



*The Scarlet Pimpernel*  
by Baroness Emmuska d’Orczy

Questions for Socratic Discussion  
by Megan Andrews





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# QUICK CARD



<i>Reference</i>	<i>The Scarlet Pimpernel</i> . Baroness Emmuska d’Orczy. (1905) ISBN: 0-553-21402-0
<i>Plot</i>	As the Reign of Terror threatens the safety of every nobly-born citizen in France, only one man dares to snatch the doomed from the jaws of the guillotine: an enigmatic Englishman who calls himself “The Scarlet Pimpernel.” As a wrathful French revolutionary, Chauvelin, scouring England in search of the trickster, he blackmails Lady Blakeney, queen of fashionable society in England, into helping him to capture this brave leader.
<i>Setting</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Paris, France in September of 1792: conflict simmers between the French revolutionaries who have overthrown their nobility and their English neighbors, who still bow the knee to their own king and nobility.</li> <li>• Dover, England within the cozy confines of The Fisherman’s Rest</li> <li>• Richmond, England at the estate of rich and famous Lord and Lady Blakeney</li> <li>• Calais, France, particularly in the squalid inn, Le Chat Gris</li> </ul>
<i>Characters</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Scarlet Pimpernel, a mysterious figure famous for his daring efforts to save innocent French nobles.</li> <li>• Chauvelin, the nefarious officer of the French revolution whose sole mission is to capture our English hero and feed him to the guillotine.</li> <li>• Marguerite Blakeney, the queen of English high society, who was once a French citizen, rumored to have been a revolutionary sympathizer.</li> <li>• Armand, Marguerite’s doting brother, the object of her undying love and loyalty.</li> <li>• Sir Percy Blakeney, Marguerite’s effete husband whose slow wits, impeccable fashion sense, and untold fortune make him beloved of the Prince of Wales and his court.</li> </ul>
<i>Conflict</i>	<p>Man vs. Man            Man vs. Himself            Man vs. Society</p>
<i>Theme</i>	<p>Loyalty to king and country            Love and Self-Sacrifice            Pride vs. Humility            Treachery and Betrayal            Good vs. Evil</p>

<p><i>Literary Devices</i></p>	<p>Imagery is created through:</p> <p>Metaphor – Marguerite Blakeney is described as “a candle” around which all her adoring fans flock like moths (123).</p> <p>Simile – Chauvelin is described as “fox-like.”</p> <p>Symbolism- The symbol of that little scarlet flower becomes representative of all the Scarlet Pimpernel’s efforts to defy anarchy and save the innocent. It is such a pronounced symbol that it becomes a “motif” over the course of the piece.</p>
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# QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: SETTING



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

This story begins in Paris in September of 1792 amid the first frenzy of the Reign of Terror. As the Scarlet Pimpernel rescues select French nobles and spirits them out of Paris, however, the setting shifts to the peaceful English countryside. The majority of the story's plot occurs on the banks of the English Channel (in Dover and Calais respectively), as characters travel between these two societies.

## **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)**

In our story, the atmosphere of France reflects the political and cultural upheaval of the Reign of Terror. With the overthrow of the monarchy and nobility, French society has become squalid, plebeian, and chaotic. As uneducated serfs discover their sudden sovereignty, they turn their new-found power on the landed gentry, tormenting and executing those whom they once served. The setting itself reflects this social inversion, dominated by darkness, filth, and ill-informed prejudices.

Meanwhile the English people appreciate the benefits of a healthy monarchy. Politically stable, they enjoy their prosperity and comfort, but watch with pity as their neighbor-nation disintegrates.

As if to highlight this glaring difference between the two countries, Orczy creates complimentary settings on either coast of the English Channel. In England, jolly Mr. Jellyband's inn, The Fisherman's Rest, serves as the representative sample of society. Clean and orderly with a crackling fire on the hearth and a hearty English meal available to order, this inn is a haven which weary travelers find "cheerful and cozy in the extreme." Likewise, the jovial proprietor of this haven, Mr. Jellyband, stretches a red-faced grin and bellows a hearty welcome to humble and grand folk alike.

