

## Asking the Right Questions – Teaching Literature with Socratic Discussion

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(The following is an excerpt from *Teaching the Classics: A Socratic Method for Literary Education*)

The *theme* of a story is the underlying idea or philosophy that the story grapples with. Often (though not always), the author will articulate a particular opinion or perspective concerning that idea, which becomes part of the theme as well.

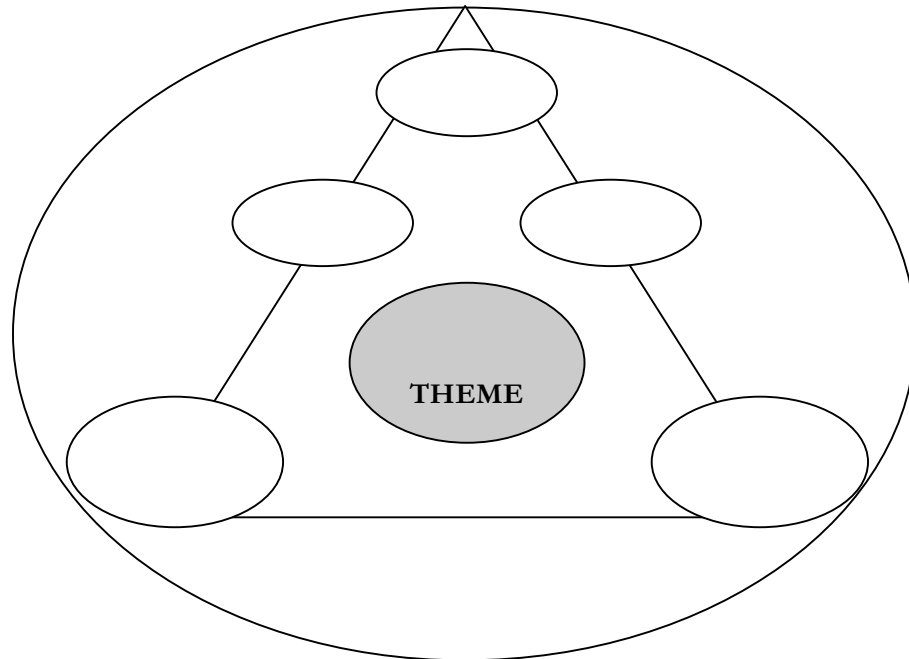
It's important to distinguish the idea of theme from some similar concepts. First, the *theme* of a work is not the same as the *subject* of the work. While the subject may be compared to the parts of a telephone – dial, mouthpiece, receiver – the theme corresponds to the idea behind the telephone, which is communication. Similarly, the subject of Dickens' *Great Expectations* is the career of its main character, while its various themes include Ambition, Loyalty and Prejudice.

One reason why the great works of Western literature have endured in popularity and influence down through the centuries is that they deal with themes which are relevant to human experience in every age of the world. Though often written about strange times and strange people, they have the power to move us because they wrestle with questions that trouble us, too.

