



Chaim Potok's
The Chosen

Questions for Socratic Discussion
by Emily Andrews



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QUICK CARD



<p><i>Reference</i></p>	<p><i>The Chosen</i> by Chaim Potok (1967) ISBN-10: 0449213447 ISBN-13: 978-0449213445</p>
<p><i>Plot</i></p>	<p>When Reuven’s eye is injured during a baseball game, an unlikely friendship develops between himself and Danny, the offending player on the opposing Hasidic team. Raised by two very different styles of fatherhood and in separate Jewish communities, they come of age together during a time of great suffering.</p>
<p><i>Setting</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A suburb of Brooklyn, New York City • Begins during the final years of World War II and continues sometime after Israel became a nation (c. 1944-1948) • The Jewish community, both Orthodox and Hasidic • Reuven and Danny’s adolescence
<p><i>Characters</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reuven Malter • Reuven’s father • Danny Saunders • Reb Saunders, Danny’s father
<p><i>Conflict</i></p>	<p>Man vs. Man Man vs. Society Man vs. Self Man vs. God</p>
<p><i>Theme</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The role of silence in God’s relationship with man and in man’s journey toward compassion. • Relationship, fatherhood, and friendship, as comfort in suffering and a guide toward coming of age. • The healing power of compassion in a cockeyed world.
<p><i>Literary Devices</i></p>	<p>Imagery/ Symbolism Foreshadowing</p>

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: SETTING



Where does this story happen? (1a-c)

Chaim Potok's moving story of compassion, fatherhood, and friendship takes place in the cultural melting pot of New York City. The traditional first stop for American immigrants, New York is known for its extremely diverse population. Yet instead of employing a conflict that pits two different people groups against one another, the main struggle of *The Chosen* unfolds inside of a community that claims to worship the same God. By focusing on the interior turmoil that undergirds the different sects of Reuven's Jewish neighborhood, Potok weaves a tale that transcends problems of nationality, race, or class. Instead he speaks to the common human condition.

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)

There is another way, however, in which Potok's tale is very much about the clashing of cultures. The main problem of this story concerns the various ways in which the Jewish community has responded to American culture and the modern world.

For Reuven and the people of his synagogue, America represents the freedom and safety to worship as they please, and they take pride in the country which has become their new homeland. They integrate American culture into their traditional way of life:

"But to the students of most of the parochial schools, an inter-league baseball victory had come to take on only a shade less significance than a top grade in Talmud, for it was an unquestioned mark of one's Americanism, and to be counted a loyal American had become increasingly important to us during these last years of the war." (12)

Although unshakeable in their religious beliefs, Reuven and his community are eager to be accepted as American patriots. Reuven's father trains him to be a free-thinking man of the world, conversant with all major contributors to the Western tradition, whether Jewish or not.

As a result of this attitude, Reuven and the other students at his yeshiva demonstrate exuberance and ease in their interactions with the world around them. They live in light of their American liberties.

On the other hand, the Polish Jewish immigrants led by Danny's tzaddik father see themselves as wanderers in a foreign land. Zealously loyal to the customs (and even the dress) of their 18th century Polish fathers, they guard themselves against Western and modern influences.

As a result, their black garments reflect their sober demeanor. Looking to the future for the appearance of a Messiah, they mourn his absence in the present. They go to great lengths to protect themselves from false teachings and to prepare themselves for the coming Savior by filling their hours with Talmud study. English subjects, or the studies required by the American government, are given minimum attention.

When does this story happen? Does the story happen in a particular year, era, or age of the world? (2d)

The story opens in the final stages of World War II. In fact, during his stay at the hospital Reuven follows the reporting of the Normandy invasion, which pinpoints the year at 1944.

This time period is particularly poignant for the Jewish community. Not only did the patriotism stirred up by the war effort hand them additional pressure to prove themselves true Americans, as it did for all recent immigrants, but in the months following the end of the war, they would be overwhelmed by the tragic news of the holocaust. The sheer magnitude of slaughter experienced by their European kinsman was astounding. For a people whose history is filled with tragedy, the sorrow of the 20th century made distant past a present reality for modern Jews.

In the years after the war, that raw wound would lead to the Zionist movement. Tired of being treated as foreigners wherever they wandered, the Zionists looked to Palestine and the home of their Biblical ancestors for a place to call their own. As Danny's father demonstrates, however, the Jews were deeply divided on this issue. While some looked to build a Jewish state with their own hands, more traditional sects viewed such action as arrogant disobedience to the coming Messiah who would only in himself have the power to right the deep wrongs of the Jewish past.

How long a period of time does the story cover? In what time of life for the main characters do the events occur? (2b,d)

At the beginning of the novel, Reuven and Danny are 15 and studying at their respective yeshivas, secondary schools primarily intended to train young Jewish students in traditional religious texts. By the time the story ends, they have entered college.

As the story unfolds, the reader watches the main characters leave boyhood behind and begin their journey into manhood. They grow physically, and Danny's beard comes in, but more important to their coming-of-age narrative is the growth of their understanding as their eyes are opened to all the tragedy, contradiction, and uncertainty of human life.

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CHARACTERS



Who is the story about? (3)

This question is not so simple as in other stories. We begin by primarily following Reuven's experiences, but as his eyes are turned outward from himself toward Danny, we too have our eyes turned to Danny's struggle. Following the two as one protagonist would perhaps be appropriate if Reuven takes his father's advice to heart: "*A Greek philosopher said that two people who are true friends are like two bodies with one soul...Reuven, if you can, make Danny Saunders your friend*" (74).

