



Jane Yolen's
Letting Swift River Go

Questions for Socratic Discussion
by Missy Andrews



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LETTING SWIFT RIVER GO



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QUICK CARD



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| <i>Reference</i> | <i>Letting Swift River Go</i> by Jane Yolen ISBN-10: 0316968609 ISBN-13: 978-0316968607 |
| <i>Plot</i> | When Sally Jane's hometown is evacuated to make room for the Quabbin reservoir, Sally struggles with feelings of displacement and loss. |
| <i>Setting</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Swift River Valley, Massachusetts• 1920s• A small town• Sally's childhood |
| <i>Characters</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sally Jane (protagonist)• Sally's parents• Sally's friends: George Warren and Nancy Vaughan• Boston councilmen• Neighbors |
| <i>Conflict</i> | The Quabbin Reservoir Project swallows up the town of Swift River Valley and with it, Sally's childhood. (Man vs. Society, Man vs. Nature, Man vs. Self) |
| <i>Theme</i> | The passage of time; the transitory nature of life. The peace that comes with accepting things the way they are. |
| <i>Literary Devices</i> | Alliteration Assonance Sensory language Personification Simile Metaphor Imagery and Symbolism |

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: SETTING



In what country or region does the story happen? (1a)

The story takes place in the Swift River Valley near the large city of Boston, Massachusetts.

What is the mood or atmosphere of the place where the story happens? Is it cheerful and sunny, or dark and bleak? What words, phrases or descriptions does the author use to create this atmosphere? (1d)

The mood of the place is sunny and peaceful. It is small town America, full of color and family history, a place with deep roots.

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 people of Swift River Valley are industrious and happy, involved in their community and linked to their forebears by the land.

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

The setting is important because of the historic inundation that was engineered there. Yet it is not singularly important since other inundations in other areas produced similar stories. This is a tribute to all such lost places.

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

The story remembers a seven-year project to flood the Swift River Valley towns and is recollected by main character Sally Jane in retrospect.

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 events remembered occur when the main character is only six. She remembers them as an adult.

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)

The author's note dates the event between 1927 and 1946. These years take in three US Presidencies including that of Calvin Coolidge ('23-'29), Herbert Hoover ('29-'33), and Franklin Roosevelt ('33-'45). The industrialization movement of the late 1800s and early 1900s caused a vast population surge in American cities. Urbanization found cities ill-designed to house such large numbers of residents. Overcrowding placed a strain on water supply and city sanitation; disease inevitably resulted.

The need for the Quabbin Reservoir was a local expression of this national problem. The project was precipitated by typhoid epidemics in Boston caused by contaminated water. In addition, a series of Boston fires ravaged the city because of the scarce water supply. City planners sought to solve these problems with the formation of this reservoir, the largest artificial domestic water supply system in the world at the time. This reservoir covers 56,000 acres and can contain 412 billion gallons of water.

NOTES:

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CHARACTERS



Who is the story about? (3)

The story is about residents of the Swift River Valley who in the 1920s were forced to deconstruct their homes and lives and move to accommodate the Quabbin Reservoir Project. In particular, the story's protagonist is six-year-old Swift River Valley resident, Sally Jane.

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)

Young Sally Jane is full of the wonder of childhood. She enjoys the abundant natural beauty of the valley, delighting in its familiar comfort and safety. She fishes with her friend and plays through the hot summer days. She traps fireflies in mason jars on summer nights, sleeping out under the spreading maples. She savors the sweet maple sap her father collects in the winter, and the feel of warm eiderdown against the chill. Moreover, she is disillusioned when the Boston City Council votes to take all these things from her forever.

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)

Sally Jane is a resident of the Swift River Valley and one of the people relocated to accommodate the Boston city-dwellers who needed clean water. Sally Jane, 6-years-old, was among those people least considered in the move: the children.

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 his thoughts and actions give him away? (3m)

As a child, Sally Jane considers her surroundings the most important thing in her life. As an adult, she struggles to let go of things wrested from her unwillingly in her youth.

How does the character of the protagonist reflect the values of the society (or individual) that produced the story? (3o)

Sally's personality and values reflect those of many small town, country children. The places in their hometown have strong association with the people and events that mark their childhood. These landmarks are lost when the inundation covers them permanently.

