



*Tuck Everlasting*  
by Natalie Babbitt

Questions for Socratic Discussion  
by Megan Andrews





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# QUICK CARD



<p><i>Reference</i></p>	<p><i>Tuck Everlasting</i>. Natalie Babbitt. (1975) ISBN: 978-0374480095</p>
<p><i>Plot</i></p>	<p>When Winnie Foster tires of her life in the Touch-me-not Cottage, she runs away into Tree Gap Wood. There she discovers two mysteries: a secret spring that gives eternal life to all who drink from it and the Tuck family, who claim to have experienced the magic of the spring first hand. In an effort to protect both Winnie and the world from the powerful and dangerous water, the Tucks kidnap Winnie, who must decide what to believe.</p>
<p><i>Setting</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tree Gap Wood – location of the Spring whose water gives eternal life.</li> <li>• Winnie’s house – the “Touch-me-not Cottage,” a sophisticated, prissy, confining household, full of rules.</li> <li>• Tuck’s house – more like an animal’s den: unkempt, rumples, disordered, careless, but cozy, homey, and comfortable as well.</li> <li>• The Pond – where Winnie learns about the Tucks’ history.</li> <li>• The Jail house – where Mae Tuck is imprisoned.</li> </ul>
<p><i>Characters</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Winnie Foster, 10 year old protagonist of the story</li> <li>• The Fosters, Winnie’s family, owners of the Touch-me-not Cottage and Tree Gap Wood.</li> <li>• The Tucks, immortal guardians of the spring: Mae, Pa, Jesse, and Miles</li> <li>• The man in the yellow suit, who has heard legends about the Tucks and hopes to capitalize upon the spring.</li> </ul>
<p><i>Conflict</i></p>	<p>Man vs. Himself Man vs. Nature Man vs. Man</p>
<p><i>Theme</i></p>	<p>Freedom is found within the Natural order. The Wheel of life Contentment vs. rebellion The nature of everlasting life Friendship, Loyalty, Love, Self-sacrifice Self-control vs. Impulsiveness</p>

<p><i>Literary Devices</i></p>	<p>Imagery is created through:</p> <p>Metaphor - Tuck uses the pond as a metaphor for <i>Natural life</i> with its constant movement and change.</p> <p>Simile – the Tucks are described as rocks beside the road.</p> <p>Symbolism – the wheel motif (i.e. the Ferris Wheel, the calendar, the map of the setting, the life cycle, circular motion with which Ma Tuck swings the gun) The wheel becomes a repeating motif. Tuck uses it to explain the Natural order – and to suggest that disrupting the Natural order brings trouble.</p> <p>Foreshadowing – “...when people are led to do things they are sure to be sorry for later” (p.3).</p>
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# QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: SETTING

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## **Where does the story happen? (1)**

This story is set in a tiny, imaginary village called Treegap, which is built on the edge of a great wood, owned by the wealthiest family in town, the Fosters.

Within this neighborhood, the story shifts from place to place. Winnie Foster's home in the "touch-me-not" cottage on the edge of the woods is imposing and exclusive, bounded on all sides by a high iron fence. Babbitt describes the house as "a square and solid cottage with a touch-me-not appearance, surrounded by grass cut painfully to the quick and enclosed by a capable iron fence some four feet high" (6). The house bears the Foster family stamp of pride and exclusivity. It exudes an air of "Move on- we don't want you here!" to each lowly passerby. Within, the straight-laced Foster women keep the house like a tightly run army barracks. They have made "a fortress out of duty," keeping house with a frightening dedication to order and sterility (50).

In contrast, the Tuck home in the heart of the woods radiates comfort. Nestled in the heart of the forest by the banks of a pond, their home seems to settle into itself, uneven and helter-skelter, but comfortable and solid. Winnie describes her first impression of the place as "a charming disarray" which is singularly "comfortable." Aside from the healthy mess of unfinished projects and the "lived-in" quality of the house, Winnie seems struck by the light and smells of the pond which creep in through the windows and suffuse the living room. She notes: "streaks of light swam and danced and wavered like a bright mirage, reflected through the windows from the sunlit surface of the pond. There were bowls of daisies everywhere, gay white and yellow. And over everything was the clean, sweet smell of the water and its weeds, the chatter of the swooping kingfisher, the carol and trill of a dozen other kinds of bird, and occasionally the thrilling bass note of an unastonished bullfrog at ease somewhere along the muddy banks" (52). This description alludes to the Tuck's particular state, ever so subtly. The thriving pond, which later becomes an analogy for the wheel of life in Tuck and Miles's conversations with Winnie, sits just outside the Tuck's home. All of its sights and smells exist just out of reach for the Tuck family. The light shines "like a mirage," a mere reflection of the real light which dances out of reach on the water's surface. In the same way, the vibrant sounds and smells drift into the Tuck's home from a distance, enjoyed but only distantly. Noted ever so subtly, this distance later becomes integral to Winnie's understanding of the Tuck's immortal existence in a transient world. In addition, the dust

hanging in the air and filming the furniture emphasizes the Tuck's tired, resignation toward eternity. Eternally motionless on the wheel of life, they gather the dust of the ages. Their attempt at housekeeping is singularly slipshod and relaxed as they have infinity to improve upon it. Even when a mouse takes up permanent residence in the kitchen drawer, the Tucks are unmoved. In spite of these eccentricities, the Tuck home is singularly inviting in contrast to the Foster residence.

