



Mem Fox's  
*Wilfrid Gordon McDonald  
Partridge*

Questions for Socratic Discussion  
by Missy Andrews





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*WILFRID GORDON MCDONALD PARTRIDGE*



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## QUICK CARD



<b><i>Reference</i></b>	<i>Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge</i> by Mem Fox ISBN-10: 091629126X ISBN-13: 978-0916291266
<b><i>Plot</i></b>	When Wilfrid learns that his favorite person at the nearby retirement home has lost her memory, he sets out to recover it.
<b><i>Setting</i></b>	A neighborhood home situated next door to an assisted living home.
<b><i>Characters</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge (protagonist) – a small, thoughtful child who lives next door to an old folks home.</li></ul> <p>Residents of the retirement home:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Mrs. Jordan – She plays the organ.</li><li>• Mr. Hoskings – He tells Wilfrid scary stories.</li><li>• Mr. Tippett – He is “crazy about cricket!”</li><li>• Miss Mitchell – She has difficulty getting around; Wilfrid runs errands for her.</li><li>• Mr. Drysdale – Wilfrid is awed by this man’s booming voice.</li><li>• Miss Nancy Alison Delacourt Cooper – Wilfrid’s special friend, she always has time for Wilfrid. He is first drawn to her because she has four names, just as he does. When he learns she’s losing her memory, Wilfrid is determined to find it again.</li></ul> <p>Other characters:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Wilfrid’s parents – They pity Miss Nancy as she loses her memory, but accept it matter of-factly as part of the aging process.</li></ul>
<b><i>Conflict</i></b>	Miss Nancy has lost her memory. Wilfrid, who loves his friend, must discover the meaning of “memory” and locate Nancy’s. (Man vs. Nature)
<b><i>Theme</i></b>	Wilfrid’s quest results in a truly heartwarming examination of the meaning attached to special objects, and the value of human kindness. Such kindness knows no age.
<b><i>Literary Devices</i></b>	Symbolism- something seen represents something unseen. In this story, the various objects Wilfrid gives Miss Nancy represent memories of things and times in her past.

## QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: SETTING



### Where does this story happen? (1)

The story takes place in a suburban neighborhood where Wilfrid, the main character, lives next door to a retirement home. Wilfrid is a frequent visitor there. The home is full of wonderful people, but none as special as Miss Nancy Alison Delacourt Cooper. Wilfrid's relationship with Miss Nancy fills the story with warmth. The main events of the story's plot take place in just a few hours; yet, they evoke memories of distant years for Nancy.

### When does this story happen? In what time of life for the main characters do events occur? Are they children? Are they just passing into adulthood? Are they already grownups? Does setting the story in this particular time of the characters' lives make the story better? (2e)

The characters' ages are very significant factors for this story. Wilfrid's openness, eagerness, simplicity, and earnest *compassion* (all characteristics of youth) are necessary for the story's events to unfold. He is still child enough to believe that Miss Nancy's memory can be found. He has not accepted the permanent effects of aging because he isn't familiar with them. Consequently, he's not bound by his assumptions.

Miss Nancy's age is also significant. Not only does old age bring memory loss, but it also brings lengthened days. Elderly people have time to spend – idle hours to give to children like Wilfrid whose days also stretch out before them. It's this shared time that sparks their friendship – well, this and their long names!

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## QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CHARACTERS



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

The story's protagonist is young Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge, a small, thoughtful boy, who befriends an elderly lady in a retirement home next door to his house.

### **How old is the protagonist? (3b)**

The narrator tells us that Wilfrid is “not very old, either.”

### **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)**

Wilfrid's actions show that he's a generous soul: compassionate, friendly, sensible, and resourceful. While Wilfrid's age makes him naive, his literal sensibilities allow him to approach Miss Nancy's problem with fresh and engaging perspective. Who says an old person must lose her memories for good? Not Wilfrid. His straightforward and accepting nature, together with his eager and loving heart, compels him to gather objects that will restore to Miss Nancy her lost memories.

