



George Selden's
The Cricket in Times Square

Questions for Socratic Discussion
by Missy Andrews



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THE CRICKET IN TIMES SQUARE



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QUICK CARD



<i>Reference</i>	<i>The Cricket in Times Square</i> by George Selden ISBN-10: 0965605116 ISBN-13: 978-0440415633
<i>Plot</i>	Chester Cricket emerges from a picnic basket to find himself not in familiar fields, but in the frightening and foreign tunnels of the New York City subway station. He makes new friends and, although he longs for home and freedom, remains in the city to help them.
<i>Setting</i>	A New York City subway station newspaper stand.
<i>Characters</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Chester Cricket, the protagonist• Mario Bellini, Chester's special friend and human protector• Mama and Papa Bellini, Mario's parents and proprietors of the newspaper stand.• Harry Cat and Tucker Mouse – residents of the station• Mr. Smedley, a musician who discovers Chester's musical talent• Sai Fong, a businessman in Chinatown who teaches Mario Bellini about crickets
<i>Conflict</i>	Man vs. Nature Man vs. Himself Man vs. Fate
<i>Theme</i>	Friendship is laying down your life for another. The call of freedom will not be denied
<i>Literary Devices</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Onomatopoeia• Personification/ Anthropomorphism• Allusion• Foreshadowing

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: SETTING



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

The story takes place in New York, New York.

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)

New York is a bustling metropolis, as alive with activity by night as it is by day. The streets are never vacant, the stores rarely closed, as millions of city dwellers hustle to their myriad destinations. In addition, the subway system lies underground. Consequently, it is dark, dingy and metropolitan. It's quite noisy when the trains run, then lonely when the people and trains leave. No sun or breeze freshens the place.

Does the story take in any other surroundings?

Mario takes his cricket on a couple of brief forays into China Town.

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

Answers will vary. As a follow up question, ask; "Is this place scary to you, as it was to Chester Cricket? Why or why not?"

Among what kinds of people is the story set? What is their economic condition? How do they live? Are they hopeful? Downtrodden and depressed? Why? (1h)

Mario and his family operate a newsstand in the subway station below Times Square. Unfortunately, his father stocks his stand with reading materials customers don't want. He never sells much.

"Too bad you couldn't have found more successful friends," said Harry Cat. "I fear for the future of this newsstand." "It's true," echoed Tucker sadly. "They're going broke fast...'" (Chapter 4, pg. 31)

The Bellini family lives in poverty and want, and no one feels it more acutely than Mama Bellini.

In what season does the story take place? (2c)

It must be late spring or early summer when the story begins, as Chester inadvertently arrives in the Times Square Subway Station via a picnic basket.

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? (2e)

The story takes place in Mario's childhood, and in Chester Cricket's young adulthood. Chester's maturity and selflessness in the face of such circumstances as the destroyed two dollar bill, the fire in the stand, and finally his difficult decision to return to the countryside indicate his age is greater than that of Mario.

NOTES:

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CHARACTERS



Who is the story about? (3)

The following questions are answered for Chester Cricket, although the same set of questions could be asked about Mario or indeed any of the characters in the story.

Is the protagonist a man or an animal? (3a)

The main character of the story is the title character, Chester Cricket.

How old is the protagonist? (3b.)

His age is undisclosed, but his thoughts and concern for others indicate maturity.

Is the protagonist male or female? (3c)

Chester is a male cricket.

What does the protagonist look like? (3d)

Chester is slight of build, a rather small cricket. He is shiny black and of delicate proportions.

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

Chester Cricket is kind, gentle, and soft-spoken.

He is considerate (Ch. 10, p. 84) and loving (Ch. 15, p. 142; Ch. 15, p. 144).

An upright, noble cricket, he behaves with honesty and obedience (Ch. 8, p. 62; Ch. 11 p. 97; Ch. 8, p. 67).

Chester is both thoughtful (Ch. 14, p. 136; Ch. 13, p. 123) and loyal (Ch.11 and Ch 8).

Musically inclined (Ch.3, p. 20; Ch.10, p.90; Ch.12, p. 110; Ch. 13-14, p. 118-140), Chester's talent gains him the awe and recognition of all New York (Ch. 12-13).

Of what nationality is the protagonist? Does he live in his native land, or somewhere else? (3g)

Chester, taken accidentally from his natural habitat in the Connecticut countryside, finds himself lost and overwhelmed by the bustling city of New York. He lives in the Bellini's newsstand in a subway station, where he sleeps in a matchbox bed fashioned for him by his new friend and owner, Mario.