Reuven Malter is the son of a renowned Jewish scholar and widower. Although they are devout and practicing Jews (Reuven still wears a four-cornered garment under his shirt), they have not closed themselves off from the secular world. Reuven takes delight in studying the irreligious subjects of mathematics and logic, however, his dearest desire is to serve as a rabbi. This in spite of his father's wish for him to become a professor. Yet there is no hostility between father and son on this subject. Rather, the two are extremely close and communicative.

Respectful, compassionate, and studious overall, Reuven does have a bit of pride and a temper. We see this triggered when Danny Saunders, who couldn't have a more opposite background than Reuven's, challenges him on the baseball field.

Danny is an unlikely friend for Reuven. The son of an honored tzaddik, or Hasidic spiritual leader, Danny has grown up in silence, consciously separated from secular society. His anger, bitterness, and pride are fueled by his father's refusal to speak to him about anything other than Talmud. Although on the outside he wears the conservative earlocks and black garb of a Hasid Jew, secretly he yearns for all the knowledge and ideas of the great and secular Western tradition.

As the eldest son, Danny is heir to his father's position. Yet quietly inside he struggles against his inclination toward the career of a scholar, and even more sinister to his family, a desire to leave the practice of Hasidism.

Reuven and Danny are thrown together by a silly accident, yet Reuven's father reminds him that the most important things in our lives often arrive through silly or superfluous means. After overcoming their original differences, these two boys form a fast friendship. Reuven is fascinated by Danny's mind, and Danny has finally found someone he can talk to. They become inseparable. Partaking of each other's experience, in many ways they become one.

What does the character say about himself to other people? What do other characters think or say about him? (3j,k)

Reuven

- “I told my team we’re going to kill you apikorsim this afternoon.” –Danny (23)
- “I found myself growing more and more angry, and I felt the anger begin to focus itself upon Danny Saunders, and suddenly it was not at all difficult for me to hate him.” –Reuven (28)
- “But you really had me going, Malter. I can’t figure it out.” –Danny (67)
- “When you are a professor in a university, you must persuade your colleagues not to have long faculty meetings.” –Mr. Malter (86)
- “I felt I had crossed into another world, that little pieces of my old self had been left behind on the black asphalt floor of the school year alongside the shattered lens of my glasses.” –Reuven (96)
- “The accident with the baseball has bound him [Danny] to you, and he has already sensed in you someone he can talk to without fear. I am very proud of you for that. He would never have told you about his library visits if he believed for a moment you would not keep his words a secret trust. And I want you to let him be your friend and to let yourself be his friend. I am certain you and Reb Saunders’ son can help each other in such a friendship.” –Mr. Malter (106)
- “I don’t understand it,” I said. “Weeks and weeks go by, one Shabbat follows another, and I’m the same, nothing has changed, and suddenly one day something happens, and everything looks different.” –Reuven (107)
- “You think a friend is an easy thing to be? If you are truly his [Danny’s] friend, you will discover otherwise.” –Reb Saunders (136)
- “I never knew myself capable of the kind of hatred I felt toward Reb Saunders all through that semester. It became, finally, a blind, raging fury, and I would find myself trembling with it at odd moments of the day.” –Reuven (221)
- “To hell with you, Danny Saunders, I kept saying to myself all that day. I can live without your beard and earlocks with no trouble at all.” –Reuven (223)
- “I felt sick with his [Danny’s] fear and said nothing.” –Reuven (256)

Danny

- “He was a good deal taller than I, and in contrast to my somewhat ordinary but decently proportioned features and dark hair, his face seemed to have been cut from stone. His chin, jaw and cheekbones were made up of jutting hard lines, his nose was straight and pointed, his lips full, rising to a steep angle from the center point beneath his nose and then slanting off to form a too-wide mouth. His eyes were deep blue, and the sparse tufts of hair on his chin, jawbones, and upper lip, the close-cropped hair on his head, and the flow of side curls along his ears were the color of sand. He moved in a loose-jointed, disheveled sort of way, all arms and legs, talking in Yiddish to one of his teammates and ignoring me completely as he passed by. I told myself that I did not like his Hasidic-bred sense of superiority and that it would be a great pleasure to defeat him and his team in this afternoon’s game.” –Reuven (18)
- “For my part,” I told him, “you can go to hell, and take your whole snooty bunch of Hasidim along with you!” –Reuven (63)
- “Sometimes I’m not sure I know what God wants, though.” –Danny (79)
- “My family has been their rabbi for six generations now. I can’t just walk out on them. I’m—I’m a little trapped. I’ll work it out, though—somehow.” –Danny (81)
- “I hope you are not as violent with a book as you are with a baseball.” –Mr. Malter (83)
- “‘I can’t get over him being the son of Reb Saunders.’ ‘Danny cannot get over it, either,’ my father said quietly.” –Reuven and Mr. Malter (86)
- “Reuven, Reb Saunders’ son has a mind like Solomon Maimon’s, perhaps even a greater mind. And Reb Saunders’ son does not live in Poland. America is free. There are no walls here to hold back the Jews. Is it so strange, then, that he is breaking his father’s rules and reading forbidden books? He cannot help himself. It is unbelievable what he has read these past few months. You are a brilliant student. I tell you that now very proudly. But he is a phenomenon. Once in a generation is a mind like that born.” –Mr. Malter (106)
- “It is a shame that a mind such as Danny’s will be shut off from the world.” –Mr. Malter (141)
- “Ah, how that man suffered! And my Daniel *enjoyed* the last terrible page, because when he finished it he realized for the first time what a memory he had. He looked at me proudly and told me back the story from memory, and I cried inside my heart. I went away and cried to the Master of the Universe, ‘What have you done to me? A mind like this I need for a son? A *heart* I need for a son, a *soul* I need for a son, *compassion* I want from my son, righteousness, mercy, strength to suffer and carry pain, *that* I want from my son, not a mind without a soul!’” –Reb Saunders (264)

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)

Although Reuven and Danny both belong to the Jewish community, they belong to very different sects of that community, each with its own views on what is important in life. While the Judaism of Reuven's synagogue holds firmly to a foundational set of principles based on Mosaic law, wearing skull caps and prayer garments as well as adhering to a kosher diet, Danny's Hasidic synagogue is characterized by its much stricter dogma and legalistic values.

