



E.B. White's
The Trumpet of the Swan

Questions for Socratic Discussion
by Jill Andrews



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THE TRUMPET OF THE SWAN



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QUICK CARD



<i>Reference</i>	<i>The Trumpet of the Swan</i> by E.B. White ISBN-10: 0064408671 ISBN-13: 978-0064408677
<i>Plot</i>	Louis, a mute swan, works to overcome his physical handicap and restore his family honor.
<i>Setting</i>	The western Canadian wilderness. Several cities, including Boston and Philadelphia. A music store in Billings, Montana. A wildlife refuge in Montana. The childhood of an 11 year old boy.
<i>Characters</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Louis the Swan (protagonist)• Sam Beaver, an 11 year-old boy• Serena the Swan• The Old Cob, Louis's father• Abe "Lucky" Lucas, the night club operator• Mrs. Hammerbotham, a teacher
<i>Conflict</i>	Man vs. Fate/God Man vs. Society Man vs. Himself
<i>Theme</i>	Sacrificial parental love. The value of true friendship. The cost of dishonesty. Overcoming handicaps.
<i>Literary Devices</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Onomatopoeia• Assonance• Alliteration• Simile/ Metaphor• Anthropomorphism

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: SETTING



Where does this story happen? (1a,b,c)

The story begins in the wilderness of western Canada on a lonely pond that can be reached only by airplane. The action unfolds across a wide area, however, moving from Canada to the sweet grass area of Montana and the Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge. The story continues in the cities of Boston, MA, and Philadelphia, PA, climaxing at a music store in Billings, MT. Each of the locations figures into the story multiple times.

Is the setting real or imaginary? Is it subject to the same physical laws as our world is? (1g)

The geography in the story truly exists. In the late 1970s, The Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge in Montana served as the prime location for a program to save the Trumpeter Swan from extinction. As a result of this program, by 2002 these swans were plentiful again.

In the city of Boston, MA, the Swan Boat Fleet has been operating since 1870 and has grown more famous as a result of the book, *The Trumpet of the Swan*.

The zoo in Philadelphia was the first incorporated zoo in the United States. It still brings in thousands of visitors each year, although its operators don't seem to have heard of Louis the Swan.

In our story, the physical world is real, but the unfolding of events is not subject to the same physical laws as our world. Even the (mostly normal) people in the story can talk to animals, and the animals are not normal at all. They talk and think like people.

When does this story happen? In what time of life for the main characters do the events occur? (2e)

The story begins as Sam, an 11 year-old boy, discovers a swan's nest. Louis, a Trumpeter Swan, hatches soon afterward. A relationship develops between them when Louis pulls at Sam's shoe strings in greeting. This relationship continues until Sam is twenty years-old, a period of about nine years. The end of the story finds them both in pursuit of adult dreams. The fact that Sam and Louis interact over a long period of time helps the author develop the theme of the value and depth of true friendship.

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CHARACTERS



Who is the story about? Is the character man or animal? (3a)

The main character in this story is a Trumpeter Swan named Louis. His father, the old cob, loves him and teaches him well. The old cob will do anything necessary to help his son. Louis also has a human best friend. This boy gets involved in his life at several important junctures. Other characters in the story include both animals and humans.

What do the characters look like? (3d)

Louis begins life as a cygnet (a baby swan) with gray down and mustard-colored feet. Over the course of the story, he grows into an adult with snow-white feathers and coal black feet and bill. The Trumpeter Swan is the largest living waterfowl species on earth, reaching lengths of up to 72 inches, wingspans of up to 9 feet, 8 inches, and weights of up to 38 pounds. Louis's father, mother, siblings and true love, Serena, "the swan of his desiring," are all enormous birds like him.

Sam Beaver, Louis's 11 year-old human friend, has black hair and dark eyes. His slight build belies the strength that he exhibits throughout the story.

Abe "Lucky" Lucas, the man who hires Louis to play in the nightclub, wears a purple suit and a Tyrolean hat which perfectly fit his flamboyant personality.

Mrs. Hammerbotham is short and fat!

What adjectives describe the protagonist and other characters in the story? (3f)

Louis's father describes him as intelligent, gay, cheerful, strong, good, brave, handsome, reliable, etc—he tends to go on and on! As the story progresses, Louis proves himself positive, hopeful, hard-working, loyal, loving, and talented. He is full of personality, a beautiful bird.

