

Charlotte's Web Study Guide

Charlotte's Web by E. B. White

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Plot Summary

Charlotte's Web is a classic children's novel about a pig named Wilbur and his friendship with a barn spider named Charlotte. This animal fable was first published in 1952 and was listed by Publisher's Weekly as the top-selling children's paperback of all time in the year 2000. Charlotte's Web explores themes of friendship, loyalty, nature, justice, language, and the cycles of life and death.

When eight-year-old Fern learns in the beginning of the novel that her father, John Arable, intends to kill a baby piglet because it is the runt of the litter, Fern begs him to spare the piglet's life. Mr. Arable finally relents and gives Fern the responsibility of raising the piglet herself, hoping this will show Fern "how much trouble a pig can be" (Chapter 1, p. 6).

Fern nurses the piglet, which she names Wilbur, for several weeks, feeding him with a baby bottle and taking him for walks in her doll stroller. Once Wilbur is old enough, Mr. Arable informs Fern she must sell the piglet and suggests calling her uncle, Homer Zuckerman, who has a farm up the road. Fern sells Wilbur for six dollars to her uncle, who allows Fern to come and visit Wilbur any time she chooses.

At Zuckerman's farm, Wilbur becomes lonely for friendship but none of the farm animals will play with him. Eventually, a soothing voice comes to Wilbur, telling him that she will be his friend. The next morning, Wilbur meets Charlotte A. Cavatica, a large gray spider whose web stretches above the door to Wilbur's pigpen. Wilbur is at first horrified by the bloodthirsty nature of the spider, but eventually the two become dear friends.

When Wilbur learns from the old sheep that Mr. Zuckerman intends to kill Wilbur to eat for Christmas dinner, he turns to Charlotte for help. Charlotte promises she will devise a plan to save Wilbur's life, and after several days an idea comes to her. Charlotte begins spinning messages in her web which praise Wilbur, including "Some Pig!" and "TERRIFIC," which have the desired effect of astonishing the Zuckermans and the townspeople.

Mr. Zuckerman becomes so preoccupied with the miracles of his famous pig he decides to enter Wilbur in a competition at the County Fair. With Charlotte's assistance, Wilbur goes to the fair and wins Mr. Zuckerman top prize, ensuring that Wilbur will not go to slaughter.

Charlotte, however, has reached the end of her natural lifespan, and after laying her eggs and weaving an egg sac while at the fair, Charlotte becomes too weak to go on. With help from Templeton the rat, Wilbur salvages Charlotte's eggs and transports them back to Zuckerman's barn, where he awaits their hatching the following spring.

When Charlotte's eggs eventually hatch, most of the baby spiders depart to build webs of their own elsewhere. Three of Charlotte's daughters, however, stay behind at Zuckerman's barn as friends to Wilbur.



Chapters 1-2

Summary

Chapter 1, "Before Breakfast."

In this chapter, the character of Fern is introduced when she asks her mother, "Where's Papa going with that ax?" (Chapter 1, p. 1). Fern is an eight-year-old girl who discovers her father is about to kill the runt of a newly-born pig litter on their farm.

Fern runs to stop her father, pleading "This is the most terrible case of injustice I ever heard of!" (Chapter 1, p. 6). Fern begs her father not to kill the pig just based on its size. John Arable, Fern's father, relents and allows Fern to keep the runt pig to raise herself, thinking this would prove "what trouble a pig can be" (Chapter 1, p. 6).

Fern returns from her room with eyes red from crying to discover a small carton containing a newborn piglet. Fern decides to name the pig Wilbur. Fern's brother, Avery, who is ten, comes downstairs for school and asks for his own pig, but Fern's parents tell him newborn pigs are for

"early risers." Fern's mother finds a baby bottle and Fern feeds Wilbur before the school bus takes the children away to school.

Chapter 2, "Wilbur."

Every morning and every night Fern feeds Wilbur and cares for him. While she is away at school, her mother feeds him a bottle at lunchtime. Wilbur is allowed to live in a box near the stove in the kitchen until he is a few days old, when he is moved to a bigger box in the woodshed. At two weeks of age, he is moved outdoors to a small pen. Wilbur follows Fern everywhere she goes and completely adores her.

When Wilbur turns five weeks old, Mr. Arable says he's old enough to sell and must be sold. Fern cries, but her father remains firm. Fern's mother suggests she call her uncle, Homer Zuckerman, and see if he might be willing to buy Wilbur. Fern calls Uncle Homer, who agrees to buy the pig for six dollars. Fern can visit Wilbur up the road as she pleases.

