

*The Biggest Bear*  
by Lynd Ward

A Teacher's Guide for Socratic Discussion  
by 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](http://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](mailto:adam@centerforlit.com)

# QUICK CARD



<b>Reference</b>	<i>The Biggest Bear</i> by Lynd Ward ISBN: 978-0395150245
<b>Plot</b>	When Johnny Orchard adopts a bear cub that becomes a community nuisance, he must rectify the situation.
<b>Setting</b>	The story takes place in Johnny's childhood in a rural, valley community among people who earn their living from the land..
<b>Characters</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Johnny Orchard - protagonist</li> <li>• Johnny's mother, father, and grandfather</li> <li>• Mr. McLean, a local farmer, hunter, and neighbor of the Orchards</li> <li>• Mr. Pennell, a local farmer, hunter, and neighbor of the Orchards</li> <li>• Mr. McCarroll, a local farmer, hunter, and neighbor of the Orchards</li> <li>• Zoo Keepers</li> <li>• The Bear</li> </ul>
<b>Conflict</b>	<p>Johnny wants to expunge the shame he feels. (Man vs. Society, Man vs. Himself)</p> <p>Johnny wants to keep the bear. (Man vs. Society, Man vs. Nature)</p> <p>Johnny wants to join the society of men. (Man vs. Himself)</p>
<b>Theme</b>	<p>Manhood as responsibility taking and self-sacrifice for the good of others.</p> <p>Appearance vs. Reality</p>
<b>Literary Devices</b>	<p>Litotes (understatement)</p> <p>Irony - circumstantial and dramatic</p>

# 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 takes place in Johnny Orchard’s childhood just as he “comes of age.” The events occur in a rural valley community, surrounded by woods and wildlife. Farming and agriculture form the primary industry in the area.

## **Among what kinds of people is the story set? (1h)**

The story takes place among rugged farmers and hunters, who make their living from the land. These men rely on their industry and bravery to make their land produce and to bring it to a good harvest, protecting it from local animals and other pests. This often necessitates shooting animals that would destroy their crops. This characterizes the bear skins Johnny sees stretched upon his neighbors’ barns as necessary sacrifices, rather than trophies to brute strength and virility.

## **When does this story happen? (2)**

The story begins in the spring and continues through summer into the fall. Bear cubs are born in March and grow rapidly to maturity. Throughout the story, readers watch as boy and bear grow together to maturity. Bear cubs weigh an average of 80 pounds, growing to an adult weight of up to 700 pounds.

## **In what time of life for the main character do the events occur? (2e)**

Physically speaking, boys grow to maturity more slowly than bears, but experiences like Johnny’s accelerate a boy’s character growth. This story takes place during a period of dramatic development in both Johnny’s and the bear’s lives. Johnny comes of age through the story’s major events.