Reuven's father outlines the history of Hasidism for his son in Chapter Six of the story. He begins by asserting that it is "*in Poland, or, more accurately, in the Slavic countries of eastern Europe, that Danny's soul had been born*" (98). The history of Hasidism is characterized by the Eastern tradition, which stands in contrast to the Judeo-Christian heritage of the West. Although it is over-generalized, one way to state the difference between the cultures of the two hemispheres would be to point to the mysticism of the East and the rationalism of the West. Mysticism emphasizes man's inability to comprehend the immensity of divine truth. At its extreme, it embraces a spiritualistic vision of the world, where man is terrorized by supernatural forces outside his control. Rationalism, on the other hand, affirms man's capacity to know and even reason his way to all truth. Also liable to an extreme, it can deny any need for special revelation and become a man-centered view of the world.

Jews made their way to the East in the thirteenth century during a time when they were being persecuted in greater Europe. Poland encouraged Jewish immigration in an effort to boost its economy, and as a result the Jewish people became intermediaries between the Polish nobility and the lower-class tax payers. When the persecuted class rose in revolution, the Jews suffered tragic loss. Their woes were multiplied when they fell under the influence of a false Messiah. When he was exposed as a fraud, they entered a period of spiritual darkness.

It was around this time that the Besht, or founder of Hasidism, arrived on the scene. Ironically, his message was one of love and understanding, born from meditation and solitude in nature. Rejecting the "pilpul" or the empty scholarship of Jewish leaders at the time, he believed that compassion on one's neighbor in spite of their beliefs or views was far more important than any kind of "mechanical religion" (103).

Against the original intentions of the Besht, division grew between the followers of Hasidism and the followers of its opponents. Hatred led the Hasids to close themselves off from the world and those who disagreed with them; they entered a silence of isolation instead of a silence of humility and compassion.

According to Reuven's father, Reb Saunders is a tzaddik motivated by the original purposes of the Hasidic tradition, a man of compassion concerned with the soul and not just the mind. However, Danny's thirst for knowledge puts him in conflict with the culture and popular practices of his religion.

Who else is the story about? Is there an antagonist? What goal of the protagonist is he opposed to? (4a,b)

At first one may consider Reb Saunders to be an antagonist, opposed to the wishes of his son. His mysterious refusal to discuss anything but Talmud with his oldest child comes across as superfluous cruelty. Danny believes himself to be trapped by his family. His father represents everything that prevents him from leaving the Hasidic community or even pursuing the career he desires. And his abba, the man who should be the first to help Danny work through his struggle, has instead fabricated a barrier of silence between them.

Has the antagonist always opposed the protagonist? If not, what caused his change of direction? Is the antagonist truly evil, by definition, or is he merely antagonistic to the protagonist by virtue of his vocation or duty? (4k,m)

At the very end of the story, we learn that Reb Saunders has consciously chosen the way of silence, not out of hatred, but out of deep love for his son. Seeing Danny's almost mechanical mind and hunger for information, he believed it was his duty as a father to cultivate compassion in his son through suffering.

NOTES:

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CONFLICT AND PLOT



What does the protagonist want? (5)

This question primarily concerns Danny, who dearly wants to study the forbidden subject of psychology, as well as the freedom to question his Hasidic upbringing. More than anything, however, he desires a sympathetic ear to listen to his troubles and concerns, and a compassionate voice to fill his silence.

It may seem at the beginning as though Reuven does not want anything. Yet over the course of the story we discover that he wants nothing more than to be a friend to Danny.

Why can't he have it? (6)

The expectations of his community prevent Danny from being open about his studious activities or career hopes. Not just his father, but all of his father's followers look to him as a promise of future guidance and authority (**man vs. society**). Also disturbing to Danny is his father's silence. The one most equipped to help him sort out his thoughts and feelings refuses to engage him on any subject but Talmud (**man vs. man**). Perhaps the root of the problem, however, is Danny's own confusion and arrogance as he wrestles with his conflicting emotions while growing from boyhood into manhood (**man vs. self**).

Once Reuven overcomes his initial prejudices, it seems as though the main barrier to his friendship with Danny will be Reb Saunders' disapproval of his father's political activities (**man vs. man**). However, when Reuven is isolated in a silence of his own, he comes to realize that all along the primary impediment to his identity as a good friend has been his own hate and blindness (**man vs. self**).

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

There are many other ideas and questions lying beneath the surface of this story. One is the problem of good reading, or good education. Danny's mind rests uneasy when he is not free to encounter ideas outside the range of his community's approval. Yet when he undertakes to pursue them on his own, Reuven's father steps in to guide his progress and converse with him about what he is learning. Mr. Malter's view might be characterized by the instruction he gives his son after the doctor has ordered Reuven to rest his eyes: "...you must not read by yourself" (141). The need for conversation as a means to proper education stands in tension to the tzaddik's way of silence. Whether or not this tension is resolved might be an interesting topic for discussion – or silent meditation.