### **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)**

Wilfrid's quiet response to Nancy's trouble communicates his regard for friendship. What's most important to Wilfrid? Whatever his friend most needs. His open, loving nature and childishness make him instantly sympathetic. His collection of memories makes readers smile with a combination of empathetic pity (circumstantial irony) and fondness. Poor Wilfrid, he doesn't know memories aren't shells or medals or eggs. Isn't he cute?

### **Who else is the story about? (4)**

In addition to Wilfrid, there are several other significant characters in the story. These include:

Miss Nancy Alison Delacourt Cooper – Wilfrid's special friend, this resident always has time for him. He is first drawn to her because she has four names, just as he does.

Wilfrid's parents – They pity Miss Nancy for her memory loss, but accept it matter-of-factly as part of the natural aging process.

The other rest home residents whom Wilfrid befriends:

Mrs. Jordan, "who played the organ"

Mr. Hoskings, "who tells scary stories"

Mr. Tippet, "who's crazy about cricket"

Miss Mitchell, "who walks with a cane"

Mr. Drysdale, "who has a voice like a giant"

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## QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CONFLICT AND PLOT



### **What does Wilfrid want? (5)**

When Wilfrid learns that his favorite friend has lost her memory, he sets out to find it for her again. Of course, unbeknownst to Wilfrid, memory is an abstract concept (5d) rather than a physical object. He asks the other residents of the retirement home to define memory for him, and he does his best to collect the things he supposes them to mean.

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

Wilfrid's search for Miss Nancy's memory is a Man vs. Nature conflict. Nature in the form of time and old age has robbed Nancy of her memory. Wilfrid's own childish understanding at first seems like a hindrance to his goals of restoring memory to his friend, yet his childish simplicity becomes the vehicle for his discovery.

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

Wilfrid hears that his 96-year-old friend Nancy has lost her memory. He determines to find it for her and asks all her friends what memory is so that he can search for it. (8a,b) Mrs. Jordan tells him memories are warm. Mr. Hoskings tells him they're something old. Mr. Tippet explains that memories make you cry. Miss Mitchell adds that they make you laugh. Mr. Drysdale pronounces them precious as gold. So Wilfrid sets out to collect things matching these descriptions.

### **How is the main problem solved? (9)**

Placing his odd assortment of gathered objects in a basket, Wilfrid delivers them to a bewildered Miss Nancy. As he presents her with each new object, her mind associates the objects with her own past experiences, and her memory is restored. (9d) Wilfrid's presentation of the gift and Miss Nancy's stirred memories form the climax of the story.

### **How does the story end? (10)**

Wilfrid listens eagerly to Nancy's recollected stories. He enjoys the vivid memories of her past almost as much as she does.

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

This shared experience validates both Wilfrid and Nancy and make their friendship stronger.



## QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: THEME



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### **What do the other characters learn? Are other people in the story ennobled, changed, improved or otherwise affected by the story's events? (12a)**

Miss Nancy is helped by Wilfrid's childish and generous act. We don't see the final response of other characters, but as he searches out the meaning of memory, the other residents find him strange and sweet.

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

Wilfrid Gordon is a regular visitor at the rest home situated next door to his house. Although he is a small boy, he is welcomed by the residents. Their colorful personalities and scary stories keep him well entertained. One resident in particular, Miss Nancy Alison Delacourt Cooper, becomes his special friend. Since he identifies with her lengthy name, and since she always seems to have time for him, their relationship grows. Unfortunately, Miss Nancy's mind is aging and her memory has begun to fail. This disturbs the child, who straightaway purposes to reclaim it for her.

Having interviewed the other residents concerning the meaning of "memory", Wilfrid begins to collect random objects, each of which are in some way associated with his friends' definitions. These gathered objects become symbols of universal, human experiences, and so prompt Miss Nancy's lagging memory.