Analysis

The setting of *Charlotte's Web* is never specifically indicated in the novel, but in these first two chapters the reader learns through clues the action takes place between two farms in a small town, in or around the 1950s. When Fern discovers her father is going to kill the runt piglet, she begs him to have mercy and introduces the theme of justice, exclaiming, "The pig couldn't help being born small, could it? If I had been very small at birth, would you have killed me?" (Chapter 1, p. 6). The author also introduces the



contrast between the laws of humanity and the laws of nature in this section, as Mr. Arable concludes children are different from pigs. Fern disagrees, calling her father's actions "the most terrible case of injustice I ever heard of" (Chapter 1, p. 6).

E.B. White further explores the boundaries between nature and humanity as Wilbur is given an essentially human childhood. Fern dresses the pig in doll clothes and takes him for walks in her toy stroller. Animal instincts, however, are given a certain degree of weight, as is indicated by Wilbur's instinctual bedding in the hay and later, through the actions of Charlotte and the other barn animals.

When Fern must give up Wilbur, she is devastated and cries but her father remains firm. Mrs. Arable's idea of selling Wilbur to Mr. Zuckerman, Fern's uncle, placates Fern because she knows her uncle will allow her to visit Wilbur at his farm just up the road.

Vocabulary

Runt, injustice, untimely, air rifle, responsibility, adoring, brook, amused, delightfully, peaceful, provide, slop, scraps, manure



Chapters 3-4

Summary

Chapter 3, "Escape."

The author opens Chapter 3 describing the new surroundings and home for Wilbur in the Zuckermans' barn. The barn is very old and large. The main floor of the barn has stalls for horses and tie-ups for cows, and down below, in the cellar, there is a sheepfold and pigpen for Wilbur. Wilbur's home is situated on a manure pile below the cows on the main floor on the south side of the cellar.

Fern comes almost every day to visit Wilbur. She finds an old milking stool which she places next to Wilbur's pen and sits quietly there every afternoon, watching and listening to Wilbur. Soon, Fern befriends the other animals of the farm and is trusted by them as well. One afternoon, when Fern does not arrive, Wilbur becomes restless. He wanders around his fence and a goose convinces him to escape through a loose board.

Wilbur follows the guidance of the goose, who encourages him to explore and enjoy his freedom, but it takes only a short while for the Zuckermans to discover the escaped piglet. After much hullabaloo and the shouting and excitement of the barn animals, Mr. Zuckerman and Lurvy, his hired man, corner Wilbur and lead him back into the barn with the sprinkling of slops. Wilbur is happy to be back in the safety of his home.

Chapter 4, "Loneliness."

The rainy dark day has foiled Wilbur's plans as Chapter 4 begins. He had planned on eating breakfast, talking with the rat Templeton, napping, eating lunch, napping and awaiting Fern's arrival. Wilbur is so depressed and lonely he refuses even to eat breakfast. As the day rolls along, Wilbur attempts to make various friends in the barn to no avail. A goose, a lamb, and even Templeton the rat refuse to play with Wilbur.

After Wilbur is fed a medicine of molasses and sulphur due to his lack of appetite, the pig feels this is the worst day of his life. It is then Charlotte the spider first appears. She is unseen, but tells Wilbur she will be his friend, and he will see her in the morning.

Analysis

In these chapters, the characters in the barn are developed in more detail. The stuttering repetition in the goose's speech, for example, gives this character a realistic speech pattern, mimicking the honking call of geese in nature. The goose tells Wilbur, "You don't have to stay in that dirty-little dirty-little dirty-little yard" (Chapter 3, p. 15), encouraging the pig to break free and run wild. Wilbur takes the goose's advice only to discover he's happier in his pen, eating the warm slops that are brought to him. "If this



is what it's like to be free,' he thought, 'I believe I'd rather be penned up in my own yard'" (Chapter 3, pg. 19).

The following day, Wilbur is burdened by loneliness and boredom as the rain prevents Fern's visit. While Wilbur is happy with the monotony of his caged life and no longer desires freedom, he desires companionship. It should be noted here Wilbur has had little to no exposure to his own species at this point, having been taken away from his litter just after birth; his only companionship has been that of humans and the other animals of the barn. When Wilbur hears the voice of the unseen Charlotte, he goes to sleep hoping his loneliness will reach an end.

Vocabulary

Perspiration, hayloft, grain, harness, tie-ups, stalls, sheepfold, pigpen, grindstones, monkey wrenches, scythes, cellar, milking stool, gosling, racket, hollering, asparagus, pricked-up ears, head off, dodge, gander, hullabaloo, wheat middlings, captivity, 8-penny nails, downspouts, custard pudding, apple parings, provender, nothingness, frolic, glutton, crafty, sulphur, molasses.



Chapters 5-6

Summary

Chapter 5, "Charlotte."

Wilbur struggles restlessly to sleep through the night, but is constantly awakened by the noises in the barn. Wilbur has a conversation with the goose, who is having trouble sleeping due to the fact that she's sitting on eight eggs. When dawn finally approaches, Wilbur begins looking everywhere for the voice that had spoken to him the night before. Wilbur eventually speaks out, declaring "Will the party who addressed me at bedtime last night kindly speak up. Please tell me where you are, if you are my friend!" (Chapter 5, p. 33). The other animals in the barn tell Wilbur to be quiet and go back to sleep.