Another question of the story is that most fundamental issue of human existence, the problem of pain (**man vs. God**). Tragedy raises its ugly head time and again in the novel. World War II claims many lives, the Holocaust brings news of over 6 million Jewish deaths, and Billy is blinded in an accident at the hands of his father. Danny's silent world, too, seems a meaningless suffering. It's a "cockeyed word" according to Mr. Savo, and when Reuven attempts to process the staggering numbers of the holocaust he proclaims it "senseless" and "empty of meaning." The perceived solution for the characters varies according to their theological assumptions. While Reb Saunders clings to the need and hope of a Messiah, Mr. Malter proclaims man's power to give the meaningless meaning by his own choices. The author doesn't seem to affirm either of their solutions, or any solution at all for that matter. Instead he redirects our attention toward the comfort found in a community that suffers together and takes on each other's pain as their own. In concentration camps during the Holocaust, those selected for the ovens were commonly called "the chosen." Potok's decision to reference this tragic epithet in his title may also point to his concern with the universal nature of suffering and the required death of self necessary for experiencing the life of community.

Finally, Reuven and Danny both struggle to understand their life's vocation or calling. Both boys have had their fathers predetermine their career. For Reuven, it is his father's preference that he become a professor when his true desire is to become a rabbi. Danny's situation, on the other hand, is a little more serious. He is the heir of his father, and to reject the position of tzaddik would be to disrupt expectations and throw into disarray the customs of his community. Do Reuven and Danny have the power to choose their life's work, or must they fulfill the vocation that has been chosen for them?

What happens in the story? (8)

What begins as an everyday baseball game for Reuven soon takes a more serious turn when the opposing team begins attacking his yeshiva's religious beliefs. Far from an innocent American pastime, the game takes on the atmosphere of what Reuven calls a "holy war" (13). The players for the Hasidic yeshiva taunt Reuven's more liberal Jewish teammates, calling them "apikorsim" or apostates of the Jewish faith. As a result, Reuven is determined that his team should win and focuses all of his energy on playing the best game of his life.

He directs all of this anger and energy toward the gangly, but aggressive and talented, Danny Saunders. Time and again Danny saunters arrogantly up to the plate and cracks balls at a dangerous speed right toward center field, where everyone is too afraid to attempt a catch. Consequently the Hasids gain points on Reuven's team and Danny rounds the bases, pausing on Reuven's plate to say, "I told my team we're going to kill you apikorsim this afternoon" (23).

Now at the height of his hatred, Reuven replaces his teammate at center field and prepares himself to catch Danny's next swing. He accomplishes his purpose, but in the

process shatters his glasses and gets knocked flat to the ground. A piece of glass gets stuck in his eye, and his coach rushes him to the hospital after the game.

Following an emergency surgery, Reuven remains in the hospital for a week, getting to know the rambunctious Mr. Savo and gentle Billy. His father visits him regularly, bringing him his prayer garments and a radio so that he can follow the Normandy invasion. According to Mr. Malter a radio brings the world together, and “anything that brought the world together he called a blessing” (52). Here at the very beginning, we see that Reuven’s family understands openness and communication to be the foundation of community.

Reuven also receives a surprise visit from Danny, the murderer himself. The injured boy reacts poorly, shouting for Danny to leave him alone. When Reuven’s father finds out about his behavior, he is disappointed in his son and Reuven regrets disgracing his father. Danny visits again, and although their respective backgrounds remain mysterious to each other, they begin to work out their differences and strike up a conversation.

Danny is different than Reuven expected. His appearance is extremely conservative, but he talks like and expresses the interests of a normal 15-year-old boy. Danny is surprisingly open right off the bat with Reuven, confessing his desire to become a psychologist and explaining the silence of his father:

“He reads a lot, but he never writes. He says that words distort what a person really feels in his heart. He doesn’t like to talk too much, either. Oh, he talks plenty when we’re studying Talmud together. But otherwise he doesn’t say much. He told me once he wishes everyone could talk in silence” (72).

Potok presents two very different father/son relationships. Reuven discusses absolutely everything with his father. He highly respects his father’s opinion and will scrutinize his own thoughts and behavior if his father does not approve. Danny, on the other hand, can only talk to his father about Talmud. He holds his opinions and all of life’s worries quietly inside himself with no one to guide his thinking.

Reuven is finally released from the hospital, but is told there is a chance that scar tissue will grow over his pupil, blinding him in his injured eye. When the bandage is taken off and Reuven can see from both eyes, he feels as though he has a new lease on life and can see everything more clearly than before. In some ways, he is passing from the life and problems of a boy to those of a man. He and Danny grow closer in their friendship, and Reuven is invited to join Danny and his family at their synagogue for the Sabbath.

When Reuven steps foot in Danny’s neighborhood, he feels as though he has been transported to another world. He accompanies Danny to his father’s Sabbath service, and then joins the synagogue for dinner afterwards. During this meal, Reb Saunders begins a detailed Talmudic exposition, and Reuven is shocked to discover its true purpose is to quiz Danny in front of everyone. He is even more shocked when the tzaddik looks to him

for answers to a problem of gematriya, a mystical Jewish tradition in which numbers are manipulated to interpret Talmud. Reb Saunders seems pleased with his son's new friend, but Reuven is disgusted, believing that Danny's father has only accepted him because of his intellect.

The boys grow closer, and Reuven begins to spend afternoons with Danny and his father during their time of Talmudic study. They discover that they are destined to attend the same college, and look forward to continuing their studies together there. Once they begin, Danny rockets to the top of his class in Talmud, but struggles over differences with his psychology professor. Reuven encourages his friend to stick to his favorite subject, and quietly excels in his own studies of Talmud and mathematics.

Things go well until after the war, when news of the European Holocaust reaches America. The Jewish community is stunned and heartbroken, but the responses of the different Jewish leaders are quite divided. Reuven's father throws himself into the Zionist movement, hoping to give meaning to the senseless slaughter by helping in the organization of a new Jewish state where the people can be safe and free to rule themselves. Danny's father, on the other hand, sees the movement as an affront to the Messiah, who alone has power to protect and right the wrongs of the Jewish people. Tensions mount until Reb Saunders orders Danny to cease all communication with Reuven because of his father's activities. Not long afterward, Reuven's father works himself into a heart attack and is forced to rest in the hospital, leaving Reuven alone in the silence of his home.