### **NOTES:**

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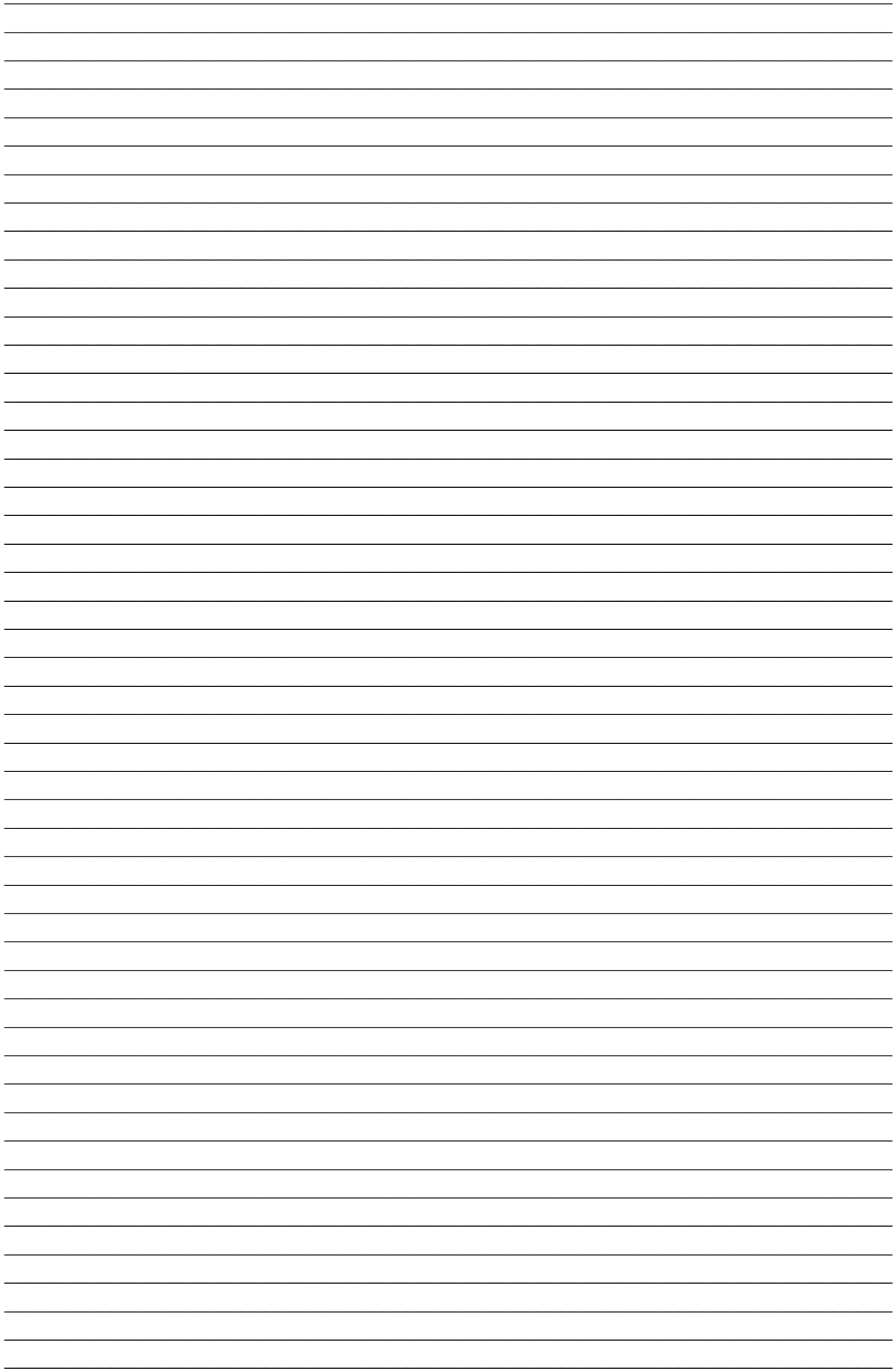
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# QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CHARACTERS



*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)**

The story follows Johnny Orchard, a young boy intent on expunging the shame he feels because his family barn lacks a bearskin tacked to its side. Johnny perceives his neighbor’s bear skins as trophies, symbolizing their virility and heroism. Johnny longs to be considered brave and to enter into the ranks of men in his community. Johnny is sure that, given the opportunity, he too would shoot a bear. “If I ever see a bear I’ll shoot him so fast he won’t know what hit him. And we’ll have the biggest bearskin in the whole valley.” In fact, Johnny goes into the woods initially in search of a bear to shoot. His behavior when he finds the cub suggests he is more an Orchard than he imagined. Perhaps the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree?

## **Who else is the story about? (4)**

Father  
Grandfather  
Mr. Pennell  
Mr. McCarroll  
Mr. McLean  
The Bear

Other characters in the story include his father and grandfather, orchardists who have little need to destroy the bears that feed on fruit in their orchards, much of which goes to seed anyway. Johnny’s grandfather, in fact, runs from the bear he encounters in his orchard, remarking, “Better a bear in the orchard than an Orchard in the bear.” This wisdom is lost on Johnny, who finds Grandfather’s actions “humiliating.” In contrast, Johnny admires the men who live in his community, farmers like Mr. Pennell, Mr. McCarroll, and Mr. McLean, who take up arms to defend their farms from bears and other pests that destroy their livelihood. Johnny longs to emulate these men; he vows to shoot a bear and to have “the biggest bearskin in the whole valley.” The bear cub Johnny encounters in the forest, however, defies his expectations. Johnny makes a pet of the cute cub, which thrives under Johnny’s attention, becoming the biggest bear in the entire valley.