Though the story moves to other locations (such as the jailhouse and the spring) briefly, these two homes are the central focus of the plot.

**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)**

As previously mentioned, the overall atmospheres of the two homes are consistent throughout the story. The Foster home is private, reserved, and cold. In contrast, the Tuck home is warm, relaxed, and delightfully "lived-in."

At the start of the story, however, a curiously ominous, foreboding atmosphere dominates the setting. August in Treegap is a weary, sticky, oppressive month which heralds the end of summer's delights and the progression of the year towards winter. Babbitt opens her tale with a telling image, comparing this heavy month to "the highest seat in a Ferris wheel." She describes its breathless nature like the hanging motion of a Ferris wheel carriage which swings at the height of the circular cycle and seems to pause its turning instantaneously (3). This image juxtaposes fanciful, childlike associations of summer fairs and celebration with the apprehensive threat of winter's approach. Though the Ferris wheel image is fanciful and childlike, Babbitt fixates on that moment in its journey where time seems to pause and hover suspended. She describes this breathless, suspended month as "motionless and hot," and "curiously silent with blank white dawns and glaring noons, and sunsets smeared with too much color"(3). Far from idyllic and joyful, Babbitt uses the Ferris wheel image rather to communicate a sense of foreboding at the start of the novel. The last sentence of the opening paragraph confirms this ominous setting: "These are strange and breathless days, the dog days, when people are led to do things they are sure to be sorry for after" (3). By capturing the oppressive heat and the breathless emotion of the stifling month of August, Babbitt uses the literary device of foreshadowing to great effect. Just as the Ferris wheel hovers at its peak before dropping low once again in its inevitable arc, so the month of August pauses briefly and threatens to dip once more towards summer's end. In this pregnant pause, Babbitt warns her readers that the oppressive atmosphere will influence her characters towards desperate actions.

Turning from her description of the time of year in which her story will take place, Babbitt leads her readers on a tour of Treegap Village. As readers follow the slow, steady progress of a herd of cows through the countryside, a curious sense of foreboding pervades each element of the rural setting. Though the cows graze peacefully, they avoid

the depths of the wood and skirt its edge. Seated on the very edge of the sleepy, tranquil forest, the Foster house has a “touch-me-not appearance,” fenced off from Nature’s encroachments by an imposing iron fence (6). Beyond, the town houses stand the jailhouse and the gallows. The imposing Foster home and the sobering law enforcement tools beyond it are portents which emphasize the coming conflict.

Babbit directs her reader’s attention to a huge ash tree with a little spring bubbling up among its roots situated in the heart of the mysterious forest. Though a pile of pebbles hides the spring, the water bubbles up rebelliously and threatens its careful concealment. Babbit asserts that the discovery of the spring “would have been a disaster so immense that this weary old earth, owned or not to its fiery core, would have trembled on its axis like a beetle on a pin” (8). Each of these elements of the setting foreshadows plot developments and fills the reader with a sense of foreboding.

**Is the setting a real or imaginary place? If it’s imaginary, is it subject to the same laws as our world is? (1g)**

Although Treegap is not a historical town, it is an ordinary town full of ordinary people whose lives are governed by the same natural laws which govern the real world. As a result, the discovery of a magical fountain of immortality shocks the characters in this story just as it would a member of our world.

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

This story takes place over the course of the first two weeks of August in Winnie Foster’s 10th year (28). Though the predominant action of the story takes place in this short span, a brief epilogue narrates events which occur many years later, which prove important to the story’s themes. In addition, there are allusions throughout the story to the multitude of lifetimes which the Tucks have lived as a result of the spring water, but these years are only remembered in the narration as things that occurred previously.

**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)**

Winnie Foster, the protagonist of the piece, is 10 years old when the events of this story take place. She is just on the brink of adolescence, eager for adventure, impatient for maturity, but still naive to the ways of the world. This becomes apparent in her encounters with the worldly wise and weary Tuck family. Her placement in this tenuous stage of life is crucial to the story, lending her an unsullied and impressionable perspective with which to receive the Tucks’ bewildering account. Not yet as greedy or ambitious as a grown up could be, Winnie proves singularly open to Tuck’s caution and influence.



Similarly, Jesse Tuck is a 17 year old boy when he discovers the magical spring water and accidentally becomes immortal. Thus, his age is a fascinating factor in this story. Just as the paused ferris wheel image encapsulates the halted progress of summer in August, so that same image captures Jesse Tuck's position in life. A youth, he was on the brink of becoming a man in his own right. With the accident at the spring, however, his life paused eternally in an instant. He can no longer progress towards maturity, no matter how many years pass. He is in a perpetual state of youthfulness. Thus he becomes a foil for Winnie over the course of the story. Though they are equally youthful, foolish, and free in this month of their acquaintance, Winnie is already maturing each moment they are together while he remains as childish as ever despite his 104 years on earth. Depicting Jesse's youth in juxtaposition with Winnie's proves important to the plot and thematic development.

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# QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CHARACTERS



## **Who is the story about? (Protagonist) (3)**

This story tracks three individuals whose lives converge around the magical spring in Treegap Wood: Winnie Foster, Mae Tuck, and the man in the yellow suit (4). While there are other characters who enter the story, these three are central to the plot.