A memory is something warm – and so Wilfrid brings a fresh hen egg. A memory is something that makes you cry – and so Wilfrid brings a medal his dead grandfather once gave him. A memory is something that provokes laughter – and so Wilfrid brings his furry puppet on strings. A football that he counts priceless too is taken, along with some old shells from "long ago."

When Miss Nancy sorts through this basket of gatherings, her mind fixes on events in her own life associated with similar objects. A medal makes her think of her soldier brother, lost in a war. The puppet brings back vivid pictures of her laughing little sister. Each object becomes a symbol which evokes recollections of some past experience in Miss Nancy's life. Bit by bit, her memory returns. This symbolism functions as a touchstone between two very different souls, a common language that both can speak.

While young Wilfrid lacks wisdom and maturity, he seems to understand both this universal language of human experience, and the medicinal effects of kindness. Rather than counting his own objects and experiences unique in kind from those of the adults around him, he expects Miss Nancy will see in them the same value as he does. Regardless of their difference in age, Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge and Miss Nancy Alison Delacourt Cooper are really as alike as their names. They're human beings.

Major themes of the story include:

- Friendship across the generations
- The universal nature of human experience – that is, the experience of being a creature on earth
- Kindness
- The transcendent value of the individual apart from age, “usefulness,” and knowledge.
- The ingenuity of children – the possibilities that exist when one is unaware of impossibilities.

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## QUESTIONS ABOUT STYLE



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

**Rhyme (14f):**

“He liked Mr. Jordan who played the organ.”

“He played with Mr. Tippet who was crazy about cricket.”

**Understatement**

The author describes Wilfrid as a small boy, “who wasn’t very old, either...”

In addition to these, the author utilizes repetition, a Hebrew poetic device often used by children’s authors.

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

**Irony (17d)**

Wilfrid’s predisposition to interpret everything literally creates a kind of circumstantial irony in the story. The reader understands what Wilfrid does not – that memories are abstract and cannot be collected – and that 96-year-olds’ lost memories are seldom found again.

**Symbolism (17h,I)**

Each of the objects Wilfrid carefully collects represents a memory for Miss Nancy. The warm egg represents her childhood discovery of a blue egg in her aunt’s garden. The shell reminds her of a trip she once made to the beach. The medal evokes sad memories of a brother, lost to war. The puppet garners smiles as she remembers her sister, laughing at her own puppet so long ago. Collectively, the objects symbolize the stuff of human experience – creaturehood. It’s this shared humanity that facilitates the friendship between Nancy and Wilfrid, in spite of the many years that separate them.

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# QUESTIONS ABOUT CONTEXT



## Who is the author? (18)

Australian born Mem Fox has authored 25 noted children’s books. Among these are the heartwarming *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge* and the swashbuckling *Tough Boris*. Ms. Fox has also authored *Reading Magic*, a book aimed at parents of children aged 0-5 years, and *Radical Reflections: Passionate Opinions on Teaching, Learning and Living*, a teacher’s text. In addition to her zeal for teaching teachers, she is actively involved in a literacy campaign, writing what she terms the “literature of liberation...from the tyranny of the attitudes and expectations that the world thrusts upon each of us.”

As a child, Ms. Fox lived in Zimbabwe where her parents worked as missionaries for Hope Fountain. There she was exposed firsthand to the kind of oppression she writes against. As a young adult, she attended drama school in England where she met her future husband. She married Malcolm Fox in 1969, and has one daughter, Chloe, now a journalist and high school teacher. Ms. Fox served as Assistant Professor at Flinders University in Adelaide, Australia for 24 years, a position from which she has since retired. Currently, she maintains a full schedule writing and traveling abroad both to promote her books and to champion literacy.