Finally, after Wilbur eats his breakfast and settles back into his morning nap, the voice reappears, saying "Salutations!" Wilbur finally sees his new friend, a spider, who introduces herself as Charlotte. Charlotte A. Cavatica is a large gray spider, described as about the size of a gumdrop, and her web stretches over the door to Wilbur's pen.

Charlotte proceeds to kill and eat a fly in her web while describing to Wilbur her method. Wilbur watches in horror but Charlotte explains that she, being a spider, must eat flies and enjoys drinking their blood. Wilbur is finally put at ease when Charlotte explains if she didn't eat bugs, they would overpopulate the world and destroy it. Meanwhile, the goose mumbles to herself Wilbur is unaware the farmer plans to kill and eat him. Wilbur doesn't hear this, but goes to sleep after his chat with his new friend.

Chapter 6, "Summer Days."

The narrator describes the early summer days on a farm as the happiest and fairest days of the year. Now that school is out, Fern comes every day to visit Wilbur and her friends in the barn. In early July, Mr. Zuckerman begins gathering hay from the fields and Avery and Fern ride atop the loads as they are driven to the barn. The birds sing a melody of songs and the trees and garden are abloom with fresh fruits and vegetables.

It is in this time of early summer when the goose's eggs finally hatch. Charlotte is the first to notice the eggs hatching and once they finish, there are seven goslings. The eighth egg, being "a dud" is taken by Templeton the rat to hoard in his home while the other animals in the barn watch in disgust.

Analysis

When Charlotte first introduces herself to Wilbur, her intelligence and literary prowess are established simply and clearly though the word "salutations." Wilbur asks Charlotte what salutations are and she informs him that they are a form of greeting. Then Charlotte catches a fly in her web and explains in intricate detail her process for killing



and eating the insect. Wilbur is horrified at the vicious and bloodthirsty nature of the spider and goes to sleep worried about what he's gotten himself into by forming a friendship with such a creature.

There is an important aside which takes place in the ending of Chapter 5, when the goose mumbles to herself the unforeseen fate of Wilbur at the hands of Mr. Zuckerman. "He's really a very innocent little pig. He doesn't even know what's going to happen to him around Christmastime; he has no idea that Mr. Zuckerman and Lurvy are plotting to kill him" (Chapter 5, p. 39). While Wilbur remains unaware of the goose's comment, this informs the reader of Wilbur's central obstacle in the narrative and creates suspense through foreshadowing.

The motif of nature returns in Chapter 6 as the author describes in sensory detail the qualities of summertime on the farm, from the smells of hay to the sounds of different birds singing. The hatching of the goslings comes in this fertile time, and Charlotte's congratulatory speech reiterates her role as a writer and intellectual. "I am sure every one of us here will be gratified to learn that after four weeks of unremitting effort and patience on the part of our friend the goose, she now has something to show for it. The goslings have arrived. May I offer my sincere congratulations!" (Chapter 6, p. 42).

Templeton's taking of the rotten goose egg further illustrates the rat's selfish and amoral qualities. The author writes, "The rat had no morals, no conscience, no scruples, no consideration, no decency, no milk of rodent kindness, no compunctions, no higher feeling, no

friendliness, no anything. He would kill a gosling if he could get away with it – the goose knew that" (Chapter 6, p. 44). The animals watch in disgust as Templeton rolls the goose egg into his lair and disappears.

Vocabulary

Clashers, all told, weather-vane, appropriate, objectionable, salutations, expression, whereabouts, gumdrop, Cavatica, near-sighted, silk, gnats, midges, daddy longlegs, centipedes, grasshoppers, choice beetles, bloodthirsty, inheritance, exterior, lilacs, trout, jubilee, phoebe, potato vine, potato bug, unremitting, dud, compunctions, untenable, stink bomb, lair



Chapters 7-9

Summary

Chapter 7, "Bad News."

Wilbur grows to like his new friend Charlotte more and more and is less disturbed by Charlotte's diet of insects and her method of killing prey. Wilbur continues to grow bigger, eating three meals of slop a day and enjoying getting fat until one of the sheep tells him why it is that Mr. Zuckerman is fattening him up.

The old sheep tells Wilbur, "Well, I don't like to spread bad news, but they're fattening you up because they're going to kill you, that's why" (Chapter 7, p. 47). Wilbur and Fern are horrified as the sheep remarks that even John Arable, Fern's father, is in on the plot and that all young pigs are killed before the winter sets in. Wilbur sobs hysterically while Charlotte attempts to reassure him that she will help him escape his dreadful fate.

