

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Charlotte's Web by E.B. White

Book Information

E.B. White, Charlotte's Web

Quiz Number: 19

HarperCollins Publishers, Inc, 1999

ISBN 0-06-441093-5; LCCN

184 Pages

Book Level: 4.4

Interest Level: MG

In this endearing story, a little girl and Charlotte, a beautiful grey spider, struggle to save Wilbur the pig from being butchered.

Award: ALA Notable/Best Books; NCTE Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts; Newbery Honor; SLJ Best Book

Topics: Animals, Arachnids; Animals, Misc./Other; Power Lessons AR, Grade 4; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 6-8; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 3-5; Series, Charlotte's Web

Main Characters

Avery Fern's brother

Charlotte the large gray spider who is Wilbur's true friend and saves his life by weaving words about him in her web

Dr. Dorian the Arables' family doctor, who tells Mrs. Arable not to worry that Fern hears animals talking

Fern the eight-year-old girl who prevents Wilbur, the runt of the litter, from being killed at birth

Henry Fussy Fern's friend

Lurvy the hired man on the Zuckermans' farm

Mr. Arable Fern's father

Mr. Zuckerman Fern's uncle, who raises Wilbur on his farm after Wilbur is no longer a baby

Mrs. Arable Fern's mother

Mrs. Zuckerman Fern's aunt

Templeton the selfish, gluttonous rat who finds words for Charlotte to spin in her web

Wilbur the pig

Vocabulary

balloonist someone who flies as if in a balloon

magnum opus the greatest achievement

runt the smallest of a litter of animals

Synopsis

A litter of pigs is born on the Arables' farm. Eight-year-old Fern is dismayed that her father plans to kill the runt. She persuades him to allow her to raise the piglet, whom she names Wilbur. At her parents' insistence, Fern takes Wilbur to live at her uncle's farm when Wilbur is no longer a baby. There, Wilbur becomes acquainted with the barnyard animals, including a large grey spider named Charlotte and a rat named Templeton. Wilbur and Charlotte become friends.

Wilbur's happy existence is shattered when the sheep tells him that the farmer, Mr. Zuckerman, is feeding him well in preparation for being butchered. Charlotte devises a plan to save Wilbur's life, and one morning the words "SOME PIG" appear written in Charlotte's web.

Visitors flock to the Zuckermans' farm to witness the miracle. Over the next days and weeks, Charlotte writes "TERRIFIC" and then "RADIANT" in the web.

When it is time for the County Fair, the Zuckermans enter Wilbur. Wilbur believes that if he can distinguish himself at the Fair, Zuckerman will certainly let him live. Charlotte and Templeton travel along with Wilbur. At the Fair, Charlotte weaves the word "HUMBLE" into the web. She also makes an egg sac and lays 514 eggs. There is an anxious moment at the Fair when Uncle, a pig much larger than Wilbur, is found with a blue ribbon on his pen. But Wilbur gets a special award. The judges say the web is a miracle. Fern misses the ceremony; she chooses instead to ride the Ferris wheel with her friend Henry Fussy.

That night, Wilbur and Charlotte agree Wilbur's safety is ensured. Charlotte says she wove the webs for Wilbur because she likes him; Wilbur says he would gladly give his life for Charlotte. Then

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Charlotte's Web

by
E.B. White

Charlotte tells Wilbur her life is nearly spent; she will not return to the barnyard. Wilbur persuades Templeton to fetch Charlotte's egg sac so Wilbur can take it back to the barnyard. If Charlotte cannot go home, at least her children must.

The eggs hatch the next spring. Soon, most of the baby spiders let loose clouds of fine silk and balloon away. Wilbur is heartbroken. Three spiders, however, make their homes in the doorway of the barn. They, and their children after them, become Wilbur's friends. None of them, however, can ever replace Charlotte in his heart.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Why is it important that Fern leaves to go for a ride on the Ferris wheel before Wilbur receives his prize at the County Fair?

The author is showing that Fern is growing up and becoming interested in other things.

Literary Analysis

Why do you think E.B. White did not end the story of *Charlotte's Web* with Charlotte's death at the Fair?

He probably wanted to show the cycles of life and that each life holds the potential for more than one friendship.

Inferential Comprehension

When Fern says her father is unjust in wanting to kill Wilbur because he is a runt, a "queer look" comes over Mr. Arable's face, and he looks "almost ready to cry himself." Why might this be?

Mr. Arable probably realizes that there is some truth in Fern's words. He seems to have a soft heart, as does Fern. He may also be concerned about Fern's feelings.

Constructing Meaning

With personification, an author gives an animal or object the qualities of a human being. There are many examples of personification in *Charlotte's Web*. Can you identify some of them?

One example is that animals speak. Also, animals have human emotions; for example, Templeton is selfish, Charlotte and Wilbur have a true friendship, and Wilbur is sad when Charlotte dies.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Literary Features The theme of the book is that true friendship is one of life's greatest satisfactions. Ask the students to reflect on the importance of friendship in their lives. Who have been their truest friends? Why have these friendships been important? Have they ever thought someone was their friend, only to find out they were not? How did they feel? Ask the students to convey their thoughts in a short essay.

Understanding Characterization Fern changes through the story of *Charlotte's Web* from a girl whose main interest is caring for Wilbur and spending time with the barnyard animals to one who prefers to spend her time with her friend Henry Fussy. Ask the students to think about how their interests have changed as they have become older. Ask them to make a list of the activities they enjoyed at different ages.

Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning One of the distinguishing features of *Charlotte's Web* is the author's use of personification. The animals display emotions and can speak. Instruct the students to go to the library and locate other books that extensively use personification. Have each student present a favorite selection to the class.

Recognizing Setting *Charlotte's Web*, written in 1952, takes place on a farm. The family-owned-and-operated farms that were commonplace nearly fifty years ago are much less prevalent now. Ask the students why the family farm might be struggling to survive. Do

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for
Charlotte's Web
by
E.B. White

they think it matters whether family farms survive? How would the farm in the story be different if it were a large, corporately owned farm? They could make a collage showing the contrast between the types of farms.