# 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)**

Superficially, Johnny wants to shoot a bear and to have the biggest bear skin in the entire valley. When viewed contextually, however, this suggests a much deeper desire: Johnny wants to join the ranks of courageous men, who have defended the community from predators. The trophy bear skins, tacked up on the side of their barns, symbolizes manhood and strength to the boy. It is this desire for manhood that provokes Johnny’s vow at the story’s outset.

## **Why can’t he have it? (6)**

Johnny is ashamed of his father and grandfather, whose barn boasts no trophy. Grandfather recently ran from a bear he encountered in the orchard. Johnny is sure the Orchards lack courage, and he vows to end this humiliation by shooting a bear himself. (Man vs. Society, Man vs. Himself)

The apple, however, doesn’t fall far from the tree (Orchard?). When Johnny encounters a bear cub in the forest, instead of shooting him, he offers him some maple candy and takes him home as a pet. (Man vs. Himself)

Johnny’s biggest problem lies in his misperception of what the bear skin trophies on his neighbors’ barns really signify. Johnny justly sees in them courage, but he misidentifies the nature and source of that courage. (Man vs. Himself)

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

When Johnny adopts the bear, he brings a nuisance into the community. As the bear grows, he begins to consume great volumes of food, looting the family cupboard and the neighbors’ stores. (Man vs. Nature)

The neighbors forebear to kill the nuisance bear because of compassion for Johnny. Their forbearance foreshadows the true nature of manhood - self-sacrifice for the good of others. (Man vs. Society; Man vs. Self)

The neighbors eventually visit father with their dilemma and ask him to do something. (Man vs. Society)

Johnny’s father speaks to Johnny about the problem. He has wanted to protect Johnny from the realities of manhood, but he finds he must sacrifice his own desire for the good of the larger

community. He tells Johnny what must be done. (Man vs. Himself; Man vs. Society)

Johnny says he understands and begins to take the bear out into the wilderness. By giving up the bear to his own hurt, he will protect both the bear and his neighbors. (Man vs. Nature, Man vs. Himself)

When the bear continues to return home, Johnny's father explains that something must be done. "Johnny says he will do it." Johnny realizes that he must shoot the bear to protect the community. This kind of bravery is much different than the kind Johnny initially imagined. (Man vs. Nature, Man vs. Himself)

**How is the main problem solved? Does the protagonist achieve his object? (9a)**

Johnny comes to true maturity when he determines to subvert his own desire to keep and protect his bear pet in order to protect the interests of his family and neighbors. This will be an act of true bravery and responsibility taking. It will require great duty and sacrifice on Johnny's part. When Johnny sets his face toward the forest, he takes upon himself the responsibility of a man; Johnny comes of age.

**How does the story end? (10)**

Before Johnny can shoot the bear, however, the animal scents sugar and bolts, trailing Johnny by the leash. Together, they find themselves caught in a large trap, set by zookeepers, searching for a specimen for their bear exhibit. This *deus ex machina* rescues Johnny from killing his bear. Instead, the zookeepers take Johnny's bear to the city, where he delights crowds with his size and passivity. Johnny visits him regularly, keeping up his friendship with the bear and spoiling him with the maple sugar candy he loves.

**What does the protagonist learn? (11)**

This ending allows Johnny to come to a new understanding of manhood while still retaining his innocence. Whereas Johnny initially understands courage as the subjugation of nature for selfish gain, he comes to see bravery as an act of duty and self-sacrifice for the good of the community. Johnny learns to equate manhood with responsibility taking. By the story's end, Johnny better understands manhood and has taken great steps in his development toward maturity yet remains a child.

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# 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)**

The story asks readers to consider the true nature of manhood and courage. Through the events of the story, Johnny discovers that manhood is not chest beating machismo but responsibility taking. Initially, Johnny perceives the bear skins on his neighbors’ barns to be evidence of their masculinity and bravery. While he is right to see in these trophies bravery, he misidentifies the nature of that bravery.