In contrast, the French inn, Le Chat Gris, is a squalid, smelly, inhospitable hovel. Listing on its foundations, it threatens every moment to tumble down upon its patrons. As for accommodations, a rickety table with a single soiled setting serves as a dining room while the loft full of straw, concealed behind a ragged curtain is the only room to rent. Like his establishment, the proprietor of Le Chat Gris, Citoyen Brogard, presents a rude front. Proud of his newfound social status in this revolution, he is eager to prove that he doesn't owe service or even civility to anyone, regardless of their rank. The irony of these two inn-keepers' varying treatment of their guests is striking. While Mr. Jellyband lives

in a society of ranks and stations and yet serves everyone with equal grace and warmth, Citoyen Brogard fixates on the maxim of the French Revolution, “Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite,” but treats everyone with varying degrees of disdain, depending on their position in the anarchist government. Though the revolutionaries attempted to create a society of equality, they merely created an unnatural new hierarchy of power far more unpleasant than the one they overthrew.

**Among what kinds of people is the story set? What is their economic class? How do they live? Are they hopeful? Downtrodden? Depressed? Why? (1h)**

The French nation, as depicted in this story, is largely composed of two sets of people: crazed peasants, drunk on newfound power, and harried nobles, frightened for their lives. Orczy offers a few characters to represent each of these social sets. For example, Citoyen Bibot in Paris and Citoyen Brogard in Calais share the same ignorant zeal for the slaughter of “les sacrees aristos” and the same swift respect for the leaders of the revolution. Meanwhile the de Tournay family serves as a representative sample of the French nobility who must flee to save their lives. Between these two extremes, however, there is one more social set in this newly established regime: the agents of the revolution. Citoyen Chauvelin is a sort of noble in this new regime. Though the revolutionaries profess to uphold the equality of all men in this new order, those men in administration hold special status. In a society that functions on secrecy, spies, and execution without trial, no man is exempt from suspicion and fear in France. Yet those with positions near the top of the pecking order of the anarchist government (like Chauvelin) command respect and enjoy a slightly more secure position. Thus, the French people are defiant, declaring themselves pleased with their newfound freedom even as they live in fear of the violence that is quickly spiraling out of their control.

In contrast, the English society is composed of both common people and nobles who seem to interact peaceably with one another. A general tone of contentment and peace pervades the culture. Mr. Jellyband and his humble employees seem satisfied with their comfortable lives even as they serve the noble classes who frequent their inn. Meanwhile, the nobles such as Sir Andrew Ffoulkes and the other members of the League pay due respect to their king and country and deal generously with those poorer than themselves. Even the stars of the noble classes, Lord and Lady Blakeney, deal civilly with the common people. The English are proud of their nation. They watch France’s upheaval with pity, believing their society to be superior.

**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)**

This story is set right at the beginning of the Reign of Terror in France. Many of the events in the background of the story, as well as some specific characters who take part in the drama are informed by real historical events. Without sufficient understanding of these events surrounding the French Revolution, students will miss the significance of the setting (which becomes essential to the plot and conflict). Thus, a quick history lesson might prove useful to the reader.

In 1793, the common people of France rose against a tyrannical monarchy. Enraged by centuries of injustice, poverty, starvation, and neglect, the common men overthrew the spoiled nobility and stripped them of their inherited privileges in a frenzied revolution. Led by Maximilien Robespierre, a Republican radical who came to power through popular street violence, the revolutionaries formed a new republic, ratifying their improved constitution in 1793. Though this constitution professed socialism, it allowed for violence in defense of “the Revolution.” Indeed, Robespierre himself seemed to encourage such violence. He instituted mass executions of nobles and their suspected supporters. Tens of thousands of French citizens, both nobles and supposed noble-supporters, fell before the gruesome blade of “Madame La Guillotine,” which quickly became the symbol of the people’s power. From September 5, 1793 to July 28, 1794 the Reign of Terror raged across all of France. 16,594 heads fell to the guillotine while another 25,000 executions occurred across France at the height of the revolution. The very king and queen of France, Louis XIV and Marie Antoinette, were executed in 1793 by order of their frenzied subjects. Asked to defend his policy in this time of Terror, Robespierre declared: “Terror is nothing else than justice, prompt, severe, and inflexible.”

