



Tomie dePaola's  
*The Clown of God*

Questions for Socratic Discussion  
by Missy Andrews





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*THE CLOWN OF GOD*



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## QUICK CARD



<b><i>Reference</i></b>	<i>The Clown of God</i> by Tomie dePaola ISBN-10: 0156181924 ISBN-13: 978-0156181921
<b><i>Plot</i></b>	An orphaned child establishes himself as a world-class juggler. In time, old age robs him of this place; society no longer wants him. Still, he finds his value in performing for the Lord.
<b><i>Setting</i></b>	Sorrento, Italy and the surrounding region during the Renaissance, around 1300-1500.
<b><i>Characters</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Giovanni – an orphan juggler, the story’s namesake</li><li>• The little brothers of the monastery – monks of the Franciscan order</li><li>• The players</li><li>• The audience</li></ul>
<b><i>Conflict</i></b>	Man vs. Man Man vs. Himself
<b><i>Theme</i></b>	All callings are holy callings. This Giovanni learns from the little brothers of the monastery. When he performs, his performance is an act of service to the most high God. With God he has a place to belong long after the laughter of the audience fades away.
<b><i>Literary Devices</i></b>	Repetition Imagery Personification Allusion Foreshadowing Symbolism

## QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: SETTING



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

The story takes place in Sorrento, Italy during the period known as the Renaissance (1300-1500 AD).

**Does the story happen in one spot, or does the action unfold across a wide area? (1c)**

The action unfolds over a broad space encompassing a variety of towns and audiences throughout Italy. Giovanni performs for both the wealthy and the poor.

**Do you long to climb into the pages of the book to live in its world, or does it repel you? Why? (1f) Is the setting of the story important because of historical events which may have taken place there? How does this link help you understand the themes of the story? (1j)**

The setting is real and historic. The thematic ideas of the piece stem from ideas of the period.

**In what time of life for the main characters do the events occur? Are they children? Are they just passing into adulthood? Are they already grownups? (2e)**

The story takes in the lifetime of its main character, Giovanni, but culminates in his old age.

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# QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CHARACTERS



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

The protagonist is Giovanni, an orphan juggler who becomes God's clown.

## **Is the character kind, gentle, stern, emotional, harsh, logical, rational, and compassionate or exacting...? Make up a list of adjectives that describe the protagonist. What words or actions on the protagonist's part make you choose the adjectives you do? (3f)**

Giovanni is a needy child at the story's outset, but discovers a talent within him that makes him useful to the world. He never thinks much of himself, however, nor of his profession.

## **What do other characters think or say about him? (3k)**

The Little Brothers say that all of Creation sings of the glory of God, including the worldly tasks of common men.

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

Giovanni is member of a traveling acting troupe. They are professional entertainers.

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

Giovanni feels that making people happy is the most important thing. He delights in making others smile.

## **Is the protagonist a type or archetype? Is he an "Everyman" with whom the reader is meant to identify? Are his struggles symbolic of human life generally in some way? (3p)**

Although readers aren't likely to identify with Giovanni in specifics, they surely will relate to his poverty of spirit, and humility. He is one of the "little ones" mentioned in the Scriptures. Most certainly they will relate to his humanity. As he ages, he loses his physical abilities and is scorned by the world.



# QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CONFLICT AND PLOT



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

Initially, Giovanni wants to be useful in order to find a place for himself in society and earn his daily bread. He wants to make people happy. However, as age robs him of his abilities, his usefulness diminishes. He wonders if he still has a place. Community forsakes him. He is discouraged and alone.

## **Is the conflict an external one, having to do with circumstances in the protagonist's physical world, or is it an internal conflict, taking place in his mind and emotions? (5e)**

The conflict, while stimulated from without (the crowd's disapproval and his aging), affects him internally. It's not merely that Giovanni can no longer juggle brilliantly, but that he is no longer of any value to anyone. He is used up and cast aside as refuse by humanity. Discouraged, he gives up juggling forever.

