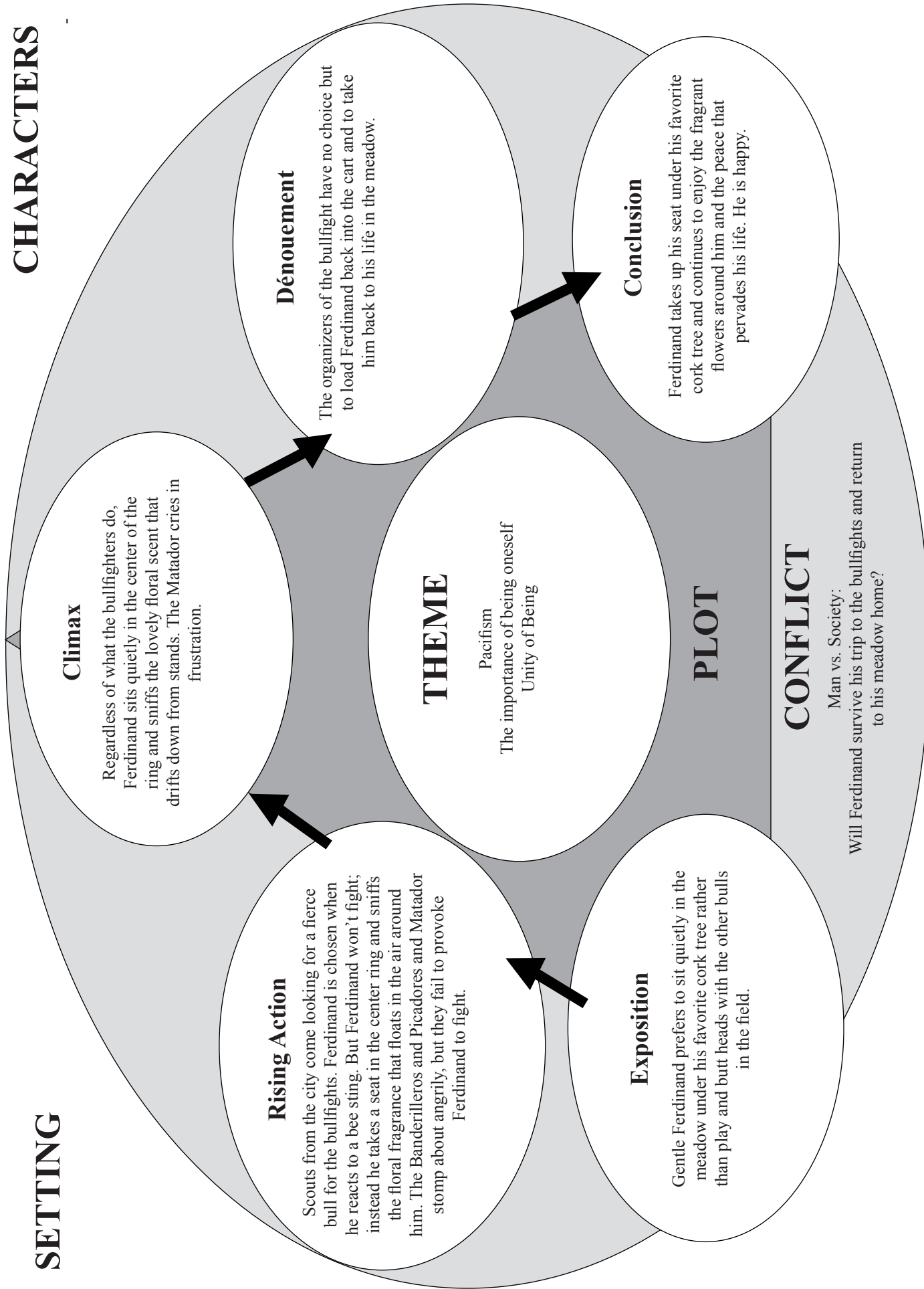
STORY CHARTS



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 Story of Ferdinand*



Story Chart: *The Story of Ferdinand*

SETTING

CHARACTERS