Ironically, even Robespierre himself, the ultimate proponent of the “will of the people” was overthrown on the 27th of July 1794. Though he tried to commit suicide the night before his execution, he failed, falling instead to the blade of the Paris guillotine as a convicted enemy of the very republic he founded.

All of these major events, however – the execution of the king and queen, the mass executions across all of France, and the eventual demise of Robespierre himself – take place after our story. In 1792, the revolution is just beginning. Though the initial overthrow of the government has occurred and the new regime has been declared throughout France, the majority of the violence stays contained within the gates of Paris. As a result, the national outlook on the revolution remains rosy and idealistic. Rumors of the true state of French affairs are hazy and vague, but the English people listen with growing concern to the reports of anarchy and violence in Paris. At this point, however, the executions of the French king and queen have not yet been imagined. As a result, the Scarlet Pimpernel spends all his energy on saving whatever innocent nobles he can find, never dreaming that the monarchs themselves will eventually be threatened.

History informs more than just the backdrop of the story, however. The antagonist of the piece, Chauvelin, is loosely based on a historical figure, Bernard-Francois, the Marquis de Chauvelin. This historical man survived the revolution to serve as an official under Napoleon I of France. He was a noted liberal Deputy under the Bourbon administration. Thus, our Chauvelin’s noted loyalty to France and respect of the revolution may in fact be historically accurate.

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# QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CHARACTERS



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

It is difficult to choose a protagonist for this particular story. While the title of the book leads one to assume that the Scarlet Pimpernel himself is the hero and therefore the primary protagonist of the tale, that man's identity is a mystery for at least half of the book. Who then do we follow when the Scarlet Pimpernel is hidden in shadow? Aside from the sweeping national crisis, the book follows the personal struggles of the darlings of English high society, Lord and Lady Blakeney. Veritable royalty themselves, they run in sophisticated circles and keep company with kings. In public, they play the charming couple, bantering with one another and flirting with ease, but at home they are estranged by lies, pride, and past misunderstandings.

In particular, the narrative follows Lady Marguerite Blakeney. Two years before our story begins, Marguerite St. Just was a poor French citizen, alone but for her devoted brother, Armand. At eighteen years of age, she rose to fame as an actress on the Paris stage. Soon renowned for her beauty, talent, and sparkling wits, Marguerite drew a crowd of eager suitors. Then she suddenly married dim-witted Sir Percy Blakeney. Both the English and French societies wondered at her sudden act, but they assumed that his great fortune was her primary incentive for the match. For his part, Sir Percy worshipped her with a dog-like devotion. Now, just two years into their marriage, however, the two have become estranged. Though they play their marital roles charmingly in public, at home they treat one another with cold bitterness.

Disappointed in her marriage, Marguerite distracts herself with a glittering social life. A porcelain-doll beauty with wits and charm to match, Marguerite has all of England on its knees in worship. She often sharpens her wits on her hapless, slow husband, charming their audience by mocking him mercilessly. But beneath this careless, acerbic, haughty exterior, Marguerite is lonely, frightened, and confused. Desperate to win back her husband's love but too proud to repent, she is left to wonder what she's done to lose him.

Meanwhile, she worries about her brother, Armand. As her dearest friend in the world, Armand stands as a bulwark of support and love for Marguerite. Yet he has earned a position in the new French revolutionary government which continually draws him into the frenzy of the Revolution. Unbeknownst to Marguerite, he is also a member of the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel, working as a double agent to undermine the frenzied revolution. Marguerite distracts herself from her marital difficulties in worrying for Armand's safety.

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

Popular opinions of Marguerite Blakeney vary according to both station and nationality. While the English adore her, calling her “the cleverest woman in England” and considering her the queen of fashionable society, French opinion stands divided. The lower classes remember her rags-to-riches journey to fame and respect her for using her talents to lift herself out of poverty. But the French nobility despise Marguerite. Not only do they see her as a social climber, but they suspect her of being a revolutionary sympathizer. Rumors run rampant that Marguerite informed on an unlucky nobleman, the Marquis de St. Cyr, resulting in the swift execution of the Marquis and his whole family. When she meets Marguerite unexpectedly in the Fisherman’s Rest, the Comtesse de Tournay’s cold greeting evidences public French feeling towards Lady Blakeney. Recently saved from the guillotine by the brave Scarlet Pimpernel, the Comtesse publically snubs Marguerite in the company of Sir Percy and many of his noble English friends. Alluding to the rumors of Marguerite’s fatal indiscretion, she frigidly forbids her daughter to have anything to do with “that woman” (38). As all members of the party squirm with discomfort, they wonder at the truth behind the rumors.