## **Why can't the protagonist have what he wants? (6) Does the protagonist lack strength, mental acumen or some other necessary ability? (6b)**

Giovanni's waning physical strength and faculties prevent him from continuing to serve and delight people.

## **Does he lack self-confidence, good health, or social connections? (6c)**

As a result, Giovanni retreats into himself, certain that he is of no more value to anyone.

## **What kind of conflict is represented in the story? (6g-l)**

Giovanni's troubles represent a Man v. Society, Man v. Himself, and a Man v. God struggle. Society rejects him. He becomes discouraged and defeated. He wonders if he has any remaining value.

## **Do the protagonist's actions provoke further conflict or unrest in the story? (7b)**

Poverty stricken, hungry, sick, and homeless, Giovanni seeks refuge in his hometown church. There he watches the Procession of the Gifts, in which townspeople ceremonially present gifts to a statue of the Madonna and baby Jesus. Dazzled, he too wishes to offer a gift. He proffers all he has – his talent – to the child. Spreading out his mat, he begins to juggle before the child. When the monks see him, they are mortified that he would bring worldly entertainments into the holy sanctuary. Giovanni is completely rapt in his expression of service. Would the Church, too, reject him?



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

The clown spends his last strength in honor of the child and falls dead before the statue of the babe. When the friars find Giovanni, they are bewildered to find his golden ball, “the sun in the heavens,” in the hands of the newly smiling statue of the Christ child.

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

The protagonist gets what he's after in three ways. First, he has made the stern statue of the Christ child smile. Second, the smile signifies Christ's blessing on Giovanni's gift, affirming that even his worldly talent could be offered to God. Last, Giovanni has finally found a place for himself. He has gone home to be with his Lord.

**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)**

The high point of the story occurs when Giovanni juggles for the stern statue of the Christ child. This last performance he offers as a gift to the Lord. It represents both a physical and a spiritual climax. He comes to understand what the Little Brothers had told him so many years before. Everything sings of the glory of God – even his juggling. Giovanni understands his calling and has found his ultimate place, at the feet of the Lord in His service for eternity.

**How does the story end? (10) How does the solution of the conflict affect each individual character? (10d)**

For Giovanni, all questions are answered. He is at rest in a place all his own. Christ Himself has pronounced his benediction. The two churchmen present are humbled to find that Christ has apparently received the sacrilegious offering of the poor clown.

**Does the ending or resolution of the story make any kind of judgments? (10e)**

This resolution resoundingly affirms the holiness of all vocations offered to the Lord. All callings are holy callings.

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

Everything sings of the glory of God.

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## QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: THEME



### **What does the protagonist learn? (11) Is he ennobled in some way? (11c)**

Giovanni is ennobled. When he offers his gift to the Lord, the gift itself is transformed into something holy and important. Simultaneously, Giovanni is changed from cast off beggar to honored heir.

### **Does he draw upon any motifs or symbols to deepen his explanation of these events? (11f)**

That the smiling Christ statue holds in his hands the sun in the heavens poetically affirms not only Giovanni's avocation and gift, but also the Holy Child's lordship over all the stuff of earth.

### **What do the other characters learn? (12) Do they look at the protagonist differently? (12c)**

To the brothers, Giovanni is still a poor clown, but their perspective on his sacrilege is questioned by the authority of the child.

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

Giovanni is a young orphan in Renaissance Italy. Although his life is difficult and his means sparse, his sunny disposition and talent for juggling keep him happy and fed. When an acting troupe comes through his village one day, he is mesmerized. Convinced that he too must become a performer, he peddles his abilities to the Maestro and begins traveling with the troupe. Age and experience hone Giovanni's skills until he is regaled as the finest of performers. No longer does he beg for his bread. He is wealthy and respected.

While traveling across the countryside one day, Giovanni shares his lunch with two Franciscan monks. These men in turn share with him their philosophy that all things sing of the glory of God. When they suggest that his juggling might also do so, Giovanni merely laughs good naturedly and continues his journey.