The fact that Chester is far from home is one of the basic sources of conflict in the story, and the question of his getting back home drives the story forward from its beginning.

What do other characters in the story think or say about the protagonist? (3k)

Mama Bellini – “Bugs carry germs”(Ch. 2, p. 16); “He’s a jinx. He goes” (Ch. 11, p. 100).

Mario – “It’s a special kind of bug. Crickets are good luck” (Ch. 2, p. 13); “You can tell the temperature with crickets too, ... You count the number of chirps in a minute, divide by 4 and add 40. They’re very intelligent”(Ch. 2, p. 15).

Harry Cat – “This cricket has talent” (Ch. 4, p. 28).

Counterman – “That’s a fine cricket” (Ch. 5, p. 36).

Mr. Smedley – “How delightful! What an enchanting little creature” (Ch. 5, p. 39); “I could add nothing to the genius of this little black Orpheus” (Ch. 5, p. 40); “Perhaps someday your cricket will play as well. I prophesy great things for a creature of such ability...”(Ch. 5, p. 40).

Sai Fong – Tells legends of crickets in China (Chapter 6, pg. 48); “ ... This cricket so remarkable...”(Ch. 6, p. 50).

Tucker Mouse – “...none too good for such talent!” (Ch. 15, p. 146).

Is the character educated? To what degree? How do you know? (3i)

Chester’s education begins in the news shack, listening to the radio. His musical ability is innate.

Is there a single character that opposes the protagonist in the story? (4a)

No single character opposes Chester Cricket intentionally. Antagonists can only be identified in particular situations. For example:

1. The couple out picnicking in Connecticut unwittingly cart him to a NY subway station and deprive him of freedom.

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CONFLICT AND PLOT



What does the protagonist want? (5)

Note: the protagonist of a story is the main character, whose struggles form the basis of the story's action. In this case, the protagonist is Chester Cricket.

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

- help the Bellini family and be a friend to Mario.
- get free again to play what and when he will in his natural environment without being eyed and imprisoned.

Does he strive to overcome a physical obstacle outside of himself? (5c)

Chester must overcome distance to reach his home in Connecticut once more.

He must overcome circumstantial disasters.

Finally, he strives with the Bellinis to overcome their poverty.

Is the conflict also an internal conflict, taking place in the protagonist's mind and emotions? (5e)

In addition to the physical conflicts mentioned above, Chester also faces an internal struggle: he must eventually choose between staying with the family and friends he has come to love, or returning to the countryside.

Do his objectives or goals change throughout the story? How? Why? (5f)

While at the outset of the story Chester considers his predicament an adventure and gives himself enthusiastically to his new friends, by the end of the story, his need to live in his proper habitat proves the stronger impulse. He longs to go home.

Why can't the protagonist have what he wants? Do physical or geographical impediments stand in his way? (6a)

Geographical distance separates him from home.

Circumstances prevent him from embracing freedom.

His own desire to help Mario and his family keep Chester from seeking freedom.

Is the conflict a man v. nature struggle? (6h)

The conflict is at some basic level a man vs. nature struggle. As much as Chester loves Mario, his natural instincts as a cricket push him toward the freedom of the countryside.

Is the conflict a man v. himself struggle? (6k)

Chester struggles mightily within himself. He is torn between two goods: his love for the Bellinis and his love for home. He doesn't wish to desert the boy who saved him, though he longs for home. He wants desperately to do the right thing, to communicate to Mario his gratitude and love, and to be unselfish.

What other problems are there in the story? Are there other characters in the story, for instance, who don't understand the protagonist's motives and ambitions? (7d)

Tucker Mouse doesn't understand what makes Chester tick (or chirp, as the case may be...). He wants Chester to perform and make money for all of them. He wants the security of wealth. Chester, on the other hand, wants the security of his natural habitat, of peace and quiet and beauty.

Neither Tucker Mouse nor Harry Cat feels the same sense of responsibility that Chester does during the two dollar incident or the newsstand fire. They do not feel compelled to stay and take the rap.

What major events form the Rising Action of the story? What happens as a result of the conflict? (8a)

Mario meets Chester, and Chester meets Harry Cat and Tucker Mouse as a result of the "Picnic Caper." This initial conflict brings the main characters of the story together.

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

The interactions of the animals tend to worsen the Bellini's financial predicament (i.e. the \$2 incident and the fire accident).