Winifred Foster is an only child, the 10 year old daughter of the Fosters who own the “touch-me-not” cottage and the entirety of Treegap Wood. It is safe to say that she is the protagonist: for it is her growth and change that the story narrates. When Babbit introduces Winnie, she is whispering conspiratorially through the bars of the iron fence to a toad in the road about her plans to run away from home. Pent-up like a prisoner in the oppressive yard of the touch-me-not cottage, she longs for a chance to be free from her overly protective parents and grandmother. Discontented, she wants to think freely and to make a difference in the world (15).

## **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? (31)**

Winnie is a member of the Foster family, which is a respectable pillar of Treegap society. Her mother and grandmother are intent upon raising her to be a lady and a credit to the Foster name, but she feels stifled by the rigorous, orderly regimen of the household. She wants to run away and disassociate herself from all of them. Even as she plans to escape their influence, however, she betrays how like them she really is. She speaks collusively with the toad about her plan to escape, saying: “I want to be by myself for a change...I might even decide to have a pet. Maybe a big old toad, like you, that I could keep in a nice cage with lots of grass...”(15).

She realizes soon enough that this instinct to cage the things that she owns is a direct inheritance from her Foster relatives. They own the Treegap Wood and make it very clear that the wood is private property (7). Their house itself sits behind an imposing fence which clearly says, “Move on- we don’t want you” (6). And their most prized possession, their daughter Winnie, belongs within that constricting cage of a fence as well, kept safe from the threats of the world. Though she longs to be different and to make up her own mind about things, she cannot escape the ties of family and human nature, as evidenced by her subconscious desire to possess a pet and cage it out of a sense of ownership. The Fosters are motivated by a desire to “make a fortress out of duty” and

order their world so that they will have control over life (54). However much she wishes to diverge from their path, she has inherited their traits and instincts.

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

Mae Tuck is the third character crucial to the progression of this story. A plump, sweet, optimistic “potato of a woman”, Mae has calm brown eyes and a sensible face. She is a wife and a mother and she manages her strange life with a matter-of-fact calm, finding comfort in the routine, regardless of the monotony of an unchanging eighty seven years (12). She loves her family fiercely and will stop at nothing to keep them safe, but she is truly gentle and kind at heart.

As a member of the only immortal family in the world, Mae and the other Tucks live by a series of guidelines designed to keep their secret safe. For example, they try to keep to themselves and avoid the town of Treegap where people might recognize them from generations before. The sons, Jesse and Miles, travel about in search of work, only returning every ten years to the spring for a scheduled family reunion. The Tucks try with all their might to keep anyone from discovering or drinking from the spring. They are motivated by a desire to save others from the uniquely difficult fate that they themselves suffer.

**Is there a single character (or group of characters) that opposes the protagonist in the story? In other words, is there an antagonist? (4a)**

The man in the yellow suit is a mysterious and suspicious individual who betrays antagonistic qualities from the start. Charming and slick in his conversations with Winnie and her grandmother, he carries himself with an apologetic and self-deprecating air. Yet he strikes Winnie as untrustworthy. Avoiding the grandmother’s direct questions about his identity, he remains vague, smooth, and disingenuous as he attempts to distract her with flattery. Watching him suspiciously, Winnie thinks how much he reminds her of the ribbons on a funeral wreath. With this sinister association, he adopts an antagonistic air. He betrays a wild curiosity about the wood and the elvish music which emanates from it on rare occasions. Not a member of some larger group, he is a lone stranger, a spy and a fortune hunter. He aims to find the secret to the Tucks’ eternal youth, partake of it himself, and then market it to all men for a great profit. He is motivated purely and simply by greed, ambition and selfishness.

The man in the yellow suit serves as the primary antagonist of the story. Though he does not pose a threat to Winnie directly at first, he opposes the goal of the Tuck family to keep the spring a secret. As Winnie falls in love with the Tuck family and realizes the implications of the water’s powers, she adopts their convictions concerning the spring. Thus, the man in the yellow suit becomes antagonistic to her desire to honor the Tucks’ wishes as well as her desire to keep the Tucks themselves safe from publicity. When the man in the yellow suit finally threatens to use her as a guinea pig or a

demonstration of the water's powers for his future business venture, he becomes fully antagonistic to Winnie.

There are, however, a few more antagonistic characters in this story whose presence add an element of depth to Winnie's story. Winnie's family, for example, seems antagonistic at first. From the start when they have her pent up and safely guarded within the front yard, they oppose her rebellious resolve to escape into the world. In turn, the Tucks themselves initially appear to be an antagonistic force when they kidnap Winnie (albeit apologetically) to keep her quiet about the spring. Even Winnie herself becomes an antagonistic force in the story. She longs to be free, to think her own thoughts, and to make a difference in the world: however, over the course of the story she discovers how very little she understands the nature of freedom, and the purpose of a good life. She fights her own immaturity and fear.

