



William Steig's
Brave Irene

Questions for Socratic Discussion
by Missy Andrews



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BRAVE IRENE



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QUICK CARD



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| <i>Reference</i> | <i>Brave Irene</i> by William Steig ISBN-10: 0374409277 ISBN-13: 978-0374409272 |
| <i>Plot</i> | While her seamstress mother lies ill in bed, little Irene braves a snowstorm to deliver the duchess's finished ball gown in time for the evening's festivities. |
| <i>Setting</i> | A snowy, windy winter day in the country. A day in the childhood of Irene Bobbin. |
| <i>Characters</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Irene – a precocious child whose fierce determination and love for her mother drive her to daring deeds of accomplishment;• Mrs. Bobbin – a sick seamstress with a remarkable daughter;• The Duchess – a courtly lady who has hired Mrs. Bobbin to create a beautiful ball gown for a party;• The Doctor and the servants;• The Wind – the antagonist in the story, the personified voice of this element screams, tormenting and toying with Irene, impeding her progress. |
| <i>Conflict</i> | Man vs. Nature: From the ailment that initially provokes Irene to embark on her errand, to the windy, snowy, dark, and cold elements she battles on the way, the main character, Irene, jousts with nature. |
| <i>Theme</i> | Diligence and courage have their rewards. "Whatsoever you do, do it with all your heart" (Col. 3:23). |
| <i>Literary Devices</i> | Alliteration Imagery Simile Personification |

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: SETTING



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) What is the weather like in the story? (1e) Among what kinds of people is the story set? What is their economic class? How do they live? Are they hopeful? Downtrodden? Depressed? Why? (1h)

The story is set in the countryside of a kingdom ruled by a monarch. The mood of the story is turbulent and troubled, but not all dark because the main character's attitude is full of determined courage. Although beset by temporary trouble, Irene never wavers in her decisive confidence.

On what day does the story happen? What time of day? (2a)

The story happens on the day the great ball is to be held at the palace.

How long a period of time does the story cover? A few minutes? A single day? A whole lifetime? (2b)

It takes place over the course of a 24-hour period.

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

The events take place in the dead of winter and during a particularly bad blizzard.

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? Does setting the story in this particular time of the characters' lives make the story better? (2e)

The circumstances are intensified by the main character's youth. Perhaps an adult is a match for nature's worst elements, but a young girl is not.

In what intellectual period is the story set? What ideas were prevalent during the period of the story? Does the author deal with these ideas through his characters? Do the characters respond to social rules and customs that are the result of these ideas? (2f)

Since this story is set in a monarchy, the loyalty of subjects to royalty is assumed.

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CHARACTERS



Who is the story about? (3)

The story's main character is Irene Bobbin.

How old is the protagonist? (3b)

She is perhaps 10-12 years old, a "small person."

Is the character kind, gentle, stern, emotional, harsh, logical, rational, and 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)

Irene is driven to face the blizzard because of her love and concern for her mother. Her actions prove her a loyal, devoted, responsible, and honest character. While daunted by fear and failure, she perseveres to complete her errand, opposing the wind and elements. She proves herself daring, determined, and trustworthy.

What does the character do for a living? Is she a professional, or a blue-collar worker? Is she wealthy or impoverished? (3h)

Irene is a seamstress's daughter.

What do other characters think or say about her? (3k)

Other characters call her brave and loving.

Is the character a member of any particular religious or social group? If so, what do you know about this group? What motivates this group? What do its members feel to be important? (3l)

The character is a part of a family, and therefore, is motivated by love and a desire for the mutual good of her mother and herself. She considers keeping her word and caring for her mother to be most important. In addition, Irene is a royal subject. As such, she must serve the duchess.

What does the protagonist think is the most important thing in life? How do you know this? Does the protagonist say this out loud, or do her thoughts and actions give her away? (3m)

In this story, Irene thinks that doing what she has promised her mother is the most important thing in life. She believes that delivering the dress to the duchess is supremely important since it will preserve her mother's reputation.

Do the protagonist'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)

Initially, this means delivering the ball gown to the duchess before the ball. Once the gown is lost, she means to report the situation to the duchess in person rather than by her absence.

Is the protagonist 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)

Irene is certainly a sympathetic character. The reader pities her setbacks and cheers her courage and victory.

Who else is the story about? (4)

Other characters include Mrs. Bobbin, the duchess, the doctor, the servants, and the Wind.