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

Initially, Marguerite seems preoccupied only with her brother’s safety and her own social standing. Disillusioned with marriage, she no longer looks to her husband for companionship or support. She seems to believe that Armand is her only true family and thus his safety is the most important thing in life to her. Indeed, even Sir Percy and his gentlemen friends find her obvious loyalty and love for her brother “deep and touching in the extreme” (50).

Over the course of the story, however, her loyalties become increasingly conflicted. She realizes how little she really knows her husband. Her discoveries of his enigmatic character lead her to feel a renewed longing to win his respect and love. Thus, it is with growing alarm that she realizes she is responsible for his current danger. At this point in the story, her renewed interest in her husband threatens to supersede her loyalty to Armand.

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

Chauvelin, a representative of the new French republic, enters the story with thinly veiled designs to seek and capture the Scarlet Pimpernel. This intention alone should set him as an antagonistic figure in the story. Yet the Scarlet Pimpernel is not the only character whom Chauvelin threatens or opposes over the course of the story. An old acquaintance of Marguerite’s, he seeks to ingratiate himself into her high society circle and win her aid in capturing the elusive Englishman. When she refuses, he resorts to blackmail, for though Chauvelin comports himself with the utmost grace and propriety in company with the English aristocrats, a certain cruelty permeates his charm.

**Is the antagonist out to do physical harm to the protagonist, violence to his reputation, his memory, his work or his family? How do you know? (4d)**

If the Scarlet Pimpernel himself were truly the protagonist of the story, the answer to this question would be abundantly clear. Initially, Chauvelin states his intention to “strike at the head” of the fearless troupe of Englishmen (66). When Marguerite scoffs at his presumption in thinking he could attack the Scarlet Pimpernel himself on English soil, Chauvelin retorts: “At any rate, we could send him to the guillotine first to cool his ardour, then, when there is a diplomatic fuss about it, we can apologise – humbly – to the British government, and, if necessary, pay compensation to the bereaved family” (68). Aflame with patriotic bloodlust, Chauvelin intends to capture and execute this enemy of France, regardless of international politics.

Indeed, when the identity of the Scarlet Pimpernel becomes clear (Sir Percy Blakeney, himself) Chauvelin’s antagonism is even more pronounced. Not only is he threatening the lives of Percy and his brave followers, but he is blackmailing Percy’s wife and convincing her to keep her involvement secret, putting even more strain upon Percy’s tenuous marriage.

If, however, one argues that Marguerite is the primary protagonist of the piece, then Chauvelin’s machinations are less overt. In choosing Marguerite Blakeney to be his helper in England, Chauvelin initially counts on her loyalty to her mother country to drive her to betray the Scarlet Pimpernel. This avenue quickly falters, given Marguerite’s admiration for the man and her general lack of bloodthirstiness. At this point in the story, Chauvelin’s methods become more sinister. He obtains a letter sent by Armand St. Just to the Scarlet Pimpernel which firmly proves that Armand is a traitor to the new French Republic. Letter in hand, Chauvelin blackmails Marguerite into spying on the Scarlet Pimpernel to save her beloved brother. Though he does not ever threaten Marguerite’s reputation or her own life, he tells her repeatedly that her actions have the power to save her brother or send him to the guillotine.

This threat becomes even more fearful when Marguerite realizes that Percy is the Scarlet Pimpernel. Horrified initially at the thought of sending a faceless innocent to the guillotine, she now shrinks at the choice between her beloved brother’s life and that of her own husband.