Chapter 8, "A Talk at Home."

On Sunday at breakfast, Fern tells her parents about the goose's eggs hatching and talks about Templeton, Charlotte, Wilbur and the other barn animals. Mrs. Arable seems worried as Fern goes on to describe the conversations between the animals and the friendship between Wilbur and Charlotte. When Fern goes upstairs to get ready for Sunday school, Mrs. Arable voices her concerns to her husband and her intention to talk to Dr. Dorian about Fern and her overactive imagination. Mr. Arable has little worries over his daughter and suggests "maybe our ears aren't as sharp as Fern's" (Chapter 8, p. 53).

Chapter 9, "Wilbur's Boast."

In this chapter, the narrator begins by describing the durability of a spider's web. Charlotte likes to repair and work on her web in the afternoons and Fern enjoys watching her. One afternoon, Fern overhears Wilbur and Charlotte discussing Charlotte's legs, which she describes as having seven sections – "the coxa, the trochanter, the femur, the patella, the tibia, the metatarsus, and the tarsus" (Chapter 9, p. 54).

This conversation leads to Wilbur challenging himself to spin a web like Charlotte's. The barn animals watch amusedly as Wilbur makes several attempts, but only ends up sprawled on the barn floor. Finally, Charlotte assures Wilbur he is unable to spin a web because he lacks spinnerets and know-how, but he needn't worry because his food is brought to him three times daily.

Charlotte and Wilbur discuss the trivialities of mankind, with Charlotte concluding "with men it's rush, rush, rush, every minute. I'm glad I'm a sedentary spider" (Chapter 9, p. 58). As the evening winds down, Wilbur again is reminded of his future and whispers to



Charlotte he doesn't want to die. Charlotte reassures Wilbur again that she is working on a plan and will find a way to save his life. Wilbur finally drifts into sleep.

Analysis

Wilbur's discovery of Zuckerman's plan to kill him introduces the rising action in the novel and careens the piglet into hysterics. It is the old sheep that tells Wilbur Mr. Zuckerman, Lurvy and even John Arable are plotting to slaughter Wilbur at Christmastime. Charlotte attempts to calm the distraught pig to little avail, exclaiming she cannot stand hysterics.

The conflict in the plot broadens also with Mrs. Arable's concern over Fern's behavior and imagination. While Mr. Arable has few worries over his daughter spending time in Zuckerman's barn, Mrs. Arable intends to talk to the family doctor about the odd behavior of her little girl.

In Chapter 9 the action returns to the barn, as Charlotte explains the anatomy of her spider legs and spinnerets and Wilbur attempts to spin a web. While this chapter is largely one of comic relief, it also explores the theme of human nature, as Charlotte describes the Queensboro Bridge and the constant rushing back and forth of men. The juxtaposition here is that of the barn, where nature dictates the lives of creatures and the pace is slower and more "sedentary," as Charlotte describes herself. The obstacle of Wilbur's impending death is still weighing on his mind, and while Charlotte attempts to placate him, she too is worried and hopeful a plan will occur to her.

Vocabulary

Campaign, victim, anesthetic, fattening, conspiracy, .22, gratified, queerly, coxa, trochanter, femur, patella, tibia, metatarsus, tarsus, spinnerets, hitches, Queensboro Bridge, sedentary, beechnuts, truffles, embarrassment, troupe



Chapters 10-13

Summary

Chapter 10, "An Explosion."

Day after day, Charlotte hangs head-down in her web, waiting for an idea to come to her of how to save Wilbur's life. Finally, in mid-July, an idea dawns on the spider. "The way to save Wilbur's life is to play a trick on Zuckerman," thinks Charlotte (Chapter 10, p. 65).

In the summertime, Fern and Avery run about the farm playing and swinging on Mr. Zuckerman's swing which hangs from the barn door. After swinging for an hour, the children go to visit Wilbur and Avery decides to catch the "tremenjus" spider hanging above Wilbur's pen. Avery loses his balance as he pokes at Charlotte with a stick from the stool, falling onto Wilbur's trough and sending it crashing to the ground. The goose egg, tucked in Templeton's lair, breaks along with it, and the smell of rotten egg fills the barn.

Later, Charlotte sits in the afternoon sun as the barn animals doze and begins to carry out her plan. Charlotte begins removing the center threads from her web and reworking them. When Templeton returns home at midnight, Charlotte is still working.

Chapter 11, "The Miracle."

The next morning, Lurvy arrives in the foggy dawn to deliver Wilbur's slops and notices the perfection of Charlotte's web. As he takes a second look, though, he is so stunned he has to set his pail down. In the middle of Charlotte's web are woven the words: "SOME PIG!"

Lurvy walks up to Mr. Zuckerman's house and insists he come down to the barn to see the web. When Mr. Zuckerman reads the writing in the web, both of the men begin to tremble and Charlotte smiles as she watches the men gape in astonishment. Mr. Zuckerman returns home to his wife and declares there is something remarkable about that pig and a miracle has happened in the barn.

