

Amos and Boris
by William Steig

A Teacher's Guide for Socratic Discussion
by Missy Andrews

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INTRODUCTION



CenterForLit’s teacher guide series is intended to assist teachers and parents in conducting meaningful discussions of literature in the classroom or home school. It is important to note that they are **not** intended to be workbooks for the student, but rather models and guides for discussion leaders. Questions and answers follow the pattern presented in *Teaching the Classics*, CenterForLit’s flagship literature seminar. Though the concepts underlying this approach to literary analysis are explained in detail in that seminar, the following brief summary presents the basic principles upon which this guide is based.

The *Teaching the Classics* approach to literary analysis and interpretation is built around **three unique ideas** which, when combined, produce a powerful instrument for understanding and teaching literature:

First: All works of fiction share the same basic elements — **Context, Structure, and Style**. A literature lesson that helps the student identify these elements in a story prepares them for meaningful discussion of the story’s themes.

Context encompasses all of the details of time and place surrounding the writing of a story, including the personal life of the author as well as historical events that shaped the author’s world.

Structure includes the essential building blocks that make up a story, and that all stories have in common: Conflict, Plot (which includes *exposition*, *rising action*, *climax*, *denouement*, and *conclusion*), Setting, Characters, and Theme.

Style refers to the literary devices used by authors to create the mood and atmosphere of their stories. Recognition of some basic literary devices (alliteration, simile, personification, metaphor, etc.) enables a reader not only to understand the author’s themes more readily, but also to appreciate his craftsmanship more fully.

Second: Because it is approachable and engaging, *children’s literature* is the best genre to employ in teaching the foundational principles of literary analysis. Children’s books present these building blocks in clear, memorable language, and are thus treasure mines of opportunities for the astute teacher—allowing him to present Context, Structure, and Style with ease to children and adults alike. Having learned to recognize these basic elements in the simple text of a classic children’s story, a student is well prepared to analyze complex works suitable for his own age and level of intellectual development.

Third: The best classroom technique for teaching literary analysis and interpretation is the *Socratic Method*. Named after the ancient gadfly who first popularized this style of teaching, the Socratic method employs the art of questioning, rather than lecturing, to accomplish education. Based upon the conviction that the process of discovery constitutes the better part of learning, our program uses well-placed questions to teach students how to think, rather than dictating to them what to think.

The *Teaching the Classics* seminar syllabus supplies a thorough list of Socratic questions for teachers to use in class discussion. The questions are general enough to be used with any book, but focused enough to lead the

student into meaningful contemplation of the themes of even the most difficult stories. Questions on the list are arranged in order of difficulty: from grammar-level questions which ask for the mere fact of a story, to rhetoric-level questions which require discussion of ideologies and transcendent themes. Properly employed, this list can help teachers engage their classes in important discussions of ideas, and can also provide a rich resource for essays and other writing assignments! Used in conjunction with a good writing program, *Teaching the Classics* produces **deep thinkers** at any age.

The questions used in this guide have been taken directly from the Socratic list, and will therefore be familiar to the seminar alumnus.

More information about *Teaching the Classics* may be found at www.centerforlit.com/teaching-the-classics.

Happy reading!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Adam Andrews", with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Adam Andrews, Director
The Center for Literary Education
3350 Beck Road
Rice, WA 99167
(509) 738-6837
adam@centerforlit.com

QUICK CARD



Reference	<i>Amos and Boris</i> . William Steig. (1971) ISBN: 978-0312535667
Plot	An unlikely friendship, reminiscent of Aesop's fable of the mouse and the lion, develops between Amos, a mouse, and Boris, a whale.
Setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The sea• The beach
Characters	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Amos, a loyal mouse• Boris, a whale
Conflict	Man vs. Nature
Theme	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Unlikely friendship• Reciprocity• Loyalty• The value of an act of kindness• Appearance vs. Reality• The Economy of Scale: Don't confuse size and strength with ability.• The strength of love• Memory
Literary Devices	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Alliteration• Anthropomorphism• Circumstantial Irony

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CONFLICT AND PLOT



The following questions are drawn from the “Conflict” and “Plot” sections of the Socratic List, found in Appendix A, pages 84-86 of the Teaching the Classics syllabus.