**How does the author’s description of the character inform you of his antagonism? Does he have any physical attributes or personality traits that mark him as antagonistic? (4e)**

Chauvelin is first described as a “not very prepossessing little figure” (62). Nearer forty than thirty, he wears a curious, clever “fox-like expression” in his sunken eyes. In addition to his small stature and shrewd manner, he has a pernicious habit of taking snuff. Rather than an addiction, this habit seems a cover for the quick glances which he takes to read a person’s character and learn his weaknesses. Over the course of his first interview with Marguerite, Chauvelin takes many of these swift, shrewd glances and keenly notes her shifting loyalty. Due to this keen, darting habit, Chauvelin is most often described as “fox-like.”

**Why does he oppose the protagonist? Does he merely belong to a different social group? Does he see the world in slightly different ways? Or is he an evil villain, like Shakespeare’s Iago? (4f)**

Chauvelin’s opposition towards the Scarlet Pimpernel is only natural. He explains his concerns to Marguerite: “this League of the Scarlet Pimpernel, which has become a standing menace to France, since it is pledged to help our cursed aristocrats – traitors to their country, and enemies of the people – to escape from the just punishment, which they deserve. You know as well as I do, citoyenne, that once they are over here, those French emigres try to rouse public feeling against the Republic... They are ready to join issue with any enemy bold enough to attack France...”(66). Himself a wholehearted supporter of the revolution and an avid hater of French aristos, Chauvelin feels personally affronted by the Scarlet Pimpernel’s attempts to aid “traitors” of France to escape and plot to overthrow the French government.

On a personal level, Chauvelin feels alternately nettled, threatened, and disdainful in company with Sir Percy, the effete fop. While Percy cuts an imposing figure, besting Chauvelin in height and strength, he seems dim-witted and docile. With his sly wits and cunning plots, Chauvelin intends to ensnare Percy with ease. Yet he finds over the course of the story that Percy is slippery prey.

Since the Scarlet Pimpernel so obviously opposes French goals and values, and since Marguerite still claims French citizenship though she has moved over to England, Chauvelin naturally assumes that she will share his bloodthirsty ambitions. Yet Marguerite and her brother, Armand, are secretly wary of their country’s revolution. In private, Marguerite admits her fears to her brother: “They are going too far... You are a republican, so am I... we have the same thoughts, the same enthusiasm for liberty and equality...but even you must think that they are going too far!” Though he agrees with his sister, Armand declares bravely, “when France is in peril, it is not for her sons to turn their backs on her” (53). Paupers who have risen thanks to the revolution, Marguerite and Armand necessarily value liberty and equality, but they fear the growing violence in their country. Thus when Chauvelin questions Marguerite’s loyalty, she answers diplomatically, withholding her pledge of loyalty even as she proclaims herself a Republican.

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# QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CONFLICT AND PLOT



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

Sir Percy Blakeney (the Scarlet Pimpernel) wants to save innocent French nobles from the guillotine, of course. Yet he also longs for reconciliation with his wife. Estranged by hurt pride and misunderstandings, neither party can bring themselves to beg forgiveness and repair their marriage. So Percy longs for Marguerite's acceptance, love, and trust, but refuses to bend his pride to earn it.

Meanwhile, Marguerite wants to save both Armand and the brave Scarlet Pimpernel. But even before she realizes that Percy is the Scarlet Pimpernel, she longs for his love and respect. When at last she does see Percy's true nature, all her desires unite into one overwhelming goal: to save her husband or die with him, reconciled at last.

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

Politically, Sir Percy faces obstacles inherent to the French revolution. As an enemy to the newfound republic, he is a wanted man in France. He must disguise himself in order to accomplish his aims, but as Chauvelin and his fellow French officials learn more about Percy's identity, he finds it increasingly difficult to deceive them, especially since his broad shoulders and six foot height make him conspicuous. These obstacles are external, either Man vs. Man or Man vs. Society in nature.

His struggles with Marguerite, however, are more internal. Though he longs to win her love once more and bear her burdens as he once did, he refuses to bend his pride and initiate reconciliation. This is a Man vs. Self struggle.