Mr. Zuckerman, his wife, and Lurvy stand for hours staring at Charlotte's web, reading and rereading the words in it. Then Mr. Zuckerman puts on his best suit and drives to the minister's house, where he describes the miracle. The minister advises Mr. Zuckerman to keep the miracle a secret, but within days everyone in the town knows of Mr. Zuckerman's wondrous pig, Wilbur. People drive from miles around to come and gaze at Wilbur's pen and the mysterious message in the web above it.

Chapter 12, "A Meeting."



Charlotte calls a meeting of the barn animals a few days after the message in the web appeared. At the meeting, Charlotte announces her trick has worked and that because of Wilbur's newfound fame, he will not be killed. The animals rejoice and Charlotte explains she called the meeting in order to solicit suggestions. She needs new messages to put in the web, praising Wilbur.

The animals conclude Templeton is their best bet, as he regularly visits the town dump and can return with magazine slogans that can be copied in Charlotte's web. Templeton is coerced into planning a trip to the dump the following day while Charlotte, in the meantime, begins tearing down her former message to write "TERRIFIC!" in the web over Wilbur's pen.

Chapter 13, "Good Progress."

Charlotte works on rebuilding her web far into the night after all the other creatures have fallen asleep. When Lurvy arrives with Wilbur's slops, he gapes at the new miracle in the web and rushes to tell Mr. Zuckerman. Soon all the Arables and Zuckermans are standing before Wilbur's pen, staring at the perfectly penned "TERRIFIC!" in the web above him.

Mr. Zuckerman decides that, in light of Wilbur's new status as "terrific," he will replace the manure pile in the pigpen with fresh hay and he will enter Wilbur in competition at the County Fair. Lurvy begins working on building a crate for Wilbur which will say "Mr. Zuckerman's Famous Pig" and will transport Wilbur to the fair.

Meanwhile, Templeton attempts to find an advertisement which is fitting for Charlotte's web but repeatedly returns with unsuitable slogans such as "Crunchy" and "Preshrunk." Finally, Templeton returns with a clipping that says "With radiant action" and the animals determine they're unsure that "Wilbur's action is exactly radiant, but it's interesting" (Chapter 13, p. 97).

Wilbur asks Charlotte to tell him a bedtime story and she relates the story of a cousin who once caught a fish from a stream. She then tells of another cousin who was an aeronaut, making silk balloons and then floating away with them into the sky. Fern listens to the stories until Wilbur dozes off and then walks home.

Analysis

In this section, the nature of humanity is again questioned when a plan finally comes to Charlotte. "If I can fool a bug, I can surely fool a man. People are not as smart as bugs" (Chapter 10, p. 65). While this comment is a humorous jab at humankind, it also proves to be somewhat true, as Charlotte's messages do, in fact, effectively trick Zuckerman and the townspeople.

Charlotte almost meets her doom in Chapter 10 when Avery attempts to knock the spider from her web. Avery's actions are shown to be reckless, but the author does not paint a picture of a villain in Avery, merely that of a wild and rambunctious boy. It is



symbolic that it is the rotten goose egg which saves Charlotte, and this is not lost on Wilbur, who saves a whole noodle for Templeton since it was his hoarding that saved his friend's life.

The reaction of Lurvy and Mr. Zuckerman to the message of "Some Pig!" in Charlotte's web is both ironic and comical. The situational irony relies in the fact that Mr. Zuckerman insists there is nothing extraordinary about the spider and even denies the spider could have woven the message. Mr. Zuckerman and the townspeople believe the message "magically" appeared.

When Charlotte holds a meeting to solicit ideas for her next web message, the animals conclude Templeton will be of use because he has access to magazines and newspapers at the town dump. Getting Templeton to agree to help, however, is another matter.

Charlotte's stories about her cousins further illustrate Charlotte's role in the narrative as that of a writer and storyteller. Charlotte, indeed, is an extraordinary spider, even if the townspeople are unaware of her abilities.

Vocabulary

Gullible, drain board, tremendous, scuttled, gabbled, surly, unbearable, squash, gingersnap, unusual, spang, blundered, sermon, notions, wondrous, Studebakers, Packards, De Sotos, buckboards, miracle, idiosyncrasy, advertisements, base instincts, destiny, adjourned, average, snare lines, alders, preshrunk, triumphantly, radiant, aeronaut



Chapters 14-17

Summary

Chapter 14, "Dr. Dorian."

On Saturday, Fern tells her mother about Charlotte's stories while she dries the dishes. Mrs. Arable scolds her daughter, saying "you must not invent things. You know spiders don't tell stories. Spiders can't talk" (Chapter 14, p. 101). Fern insists she isn't making up lies and tells her mother of Charlotte's cousins. After Fern leaves to head to Mr. Zuckerman's barn, Mrs. Arable decides to pay a visit to Dr. Dorian and ask about Fern's behavior.