What does the protagonist want? (5)

Initially, the main character, Amos, wants to have an adventure and to see the world. Yet when he falls into the sea, his only desire is to survive the mishap and make his way back to dry land with his life. He longs to be safe and secure again. Adrift and alone, he wonders if he will drown.

After his miraculous rescue, Amos hopes he'll have an opportunity to repay his friend Boris for his help.

Why can't he have it? (6)

Amos's initial predicament is punctuated by his smallness in the face of the briny deep. “And there he was! Where? In the middle of the immense ocean, a thousand miles from the nearest shore, with no one else in sight as far as the eye could see and not even so much as a stick of driftwood to hold on to.” Though Amos is a mammal, which he notes is the “highest form of life,” he is ill equipped to live in the water. (Man vs. Nature, Man vs. Himself)

Amos hopes to repay Boris's kindness one day, but he cannot imagine how, small as he is, he will ever do so. “How he could ever possibly help Boris, Amos didn't know, but he knew how willing he was.” The whale Boris also harbors doubts that such an occasion might ever arise. “How could that little mouse ever help me?” (Man vs. Himself)

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

Amos has opportunity to repay Boris's kindness when Hurricane Yetta tosses the whale upon the beach, stranding him on the sand. Without Amos's help, Boris will most certainly die. (Man vs. Nature) As a matter of fact, Boris's predicament ironically parallels Amos's earlier trouble. While Amos was drowning in water, Boris is drowning in air.

When Amos finds Boris in this predicament, the little mouse is determined to help his friend. But how could such a little mouse move such a big whale back into the water? “Amos gazed at Boris in an agony of pity. He realized he had to do something very fast and had to think very fast about what it was he had to do.” (Man vs. Himself)

Boris likewise doubts his friend's ability to help him. “I'm afraid he won't be able to help me,” said Boris to himself. “Much as he wants to do something, what can such a little fellow do?” (Man vs. Himself, Man vs. Man)

QUESTIONS ABOUT STYLE: LITERARY DEVICES



The following questions are drawn from the “Literary Devices” section of the Socratic List, found in Appendix A, pages 88-90 of the Teaching the Classics syllabus.

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

Onomatopoeia - Does the author use sound words to tell his story? (14a)

Spluttering
Splashing
Rumbled

Assonance - Does the author use words in sequence or in close proximity which have the same internal vowel sounds? (14c)

“...He loved to hear the surf sounds—
the bursting breakers...”

Consonance - Does the author use words in sequence or in close proximity with the same consonant sound? (14d)

“Amos, a mouse, lived by the ocean. He loved the ocean.”

Alliteration - Does the author use words in sequence or in close proximity that repeat the same initial consonant sound? (14e)

“He loved the smell of the sea air. He loved to hear the surf sounds—the bursting breakers, the backwashes....”

“He was getting terribly tired.”

“He was a ...wet and worried mouse.”

“Without wasting time, these two goodhearted elephants got to pushing with all their might at Boris’s huge body until he began turning over, breaded with sand, and rolling down toward the sea.”

Internal Rhyme - Does the author end words within a sentence or passage with the same final sound to create a musical quality within the text? (14f)

“The whale said he would be happy to take Amos to the Ivory Coast of Africa, where he hap-

pened to be headed anyway, to attend a meeting of whales from all the seven seas.”

“Amos, a mouse, lived by the ocean.”

Clearly Steig loves word play, as here he utilizes a *mosaic rhyme* to create an *elided rhyme*. Mosaic rhyme occurs when a single word achieves a rhyme with a group of words (for example, *Amos* and *a mouse*). Elided rhyme occurs when the first and second rhymes match, but for an aberrant vowel in the second word (for example, the fourth sound of the “o” in *Amos* achieves an elided rhyme with the second sound of the “ou” in *mouse*).