**Does the author believe this character to be responsible for his own sinfulness, or does he believe him a product of a “negative environment”? (41)**

The man in the yellow suit is responsible for his own sinfulness. Having heard rumors about the Tuck family his whole life, he seeks them and their magical spring water with intent to blackmail them into helping him with a “get-rich-quick” scheme. Driven by greed, he blackmails Winnie's father into selling him the wood in return for her safety. In the same way, he intends to force the Tucks into being “demonstrations” of the spring's great power. He even threatens to make Winnie drink the water to become the guinea pig for his marketing scheme (100). Ironically, he declares the Tucks to be selfish and stupid for not revealing the spring to the public sooner. In doing so, he reveals his own selfish and short-sighted motivations. Blind to the disastrous implications of his plan for the spring, he feels supremely confident that prosperity will be the only result of exploiting the spring's powers.

Winnie's parents, however, are not malicious like the man in the yellow suit. Well-meaning and careful, they desire Winnie's good, though she doesn't appreciate their methods. When Winnie runs away, they spare no expense of time, effort, and money in order to get her back again safely. Once she is home, they take note of her changed attitude and new-found maturity and try to respect her. They are not intentionally antagonistic but rather they are attached to their militaristically ordered environment and social status and intend for Winnie to share in all the benefits of their station. When Winnie returns to them, their relief and exuberance evidence their deep love for her and stand testament to their good-intentions. Even after she has betrayed their trust one final time and helped Mae Tuck to escape hanging, they prove their fierce loyalty to her by “drawing staunchly around her” heedless of the shame and pain she has caused them. These events develop the characters of Winnie's parents and prove them to be far from antagonistic to her in the end.

Similarly, the Tucks prove benevolent barriers to Winnie’s immature desire to drink the spring water. They have her best interest at heart and quickly prove their devotion and loyalty to her both through their kind hospitality and their devotion to her future well-being. Therefore, they are not truly antagonists as the man in the yellow suit becomes.

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# QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CONFLICT AND PLOT

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## **What does the protagonist want? (5)**

Winnie Foster wants to run away from her “cage,” to make a difference in the world, to make up her own mind, and to drink from the spring and gain eternal life (15). These initial desires shift and change as she meets the Tuck family, whose accounts broaden her understanding of the world. Still these desires remain the fulcrum around which all of her decisions and actions pivot.

## **Why can't he have it? (6)**

Initially, Winnie's first three desires are suppressed by her overly protective family. This initial conflict is a Man vs. Man or a Man vs. Society conflict. Yet Winnie proves to be her own worst enemy, as she wants to run away and be independent but fears the wide world outside her family's gates. In addition, she wants to be able to make up her own mind about things, but over the course of the story she encounters people and problems with which she is unprepared or unqualified to handle alone. This is a Man vs. Self conflict.

Lastly, Winnie is enamored with the possibility of eternal life and she is sorely tempted to jump off the wheel and join the Tucks as perpetual rocks by the road of life (28). Their testimony, however, warns her to respect the boundaries of the natural order. She fears death and longs for their seemingly carefree “eternal sameness” but she is naturally maturing already before their eyes. This is a Man vs. Nature conflict.

## **What other problems are there in the story? Do the character's actions provoke further conflict or unrest in the story? (7b)**

Prompted by her longing for freedom, Winnie escapes into the wood and stumbles upon Jesse Tuck and the secret spring. Once she has discovered the secret of the waters, Winnie cannot be trusted, so the anxious, well-meaning Tucks decide to kidnap her in order to fully explain the truth. This well-intentioned kidnapping proves the catalyst for the man in yellow's sinister designs. He blackmails the Foster family into selling him the wood in return for bringing Winnie home safely. Then he approaches the Tuck family, intending to coerce them into becoming “freaks” or demonstrations of the spring water's powers in his selfish business venture. When they cannot be convinced to join him, he threatens to dose Winnie with the water in order to make her an alternative example. This threat causes loyal Mae Tuck to lash out in protective fury and bash the man in yellow

with a shotgun. When he dies from the wound, Mae Tuck is doomed to hang, which fills Winnie and the Tuck family with dread of discovery: for she cannot die. Thus, Winnie's initial childish desire to run away proves the catalyst for a series of compounding conflicts in the story, each more grave than the last, and leads her to her final decision: to become an accomplice to a murderer.

**Are there larger issues, (a larger context or frame) in which conflict exists and forms a background for the story? (A war setting for example)? (7f)**

While Winnie encounters practical dilemmas as a result of her flight from home, which include being kidnapped, being "rescued" by the police, and then becoming enmeshed in a jailbreak, there is an overarching issue looming in her mind throughout the story. Winnie contemplates the value of a mortal life. Even as she longs for freedom and autonomy and the trappings of maturity, she thinks wistfully of eternal youth and fears the necessary end of a growing, changing life. Prompted by her multiple conversations with Tuck and Miles in the rowboat, she begins to understand the joint beauty and tragedy of mortality. Tuck explains the natural cycle of life and emphasizes the necessity of death. He even goes so far as to argue that "dying's part of the wheel" and "being part of the whole thing, that's the blessing" (63). He urges Winnie to trust his testimony saying, "Living's heavy work, but off to one side, the way we are, it's useless, too" (64). Though the thought of death makes young Winnie cringe, she begins to understand Tuck's point: that the very inexorability of death is the crucial factor which gives life meaning and purpose. The inevitability of death makes Winnie's few moments sweeter than the countless hours which Tuck can anticipate. Once it is limitless, all life loses its value according to Tuck.