Dr. Dorian listens to Mrs. Arable's concerns about Fern, but remarks she has nothing to worry about. He asks if Fern's appetite is good and if she's otherwise healthy, and asks if Fern knows any boys. Mrs. Arable remarks Fern knows Henry Fussy. Dr. Dorian claims Fern's fascination with the animals of the barn will eventually pass and someday she will find boys as interesting as spiders and pigs and sends Mrs. Arable on her way. Mrs. Arable leaves feeling greatly relieved.

Chapter 15, "The Crickets."

In the beginning of this chapter, the narrator describes the song of crickets, who sing in sorrow of summer's ending. Everyone on the farm hears the crickets sing, and are reminded soon school will start again and it will be time to harvest the potatoes. Wilbur is now the center of attention at the farm and with Charlotte's new web message describing him as "RADIANT," the townspeople come to stare at Wilbur, the radiant pig.

Wilbur looks forward to the County Fair and believes if he can distinguish himself and win some prize money, Mr. Zuckerman will let him live. Wilbur begs Charlotte to accompany him to the fair, but Charlotte tells Wilbur during that time she'll be busy making an egg sac and laying her eggs. Finally, Charlotte relents and promises Wilbur if it is at all possible, she will accompany him to the fair.

Chapter 16, "Off to the Fair."

The night before the County Fair, everyone goes to bed early dreaming about the excitement of rides and competitions. The next morning, everyone dresses in their finest and Wilbur's crate is brought out, which reads, "ZUCKERMAN'S FAMOUS PIG" in gold block letters. Mrs. Zuckerman decides to give Wilbur a bath in buttermilk to clean him up before leaving, and she scrubs him down until he is gleaming white.

Charlotte announces she will accompany Wilbur to the fair and insists Templeton accompany them as well, as someone will be needed to run errands and do general work. Templeton refuses until he is convinced by the old sheep a fair is a rat's paradise,



and he and Charlotte creep into Wilbur's crate to hide before Mr. Zuckerman comes to load Wilbur.

When Mr. Arable, Mr. Zuckerman and Lurvy arrive to load Wilbur, the old sheep whispers, "When they open the crate and try to put you in, struggle! Don't go without a tussle. Pigs always resist when they are being loaded" (Chapter 16, p. 120). When Mr. Arable says to Mr. Zuckerman that Wilbur will make for some great bacon and ham once he's killed, Wilbur faints dead away. Lurvy runs and gets a pail of water and throws it on Wilbur, who awakens and gives a great struggle as the men try to load him into the crate. Once they have Wilbur inside, Lurvy nails shut the box and everyone loads into the truck to head to the fair.

Chapter 17, "Uncle."

Upon arriving at the County Fair, Avery and Fern ask their parents for money, and Mr. Arable gives them each seventy cents and lets them run off to play. Crowds gather to watch as Wilbur's cart is unloaded and taken to his pigpen at the fair. Charlotte quickly scrambles out of the crate and disappears unseen into the rafters above the pen while Templeton remains inside until dark.

Once the Arables, Zuckermans and crowd disperse, Charlotte speaks to Wilbur, telling him of the pig in the next pen, which is enormous. Charlotte, who Wilbur notes is appearing weak and feeble of late, goes to take a nap in the rafters, leaving Wilbur very much worried. The Zuckermans and Arables return to eat lunch and discuss the fact that Wilbur won't be judged until the following day. After lunch, they all fall asleep.

Analysis

Dr. Dorian's response to Mrs. Arable's concerns about Fern show him to be the most open-minded adult in the narrative. Dr. Dorian points out to Mrs. Arable the miracle of a spider web in the first place—stating while the townspeople find the web's messages to be miraculous, no one questions the miracle of how a spider instinctively knows how to produce and weave silk. This chapter also includes foreshadowing when Mrs. Arable and Dr. Dorian discuss Henry Fussy, the boy that Fern will later develop a crush on.

The theme of nature is illustrated in Chapter 15 through the song of the crickets, who sing of summer's ending. The seasonal transformation on the farm reflects the ebb and flow of life and death. "Even on the most beautiful days in the whole year - the days when summer is changing into fall the crickets spread the rumor of sadness and change" (Chapter 15, p. 109).

Wilbur's fame continues to grow as Charlotte's messages evolve from "Some Pig!" to "TERRIFIC" and finally "RADIANT." However, Wilbur doesn't let the fame go to his head and remains a humble pig. When Mr. Zuckerman decides to take Wilbur to the fair, there is hope Charlotte's messages have achieved the desired effect: if Wilbur can make Zuckerman proud at the fair, he may be assured he won't become Christmas dinner.