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

Imagery - Does the author create snapshots of images in the mind of the reader for the sake of enhancing meaning, creating setting or mood, or developing character? (16a)

“...these two goodhearted elephants got to pushing with all their might at Boris’s huge body until he began turning over, *breaded with sand*, and rolling down toward the sea.”

“One night, in a *phosphorescent* sea, he marveled at the sight of some whales spouting *luminous* water; and later, lying on the deck of his boat gazing at the immense, starry sky, the tiny mouse Amos, a little speck of a living thing in the vast living universe, felt thoroughly akin to it all. *Overwhelmed* by the beauty and *mystery* of everything, he rolled over and over and right off the deck of his boat and into the sea.”

Steig uses words like “luminous” and “phosphorescent” to create an image of the water of the sea in the night light. He augments Amos’s feeling of the sublime by contrasting the mouse’s size with the universe and by his choice of words like “overwhelmed” and “mystery.”

Personification/Anthropomorphism - Do creatures speak with human voices, expressing rational thoughts and ideas? (16e)

Both Amos and Boris are personified, talking beasts. The author imbues them with human personality, agency, motives, and emotion. He even depicts them thinking about abstract philosophical ideas. When animals are portrayed as human beings, they are said to be *anthropomorphised*.

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

Irony - Do the events in the story turn out in reverse of the way initially expected? (17e)

Boris’s predicament in the story’s final episode leaves him in circumstances akin to those in which he had earlier found Amos. He will die out of water. He needs his friend to extend help. He never anticipated being in such a situation, nor does he expect the mouse Amos to be able to lend him the same help Amos had once received. Boris’s dire circumstances and Amos’s rescue both are instances of circumstantial irony.

Likewise, Steig achieves a degree of humor, which lightens the gravity of Amos’s dilemma, when the mouse, stranded in the middle of the ocean without “so much as a stick of driftwood to hold on to,” begins philosophizing about the nature of death: “He began to wonder what it would be like to

QUESTIONS ABOUT CONTEXT



The following questions are drawn from the “Context” section of the Socratic List, found in Appendix A, pages 91-92 of the Teaching the Classics syllabus.

Who is the author? (18)

William Steig is the well-known author and illustrator of 25 acclaimed children’s classics, including *Brave Irene*, *Amos and Boris*, *Shrek!*, and *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble*. Few readers, however, are aware that his success in the field of children’s books represents what he considered 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 revealed that he used animal characters intentionally to symbolize human behavior. That is, Steig was participating in the genre termed the *beast fable*.

Born in Brooklyn to Polish, Jewish immigrants, Mr. Steig became an artist at his father’s request. A socialist, the elder Steig taught his children they should avoid careers as businessmen (whom he considered exploiters) and as laborers (whom he termed the exploited). Father Steig urged a career in the creative arts. Dutifully, William took his father’s advice, attending City College for two years and the National Academy for three. He spent a mere five days at the Yale School of Fine Arts. When questioned, he remarked that his own education was “defective.” When the Great Depression left his parents, a seamstress and house painter, jobless, William took on the role of provider, hocking his art for bread. Shopping his cartoons around the capitalistic marketplace, he sold several to the *New Yorker* magazine, which became his lifelong employer. Having prospered by capitalizing upon his artistic talents, Mr. Steig continued to market his artwork, popularizing both the contemporary greeting card and carved wooden figurines.

William Steig was the husband of Elizabeth Mead, sister of anthropologist Margaret Mead. Before his death at the age of 95, Steig, ironically modeling his father before him, encouraged his own three children never to take 9-5 jobs, but instead to spend their own lives as artists.

NOTES:

ESSAY QUESTIONS FOR WRITING ASSIGNMENTS



Hints for effective writing assignments can be found on pages 73-74 of the Teaching the Classics syllabus and Chapter 6 of Reading Roadmaps.

1. How does the story characterize friendship?
2. How does Steig's use of anthropomorphism further his meditation on the grandeur and misery of man?
3. Steig is known for his direct style and colorful action. How do the author's syntactical choices affect these? Provide examples from the text.
4. How does Steig use irony to create reversal in the plot, and what kind of themes subsequently emerge?