Louis's father, the old cob, is known as *Cygnus Buccinator* (that is the scientific name for the Trumpeter Swan). Majestic and proud in the tradition of a Trumpeter Swan, he waxes poetic in all his pronouncements. While he behaves rashly, he loves Louis and courageously endeavors to provide for his needs.

Louis's mother always remains practical and down to earth. Although she seems to criticize her husband, she really loves him. She just does not get carried away with his philosophizing.

Sam Beaver loves to keep things to himself. He walks like an Indian in the woods, one foot straight in front of the other. His quietness in the woods and his interest in nature lead him to the swan's nest and to a relationship with Louis. His steadfastness makes him a valuable friend to Louis. He helps him solve problems and find jobs.

Sam's father, an outdoorsman, takes Sam on camping trips to the wilds of Canada. He and his wife own a guest ranch where they extend great hospitality.

Mrs. Hammerbotham teaches Louis to read and write even though she doesn't see why swans need to communicate. She has to be convinced that Louis can learn.

The Swan Boat captain lets Louis have a job to prove himself. It is only after Louis succeeds that the captain compliments and pays him.

Abe "Lucky" Lucas recruits Louis for a gig in a nightclub. He "knows things not worth knowing," as Louis says. His offer to keep the money bag while Louis works proves his shrewdness. Louis's own wisdom leads him to reject the offer.

The Head Man in charge of birds at the Philadelphia Zoo wants to keep Serena in his flock, but responds to Louis's declaration of love for her. Being a reasonable man, he agrees to a compromise.

Is there an antagonist in the story? (4a)

The main opposition to Louis in the story comes from "acts of God" or "Fate" rather than from people. Louis says, "Fate has been cruel to me," and his father says, "God has failed to give him a voice." To be a great Trumpeter Swan of pride, majesty and grace, one has to trumpet; Louis has no voice at all.

The music store owner might be considered an antagonist, also, because he doesn't want the swans to have the trumpet so necessary to their lives.

Why does he oppose the protagonist? Is he evil or is he antagonistic because of his vocation? (4f,m)

The music store owner wants to protect his property. He is not evil; he just doesn't understand Louis's problem. The old cob cannot communicate with the store owner any more than Louis can communicate with the rest of the swans. In desperation, Louis's father steals the trumpet. Naturally, this sets up an antagonistic relationship between them. When he returns to pay for the stolen trumpet, the man shoots him.

NOTES:

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CONFLICT AND PLOT



What does the protagonist want? (5a,b,d)

This story is about the protagonist trying to overcome a physical impediment in order to become normal. Louis, a Trumpeter Swan, hatches without a voice. His name, an allusion to another famous trumpeter, indicates the importance of a voice to his species. The majestic “Ko-Hoh” ringing out over the air identifies the proud swan and attracts attention to his beauty and grace. The voice, specifically, attracts a mate. Louis very definitely wants to be attractive to a certain beautiful young swan named Serena.

Why can't he have what he wants? Are there other characters who represent obstacles to his pursuit of his goal? (6f)

Louis can't be normal until he solves the problem of communication. First, he learns to read and write even though his teacher, Mrs. Hammerbotham, is skeptical of his ability or the necessity of his learning. Becoming literate doesn't help Louis talk with other swans who can't read, but it does help him interact later with the humans in the story.

Serena doesn't respond to Louis initially because she thinks that “a Trumpeter Swan who can't trumpet is a bust.” She barely acknowledges him the first time they meet and doesn't recognize him when they meet again. Winning her heart represents a major obstacle for Louis.

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

Louis's father, the old cob, is willing to do anything to help his son. Having no money or ability to communicate with humans, he resorts to theft to acquire a trumpet for Louis. This not only causes conflict with the music store owner, but also produces conflict between father and son. The father sacrifices his pride and reputation as a result of the theft and suffers greatly. Louis, seeing his father's pain, feels responsible to earn money to pay for the stolen trumpet.

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

Mrs. Hammerbotham doesn't understand why Louis wants to learn to read and write.

Louis's parents don't understand why he wants to read and write, either.

The music store owner doesn't understand why a swan would steal a trumpet.

The Swan Boat man doesn't understand why a bird needs money.

The desk clerk doesn't understand why a swan wants to spend the night at the Ritz.

