



TEACHING THE CLASSICS

by Adam and Missy Andrews

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Teaching the Classics: A Socratic Method for Literary Education

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HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This syllabus is designed as a supplement to the eight-hour DVD seminar *Teaching the Classics*. You should plan to follow along in the syllabus as the DVD sessions unfold, taking notes in the spaces provided.

The DVD seminar will teach you how to study literature with students of all ages. Through discussions of several short stories, it presents the basics of literary analysis in a step-by-step progression. The seminar is normally given over a two-day period, but you may view it over a longer period if you wish.

The seminar is divided into eight one-hour sessions corresponding to the first eight sections of this syllabus. Each session focuses on one area of literary analysis, as summarized in the table of contents above, and features a model discussion of a classic short story. Sessions include live readings of each story, followed by lectures, discussions and practice sessions for teachers. Students in middle school and above may enjoy watching the seminar with their teachers as the sessions are lively and engaging.

After you complete the seminar, you can practice what you have learned with any other piece of literature. The principles of *Teaching the Classics* apply to picture books, historical readers, biographies, classics, poetry, movies and plays – anything, in fact, that tells a story. If you need some suggestions, this syllabus provides graded book lists for students of all ages.

Content of the DVD seminar:

- Disc 1: **Tools for Literary Analysis** (50 minutes)
Syllabus Section 1
- Disc 2: **Style & Context** (1 hr. 13 minutes)
Syllabus Section 2
- Disc 3: **Setting** (50 minutes)
Syllabus Section 3
- Disc 4: **Characters** (52 minutes)
Syllabus Section 4
- Disc 5: **Conflict & Plot** (52 minutes)
Syllabus Section 5
- Disc 6: **Theme** (52 minutes)
Syllabus Section 6
- Disc 7: **Practicum** (48 minutes)
Syllabus Section 7
- Disc 8: **Curriculum & FAQ** (1 hr. 6 minutes)
Syllabus Section 8

SECTION 1: TOOLS FOR LITERARY ANALYSIS

Why Literature?

To experience literature is to see the world through new eyes. As C. S. Lewis stated in his *Experiment in Criticism*, “Those of us who have been true readers all our life seldom fully realise the enormous extension of our being which we owe to authors. . . My own eyes are not enough for me, I will see through those of others.” When we read, we broaden our perspective, so that we are no longer trapped within the limits of our own experience. “In reading great literature,” Lewis says, “I become a thousand men and yet remain myself. . . I see with a myriad eyes, but it is still I who see. . . I transcend myself; and am never more myself than when I do.”

This broadening of perspective is a necessary and crucial part of a strong education. The ability to interact gracefully with important ideas is one mark of a truly educated person, and exposure to such ideas is the only way to become conversant with them! Great literature provides models and examples by which students can hone both their knowledge and expression of the great ideas. Education, however, represents only half of the reason to read.

The other half is that great literature, because it beautifully portrays the tragedy, pathos, and wonder of the human condition, is an end in itself. Literature is not just a textbook of transcendent ideas or a tool for teaching the skill of debate; it is art that richly rewards contemplation. It represents the contributions of its authors to what Mortimer Adler called the Great Conversation about the eternal things. These are the universal ideas that man has contemplated throughout the ages, regardless of his place in space and time. The pleasure and fulfillment that come from reading literature are part of what it is to be human, in the fullest sense. Participation in this conversation sets thinking man apart from the animals.

Why should you want your student to read and understand Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*? So that he will get the chance to think critically about literature and about life, of course, but also so that he will have read *Hamlet*. In it he will see and understand, in all its beauty and tragedy and glory, the plight of the human soul. As he reads he will see himself mirrored in Hamlet’s nobility and heroism, in his anxiety and indecision, in his glory and his destruction. The student’s mind will be uplifted beyond the facts of his own experience to the world of ideas, which will eventually bring to his own life a depth of understanding and a sense of perspective that would otherwise prove unavailable to him.

It is an odd and somewhat disturbing thought, but statistics say that most of us will be utterly forgotten by history within fifty years of our deaths. Achilles, however, still lives, three thousand years later. Hamlet lives. Huckleberry Finn, Augustine of *The Confessions*, Hawthorne’s Hester Prynne, Dostoyevsky’s Grand Inquisitor – they are all immortal, in a manner of speaking. Why? Because there is something about them, be it the bitterness of Achilles, the repentance of Augustine, the tortured humanity of Hamlet or the earthy wisdom of Huckleberry Finn, that calls out to us at some deep level and makes us answer – that touches us in our humanness, that

mirrors our own glorious potential and our own sinful wretchedness. These characters have the power to move and inspire us, to ennoble us.