What external impulses heighten the conflict – weather, war, summer break, separation, sickness, etc? (8d)

The coming of September heightens the conflict within Chester's heart as it increases his longing for home (Ch. 14, p. 132 "...feeling Septemberish...").

How is the main problem solved? Does the protagonist get what he's after? (9a)

Chester gets what he wants on all counts.

How are the protagonist’s obstacles finally overcome? (9b)

The Bellini’s newsstand prospers and becomes a New York City landmark because of its famous cricket and his concerts. Chester returns to Connecticut after being released by Mario’s words.

Does the protagonist solve his own dilemma? (9e)

Chester is helped home by Harry Cat, who leads him through the maze of the city and onto the proper train.

Do you believe the characters’ responses to the climax of the story, or are they anti-climactic in some regard? (10c)

Mario understands Chester’s leaving and is glad for him. Harry Cat and Tucker Mouse yield to their friend’s wishes, help him, miss him, and plan to visit him. They pledge to look after the Bellinis.

How does the solution of the conflict affect each individual character? (10d)

Tucker Mouse is ennobled by his association with Chester. He learns to give.

The Bellinis’ economic circumstances are changed for the better.

New York itself has been touched by the small Orpheus and his song.

Mario learns to consider the needs of others as more important than his own; that is, he has learned to love.

Does the resolution offer any particular perspective or understanding of the story’s themes? (10f)

Chester’s decision to go back to the country stresses the importance of freedom to an individual’s identity. Love was not enough for Chester. He needed also to be free.

NOTES:

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: THEME



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

In Chapter 14, Chester explains his rationale for choosing freedom.

In Chapter 13, p. 124, Chester explains his discomfort with his circumstances.

What is the main idea of the story? Does the story seem to deal with a universal theme of some kind? (13a)

Two important themes drive this story forward -- Friendship and Freedom.

Friendship: What does it mean to be a friend? The relationships between characters in this story may be examined by asking how each of them demonstrates friendship to the others.

Freedom: What defines freedom? Why is it good, and what is worth sacrificing for it?

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

This story suggests a good life includes both self-sacrifice for loved ones, honorable actions in the face of difficulty, and freedom from slavery and cages.

NOTES:

QUESTIONS ABOUT STYLE



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

Onomatopoeia (14a)

Cricket – Clicket (p. 45)

Crik, crik, crik (p. 30)

Personification/Anthropomorphism (16 e-g)

Crickets, cats, and mice all become human-like in action and feelings.

Does the author use allusions (references to well-known works of art, ideas, or historical events)? (17f-g)

Mr. Smedley alludes to the mythical figure, Orpheus, who was known for his divine musical ability that could charm even the stones.

Both chapter 14 and Chester’s final concert allude to musical pieces such as Mozart’s Night Music and several Italian operas. Earlier chapters allude to some pop music from the period in which the book was published.

Does the author use foreshadowing (a technique whereby coming events in the story are hinted at or symbolized before they happen)? (17a-c)

When Mr. Smedley alludes to the mythical Orpheus, the author hints at Chester’s forthcoming success. This is manifested when Chester gives his final concert and all New York pauses to listen.

Sai Fong’s gift of a fortune cookie and its message also point at coming developments in the text.

The brown leaf, a symbol of Fall in Connecticut, foreshadows the developing conflict in Chester’s mind and heart.

NOTES:

QUESTIONS ABOUT CONTEXT



Who is the author? (18)

George Selden

Where did he live? (19a-c)

The author resided in New York City at his death.

When did he live? (20a-d)

The author died in 1989.

What did he believe? (21)

This author was an accomplished scholar. He received his BA from Yale and spent three summers at Columbia University. Additionally, he spent a year in Rome on a Fulbright scholarship. Yet he gave himself to writing charming children’s stories about talking animals. He was quoted as having said, “However fantastic the adventures may be, the human truth that the animal characters embody must be clear, real, and accurate.” He believed in and championed friendship, and the abiding effects of nature and beauty on a consumer culture.