When Johnny’s pet bear threatens to destroy the community, Johnny realizes that he must subjugate his desire to keep his pet for the greater good of his family and neighbors. He learns the extent of this responsibility to his community when his best efforts to relocate the bear fail and he is faced with the prospect of shooting his pet. The story’s climactic moment occurs when Johnny wanders deep into the forest with his gun and the bear, delaying what seems an inevitable and violent goodbye. This moment suggests the story’s turning point and exposes its major theme. Here Johnny contemplates the nature of true manhood: responsibility taking for the good of others and the subjugation of childish desires for the good of others.

The story suggests that manhood has less to do with virility and violence than with placing the needs of others above the self in an act of self-sacrifice and duty. Manhood, the story suggests, is responsibility taking. This requires courage, but not the kind of courage Johnny originally perceived in his neighbors’ bear skin trophies. Ward’s story suggests that it takes great bravery to sacrifice personal desires so that others can thrive.

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# 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 common words and phrases in uncommon ways? (15)**

*Understatement (Litotes) — Does the author intentionally represent things in language that is less strong than the situation or thing would necessarily warrant for purely rhetorical effect? (15a)*

Several times in the text, the author represents Johnny’s circumstances through the use of understatement. For example, when Johnny meets the a bear cub in the forest, Ward writes, “It was a bear alright.” This device contrasts what Johnny expected with what he found. Johnny expected to find a ferocious bear; instead he discovers a cute and cuddly bear cub. This discrepancy creates circumstantial irony. Again when grandfather receives Johnny’s pet with the words, “Humph, I suppose you know what a bear likes to eat,” Ward foreshadows future story events through understatement. As Ward lists the individual things the bear consumes from the stores and supplies of Johnny’s family and neighbors, the tension in the plot grows. Each listed item represents an extension of this ironic understatement. This is amplified with the statement, “There was hardly anything he didn’t like, and Johnny’s mother got pretty upset when he started looking for things on the kitchen shelves.” The adverbial qualifier “pretty,” repeated in the next several pages of the story, downplays the degree of frustration Johnny’s mother and the neighbors felt in turn as the bear destroyed their provisions. The adverbial qualifier “pretty,” which modifies Ward’s description of the bear’s rate and size of growth, functions similarly. Perhaps the greatest use of understatement occurs at the story’s climactic moment, when Johnny and his father talk the issue over to determine that “there was only one thing to do. Johnny said he would do it.” The fact that the text never literally spells out what Johnny will have to do augments the emotional drama of Johnny’s duty. Finally, Ward utilizes understatement once again in the story’s surprising conclusion, when the men coming to check the trap discover Johnny inside with the bear. “They were a little surprised to see Johnny in there.” Once again, Ward utilizes understatement in this moment to augment circumstantial irony.

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

The author creates a rural setting through place names like Baldwin’s hill, Watson’s hill, the blueberry bluff, and Gull’s Island. Likewise, the use of the neighbors’ names creates a neighborhood of Johnny’s home. Naming the various landmarks — the woods, the cornfields, the orchard, and the valley — likewise suggests a rural, agrarian community and conjures up images in the mind of the reader which Ward enhances with his sepia-toned illustrations.

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

*Circumstantial Irony:* The story is predicated on circumstantial ironies that the author develops throughout the story. The unexpected dominates the story's pages. First, Johnny is an Orchard, implying that the apple doesn't fall far from the proverbial tree! Like his grandfather and father, Johnny is of a gentler and more nurturing breed than his neighbors. Johnny goes into the woods to seek a bear, but instead finds a cub. This too is a circumstantial irony. Rather than killing the cub, Johnny feeds it, extending the circumstantial irony (Johnny does the opposite of what he had declared he would do) and demonstrating his "Orchard" nature. Circumstantial irony provides a gentle solution for the story as well, with the men from the zoo experiencing surprise when they discover Johnny in the cage with the big bear. Rather than destroying the bear, these men take the bear to the city where others like Johnny can enjoy him.

*Verbal irony:* When Johnny's grandfather encounters a bear among his apples, he quips, "Better a bear in the orchard than an Orchard in the bear." This is a pun, or play on words.