The simple truth that all things sing the glory of God becomes the theme of author Tomie DePaola's medieval folk tale. While the Catholic church of Giovanni's day created a distinction between the sacred and the secular, Brother Francis (for whom the Franciscan monks are named) taught otherwise. Franciscans rejoiced in the glory God receives when creation and man function in the gifts He gave them. This philosophy also animated Protestant reformers such as Martin Luther, who taught that every occupation is a holy calling.

Giovanni's talent cannot last forever, though. Age debilitates the juggler, robbing him of his skill. When he begins to drop his rainbow of balls during live performances, he becomes aware that his days on the stage are over. Worse, the public that had once

befriended and sought after him now jeers and taunts him. Forsaken, Giovanni returns to his home town of Sorrento to beg once more for his bread. After an arduous journey, he collapses in the Catholic Church in town. There he encounters a statue of the Virgin Mary and the baby Jesus. Concerned by the stern countenance of the child, Giovanni decides to put on one last performance, a gift of his talents to the child.

Though the brothers who discover Giovanni's gift are stricken and horrified, God, it would seem, is pleased. The image of the Christ child mystically affirms the holiness of Giovanni's worldly profession and delights in his humble offering. Giovanni's tale and its moving resolution capture the joy and glory of a holy calling, no matter how simple.

While distinctly Catholic in its pageantry and mysticism, the theological content of this story is far broader. It suggests that he who would serve God need not enter a monastery to do so. Rather he may offer his talents to the One who allocated them and receive the joy of an audience that never spurns, ridicules, or despises.

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

Giovanni affirms that a truly good life is one offered in service to God, glorifying Him with one's gifts and abilities.

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

This is a wonder – that God would delight in the humble gifts of man. As Psalm 8 says, "When I consider the heavens, the moon and the stars which You have ordained, what is man that You are mindful of him?"

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## QUESTIONS ABOUT STYLE



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

### **Repetition**

The repetition of Giovanni's lines in his juggling routine become a familiar device within the story and gain importance at the story's climax.

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

### **Imagery (16a, b)**

The author's use of the golden ball to represent the sun in the heavens is a kind of image, as is the "rainbow" of colored balls Giovanni juggles. The image of the golden ball is extended in meaning when the Son of the Heavens deigns to hold it in His hands (symbolism).

### **Personification (16e)**

The statue of the Christ child smiles. The statue is given human – godlike qualities. This is a storytelling device, but also references the mystical miracles to which Catholics attest.

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

### **Allusion (17f)**

The author alludes both to the philosophies of the Franciscan monks and to Catholic doctrines.

### **Foreshadowing (17a-c)**

Giovanni's early encounter with the Franciscan brothers informs his experience at the story's turning point. Whereas his service to earthly audiences proves ultimately vain, his service to the baby King proves his lasting purpose.



# QUESTIONS ABOUT CONTEXT



## Who is the author? (18)

Tomie dePaola was born in Meriden, Connecticut, one of three siblings. When he was only four years old, he set his heart upon a career in writing and illustrating books. During his formative years, he spent hours drawing and working in theatrical productions. After graduating from high school, he attended Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York.

His schooling complete, he illustrated his first book, *SOUND*. Soon after, he wrote and illustrated *The Wonderful Dragon of Timlin*. Perhaps his most famous books include *26 Fairmont Avenue* and *Meet the Barkers*, both of which won the Newbery Medal. Another of his well-loved favorites is *Strega Nona*, which received a Caldecott Award. Mr. De Paola has sold over 6 million books worldwide and has taught art at the college level for many years. In 40 years, he has published more than 200 books and joyfully continues his work in New London, New Hampshire.