Is there a single character (or a group of characters) that opposes the protagonist in the story? (4a)

Of all of these other characters, the Wind is most important as it opposes Irene in her objectives. In this way the Wind, personified, becomes the antagonist. While all of Nature opposes Irene, it is the Wind that gives voice to this antagonism.

In what way is he antagonistic? What goal of the protagonist is he opposed to? (4b)

The Wind opposes Irene's desire to deliver the gown to the Duchess on foot.

What actions does he take to oppose the protagonist? (4c)

The Wind torments and toys with Irene, first heckling her and impeding her progress, then wresting the cherished gown from her grasp.

How does the author's description of the character inform you of his antagonism? Does he have any physical attributes or personality traits that mark him as antagonistic? (4e)

The author personifies the Wind, giving him a voice that screams at Irene, "Go HOOME!" The Wind drives Irene rudely. The Wind blocks her way. It threatens Irene, "Go home, or else." It wrestles her for her package. Finally, it steals the package. Steig describes the Wind as "ill-tempered" and compares it to a "wild animal." Although the Wind races Irene to the finish, she bests it in the end, and the Wind admits defeat with a graceful flourish.

Why does he oppose the protagonist? Does he merely belong to a different social group? Does he see the world in slightly different ways? Or is he an evil villain, like Shakespeare’s Iago? (4f)

Nature opposes Irene because of its “ill-temper.” It’s not personal.

Is the antagonist truly evil, by definition, or is he merely antagonistic to the protagonist by virtue of his vocation or duty? (4m)

The Wind behaves in a way consistent with his nature. He is, in a sense, doing his job, blowing in a blizzard. Likewise, he simultaneously functions as a spur to Irene’s nature, bringing out her better character qualities by necessity.

NOTES:

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CONFLICT AND PLOT



What does the protagonist want? (5)

Irene wants to deliver her mother's newly finished gown to the duchess before the ball so that her mother can rest in both body and mind.

Does he attempt to overcome something – a physical impediment, or an emotional handicap? (5b)

To do so, Irene must overcome the elements: wind, cold, snow, distance, darkness, fear, and her own failure.

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)

Although the conflict begins as an external man vs. nature conflict, as the story progresses, the battle becomes more personal and more intense. Irene must master not only the elements, but also herself to arrive at her destination.

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

Irene must overcome physical and geographical impediments to reach her objective. In particular, she must best the wind, snowdrifts, cold, darkness, and a sprained ankle.

Does the protagonist lack strength, mental acumen or some other necessary ability? (6b)

Irene's lack of physical strength poses an obstacle.

Is the protagonist racing against time? (6e)

Time runs short, as the dress must be delivered before the ball begins.

What kind of conflict is represented in the story? (6g-k)

All these things represent a man vs. nature conflict. There is also a man vs. self conflict here, as Irene must resist discouragement at her setbacks and press on in spite of them.

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

Because of the blizzard, Irene is unable to return home after delivering the dress. She must spend the night at the palace with no means of sending word to her mother. When Mrs. Bobbin wakes in the morning to mountains of snow and no Irene, she is dismayed.

What happens in the story? (8)

- As a result of Mrs. Bobbin's illness, Irene sets out with the dress.
- As a result of the unwieldy package, the Wind is able to wrest it from her.
- As a result of the Wind's impediments and thievery, Irene must go empty-handed to the palace.
- As a result of the deep snow and extreme cold, Irene twists her ankle.
- As a result of the darkness, Irene fears both being alone and missing the ball.
- As a result of her fall into the drift, she is enraged and finds strength to outwit and best her opponent the Wind.

How is the main problem solved? (9)

By determined perseverance, courage, and character, Irene solves her problem. She will not be denied!

How are the protagonist's obstacles finally overcome? (9b) Is the situation pleasantly resolved, or is it resolved in a terrible way? (9c)

When she races the Wind on the box-turned-sled and finds the dress clinging to a tree trunk, Irene is finally victorious.

What events form the highest point or climax of the story's tension? Are they circumstantial events, or emotional ones? Is the climax a spiritual or physical one? (9d)

Irene's final fall into the snow bank marks the climax of the story. She is swallowed up by the weather, her opponent. It can't get worse. However, thoughts of her mother's love spur her forward to the finish line, just as these same thoughts caused her to embark on her journey initially. This is both a physical and an emotional victory.

How does the story end? (10)

Irene's struggle has a happy ending. She accomplishes all she set out to do. The duchess is pleased by the dress, startled to receive it in such bad weather, and impressed by Irene's strength of character. Irene's mother is relieved that all ends well. Irene is satisfied with her accomplishment.