In the same way, Marguerite faces physical impediments in her attempts to keep her brother and husband safe. Chauvelin's interference is a Man vs. Man conflict while the foul weather off the coast of Dover is a Man vs. Nature conflict. Yet Marguerite's relational struggle with her husband is a Man vs. Self conflict. At any moment, she could clear up all miscommunication about the deaths of the Marquis de St. Cyr and his family, but she cannot forget that Percy assumed the worst of her. Pride stinging, she refuses to humble herself and explain.

## **Are there other characters in the story who don't understand the protagonist's motives and ambitions? (7d)**

Marguerite is widely misunderstood in both French and English societies. Both cultures suspect her of being an avid revolutionary and a populist. As a result, the French expect her support and loyalty, while the English handle her with caution in political matters. Sir Percy and his faithful men hear the rumors of Marguerite's involvement in

the execution of the Marquis de St. Cyr and his family. Wary of her, they resolve to keep her ignorant of their brave schemes. In truth, however, Marguerite looks darkly on the revolution's trajectory and feels more loyalty to England than to her mother country.

Her motives become still more muddled when Chauvelin blackmails her into helping him entrap the Scarlet Pimpernel. Unable to reveal her secret struggle with conscience and loyalty, Marguerite seems for all the world like a French revolutionary (and worse, a heartless and disloyal wife).

**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)**

As mentioned above, the French Revolution itself provides essential context for the events of the story. Without the social and political tensions (which are alluded to, but mostly assumed given the historical context of the period) this story would lose its power.

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

When Chauvelin confronts Marguerite and shows her a letter from Armand to the Scarlet Pimpernel which proves his treason against the new French Republic, Marguerite is forced to make a choice between saving the faceless English hero or her beloved brother. Desperate, she agrees to help Chauvelin discover the identity of the Scarlet Pimpernel, in return for her brother's life. At Lord Grenville's ball, Marguerite reveals a crucial hint about the Scarlet Pimpernel's identity to Chauvelin. Defeated, but hoping that her actions have been sufficient to save Armand, Marguerite returns home with a heavy heart. Despite their strained relationship, Marguerite breaks down and tells Sir Percy of Armand's danger. To her great surprise, he leaves early the next morning to "pull strings" for Armand in English high society. Marguerite comforts herself with the hope that Percy's action reflects a renewed devotion to her.

No sooner has Percy left than Marguerite receives a packet from Chauvelin containing Armand's foolish letter. With a sinking heart, Marguerite realizes that Chauvelin must have discovered the Scarlet Pimpernel's identity if he has truly given up threatening Armand...and soon enough, Marguerite learns that the Scarlet Pimpernel is none other than Sir Percy Blakeney himself.

Horrified at her blindness and the gravity of her mistake, Marguerite resolves to warn Sir Percy and repent of her part in this calamity. She races Chauvelin to Dover, but they must each wait impatiently for the weather to calm enough to allow passage across to Calais. There, Sir Percy is doubtless attempting to find Armand and bring him home to safety.

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

At this moment in the story, Marguerite's tension is palpable. The raging storm which keeps all boats in the Dover port docked mirrors Marguerite's internal struggle. In addition, it heightens the anticipation of the coming conflict between Chauvelin and the Blakeney's. Their headlong race now paused by forces of Nature, both Chauvelin and



Marguerite strain for release and wonder who will make it over to the unsuspecting Lord Percy first.

**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)**

It is difficult to pinpoint the climax in this story. Spurred forward by intrigue and mystery, there are a few moments of revelation which release some tension and might be chosen as “climactic scenes.” For example, when Chauvelin and Sir Percy face one another at last in the filthy Calais inn, Le Chat Gris, there is a certain measure of relief and triumph. All identities revealed, Sir Percy still outwits Chauvelin and manages to escape. Yet the chase continues past this point. And more than that, Marguerite’s suspense continues on, unbroken, as she worries that either Sir Percy, or Armand, or both will be captured and killed at any moment.

Similarly, the climax of the story could come as late as Sir Percy’s final revelation of his identity as the old Jew. Proven wiler than Chauvelin at the last and loyal to Marguerite above all, Percy reunites with her, promising future happiness and bliss.