*Dramatic Irony:* Parent readers will feel the irony of moments like Johnny's declaration of his intent to shoot the biggest bear, chuckling gently when he encounters the cub in the woods. They see what's coming. The boy will make a pet of the bear. They feel the tension of the moment before it is worked out because they know that cubs grow. They know more than Johnny of what is to come. This dramatic irony increases the humor and the pathos of the story. Readers smile at the boy's inexperience and naivete and feel the pain of the responsibility that will certainly come upon him. This dramatic irony begins on the story's first page when readers realize that Johnny takes the bear skins for manhood, but misses the responsibility and hardship these symbolize.

*Foreshadowing:* When Johnny's grandfather quips, "Humph, I suppose you know what a bear likes to eat[,]" readers see what's coming. Sure enough, when Johnny's bear begins to ransack the neighbors' stores, readers anticipate the responsibility that Johnny will be called upon to bear.

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# 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)**

Author and illustrator Lynd Ward (1905-1985) is perhaps best known for his pioneering work in the field of graphic novels and his award winning work in the field of children’s literature and illustrations. His work garnered many awards, including a Caldecott Medal, two Newbery Medals, and multiple runner-up awards. Today, a prestigious prize for graphic novels bears his name: The Lynd Ward Graphic Novel Prize. Among Ward’s most celebrated children’s stories is *The Biggest Bear*, which received the Caldecott Medal in 1953. In addition to three original children’s stories, Ward illustrated over 100 works of children’s literature, including the Newbery Medal winning *Johnny Tremain*, by Esther Forbes (1943).

Ward illustrated stories for adults as well. The most celebrated of these is a series of six wordless books done in woodcuts, a medium he learned in his post-graduate studies at Germany’s National Academy of Graphic Arts and Bookmaking, where he studied for a year after earning his BA in fine arts from Columbia Teachers College. In Germany, Ward studied under mentors Alois Kolb, Georg Alexander Mathey, and Theodore Mueller, the last of whose influence is readily observable in Ward’s signature style.

The son of a Methodist preacher and activist, Ward’s work often depicted man’s struggle against sin and corruption in a fallen world. In addition to the medium of wood engraving, Ward worked in watercolor, oil, brush and ink, and lithography. He employed casein, a milk based paint that results in sepia tones, for his illustrations for *The Biggest Bear*, which remains his most beloved work.

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# 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 Johnny Orchard most want in the story and why can't he have it?
2. What do the bear skins that adorn the neighbors' barns mean to Johnny? That is, what does Johnny understand these skins to symbolize?
3. The story traces Johnny Orchard's journey to maturity. What, according to the story, does it mean to be a man?
4. How does Ward's use of irony develop the story's conflict?
5. How does Ward's use of *litotes* (understatement) add to the story arc?

# Story Chart: *The Biggest Bear*

**CHARACTERS**

**SETTING**

## Climax

Johnny understands the situation and what it entails and agrees to fix the problem; he sets out into the woods with his gun and the bear.

## Rising Action

Johnny ventures into the woods to find a bear and encounters a cub. He feeds it and takes it home as a pet. The cub grows and becomes a nuisance to his family and the neighbors. Johnny tries to release it into the wild, but the bear returns again and again. The neighbors appeal to Johnny's father, who explains the situation to Johnny.

## THEME

Johnny learns that manhood means responsibility taking - subduing personal desires for the good of others.

## Exposition

Little Johnny is humiliated that his family's barn alone is bereft of a bear skin. He vows to shoot the first bear he sees.

## PLOT

Will Johnny overcome his family's shame and shoot the biggest bear in the whole valley? (Man vs. Self)  
Will Johnny learn the meaning of manhood and join the ranks of men? (Man vs. Self)

## CONFLICT

## Dénouement

Before Johnny can load the gun, the bear scents maple sugar and bolts, taking Johnny with him. Together they end up in a trap set by zookeepers from the city.

## Conclusion

Once they've overcome their astonishment, the men agree to keep the bear at the zoo, where Johnny can visit his friend.

# Story Chart: *The Biggest Bear*

**SETTING**

**CHARACTERS**