How is the main problem solved? (9)

It is striking that, by the end of the novel, Reuven is forced to experience the same silence that has tortured his best friend all these years. Waiting for his father's release from the hospital, he observes, "It was now a matter of waiting out the silence until he came home" (229). Similarly, he agonizes over Danny's enforced absence, "I wished he would at least say or do something, nod his head, smile, even catch me at a mistake— anything but that awful silence" (233). It is only after this period of nothingness that Reuven is ready for the greatest test of friendship he has had to face yet.

Israel eventually becomes a state, and universal compassion for the lives lost in the fight for nationhood dissolves tension in the Jewish community. Time softens Reb Saunders' anger, and he eventually allows Danny to resume his friendship with Reuven.

He asks Reuven to return for another of their Talmudic discussions, but Reuven is angry and bitter and cannot bring himself to go. Meanwhile Danny has applied to several schools to study psychology without talking to his father, and he panics when an acceptance letter arrives at his house before he can hide it. He spends several days in misery over his father's silence on the issue, and Reuven confesses, "I felt sick with his fear and said nothing" (256). It is at this moment that we come to realize Reuven's greatest desire has been fulfilled. The project of true friendship as his father described it

in the beginning is brought to fruition as Reuven carries the fear and emotion of another person within himself.

Reuven expresses to his father his confusion over Reb Saunders' failure to act, and admits to some guilt for not yet visiting the tzaddik. Mr. Malter confronts Reuven's blindness, helping him see that the tzaddik's invitations have been a plea for help concerning Danny. Reuven is still learning to hear what is spoken silently.

He agrees to visit Danny's family, and sits down with his friend in front of Reb Saunders. At first the tzaddik only speaks to Reuven, explaining his love for his son, the callousness Danny manifested as a young child, and his desire to raise a son who has a compassionate heart. He chose the way of silence for this purpose early in Danny's life, saying "One learns of the pain of others by suffering one's own pain, by turning inside oneself, by finding one's own soul" (265). The role of a tzaddik, he continues, is to carry the weight of his people's suffering, a suffering that one feels and cannot express with distorting words:

"And I had to make certain his soul would be the soul of a tzaddik no matter what he did with his life" (266).

Regardless of what Danny would choose to do with his life, Reb Saunders desired to give his son a heart of compassion and empathy. He admits that a wiser man may have chosen a different means of education, but however righteous the method the truth is that he has succeeded in his goal. He raised Danny the only way he knew, the same way in which he himself was raised. In a climactic moment he speaks Danny's name, and in tears Danny assures his father that even though he will leave the practices of Hasidism, he will not cease to follow God's law or reject his faith.

Danny's father confesses to Reuven that his success with gematriya had nothing to do with his acceptance of him, and that from the beginning he approved of his heart even more than he approved of his mind. The tzaddik leaves, and Reuven sits by Danny as he cries, feeling his pain:

"And then I was crying too, crying with Danny, silently, for his pain and for the years of his suffering, knowing that I loved him, and not knowing whether I hated or loved the long, anguished years of his life" (268-69).

Danny is not the only one who achieves the heart of a tzaddik.

How does the story end? (10)

Danny attends Columbia to study psychology, and when Reuven sees him again he has shaved his face and cut off his earlocks. We find out that Reb Saunders is now talking to his son, even if he is disturbed by Danny's new appearance. Mr. Malter asks Danny if he will raise his own son in silence, and after careful consideration he admits that he will if

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: THEME



What does the protagonist learn? (11)

Danny may have grown into a man of compassion as his father desired, but it is perhaps Reuven whose heart most clearly changes over the course of the story. Prejudiced at first toward Danny, and then toward Reb Saunders, Reuven is slowly drawn outside of himself through his own silent suffering, finally experiencing the joys and sorrows of his best friend as if they were one person. Danny's tears become his tears.

But if Reuven has benefited from the tzaddik's way of silence, Danny has also benefited from Mr. Malter's way of conversation. It is the confidence and support of Reuven that carries him through his season of suffering. The Malter's encourage him to open his mind to ideas that are not his own through reading and discussion, which eventually allows him to humble himself enough to learn a method of psychology with which he did not originally agree.

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

The way of silence is prevalent in Eastern thought, even appearing in the Christian theology of some Eastern Orthodox churches.¹ It is sometimes called an **apophatic** theology or the **via negativa** (way of negation). In man's relationship to God, it calls for silence or the emptying of the mind in God's presence. Proponents, just like Reb Saunders, claim that words or language stand as a barrier between man and that which he would know. It is not that words mean nothing, but rather that they mean too much and can distort the meaning of that which they are describing. The words describing an object are symbols and not the object itself, but man can confuse the symbol for the object and misunderstand that which the words are describing. Therefore, when man stands before God, an apophatic theology demands that he get rid of the intervening words in order to approach God as closely as possible.

Reb Saunders has applied this theology to human interactions. By refusing Danny any words, he forces Danny to encounter a suffering in himself that couldn't possibly be fully described to another with language. As a result, during the times where Danny and Reuven walk in silence, they communicate feelingly instead of with language. For either Danny or Reuven to try to give words to their pain would be to fail in honestly communicating their suffering.

¹ This idea is not absolutely Eastern as it can be found in the Western Catholic tradition as well.