Miles brings this point home to Winnie later on in the story as he dreams aloud of finding purpose in his infinite life. Winnie asks him, "What will you do, if you've got so much time?" Miles answers, "Someday, I'll find a way to do something important... People got to do something useful if they're going to take up space in the world" (87). Though Winnie identifies with Miles's longing to make a difference in the world and do something important, there is an underlying sadness in Miles's "someday" resolve. With all the time in world, there is little impetus to hurry and find that important purpose for which one should live. Death itself gives a man purpose and drive to accomplish important things and live intentionally. The limitation itself offers ample opportunity for a life far more fulfilling than eternity could ever be according to the Tuck family. Watching Miles and Tuck, Winnie wrestles with the mixed blessing of mortality and struggles to decide whether or not to submit herself to the constraints of the natural cycle of things. This universal struggle against death and mortality looms large behind the story as a whole and serves as a point of reference for Winnie's own maturity. Each time the subject resurfaces throughout the story, Winnie's response to the temptation of eternal life is informed by the testimonies of her new friends and her growing life-experience. The larger conflict serves as a marker for Winnie's growth and maturity.

### **What happens in the story? (8)**

Kidnapped by the gentle Tucks, Winnie learns quickly of the mixed blessings of eternal life. Though she is tempted to drink the water in order to be with the fascinating Jesse Tuck forever, she begins to understand the gravity of inescapable survival thanks to Tuck and Miles. She finds herself in a unique position, given the opportunity to decide for herself what she will believe about mortality and eternity. She loves this family and feels keenly the weight of responsibility for their secret. She decides to keep their secret for them.

No sooner has she decided this when the man in yellow arrives, armed with a dangerous knowledge of the spring and the Tucks' curse. He is intent on tearing Winnie away from the Tucks and marketing the spring to the world for an enormous profit. He declares Tuck a "selfish fool" for keeping the spring water a secret, and, in so doing, he ironically betrays his own selfishness and foolishness. Blind to the dire consequences of publicizing this fountain of youth, he can only comprehend the dazzling wealth at his fingertips. His accusation calls to mind Miles's act of self-denial in choosing eternal solitude rather than condemning his family to an unnatural existence. In the same way, Tuck urged the family to keep the spring a secret, not out of selfishness or stupidity, but wisdom and forethought, seeing the possible consequences of such a dangerous knowledge. Rather than allowing themselves to be swept away by greed or ambition, the Tucks considered the lasting consequences of eternal life and purposefully chose a solitary life of exile for the sake of their world. When the man in yellow calls the Tucks' decision into question, he inadvertently proves himself a lesser man and fortifies Winnie's faith in the family's wisdom.

Caged within her home fences again, Winnie feverishly tries to think of a way in which she might help her dear friends keep their momentous secret. She still longs to make a difference in the world. She still longs to be free to make her own choices and go where she pleases, but she feels helpless to accomplish any great changes. When the news of the man in yellow's death comes, Winnie waits in anguished expectation for the day of Mae Tuck's execution.

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

As Winnie waits for word from the Tucks in an agony of inactivity, the weather matches her feverish mood. The August sun blazes down on Treegap, confining all the inhabitants to the cages of their homes and casting a universal pall of sticky, sweaty, oppressive heat. This heat exacerbates Winnie's desperation in the waiting period. Heat lightning throbs in the distance and a watching Winnie describes its pulsing "like pain" (108).



Once the date is set for Mae Tuck's funeral, the weather indicates the darkening mood of the story. A summer storm builds the night before the execution, and even as Winnie resolves to help the Tucks break Mae free, the remorseless heat takes on a new heaviness that speaks of coming rain. As Winnie waits for the cover of darkness, a wind begins for the first time in the story, signaling the coming events (117). She wakes in the middle of the night and finds the night "poised on tiptoe, waiting, waiting, holding its breath for the coming storm" just as she herself is poised and waiting for her moment to "make a difference"(115).

When at last Winnie and the Tucks break Mae free, the first drops of rain fall on Winnie's nose as if in response to her desperate relief. As she slides into Mae's jail cell to take her place, the rain comes in sheets and drenches the parched town, a farewell to the Tucks who have vanished forever.

This August storm heightens Winnie's inner conflict and mirrors her progress towards heroism and maturity.

**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)**

There are two possible moments which could be flagged as climaxes in this story. The first is when Winnie willingly chooses to take Mae's place in a prison, accepting a cage and so making a difference in the world by exercising her autonomy out of love for her friend. Understanding at last the freedom of her own ability to choose, she no longer fears the constriction of the cell. As she takes her place within the cell, she murmurs a snatch of a poem, "Stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage" (123). These lines mark a significant change in Winnie's own perception of the world. Through her experience with the Tucks, Winnie comes to understand freedom as a deeper concept than merely the absence of constraints or barriers. Rather she comes to value freedom of thought over physical freedom. Possessed of a new-found self-control, she can remain independent in her mind even as she subjects herself to physical limitations. This same concept comes to bear on her thoughts on the natural cycle of life.

The second occurs when Winnie chooses to pour the water of eternal life on the toad as opposed to drinking it herself and spending eternity with Jesse. Having learned the nature of true freedom which can exist even within the confines of a prison, Winnie acts on this new knowledge in her decision to reject an unnatural life. She accepts the boundaries and impositions of the natural cycle and decides that there is enough freedom of thought and individuality within the natural order. She submits herself to a natural life, and, in so doing, she demonstrates a maturity and growth which far exceeds her initial perspective. Either of these climaxes adequately charts Winnie's growth and maturity.