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: THEME



What does the protagonist learn? (11) Is she ennobled in some way? (11c)

The protagonist is ennobled. Irene chooses to go on despite her setbacks and learns to overcome adversity through determination and perseverance.

She realizes her love for her mother: “And never see her mother’s face again? Her good mother who smelled like fresh-baked bread?”

What do the other characters learn? (12)

The duchess and her retinue are challenged by Irene’s stance towards difficulties. They are impressed by her unflinching willingness to face the elements to honor her family’s word.

What is the main idea of the story? (13)

The story’s themes include the value of perseverance, fortitude, endurance, courage, determination, and integrity.

NOTES:

QUESTIONS ABOUT STYLE



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

Alliteration (14e)

wind whirled

flakes were falling

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

Imagery

“The ball gown flounced out and went waltzing through the powdered air with tissue paper attendants.” (Metaphor in which the ball gown is compared to the dancing duchess and the tissue paper is compared with her attendants.)

Similes (16d)

“The wind was howling like a wild animal.”

“The box shot forward, like a sled.”

“The duchess in her new gown was like a bright star in the sky.”

Personification (16e) –

Personification is a literary device by which an author lends human characteristics or attributes to an inanimate object or idea. Using this device, authors make tea kettles sing, birds praise their Creator, and flowers dance. Of course, neither kettles, birds, nor flowers participate in the rational life that yields such willful action. However, once the comparison is drawn, the objects become alive and leap off the page in three-dimensional brilliance.

Man against Nature is a common literary theme. Jack London and other Naturalists made it the subject of the bulk of their work. But the unspoken, malevolent force of nature in London's stories takes on new voice and character when imbued by author William Steig with human attributes and personality.

Steig's Wind is a devilish sort of brute. Seeing a small, yet determined girl on a seemingly impossible errand, it endeavors to deter her by presenting obstacle after obstacle. Unruly and unfeeling, the prankster Wind plays a game of tug-of-war for the contents of Irene's parcel. It roughs her up, pushing and pulling at her. Snatching at the

precious package, it rips it forcefully from her hands. Then proudly, like a bad winner, the Wind parades the contents of the box on the air before her, seemingly trying its ill-gotten gain on for size before whisking it out of sight, and with it her hopes.

Even so, the protagonist's mettle is not broken, but rather forged by the conflict she encounters. Though the Wind continues to torment the girl, heckling her with its jeers and harassing her with its ferocity, Irene's dauntless character drives her to deliver a message in the stead of the lost package. The Wind roars at her, while she trudges boldly ahead in defiance of its attempts to terrorize her: "Go hooooome. Irene, go hoooooooooome!" Still she struggles on through the fierce snowdrifts the Wind lays in her path in the face of great cold, darkness, and loneliness.

Consequently, Irene's fiercely loyal and bold nature is revealed by the antics of the antagonistic Wind. When the prankster returns the stolen article in the final pages of the narrative, his gentler side is revealed. This is no malicious, malevolent entity, but a playful, mischievous adversary. Having found its opponent worthy, it rewards her with the stolen object she cherished as a sort of truce. In effect, the Wind breathes, "All right, Irene. I give. You're a good sport." Having had its fun, the Wind retreats into a calm stillness punctuated by Irene's peaceful sleep and the white blanket of snow across which she is carried home.

In this manner, author William Steig uses personification to develop a man against nature conflict that drives his story forward to a feverish climax before resolving in a gentle breeze of lingering confidence, highlighting the character development of his protagonist.

NOTES:

QUESTIONS ABOUT CONTEXT



Who is the author? (18)

William Steig is the well-known author and illustrator of 25 acclaimed children's classics including *Brave Irene*, *Amos and Boris*, and *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble*. However, few are aware that his success in the field of children's books represents only his second professional career. Mr. Steig's artistic talents were first recognized and popularized by *The New Yorker* magazine where he served as a cartoonist for 60 years. His interest in children's books began at a colleague's prompting when he was 61 years of age. When asked about his books, he stated that he used animal characters intentionally to symbolize human behavior.

Brooklyn-born to Polish Jewish immigrants, Mr. Steig became an artist at his father's request. A socialist, the elder Steig taught his children that they should take careers neither as businessmen, since they exploit their workers, nor as laborers, since they become exploited. Art was the field of his choosing. Dutifully, William took his father's advice, attending City College for two years and the National Academy for three years. He spent a mere five days at Yale School of Fine Arts. When questioned, he remarked that his own education was "defective." When the depression left his parents (a seamstress and house painter) jobless, William took on the role of provider. Shopping his cartoons, he sold several to *The New Yorker* magazine, which subsequently became his lifelong employer.