We can only occupy the experience of our own minds, and can never truly understand the thoughts or experiences of another. According to Reb Saunders' perspective, silence is the closest we can come to being one in suffering or even joy. At the end of the novel, Danny and Reuven marvel over the fact that Danny desires to become a professor when he is expected to be a tzaddik, and Reuven desires to be a rabbi when he is expected to be a professor. They cannot understand each other's position, and Reuven says "we looked at each other in quiet wonder" (247). They are closer in their quiet and wonder than in trying to explain and defend themselves.

Potok doesn't offer clear agreement or disagreement with this line of thought. Reuven's father disapproves of Reb Saunders' decision to the very end, arguing, "There are better ways to teach a child compassion" (253). He admits, however, that Danny's father has the right to raise his son as he chooses, and that he did not have to raise Reuven in this way because he is not a tzaddik. However, Reuven does himself gain compassion for his friend through his enforced time of silence.

Yet there is also merit in Mr. Malter's style of parenting. Through continued conversation with his son, he offers Reuven a secure place to voice and wrestle with new ideas. He gains a relationship with his son through openness in the same way that Reuven and Danny develop a friendship through vulnerable conversation.

Perhaps the means are not what is important to Mr. Potok, but rather the end which matters in his view. Both fathers desire their sons to come of age with a heart, and not just a mind. In a "cockeyed" world of seemingly meaningless tragedy, division, and loss, comfort is found through carrying one another's suffering and standing beside each other through the pain. The joy of life is found through choosing a friend, becoming "like two bodies with one soul." It is often a difficult and demanding choice, bringing a person twice the allotment of suffering, but it is also a rewarding choice, preventing isolation and doubling the allotment of joy. The pain that enters the world is an opportunity to be drawn outside ourselves and experience the salvation of unmerited companionship – a little reflection of the comfort promised to come through the Messiah.

Consequently, although Danny is given the opportunity to choose his own line of work, he has not entirely avoided his inherited calling. Just as Reuven and Danny have been chosen by each other to fill the role of friendship, Danny (and perhaps also Reuven) has been chosen by providence to be a tzaddik for the world, even if he does not serve officially as one for his own community. Coming of age, they have become "the chosen" friends to suffering mankind.

NOTES:

QUESTIONS ABOUT STYLE: LITERARY DEVICES



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

The eye as a vehicle for sight or vision is a frequent concern of this novel. At first it is Reuven's injury that forces him to consider the possibility of blindness. He fears the loneliness and darkness of lost sight.

His kind and considerate hospital companion, Billy, is the first indication that someone without physical sight may still have better vision than those who do not have the use of their eyes. Mr. Savo, on the other hand, comes to lose one of his eyes, and ends up literally seeing the world "cockeyed." Without the grounding of tradition or religion, he fails to see any coherency in seemingly random and meaningless tragic events. Yet Savo is also a picture of man's condition in a fallen world. Even with faith we are unable to grasp with the mind's eye the purpose of suffering; we can only see half of the picture.

When Danny first visits Reuven in the hospital, Reuven senses someone's presence before he opens his eyes. Potok again uses the **imagery** of sight and blindness, light and darkness: "*Now something was blocking the sunlight. Then the sunlight was back again, and I could see it in my sleep through the lid of my right eye. Then it was gone again, and I felt myself getting a little angry at whoever was playing with the sunlight*" (61). Having thus far lived a bright and simple childhood, Danny is the first indication that there is something which Reuven cannot see. He is blind to the suffering of others and to a way of life that is not his own. Although he escapes physical blindness, there is a deeper kind of vision that he lacks.

Danny's eyes are one of the first features that Reuven notices, and over the course of the story his vision begins to grow weak with too much study. He is constantly rubbing at his eyes. Even glasses do not help. Danny's sight is strained, and just as he is striving to find truth with his eyes through reading, he is also striving to find sight of a spiritual or emotional nature with his inner eye. He tells Reuven, "We're blind about the most important thing in our lives, our own selves" (147). Reuven, too, imagines Danny as a blind man, likening the tapping of his capped shoes to the tapping of a blind man's cane as he tries to find his way (116).

It is eventually through someone else’s eyes that Danny is able to see himself. Reuven opens his own eyes to see Reb Saunders’ plea for help, which allows Danny to come to peace with his father and with himself. Both boys find the true purpose of their eyes: to see and bring into themselves the suffering of others. In the final pages of the novel, Reuven observes of Danny that “there was a light in his eyes that was almost blinding” (270). Light enters a dark and dusty world when we truly see each other.

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

Potok uses **foreshadowing** when Reuven senses that a normal ball game has turned into a critical moment in his life:

“I felt a sudden momentary sense of unreality, as if the play yard, with its black asphalt floor and its white base lines, were my entire world now, as if all the previous years of my life had led me somehow to this one ball game, and all the future years of my life would depend upon its outcome. I stood there for a moment, holding the glasses in my hand and feeling frightened. Then I took a deep breath, and the feeling passed. It’s only a ball game, I told myself. What’s a ball game?”

Reuven has no way of knowing it at the time, but the outcome of this ball game will mark the beginning of his growth into manhood. It is not just the win or loss of the day, but the decision Reuven will make to allow Danny into his life that will change its entire course.

A bit of foreshadowing also takes place as Reuven’s father tells his son the story of Solomon Maimon, foreseeing a path that Danny’s life could take:

“He had a great mind, but it never left him in peace. He wandered from city to city, never finding roots anywhere, never satisfied...” (106).

Forbidden to study secular subjects, Solomon abandoned his Jewish faith and his family to feed his mind on all the knowledge the world could offer. Eventually he found that knowledge could not fulfill him. Mr. Malter suggests that unless something changes, Danny is headed for the same fate. Like Reb Saunders, he knows that Danny needs more than just a mind, and he encourages Reuven to engage his heart through friendship. It is relationship that roots and grounds a wandering soul.