The Head Man in charge of birds at the zoo doesn't know why Louis and Serena don't want to live a safe and protected life in the zoo instead of being wild and free.

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

Louis hatches without a voice on a remote pond in Eastern Canada, where Sam Beaver is on a camping trip with his father.

He greets Sam Beaver with a tug on his shoestring instead of a beep, alerting Louis's father to the speech impediment.

Shortly after arriving at their home in Red Rock Lakes, MT, Louis takes off for a year and a half to go to school. He thinks that learning to read and write will solve his problems.

When he returns, he still can't communicate with his father because the old cob can't read. In desperation, the old cob flies off to a music store in Billings, MT, and steals a trumpet to give Louis a voice.

Louis learns to play the trumpet and with Sam's help gets a job at Camp Kookooskoos playing Reveille, mess call, and Taps. He earns his first \$100 toward paying for the stolen trumpet.

At Sam's suggestion, Louis goes off to Boston to work for the Swan Boats. He earns his second \$100 and spends a night at the Ritz.

Abe "Lucky" Lucas offers Louis a job in Philadelphia working in a nightclub at \$100 a week for ten weeks. His earnings there will complete the payment for the trumpet.

Louis lives at the Philadelphia Zoo while working in the nightclub and avoids getting pinioned (having his wing tips cut off) by giving a free concert every Sunday afternoon.

Serena is miraculously blown in to the Zoo by a huge storm and sleeps off her exhaustion. Louis courts her with the song, "Beautiful Dreamer."

Sam Beaver comes to negotiate a deal with the Head Man in charge of birds to keep Serena from being pinioned. In the future, they will provide the zoo with a cygnet whenever one is needed.

How is the main problem solved? What events form the climax of the story? (9d)

The story climaxes when Louis brings his father the \$4,420.78 that he has earned, and the old cob courageously returns to the music store to pay for the stolen trumpet. The owner, not understanding his intentions, shoots him. Afterwards, he reads the slate that Louis hung around his father’s neck and finally understands the whole story. After a skirmish with the game warden and the local policeman about who should get the money, the judge awards the money to the music store owner. His trumpet is paid for, and he is satisfied.

How does the story end? (10)

The story ends with Louis’s father going home after escaping from the hospital where he has been taken. He recovers completely to live a long life and have more family.

Louis and Serena return to the remote pond in Western Canada where Louis was hatched. They begin their own family. Every year they take a pleasure trip across the United States and visit their old haunts. They return to Philadelphia to see Sam Beaver, who found his life’s calling working in the zoo. When need arises, they bring a cygnet for the Head Man in charge of birds.

NOTES:

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: THEME



What does the protagonist learn in this story? Is he changed in mind or heart by the events? (11a)

Louis, the protagonist, learns to overcome his handicap. With some thought and hard work, Louis's life is even better than it might have been if he had hatched with a great trumpeting voice. He would never have become a musician, for instance, if he had only his swan voice instead of a trumpet. He might not have traveled beyond Montana to see Boston and Philadelphia, nor met such interesting people. In overcoming his handicap, Louis becomes a stronger, more accomplished creature, meeting all his goals in a much more satisfying way. Louis quits feeling sorry for himself and becomes grateful for his life.

Are other people in the story affected by the events that happen? (12a)

Louis's father is willing to lay down his life for his son. To help Louis, he steals the trumpet and sacrifices his honor, reputation, and peace of mind. He is saved in the end by his son's responsible and diligent behavior.

Sam Beaver, who always wondered what he would be when he grew up, finds his niche when he goes to Philadelphia to help Louis save Serena. At the age of twenty, he goes to work at the zoo.

Serena grows from an immature, young swan who thinks Louis's handicap makes him a "bust," into a mature swan who falls in love with him as he woos her with his beautiful trumpet music. Because of Louis's intervention, she is saved from the head bird keeper's attempts to pinion her and keep her captive.

Everyone who hears Louis's music enjoys it and is enraptured by it. He affects the lives of everyone he meets in a positive way.

Does the story deal with universal themes like the ones listed in this syllabus? (13a)

Four main themes are dealt with in this story:

Overcoming Handicaps: Louis lacks a voice. With innovative thinking, hard work, and help from others, he overcomes this defect.

The Sacrificial Nature of Parental Love: Cygnus Buccinator, Louis's father, lays down his own life to provide whatever Louis needs.