**How does the story end? After the climax of the story, did you wonder how it would end? How does it end? How are the “loose ends” tied up? Were all of your questions answered? (10a)**

Two weeks after the Tucks have escaped, Winnie Foster sits in her front yard once again, remembering the recent events. Found in the cell by a shocked constable the morning after Mae Tuck’s escape, Winnie endures his outrage. Too young to be punished as an accomplice to a murderer, she returns home to her family and faces their bewildered questions: why had she done such a thing? Hadn’t they raised her properly, with a true sense of right and wrong? They had trusted her. She explains simply, that in spite of everything, she loves the Tuck family (130). Remembering this moment of truth, Winnie contemplates the miraculous change which overtook her family. Of all things, love at least her family understood. They “drew together staunchly around her,” though their social standing in the village and their pride made the shameful situation painful to them. The knowledge of their shame and her responsibility for it causes Winnie pain as she reminisces, a fact which evidences significant growth in Winnie. No longer the rebellious child who ran away from home, she has become a respectful young lady, capable of appreciating the love, loyalty, and good intentions of her family and enduring her confinement with a good attitude.

Despite this familial resolution and the happy escape of the Tucks, however, there remains one last unresolved thread of the story. The little bottle of spring water from Jesse still tempts Winnie with its infinite possibilities. She has yet to decide whether or not she will drink the water when she turns 17 and find Jesse again. At this moment, her old friend the toad appears once again. A neighborhood dog threatens to attack the toad and Winnie acts on a protective impulse, swiftly snatching the toad to safety within her own fenced yard. She taunts the disappointed dog, “It’s my toad, so you’d better leave it alone” (132). Just as in the first part of the story, Winnie claims ownership of the toad as her own pet or property. Yet the actions which follow denote a change in her character. She dumps the little bottle of spring water on the toad, remembering her grandmother’s advice that toads drink through their skin, and murmurs in a satisfied tone: “There! You’re safe. Forever”(133). With these words, she sets the toad free. Having claimed him as her own and protected him as best she can, she performs the greatest act of love which she can imagine as she releases him. Breaking the pattern set by her family, she recognizes her desire to claim ownership over the toad and cage her property. Instead she sets him free, knowing from experience just how loving such release can be.

Even beyond this loving release of the toad, her swift decision to pour out her water over the toad marks a transition in her heart. Even as she comforts herself with the idle reminder that there is always more water in the wood if she should change her mind, she chooses a mortal life as she baptizes the toad. In so doing, she proves exceedingly mature and circumspect, resisting the temptation of eternal life. There is still the slim chance that she could change her mind at 17 and come back for the spring water and an eternity with Jesse, but the chance seems a weak one.

Sure enough the epilogue answers all the residual questions which the readers (and indeed the Tucks themselves) still have at the end of the story. Mae and Tuck re-enter Treegap 67 years later, searching for any hint of Winnie’s fate or the secret of the spring. They find that the wood has been destroyed by an electrical storm and consequentially bulldozed, which seems like an act of Providence. There is no longer any danger of others finding the spring and its catastrophic immortality. Soon after this discovery, Tuck wanders through the cemetery and finds Winnie’s grave, which indicates that she lived a long and happy life, dying at 78 years of age after being both a wife and a mother. With tears in his eyes, Tuck Everlasting whispers: “Good girl.” Together, Mae and Tuck wander off aimlessly into the world, relieved that they’ve been able to save Winnie and the rest of the world from their fate.

**Were you satisfied with the resolution? (10b)**

The ending is bittersweet indeed. While readers feel proud of Winnie’s choice to brave death in exchange for a purposeful and rewarding life, they mourn for the Tucks who must still wander the earth aimlessly for a tragic eternity. Though not entirely happy, it is a satisfying conclusion in its way.

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

On their way out of Treegap for the last time, Mae and Tuck almost run over a toad which is squatting in the center of the busy street. As Tuck saves it from the speedy passage of a truck, he mutters to himself, “Durn fool thing must think it’s going to live forever” (139). While the line is ironic, since the toad is in fact the very same which Winnie baptized with the spring water and therefore immortal, it proves the truth of Tuck’s initial philosophy regarding immortality: an eternal life loses its value. According to Babbit, it is mortality which gives life its meaning. Somehow aware of its invincibility, the toad no longer values its existence and puts itself in the way of death, almost wistfully, knowing that no escape is possible.

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# QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: THEME



**What does the protagonist learn? Does he draw upon any motifs or symbols to deepen his explanation of these events? (11f)**

Winnie Foster learns to value her mortal existence, respecting both life and death in equal measure as necessary parts of the natural cycle. The initial symbol of the Ferris wheel becomes a picture of the natural order of things. Tuck alludes to this wheel when he describes the natural cycle of life, saying, “Everything’s a wheel, turning and turning, never stopping... That’s the way it’s supposed to be. That’s the way it is” (62). This image recurs when Mae Tuck draws the shotgun in wheel-like arc to bring it crashing down on the head of the man in yellow, ultimately killing him. This consistent allusion emphasizes the various subtleties of the motif: as Tuck describes the cycle of life, he emphasizes the need for others to move on so that new life can flourish in place of the old. Mae Tuck’s action in killing the evil man in yellow is a picture of the flipside of the natural cycle at work, death being an equally necessary part of the natural order. Tuck mourns his immortality, longing to “get back on the wheel” and endure even death just to grow and change and truly live again. Through her relationship with the Tucks, Winnie learns to appreciate the limitations of a natural life and even a domestic life, cultivating a respect for her loving family. She realizes over the course of the story that freedom is possible even within constraints of duty and necessity, and that it can be even more rewarding in those circumstances if one is capable of self-control and free thought.