NOTES:

QUESTIONS ABOUT CONTEXT



Herman Harold Potok, Hebrew name Chaim Tzvi, was born in Buffalo, New York on February 17, 1929 into an Orthodox Jewish family. Although he was not Hasidic, like Danny he was discouraged from reading secular books, but dreamed of becoming a writer of fiction. He received a Jewish education and attended Yeshiva University, earning a BA in English Literature by 1950. He continued his studies at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, where four years later he was ordained as a rabbi.

He married Adena Sara Mosevitzsky in 1958 after a few years of service in the army as a chaplain in South Korea. Together they had three sons. Not long after his marriage he began graduate studies at the University of Pennsylvania and spent a year in Israel to prepare for his dissertation on Solomon Maimon. That was 1963. In 1964 he moved to Brooklyn, and three years later he would publish his first novel, *The Chosen*.

Potok claimed that Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* most influenced his own literary career along with the works of Ernest Hemingway, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Thomas Mann. A serious student of Jewish theology, he also concerned himself with the role of art and uncensored reading in the Jewish community. He would write several works of fiction and nonfiction including *The Promise*, a sequel to *The Chosen* that follows the adult friendship of Danny and Reuven. He is also famous for his 1972 novel *My Name Is Asher Lev* about a young Jewish boy who desires to pursue a career in art.

Potok lived with his family in Jerusalem from 1970-1977, and his work was much admired by other Jewish authors and artists including Elie Wiesel. In 2001 he was diagnosed with brain cancer and died in his Pennsylvania home on July 23, 2002 at the age of 73.

NOTES:

ESSAY QUESTIONS FOR WRITING ASSIGNMENTS



1. In what ways do Reuven and Danny change over the course of the novel? *The Chosen* is a coming of age story. What is maturity or coming of age according to Chaim Potok?
2. In what ways does the setting of this story make it more powerful? What about the time period or location of the events draws out Potok's theme more clearly?
3. What is the difference between the ways that Mr. Malter and Reb Saunders encourage compassion in their sons? What are the benefits and drawbacks to each style of parenting?
4. Reb Saunders says that "words are cruel, words play tricks, they distort what is in the heart, they conceal the heart, the heart speaks through silence" (265). What does he mean by this? Support your answer with examples from the story of silence communicating more effectively than words.
5. How does Potok employ the symbol of eyes to emphasize his main theme? Find passages where he uses the imagery of eyesight, vision, light, or darkness and blindness. Explain how these passages underscore the author's ideas.
6. What conflicts do the protagonists struggle with in the story? What does Reuven or Danny want and why can't they have it? Choose one main conflict and explain how the author uses that struggle to communicate his main theme.