The Value of Friendship: Sam Beaver’s interest in Louis and willingness to help him in good times and bad show the importance of friendship.

The High Cost of Dishonesty: Because Louis’s father has no money and can’t communicate with the music store man, he is forced to steal the trumpet. The consequences of that decision run throughout the story. Although the trumpet is a necessity for Louis, he finds it costly. He has to spend a lot of time using it to earn the money both to pay for it and redeem his father’s good name.

NOTES:

QUESTIONS ABOUT STYLE



Does the author use sound words to tell his story? (14a,b)

Examples of onomatopoeia in the story:

fish were “sizzling” in the pan (p.3)

hatching eggs made a “pipping” sound (p.25)

“bom” went the drum, “crash” went the glass window, “rrrongee, rrrongee” went the piano (p.78)

he fired another shot—“bang” (p.80)

“puwoowf, puwoowf” went the trumpet (p.86) also “Ko-Hoh,Ko-Hoh” (p.91)

bumping can went “clank, clank, clank” (p.100)

bullfrogs called “trooonk, trooonk” (p.112)

siren wailed “woooaw, wooaw” (p.194)

Does the author use assonance or words that have the same internal vowel sounds? (14c)

skunk who hunts (p.31)

this is distressing (p.36)

“glided out of the sky” and skidded to a “stop on the pond” (p.49)

camp Kookooskoos rhymes with moose (p.96)

Does the author use alliteration or words that repeat the same initial sound? (14e)

The cob cruised around close by to keep her company (p.18)

The fox heard the sound of splashing water. He sniffed the air and smelled the swans.
(p.21)

a face peering through protective feathers (p.27)

he slid off slippery feathers and settled himself at her side (p.30)

a vile fox with stealthy tread and sharp teeth (p.31)

he set off slowly with the cygnets following in single file (p.31)

the sun shone down, strong and steady (p.202)

fond of pretty ponds, marvelous marshes, reedy shores and restful retreats (p.44)

you've listened and learned, avoided the odious otter and the cruel coyote (p.45)

Love at long last; Love at first sight (p.161)

pack a wallop with one of those wings (p.95)

skunk blundered around blindly bumping into things (p.102)

The splashdown was sensational (p.143)

Does the author use “like” or “as” in making comparisons between two dissimilar things? (16d)

Examples of similes:

mist rises like steam from a kettle (p.26)

swimming like a locomotive with mother like a caboose (p.45)

notes are like jewels held up to the light (p.154)

love is like the rapture of the deep (p.162)

neck pointed out in front like a lance (p.165)

boy's nose looked like the beak of a bird (p.197)

Does the author call one thing or object another, using metaphors? (16i)

Louis says the sky is his living room, the woods his parlor, and the lonely lake is his bath. (p.172)

Do creatures speak with human voices, expressing rational thoughts and ideas? (16f)

This story, an example of anthropomorphism, features a family of swans who have human thoughts, ideas, and feelings. They cannot communicate these ideas to humans, however, because they do not have a human voice. One of them, Louis, has no voice at all. He learns to read and write, enabling him to “talk” to humans, and he acquires a trumpet to “talk” to his family. He is the only one who can communicate with both the swans and the humans and, thus, “speak with a human voice.”

QUESTIONS ABOUT CONTEXT



Who is the author? (18a-d)

The Trumpet of the Swan was written by Elwyn Brooke (E. B.) White in 1973 at the age of 71. He was already a successful writer when he began to write juvenile fiction. *Stuart Little*, written in 1945, was his first children's book, followed by *Charlotte's Web* in 1952. All three were major award-winning books. His wife and step-son were also successful writers. He was known for being friendly, witty, and amusing.

Where did the author live? (19a-c)

An American writer, born in New York State, White spent most of his life in New York City. He published his first article at age 36 in *The New Yorker Magazine* and was a part of the staff of that magazine for six decades. He wrote *Here is New York* in 1949, which has been called a "love letter" to the city. He received an honorary Pulitzer Prize in 1978 for the whole of his work. As a successful member of the writing establishment in a major city, he lived a comfortable life.

When did the author live? (20a,b,d)

E. B. White was born in 1899 and lived to be 86 years old. He served in the army before he graduated from Cornell University in 1921. Although his life encompassed both the World Wars, he was too young for the first and too old for the second. White lived a charmed life in many ways. He had a happy family and a sunny disposition; he was extremely successful in his career; he was secure financially and he never had to go to war. This background is apparent in the nature and appeal of his stories for young people.