## NOTES:

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## STORY CHARTS

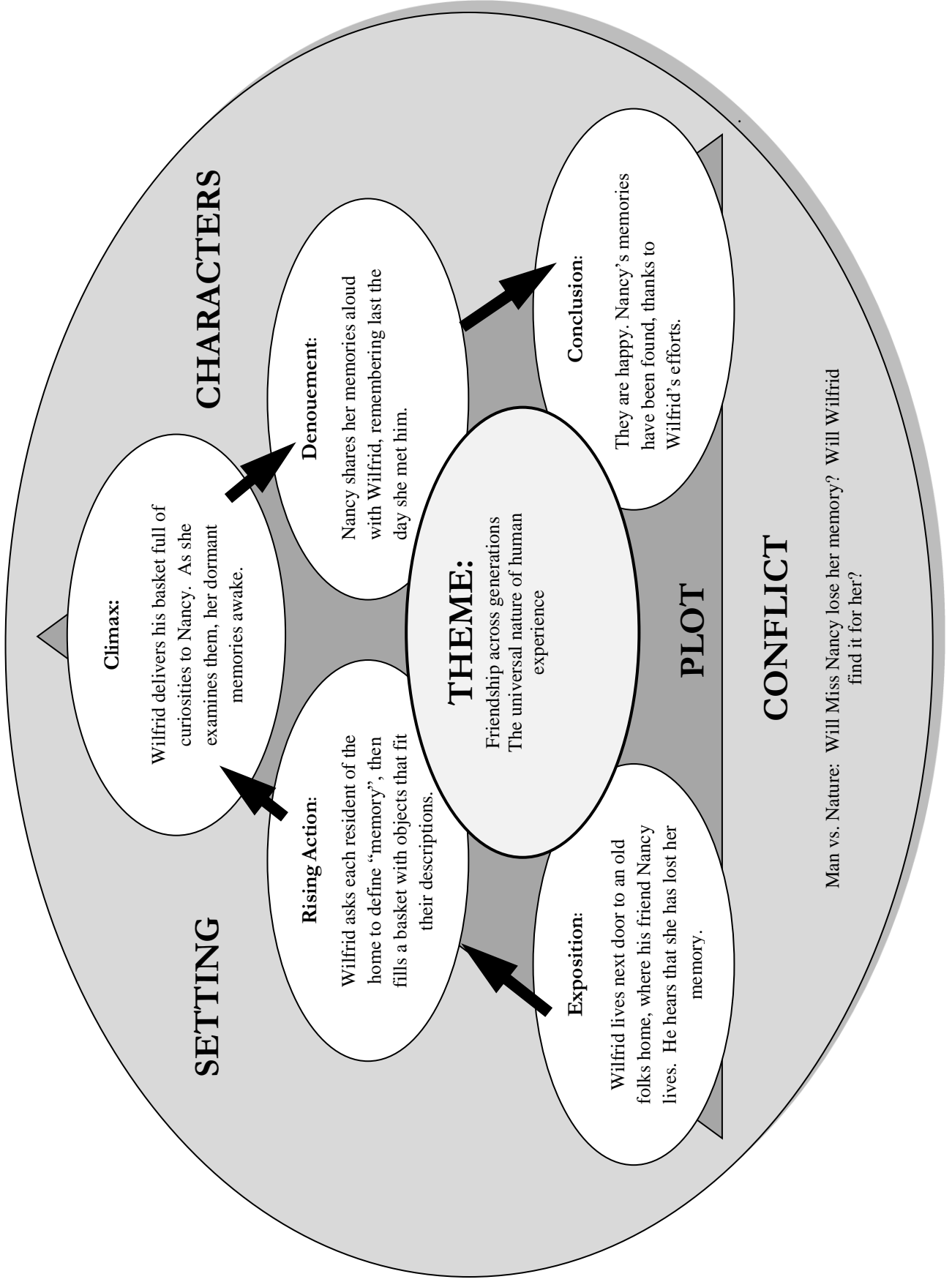


The following pages contain story charts of the type presented in the live seminar *Teaching the Classics*. As is made clear in that seminar, a separate story chart may be constructed for each of the conflicts present in a work of fiction. In particular, the reader's decision as to the *climax* and central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



# *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge* by Mem Fox: Story Chart







*Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge* by Mem Fox: Blank Story Chart