**What is the main idea of the story? Does the story seem to deal with a universal theme like the ones listed in this syllabus? (13a)**

This story showcases a variety of themes, among them: coming of age, freedom within limitations, the natural life cycle, self-sacrifice, self-control, and friendship. Any or all of these themes will stimulate a fruitful discussion.

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

According to Tuck and the others in this story, a good life is one lived within the natural order of things, upon the wheel of mortality which provides man both a beginning and an end.



# QUESTIONS ABOUT STYLE: LITERARY DEVICES



**Does the author use descriptions and comparisons to create pictures in the reader’s mind?  
Does the author rely upon similes, metaphors, or personification to convey his meaning  
more powerfully? (16b)**

Babbitt uses rich imagery to convey her themes and ideas to the reader more powerfully. The image of the natural order as a wheel is a simile which recurs through the story so often that it becomes not just a symbol but a motif, pregnant with rich meaning. In addition, she paints vivid word pictures to depict the scenes and characters of her story. For example, when she describes Miles and Jesse, she uses powerful similes: “(Miles) looked solid, like an oar, whereas Jesse. . .Jesse was like water: thin and quick” (84). Such similes communicate the emotion and color of a scene more powerfully than a simple description could. Similarly, Babbitt describes the oppressively hot night when Winnie and the Tucks are trying to break Mae out of the jail before the thunderstorm and notes that the windows of the empty shops were “lidded eyes that didn’t care – that barely saw them, barely gave them back reflections” (122). This metaphor adds to the feeling of watchfulness and secrecy which permeates the tense scene. This image also serves as an example of personification as the building’s windows take on human characteristics.

**Personification- does the author represent inanimate objects as being lifelike or human?  
(16e)**

Babbitt peppers her text with personification to give the setting a sense of vibrant life and consciousness, emphasizing her theme that all of the natural order lives, breathes, and dies in tandem. At the end of the story there is a beautiful description of a milkweed plant “opening its rough pod, exposing a host of downy-headed seeds” and “one of these detaching itself into a sudden breeze and sailing sedately off, while others leaved from the pod as if to observe its departure” (127). Though the milkweed is an inanimate object and has no will to detach a pod purposefully and watch consciously as it floats away, such a description breathes life into the setting of the piece. In addition, this particular event is suffused with Winnie’s own feelings as she longs to drift away into the world along with the milkweed pod, to find the Tuck family and be free.

**Does the author use the characters and events in his story to communicate a theme that goes beyond them in some way? Irony-do the words of a character or narrator offer information that contradicts with what you’ve already discovered to be true about his or her circumstances, character, or thoughts? (17d)**

There are multiple instances of irony in the story as Winnie attempts to understand the implications of an everlasting life. When she first meets Jesse Tuck and asks him his age, he first replies “104,” which later proves to be the truer of his two answers. When pressed, he then admits, “I’m 17.” Winnie’s response is an example of dramatic irony: “Oh. That’s old.” Jesse smiles and chuckles, “You have no idea”(28). Unaware of how truly old he is, her words are unnaturally apt to describe him.

Again at the very end of the story, in another instance of dramatic irony, Tuck moves the immortal toad to the side of the road and mutters, “Durn fool thing must think it’s going to live forever” (139). Although Tuck does not know that this very toad has been bathed in the waters of eternal life and will therefore live forever, readers do.

**Foreshadowing- does the author provide any clues early in the story of things to come in the plot? (17h)**

Many times, Babbitt uses foreshadowing to build tension in the story. For example, on the very first page, she writes: “These are strange and breathless days, the dog days, when people are led to do things they are sure to be sorry for after.” As if this ominous portent weren’t enough, she writes again on the next page: “All wheels must have a hub. A Ferris wheel has one, as the sun is the hub of the wheeling calendar. Fixed points they are, and best left undisturbed, for without them, nothing holds together. But sometimes people find this out too late” (4). These moments of unnatural prediction and portent foreshadow the story’s coming events.

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# QUESTIONS ABOUT CONTEXT



## **Who is the author? (18)**

Natalie Babbitt, born in 1932 in Dayton, Ohio, is an American author and illustrator of acclaimed children's literature. She was nominated in 1982 for the biennial international Hans Christian Anderson Award. For her work on *Knee Knock Rise* she was awarded the Newbery Honor in 1971. *Tuck Everlasting* was named an ALA Notable Book in 1975 and ranked number 16 in the "Top 100 Chapter Books" of all time survey in the *School Library Journal*. In addition, the book was adapted for the movies and is currently being prepared as a Broadway musical as well. At 83, Babbitt remains a beloved children's author. She lives in New York with her husband, Samuel Fisher Babbitt. They have three children.