NOTES:

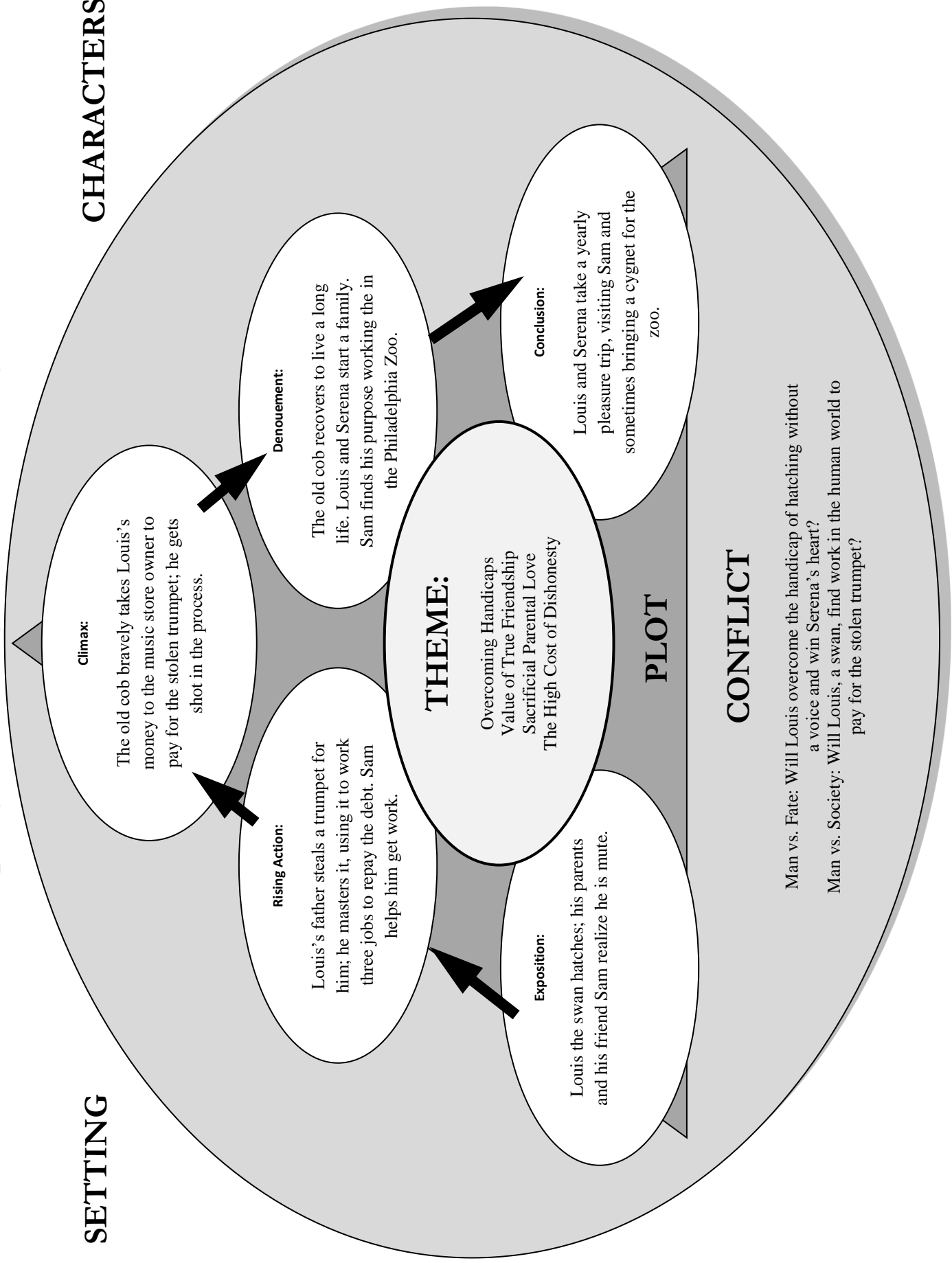
STORY CHARTS



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 Trumpet of the Swan by E.B. White: Story Chart



The Trumpet of the Swan by E.B. White: Blank Story Chart