Wilbur's conversation with Charlotte about her egg sac and her accompanying him to the fair are the first signs of foreshadowing that Charlotte will die soon. While Wilbur is too naïve to follow the hints of Charlotte, the reader understands once Charlotte has laid her eggs, she will no longer be able to help Wilbur.

Once at the fair, Wilbur's next obstacle is introduced in Charlotte's discovery of Uncle, the large pig in the next pen who is Wilbur's competition. Uncle makes little impression on Charlotte, who finds him rude and unpleasant, but nonetheless daunting competition based upon his size. Wilbur goes to sleep worried about his chances of winning and Charlotte's weakening health.

Vocabulary

Fascinating, fib, dangerously, mercilessly, balloonist, enchanting, crochet, doily, knit, civilly, incessant, monotonous, anxiety, attraction, modesty, distinguish, inconvenient, egg sac, versatile, Ferris wheel, Navajo blanket, buttermilk, paddle, trotters, knothole, stowaway, lacerated, biffed, fainted, race track, custard, pickpockets, merry-go-round, listless



Chapters 18-22

Summary

Chapter 18, "The Cool of the Evening."

In the cool of the evening, Charlotte is spinning a web and Wilbur is sleeping as Templeton slinks from the crate and away to explore the fairgrounds. Charlotte calls to Templeton for him to bring her a word for the web and the rat mutters as he creeps away.

Fern meets with her friend Henry Fussy, who pays her way on the Ferris wheel. Templeton finds endless delights of scrap food and gorges himself before grabbing a scrap piece of paper for Charlotte's web. When he returns, he gives Charlotte the latest word, "humble," and Charlotte agrees that this epitomizes Wilbur and gets to work finishing her design. After the Zuckermans and Arables leave the fair for the night, Wilbur attempts to talk to Charlotte, but the spider responds that she's too tired. When Wilbur asks what Charlotte is doing, she replies she is "making something, as usual" and tells Wilbur to go to sleep.

Chapter 19, "The Egg Sac."

The next morning, Wilbur awakens and looks for Charlotte, spying her overhead in a corner near the back of his pen. Next to her, attached to the ceiling, Wilbur sees a sort of sac, or cocoon. It is peach-colored and looks as though it were made of cotton candy. Charlotte explains to Wilbur this is her egg sac, which contains 514 eggs. Wilbur asks why Charlotte sounds sad, and she tells him she won't be here to see her children. When he attempts to reassure her that she will, she is less than convinced, but suggests Wilbur examine her latest web.

Templeton returns from his nightly exploits swollen to twice his usual size and bearing bad news. When he passed the pig in the next pen, Templeton saw a blue tag on the front of the pen. When the Zuckermans and Arables return to Wilbur's pen, they remark at Charlotte's web and its new message, "Humble." When Avery points out the blue ribbon on Uncle's pen, Mrs. Zuckerman begins to cry and everyone stands agape, staring at the blue tag until Mr. Zuckerman snaps out of it and orders everyone to assist him in bathing Wilbur. A crowd gathers and watches as Wilbur is bathed in buttermilk until he is gleaming white, remarking that although the pig in the next pen is bigger, Wilbur is cleaner, and as the web indicates, he is also humble.

Suddenly, a message blares across the loudspeakers, saying "Attention, please!" Will Mr. Homer Zuckerman bring his famous pig to the judges' booth in front of the grandstand. A special award will be made there in twenty minutes (Chapter 19, p. 147)." Everyone rejoices and begins preparing to take Wilbur to the grandstand.

Chapter 20, "The Hour of Triumph."



When Mr. Zuckerman arrives at the special judging ring, the boys and men unload Wilbur's crate as Fern repeatedly asks her mother for money. She spots Henry Fussy and explains that Henry invited her to ride the Ferris wheel again, but had run out of money. Mrs. Arable finally hands her daughter forty cents and tells her to meet her back at the pigpen soon as Fern runs off.

The fair announcer introduces Mr. Zuckerman and his famous pig and awards him twenty-five dollars and a bronze medal just as Wilbur faints, yet again. Templeton, hidden inside the crate, grabs the tip of Wilbur's tail and bites it hard as Lurvy runs to get water to splash on the pig. In a second, Wilbur was back on his feet. Lurvy rushes back and in the excitement misses his aim, throwing water all over Mr. Zuckerman and Avery. The crowd bursts into laughter, and eventually, Mr. Zuckerman laughs as well.

Chapter 21, "Last Day."

Charlotte and Wilbur are alone after the families leave to look for Fern and Wilbur asks Charlotte why she's so quiet. Charlotte responds she is tired, and talks of how much Wilbur's friendship has meant to her. "A spider's life can't help being something of a mess, with all this trapping and eating flies. By helping you, perhaps I was trying to lift up my life a trifle" (Chapter 21, p. 158).