# ESSAY QUESTIONS FOR WRITING ASSIGNMENTS



1. Natalie Babbitt uses a recurring symbol of a Ferris wheel to describe the motion of the natural cycle of life. Explain the connection between the Ferris wheel and life itself. How does the use of the symbol draw out the theme of the book?
2. At the start of the story, Winnie longs for freedom and autonomy. There is nothing she hates more than a cage. And yet, at the end of the piece, she willingly chooses to take Mae's place in the cell. What sort of progress or development does this decision evidence in her? What does it say about her understanding of a good life? A good love?
3. The man in the yellow suit declares Tuck to be "selfish" and "stupid" for keeping the spring a secret all these years. He believes that marketing the water would be both wise (financially) and generous. Compare and contrast the man in yellow and Tuck's opinions on the spring water and eternal life. Given the evidence of the text, who is truly wise?
4. Jesse claims to love Winnie. In that effort, he begs her to drink the water and join him for eternity. Given the evidence of the story, is this request truly loving? Why or why not? What is true love according to the story?
5. When Tuck returns and sees Winnie's grave, he murmurs softly, "Good girl." What quality of Winnie's is he applauding in this moment? What does his approval indicate about his view of "the good life?"

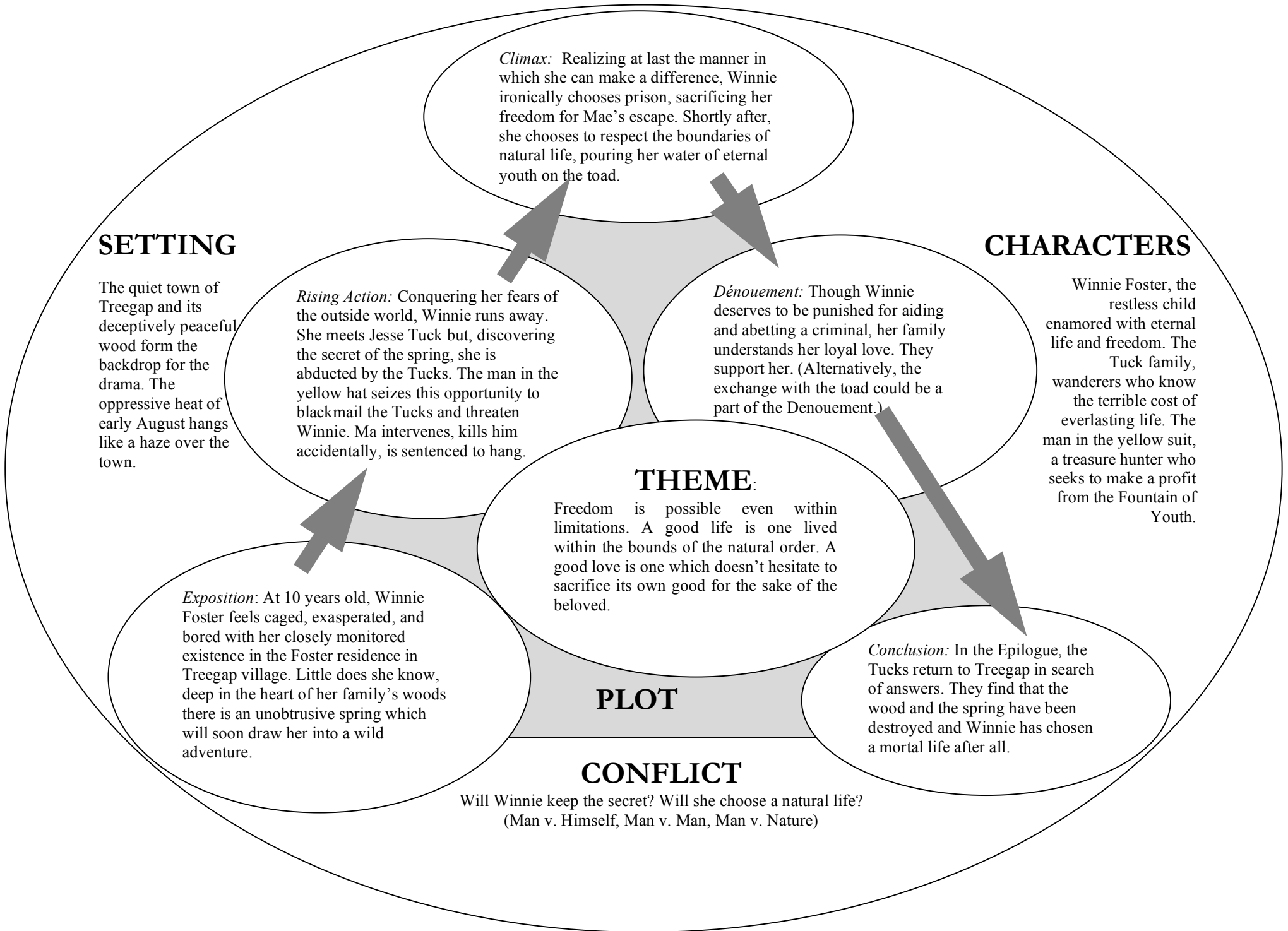
# STORY CHARTS



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.

# Tuck Everlasting by Natalie Babbitt: Story Chart



***Tuck Everlasting* by Natalie Babbitt: Story Chart**