In addition to his cartoons and children's books, Mr. Steig popularized both the contemporary greeting card and carved wooden figurines. Steig was the husband of Elizabeth Mead, sister of anthropologist Margaret Mead. Before he died at the age of 95, Mr. Steig encouraged his three children never to take 9-5 jobs, but to spend their lives as artists.

NOTES:

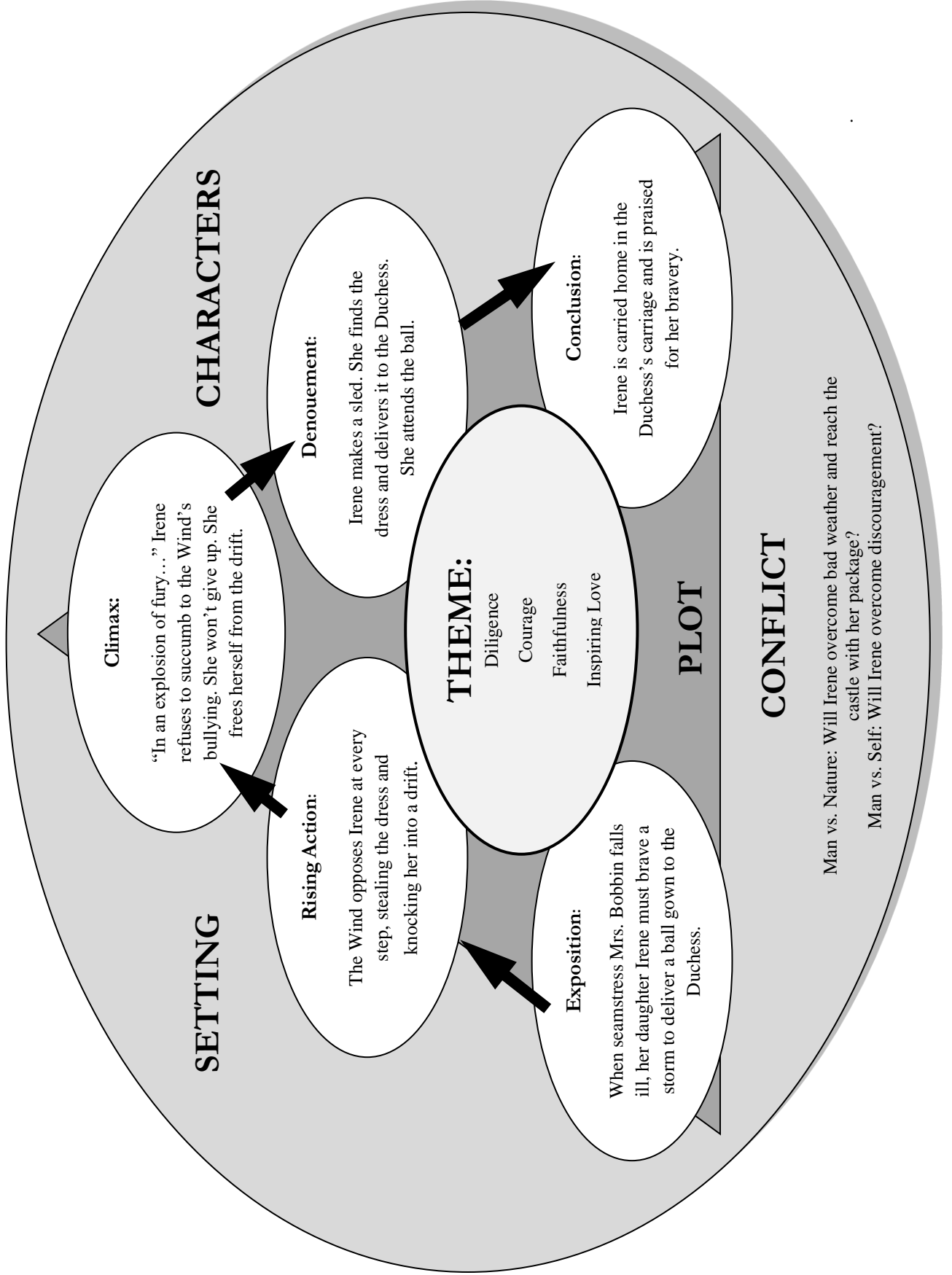
STORY CHARTS



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.

Brave Irene by William Steig: Story Chart



Brave Irene by William Steig: Blank Story Chart