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)

Sally's plight is sympathetic. Although perhaps only a handful of people can relate to the specific context of the story, most can relate to geographical changes that touch the historical landmarks of their childhood. Time marches ahead, sparing none.

Who else is the story about? (4)

Other protagonists include Sally Jane's friends and other residents of the Swift River Valley.

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

The antagonists are faceless – the Boston City Planners, the governor, progress. Of course, none of these mean harm to Sally Jane or her friends. Their exchange is purely business.

NOTES:

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CONFLICT AND PLOT



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

Sally Jane, grown to adulthood, contemplates the events of her childhood. She wants to recapture the past that has been lost.

Does the protagonist try to capture something? (5d)

More broadly, however, Sally Jane seeks peace with her past. This is an inner conflict.

Why can't she have it? (6) What kind of conflict is represented in this story? (6g-k)

On the surface, Sally's conflict is with the Boston City planners. (Man v. Man, Man v. Society) More broadly, Sally's struggle is against the inevitable encroachment of time (Man v. Nature), and with her own bitter loss (Man v. Self).

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

As a result of the vote to create the reservoir, the valley residents are forced to deconstruct their towns, move their dead, and evacuate the valley. Homes are abandoned or relocated. Graveyards are exhumed and relocated. Forests are felled. The towns are stripped of their life and beauty. Families move to new towns, some never to be seen again by Sally Jane. Friendships are lost. Finally, the waters cover the valley. The project takes seven years.

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

Time heals all wounds. A grown Sally Jane revisits the scene of the disaster with her father, skimming the surface of the Quabbin Reservoir by boat one evening. She peers through the water, vainly trying to revisit the dear places of her childhood. Yet they are covered over, never to be seen again.

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)

This boat excursion represents the climax of the story. It's a spiritual climax for Sally.

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: THEME



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

Sally Jane, affected by things common to man, is ennobled by her graceful response to them. Her strength is in her acquiescence to things she cannot change, her acceptance of the limitations of her “creaturehood.”

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

The past cannot be contained or preserved. It is ephemeral like the blinking fireflies of Sally Jane's memory or the twinkling night sky. Peace comes from embracing the limitations of creaturehood rather than resisting them.

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

The story suggests a good life is a life rooted in family and community.

What aspect of the human condition is brought to light and wondered at in this story? (13e)

The author contemplates the resilience of the human spirit.

NOTES:

QUESTIONS ABOUT STYLE



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

Alliteration and Assonance (14c, e)

“wind whispered...through...the willow by my...window”

“Georgie and I fished the Swift River in the bright days of summer; catching brown trout out of the pools with a pinhook... We played mumblety-peg... and picnicked...”

“”We’d listen to the trains starting and stopping along Rabbit Run, their long whistles lowing into the dark, startling the screech owl off its perch on the great elm.”

Sensory language

Gravestone stayed warm

We’d listen to the trains

See the fireflies

Taste the thin sweetness of maple sap

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

Personification (16e-g)

Wind whispered

Similes (16d)

Papa had “bites under his eyes, swollen like tears.”

Trees are “stacked like drinking straws”

“windows...stared out like empty eyes...”

Waters “rose like unfriendly neighbors”

Stars “winking on an off and on like fireflies”

QUESTIONS ABOUT CONTEXT



Who is the author? (18)

Born in New York, February 11, 1939, Jane Yolen became one of the most highly regarded children’s authors of the twentieth century. After receiving a BA from Smith College in 1960, followed by a MA of Education in 1976 from the University of Massachusetts, Miss Yolen married David W. Stemple, a university professor. They parented two boys and a girl. Now the grandmother of 6, Ms. Yolen lives in Hatfield, Massachusetts where she continues her career as a writer and editor of children’s books.

Hailed as America’s Hans Christian Anderson, Miss Yolen has published 170 books. Among these are *The Emperor and the Kite*, *Owl Moon*, *All Those Secrets of the World*, and *Letting Swift River Go*. Writing stories she calls “rooted in family and self,” Yolen’s narratives follow in folklore tradition, the “universal human language.” She is the winner of many awards including the society of Children’s Writers Golden Kite Award, the World Fantasy Award, the Christopher Medal, the Kerlan Award, and the Caldecott Medal.