## NOTES:

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## STORY CHARTS



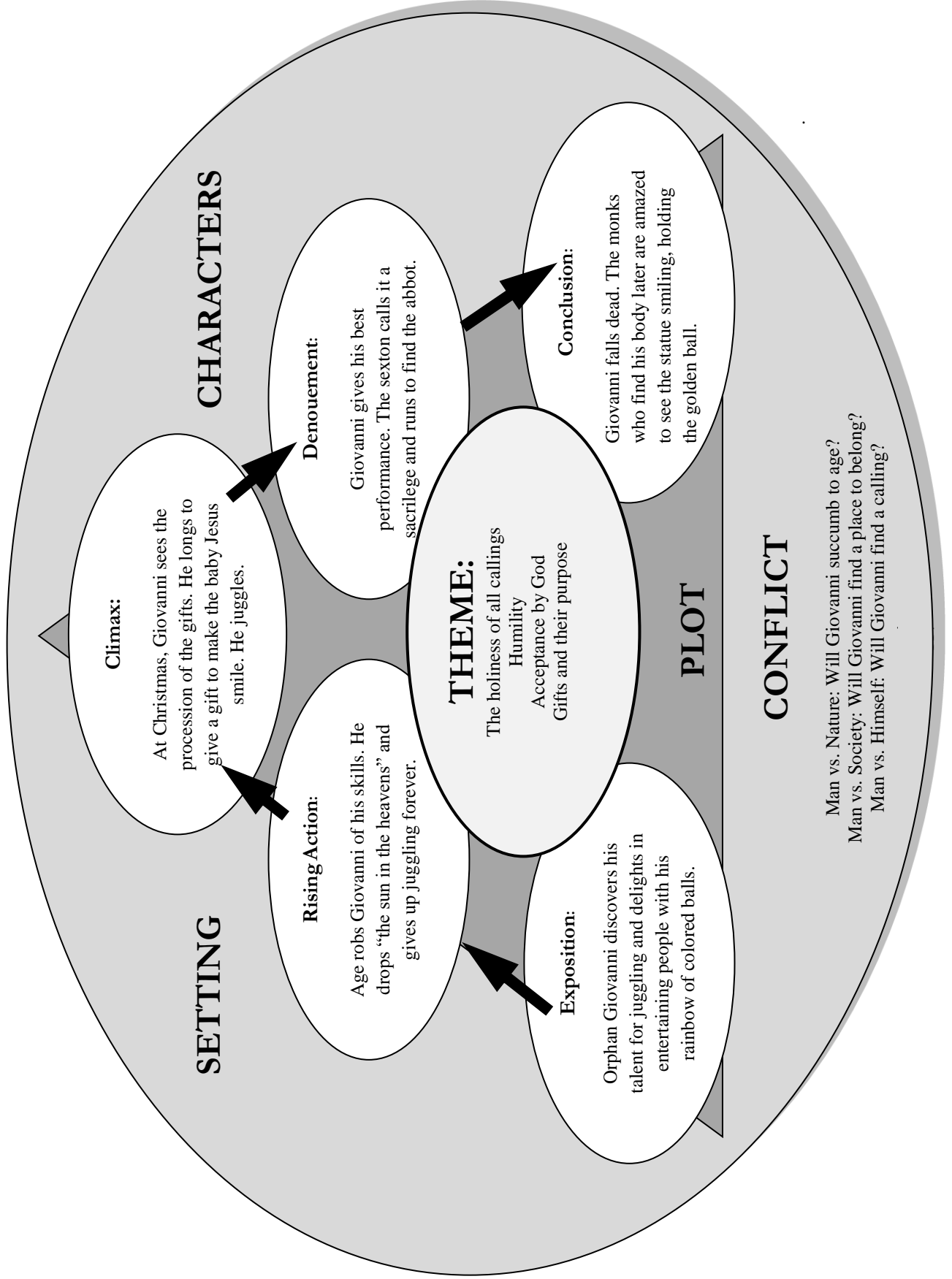
The following pages contain story charts of the type presented in the live seminar *Teaching the Classics*. As is made clear in that seminar, a separate story chart may be constructed for each of the conflicts present in a work of fiction. In particular, the reader's decision as to the *climax* and central *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 Clown of God by Tomie dePaola: Story Chart





# The Clown of God by Tomie dePaola: Blank Story Chart