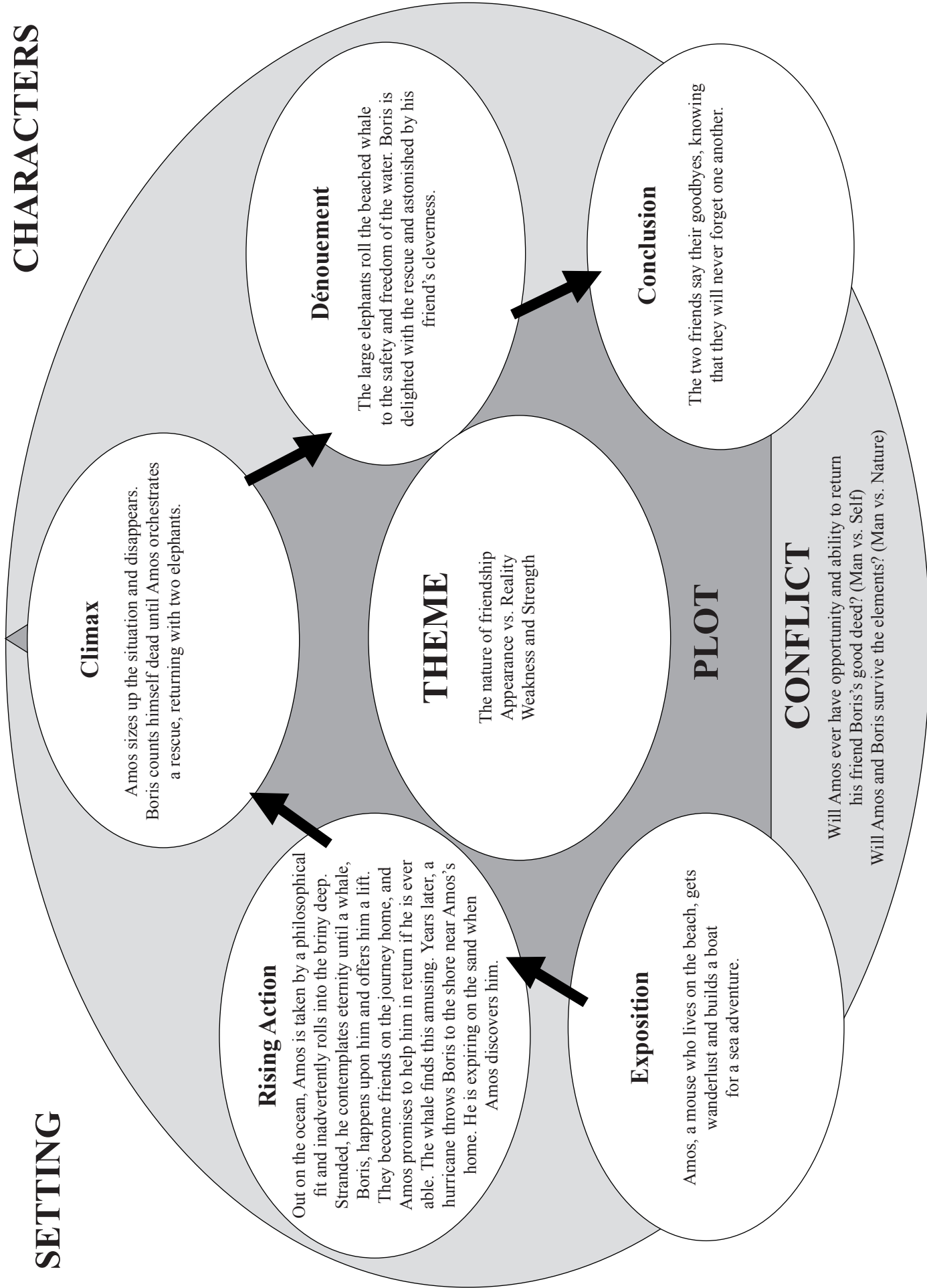
STORY CHARTS



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.

Story Chart: *Amos and Boris*



Story Chart: *Amos and Boris*

SETTING

CHARACTERS