She lives near the Quabbin Reservoir in Hatfield, Massachusetts. She is of Jewish ancestry, and has belonged to the Quaker Friends church.

NOTES:

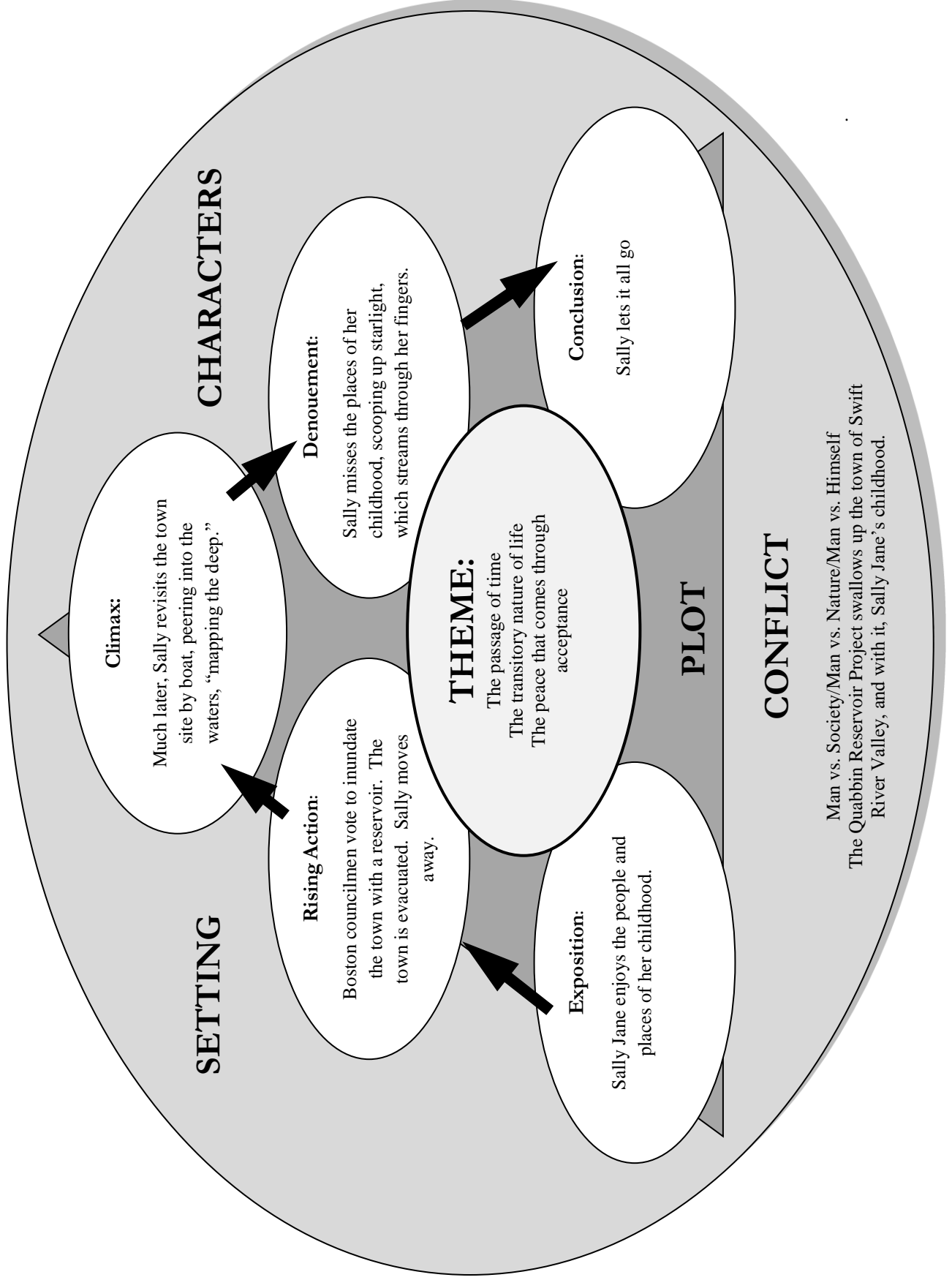
STORY CHARTS



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.

Letting Swift River Go by Jane Yolen: Story Chart



Letting Swift River Go by Jane Yolen: Blank Story Chart