NOTES:

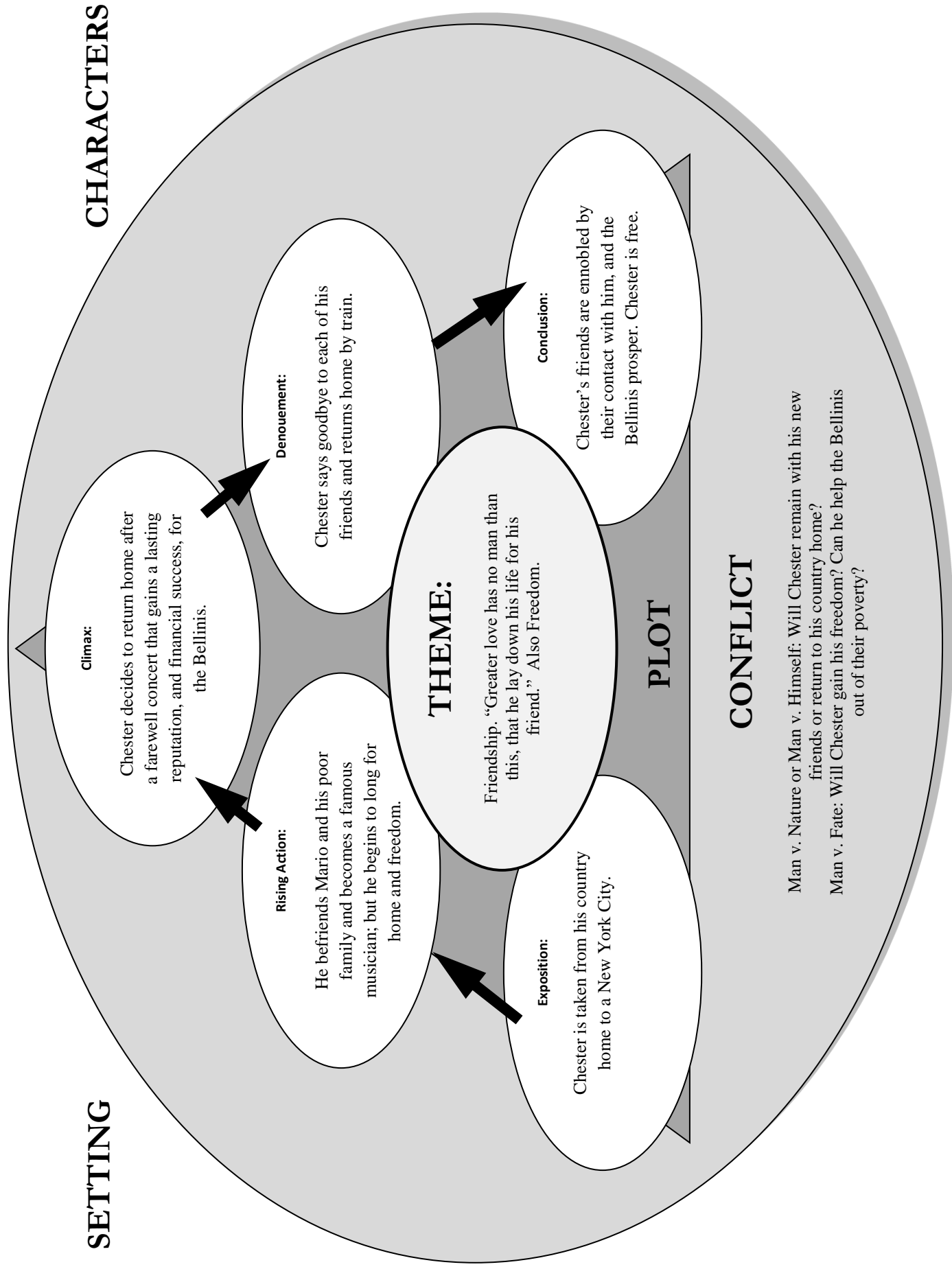
STORY CHARTS



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.

The Cricket in Times Square by George Selden: Story Chart



SETTING

CHARACTERS

PLOT

CONFLICT

Climax:

Chester decides to return home after a farewell concert that gains a lasting reputation, and financial success, for the Bellinis.

Rising Action:

He befriends Mario and his poor family and becomes a famous musician; but he begins to long for home and freedom.

Denouement:

Chester says goodbye to each of his friends and returns home by train.

THEME:

Friendship. "Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friend." Also Freedom.

Exposition:

Chester is taken from his country home to a New York City.

Conclusion:

Chester's friends are ennobled by their contact with him, and the Bellinis prosper. Chester is free.

Man v. Nature or Man v. Himself: Will Chester remain with his new friends or return to his country home?

Man v. Fate: Will Chester gain his freedom? Can he help the Bellinis out of their poverty?

The Cricket in Times Square by George Selden: Blank Story Chart