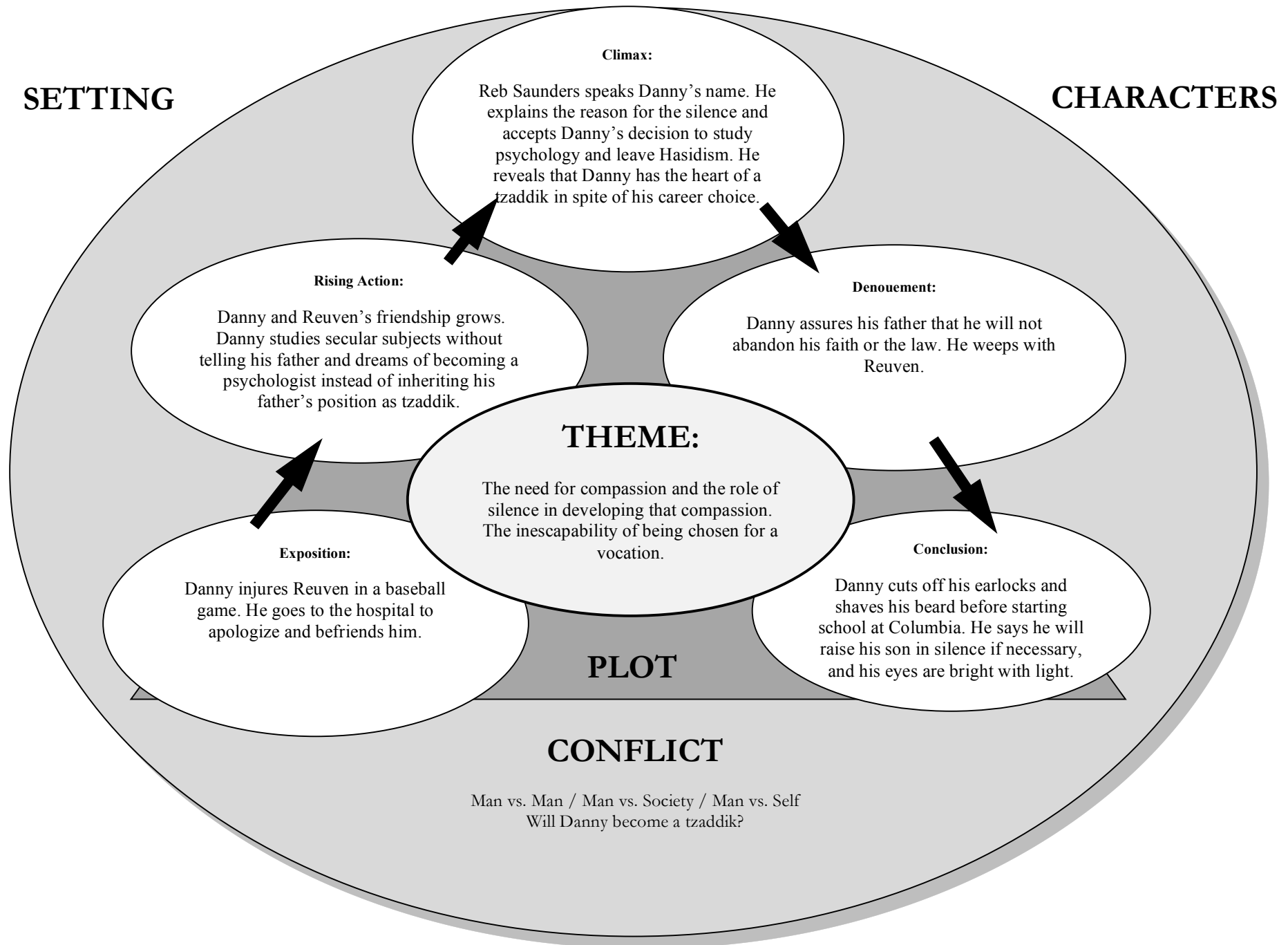
STORY CHARTS



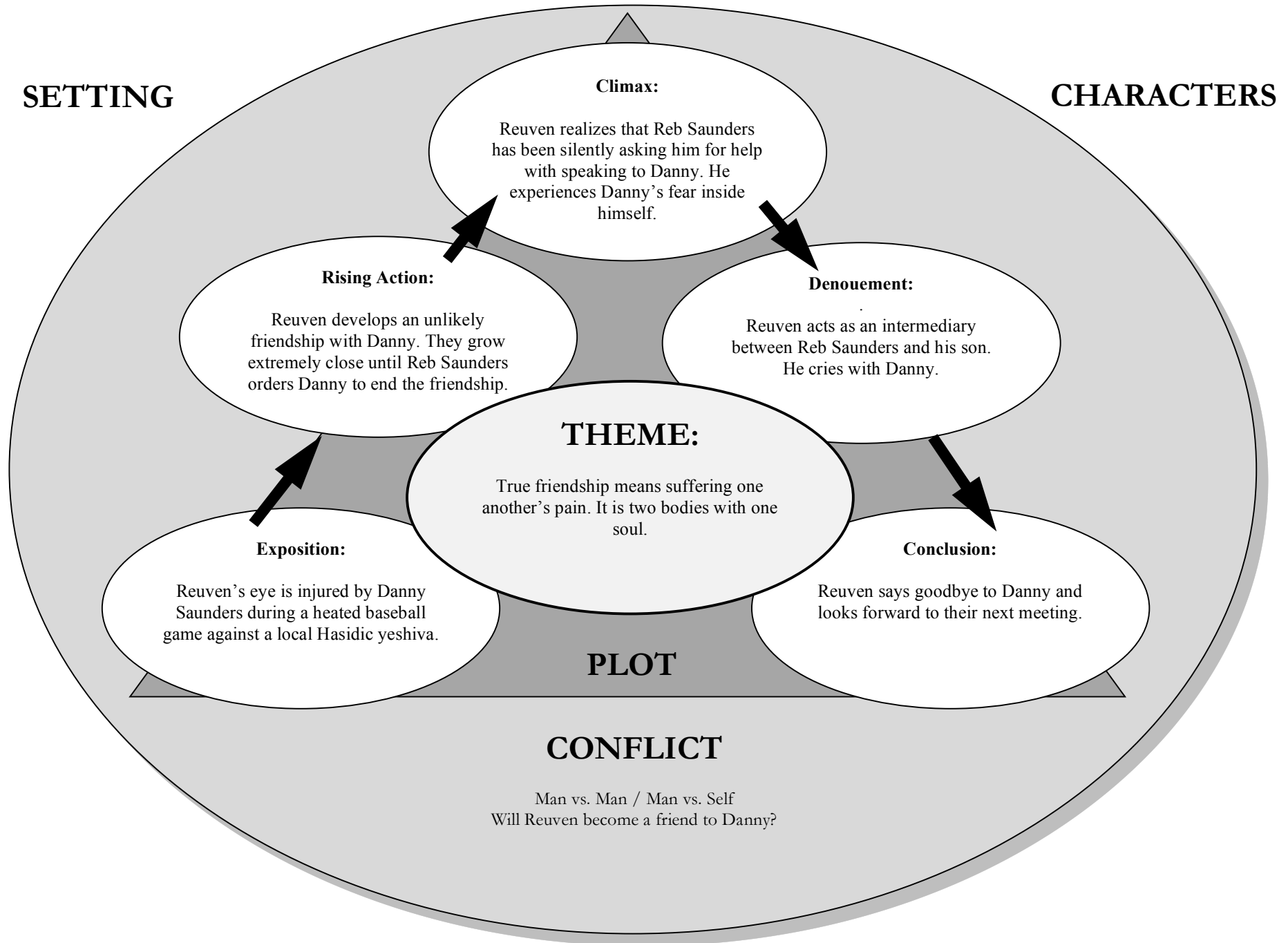
The following pages contain story charts of the type presented in the live seminar *Teaching the Classics*. As is made clear in that seminar, a separate story chart may be constructed for each of the conflicts present in a work of fiction. In particular, the reader's decision as to the *climax* and central *themes* of the plot structure will depend upon his understanding of the story's central *conflict*. As a result, though the details of setting, characters, exposition, and conclusion may be identical from analysis to analysis, significant variation may be found in those components which appear down the center of the story chart: Conflict, Climax, and Theme. This of course results from the fact that literary interpretation is the work of active minds, and differences of opinion are to be expected – even encouraged!

For the teacher's information, one story chart has been filled in on the next page. In addition, a blank chart is included to allow the teacher to examine different conflicts in the same format.

The Chosen by Chaim Potok: Story Chart



The Chosen by Chaim Potok: Story Chart



The Chosen by Chaim Potok: Blank Story Chart