Yet the true climactic moment of the story lies between these two extremes. Curiously, it has less to do with Percy than with Marguerite. Though she has struggled throughout the novel to choose between the lives of her brother and her husband (the Scarlet Pimpernel), there is a moment in which her love and loyalty for her husband at last supersedes all thought for Armand. Captured by Chauvelin at last, Marguerite knows that a single scream from her will spell the deaths of Armand and his companions. Yet she hears the lusty singing of her English husband ringing off the cliffs as he comes unwittingly to his doom. Wild with worry, she screams a warning to Percy, heedless of the consequences for Armand and the others. In this moment, Marguerite reaches a moment of decision and commits herself to her husband, for better or for worse. This moment is both emotional and circumstantial, as Marguerite’s scream proves the catalyst for Chauvelin’s discovery of his defeat. Though Chauvelin rushes into the little hut, expecting to capture Armand and the others, he realizes too late that they have caught wind of his nefarious scheme and escaped just in time.

**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)**

Having done all she can to save her husband, Marguerite watches helplessly as Chauvelin and his men storm the little hut where Armand and his companions should be waiting for their leader, heedless of their danger. Yet the hut is empty. Furthermore, the Scarlet Pimpernel (who sang out so lustily on the path a moment before) is nowhere to be found. A note lies on the floor of the hut from the Scarlet Pimpernel, telling the men to sneak away to another cove where their leader will meet them. Infuriated but determined, Chauvelin leaves Marguerite and the Jew tied up and hastens to follow the directions in the note.

No sooner has Chauvelin disappeared when Sir Percy’s own voice rings off the cliffs once more and Marguerite realizes that the Jew is, in fact, Sir Percy in disguise.

Overjoyed (if a bit confused), Marguerite soon learns that her husband has managed to orchestrate Armand's escape and lead Chauvelin on a wild goose chase, all the while looking out for Marguerite's safety even as she desired his. Reunited in mutual loyalty and affection at last, Percy and Marguerite board Sir Percy's yacht, *The Daydream*, and sail off into the distance.

In his explanation to Marguerite, Sir Percy himself sheds light on the mysterious course of events which have transpired and led to this miraculous solution. No question is left unanswered as a result.

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

This ending, though cliché, affords the appropriate modicum of romance, reconciliation, and triumph of the right, to satisfy even the most reluctant reader. What it lacks in subtlety, this story makes up for in thrilling adventure, intrigue, and good old fashioned romance.

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# QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: THEME



**What does the protagonist learn? Is he sacrificed in some way? (Was this part of the climax or resolution?) (11d)**

Marguerite learns to value the love and respect of her husband over her own pride. She sacrifices her physical comfort and safety as well as her pride and noble image, all for the chance to prove her loyalty to her husband and possibly save his life.

In the same way, Sir Percy realizes that he has been foolish to mistrust his wife and exclude her from his life. In all his disguising, he has managed to hide his true self from her. Newly convinced of her loyalty and love, he takes every opportunity to lay his life down for her, reveal his true self, and reestablish their marriage on the basis of newfound trust.

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

According to Sir Percy and Marguerite Blakeney, a good life is one lived in reality and honesty with the one you love. A good life is one lived “mask-free.”

**NOTES:**

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# 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)**

D’Orczy uses some vivid images to convey her meaning. For example, when Marguerite is coming down the stairs at Lord Grenville’s ball to bid goodbye to all her adoring fans, the description reads, “Lady Blakeney never stepped from any house into her coach, without an escort of fluttering human moths around the dazzling light of her beauty” (123). And later in the scene, this image recurs as Chauvelin “allowed the moths to flutter more closely round the candle.” Comparing Marguerite in all her beauty to a dazzling candle, d’Orczy paints a vivid picture in the reader’s mind. As this description does not use “like” or “as,” it is metaphor, not simile.

**Anthropomorphism- does the author give a human character animal-like qualities?**

D’Orczy describes both Chauvelin and the Scarlet Pimpernel as possessing certain animalistic qualities. Chauvelin is “foxlike” with his sly ways and vicious, predatory temperament. The Scarlet Pimpernel, however, is noble and true and so d’Orczy compares him to the great eagle.