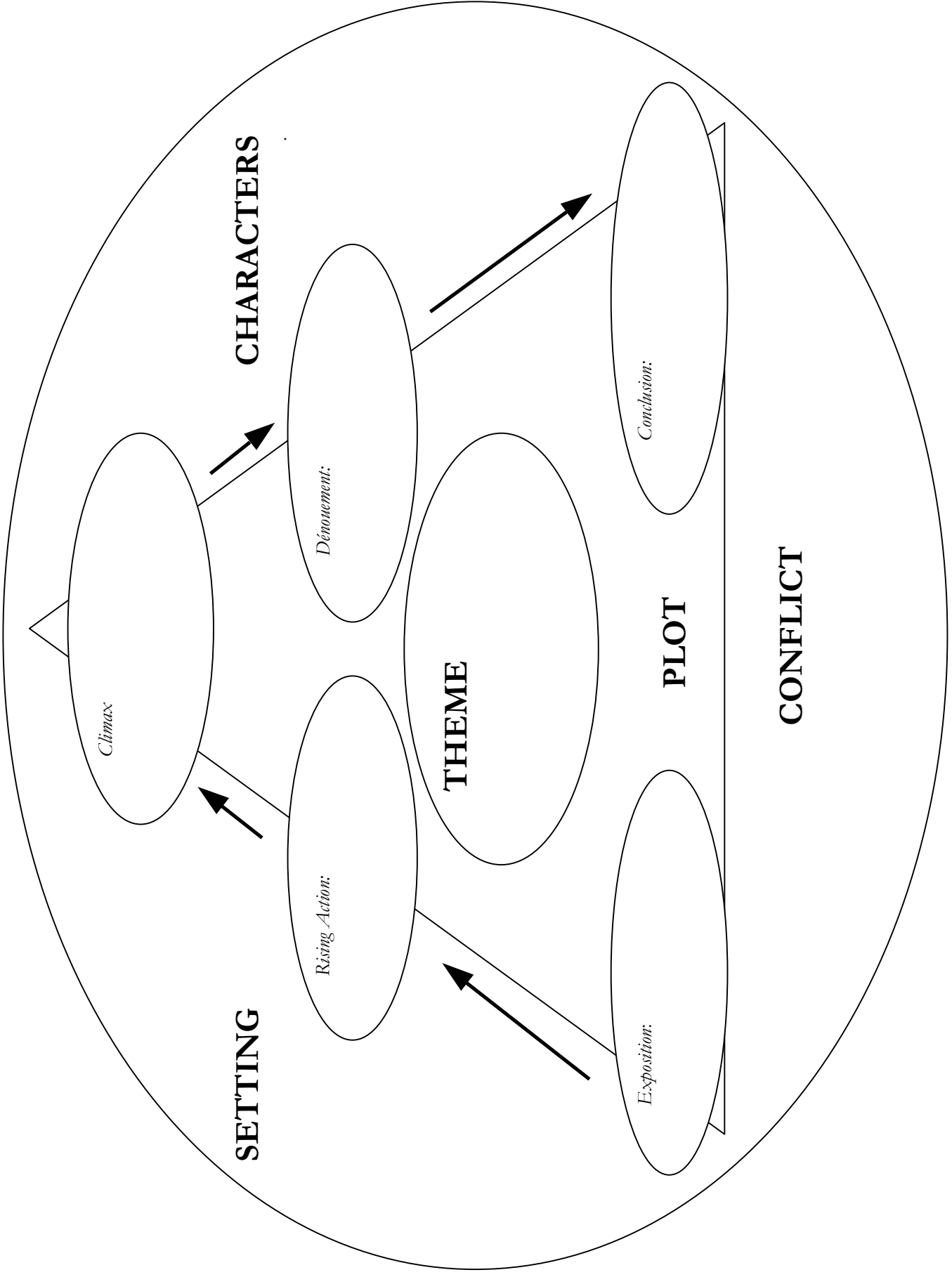
### Some Universal Themes

Prejudice	Fear
Betrayal	Honor
Innocence	Survival
Materialism v. Idealism	Loyalty
Generosity of Human Nature	Struggles with the Conscience
Wisdom of Age	Disillusionment
Pride & Humility	Compromise
Alienation	Human Integrity
Ambition	Human Frailty
Authority	Youth vs. Age
Family Relationships	The Nature of Faith
Good vs. Evil	The Nature of God
Growing Up/Coming of Age	Innocence vs. Experience

Also important to remember is that the *theme* of a story is not the same as the *moral* of the story. Not all stories are written to teach a moral lesson, and it's not necessary that they do. There is a crucial difference, after all, between a *sermon* and a *story*. Both are good, but it is not necessary that every piece of writing be a sermon in order to be good, true, and beautiful. Though not all books have a moral, almost all have a theme of some kind. An author doesn't have to have answers for life's questions before he writes a book. Some authors are only good at asking the questions! If he has been properly trained, the reader will recognize the questions, and evaluate them from his own perspective. Often, the most powerfully thematic works do no more than hint at the author's perspective. In literature, as in teaching, a well placed question is sometimes more eloquent than the deepest sermon.



*The Biggest Bear* by Lynd Ward: Story Chart



# *The Biggest Bear* by Lynd Ward

## Discussion Notes on Theme

1. Among what kinds of people is the story set? What is their economic class? How do they live? Are they hopeful? Downtrodden? Depressed? Why? (Question 1h.)
2. In what time of life for the main characters do the events occur? Are they children? Are they just passing into adulthood? Are they already grownups? Does setting the story in this particular time of the characters' lives make the story better? (Question 2e.)
3. 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? (Question 3m.)
4. What does the protagonist want? Fill in the blank: This story is about the protagonist trying to \_\_\_\_\_. (Question 5a.)
5. Do his objectives or goals change throughout the story? How? Why? (Question 5f.)



# Theme in Adult Literature

A partial list of themes in the four adult works we have studied is presented here. Notice the relatively small number of themes addressed by these widely disparate works. Though they have little in common in terms of genre, style, subject matter or historical context, *they all deal with similar themes!* This is a clue to the mystery of “the classic.”

## *The Iliad*

The Devastating Effects of Bitterness  
Free Will and Fate  
Loyalty and Friendship  
The Love of Fathers for their Sons

## *Macbeth*

Ambition and its consequences  
Treachery and Betrayal  
Guilt and Remorse  
Free Will and Fate

## *Great Expectations*

Lost Innocence/Coming of Age  
Ambition and its Consequences (See James 4:4)  
Loyalty and Friendship  
Treachery and Betrayal  
The Immaturity of Youth  
The Power of Kindness and Sacrifice

## *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Lost Innocence  
The Power of Kindness and Sacrifice  
The Brotherhood of Man  
Good versus Evil