This is why we study our past, our traditions, our cultural heritage; this is why we read great literature. The world is filled with gifts of beauty, truth, and goodness, and among these gifts are authors, philosophers, and poets. To understand their work is to experience these gifts firsthand.

This seminar is presented with the conviction that even young students can embark on this journey to understand and appreciate literature. They need not wait until they go to college to begin the process; they can start right now. The techniques are easy to learn and easy to teach, and much pleasure and fulfillment awaits him who would apply them.

The following lessons present a model for teaching the skills of literary analysis and interpretation. They are organized according to three important principles, which together form the heart of the *Teaching the Classics* approach to literature:

Principle #1

All works of fiction possess common elements, including Context, Style, and Structure.

Principle #2

Because of their clarity, children's stories provide the best opportunities for learning these elements.

Principle #3

The best classroom technique for presenting and analyzing literature is the Socratic method.

Principle #1 – The Common Elements of Fiction

Tool: The Story Chart

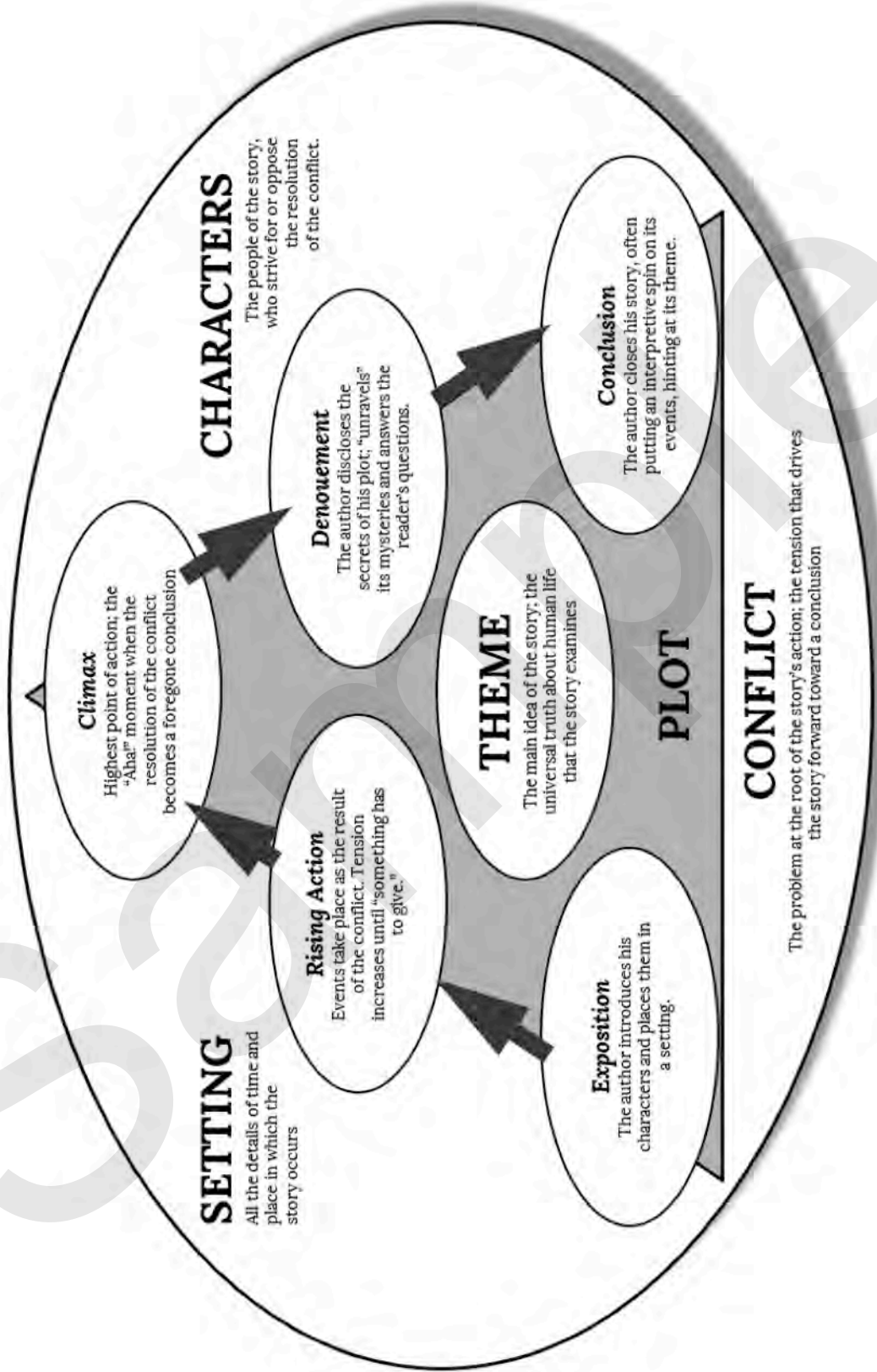
The key to understanding literature lies in recognizing its structure. All stories are composed of five basic elements: Setting, Characters, Conflict, Plot, and Theme.