**NOTES:**

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# QUESTIONS ABOUT CONTEXT

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

Baroness Emmuska d’Orczy was born on September 23, 1865 in Tarnaors, Hungary to composer Felix Orczy de Orci and Countess Emma Wass de Szentegyed et Cege. A member of the Hungarian aristocracy, “little Emma” received an excellent education in music, painting, and the arts. She married a young illustrator, Montague MacLean Barstow, and she worked as a translator and illustrator to help him support their family. Her first few works of fiction were failures, but in 1903 she and her husband co-wrote a play about the now famous Sir Percy Blakeney, the Scarlet Pimpernel. She later submitted her novelization of the story to 12 different publishers. The tale and its many sequels soon gained enough popularity that Orczy was quite successful enough to live on an estate in Monte Carlo where she continued to write and be a political activist until her death in 1947.

# ESSAY QUESTIONS FOR WRITING ASSIGNMENTS



1. Examine the significance of disguises and dissembling in this story. Is the Scarlet Pimpernel himself the only one who wears a mask? Must the mask always be a physical/literal one?
2. The Scarlet Pimpernel and Chauvelin are each leaders in their separate spheres. They command the respect and obedience of their followers, but their methods of motivating their men are drastically different. Compare the two and consider how each might answer Machiavelli's timeless question: "Is it better to be feared or loved?"
3. The author takes pains to draw a stark comparison between France and England. In this spirit, she creates two similar settings (one in each country) to serve as representative samples of their societies. Examine the two inns: Le Chat Gris in Calais and The Fisherman's Rest in Dover with an eye to this social comparison.
4. Marguerite Blakeney seems at first to be a one dimensional, cardboard figure. The darling of English high society, she seems untouchable and, as a result, unrelatable. Does she remain a cardboard character or does she become sympathetic? Explain.
5. D'Orczy's description of Paris and her people in the first few pages of this story is vivid and gripping. She uses a multitude of literary devices to bring her description to life. Discuss a few of these literary devices and explain how they help the author to communicate her message about the nature of France's political and social turmoil at the start of the story.

# 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 Scarlet Pimpernel by Baroness d’Orczy: Story Chart

## SETTING

The French people have dethroned their monarch and begun a bloody revolution. Over in England, the nobles look darkly on anarchy. One Englishman in particular earns national acclaim through his daring efforts saving French nobles from the guillotine.

## CHARACTERS

Marguerite Blakeney, darling of English society and unhappy wife to Sir Percy. Sir Percy the foolish fop. Chauvelin, the villain hunting the Scarlet Pimpernel. The Scarlet Pimpernel, the enigmatic hero of doomed French nobility and adoring English society.

### Climax:

Captured by Chauvelin and his men, Marguerite feels helpless as she watches the trap closing in around Armand and Percy. Hearing Percy’s approach, she screams a warning, ultimately choosing to save him over her own brother.

### Rising Action:

Chauvelin, appears in England and blackmails Marguerite into a fateful choice: the life of her brother for the identity of the Scarlet Pimpernel. Even as M betrays the SP, she realizes that he is her own husband, Sir Percy! She must now race Chauvelin to warn her husband of her fateful mistake.

### Denouement:

Chauvelin and his men fail to capture both the Scarlet Pimpernel and Armand. They run off in hot pursuit. Meanwhile, Marguerite discovers that Sir Percy has remained close to her, disguised as the Jew. They reunite at last.

## THEME:

Masks and Disguises. Pride and Humility. Loyalty vs. Betrayal. Sacrificial Love.

### Exposition:

Marguerite Blakeney, once a citizen of France, now rules English high society by Lord Percy Blakeney’s side. Despite her cheerful public manner, Marguerite is unhappy in her marriage and worried about the state of affairs in her mother country. She worries particularly for the safety of her darling brother, Armand.

### Conclusion:

Sir Percy explains his ingenious exploits and carries Marguerite to his yacht. They sail off into the distance, happy and safe at last.

## PLOT

## CONFLICT

Will Chauvelin capture the Scarlet Pimpernel? Will Marguerite make amends with Sir Percy? Will Sir Percy abandon his mask and let his wife see his true self? (Man vs. Man; Man vs. Society; Man vs. Self)



# *The Scarlet Pimpernel* by Baroness d’Orczy: Story Chart