The powerful “secret” of literary interpretation is really no secret at all: All stories have these components, even the children’s stories you read to your second graders at night! What is more, the elements of fiction are easily perceived in children’s literature, even for the children themselves. Children’s stories are therefore powerful tools for explaining the elements of fiction to students of all ages. Once grasped, an understanding of these elements may then be applied with great results to the works of the masters.

The lessons in this seminar demonstrate the parts of a story and the techniques used by authors to assemble them into a beautiful whole. The story chart on the next page is a graphic representation of this assembly of components and the relationships that exist between them.

This story chart is the foundational tool of the Teaching the Classics approach to literature. You will be encouraged in the sessions that follow to put each and every story “up on the chart,” and through continuous repetition to develop a habit of thinking in these categories. In this way the story chart will become a template for interpretation that you can apply to any work of fiction.

The Story Chart



Principle #3 – The Socratic Method

Tool: The Socratic List

This seminar presents its concepts in the same way that you will be instructed to present them to your own students: by asking questions in the context of a discussion of literature. The pedagogical technique of asking questions is often called the Socratic Method after Socrates, the Greek philosopher who made it famous.

We prefer this method for a variety of reasons:

- First, it is the most immediately effective way to involve the student in the learning process, and avoids dependence on the lecture format, which characterizes most high school and college literature courses. While a good lecture may be informative, a Socratic discussion provides the element of discovery. Students realize information and ideas as they think through well placed questions. In this way, they are best poised to take possession of the ideas themselves.
- Second, use of the Socratic method allows parents and teachers to put instruction in literature in the service of their larger ideological goals. Because the curriculum doesn't claim to tell students what to think about literature, this job is left to the parents – which is as it should be. No matter what your convictions about appropriate reading material, no matter what your idea of the good, the true, and the beautiful, this method will work for you. After learning the techniques of understanding presented here, you will be able to carry on an informed discussion of literature from the standpoint of your own worldview.
- Third, and perhaps most importantly, it allows the teacher to focus on the essential element of education, which is teaching the student how to think. The Socratic method does not begin with answers; it begins with questions. Students are therefore never told what to think before they have a chance to develop their own powers of observation, deduction, and evaluation. In this way, the Socratic method encourages good reading.

The Socratic List (included with this syllabus as Appendix A) provides an easy, step-by-step method for studying literature. It is the means by which you can teach your students to be profound thinkers. Familiarity with these questions gained by long, consistent use will make the understanding of difficult works easy – and this familiarity can be gained *before* the student is able to read those difficult works! Because the elements of fiction are the same for children's stories as for adult stories, the questions used to identify them are the same as well. Young readers may therefore learn real literary analysis at their own reading levels.

It is not necessary to be a college graduate with a literature major or to understand the most technical intricacies of literary interpretation and analysis to participate in Adler's "Great Conversation"; it is only necessary to know which questions to ask – of yourself, and of your students.

Individual questions on the Socratic List are arranged in order of increasing complexity. Generally, the first question for a particular structural element or stylistic device corresponds to the grammar stage of understanding (roughly grades 1 – 6); as such, it will ask for a re-telling of details or a simple description of characteristics. The next questions are aimed at logic level students (grades 7 – 9, for example) and will ask the students to explain the relationship between story elements, draw cause and effect connections between events, and account for significant changes. Finally, rhetoric level questions (aimed at high school students) will demand that the students understand and interact with the worldview of the author, identify and discuss major themes of the work, and evaluate the author’s treatment of them.

The Socratic List is designed first of all to stimulate a discussion of literature, which can begin at a very early age. As the student progresses as a writer – especially if he is learning to write well – such discussions can be extended into short, expository essays about particular aspects of a story, either structural or stylistic.

Above all, the Socratic List is designed to stimulate thinking about literature so that students can understand the author. Teachers should be careful not to require the student to evaluate a story before he has experienced it. Grammar and logic before rhetoric, please!

Sample