Finally, Charlotte tells Wilbur she will not be returning to the barn. Wilbur begins to sob and race around the pen in a panic. Suddenly Wilbur screams for Templeton, realizing if Charlotte is to die, at least he will take her egg sac with him back to the barn, where Charlotte's children will be born the following spring. Templeton, however, refuses to help until Wilbur desperately makes him a promise. Wilbur promises that if Templeton will climb up and get Charlotte's egg sac, he will give Templeton his choice of everything in the trough before eating forever more. Templeton agrees and brings Wilbur the sac just before the Zuckermans and Arabes return to take Wilbur home.

Wilbur, having no other choice, carries the egg sac in his mouth as he is loaded in the crate and winks at Charlotte, who musters all of her strength to wave goodbye. She never moves again, and the following day, Charlotte dies alone at the fairgrounds.

Chapter 22, "A Warm Wind."

When Wilbur returns to the barn, he deposits Charlotte's egg sac in a hidden corner. He is welcomed by all of the barn animals and Mr. Zuckerman hangs the medal from Wilbur's neck on a nail over the pigpen. In the days after his return, Wilbur is happy and no longer fears being killed by Mr. Zuckerman. Autumn changes to winter and Wilbur holds up to his promise to Templeton, letting the rat have first choice of his slops. Templeton grows fat with overeating.

Finally, spring arrives and Charlotte's eggs begin to hatch. Wilbur watches as tiny spiders crawl out of the egg sac and wave at him. For several days and several nights the baby spiders crawl here and there, waving at Wilbur, trailing tiny draglines behind them, and exploring their home. Then, on a quiet morning, the baby spiders began to



crawl to the top of the fence and create silk balloons which hoist them into the air as they wave goodbye to Wilbur. Wilbur sinks to the barn floor in sorrow of being left alone.

As Wilbur walks drearily to the doorway, he hears a tiny voice call “Salutations!” and then a second and a third. The three spiders, Joy, Aranea and Nellie, have decided to stay in the barn. Wilbur is overjoyed.

The next several years go by and many generations of spiders come and go. Wilbur is never without friends. Fern comes to the barn less often as she grows older, but Wilbur is surrounded by the animals of the barn. Although Wilbur loves her children and grandchildren dearly, none of the new spiders ever take Charlotte’s place in his heart.

Analysis

By using the last of her energy to spin a web which will help save Wilbur, Charlotte makes the ultimate sacrifice for her friend. Unbeknownst to Wilbur, Charlotte works all night to create the message “Humble,” before completing her “magnum opus,” which is her egg sac.

Fern’s relationship with Henry Fussy is also explored in the final chapters, beginning with the Ferris wheel ride at the fair. Fern’s interest in Henry is the beginning of her “growing up” and disregarding the childishness of visiting the barn. This, like Charlotte’s death, is just another of nature’s cycles the author explores in the novel.

In the climax of the narrative, Wilbur and the Zuckermans believe Uncle has won the competition based on the blue ribbon on his pen. However, the announcement of Wilbur’s special prize brings everyone to rejoice. Wilbur again faces an obstacle when he faints at the judging pen, but is saved by Templeton in his one act of unselfish kindness. Ironically, like the rotten goose egg, Templeton’s help is not always pleasant, and Wilbur leaps up in pain after the rat bites his tail.

The death of Charlotte breaks Wilbur’s heart, but he returns Charlotte’s kindness by saving her egg sac and taking it with him to the barn. In this act, Wilbur acts heroically and selflessly, reiterating the theme of the novel that friendship is worth sacrifice and love does indeed conquer all.

Vocabulary

Beano, humble, grandstand, masterpiece, nifty, magnum opus, Latin, waterproof, downhearted, pep, languishing, marveling, carousing, gorge, indigestion, hankering, dopey, peachy, rejoice, midway, confetti, triumph, loudspeaker, sundry, deserted, monkeyshine, wisecracks, lee, hallowed, garrulous



Characters

Wilbur

Wilbur is a young pig who was born the runt of his litter. When Fern discovers her father about to kill the piglet, she convinces him to let her take it into her care. Fern raises Wilbur on a baby bottle until he is a few weeks old, when Mr. Arable tells Fern they must sell the piglet. Wilbur is sold to Fern's uncle, Mr. Zuckerman, for six dollars.

Mr. Zuckerman allows Fern to visit Wilbur, which she does daily, sitting by his pigpen in Mr. Zuckerman's barn cellar. Wilbur is a rambunctious and curious pig, and eventually befriends the spider, Charlotte, whose web sits above his pen. When Wilbur discovers from the other barn animals that the Zuckermans intend to kill him for Christmas dinner, he becomes overwrought with despair. Charlotte reassures Wilbur she will help to save his life.

In the next weeks, Charlotte builds a series of messages in her web, praising young Wilbur. When the humans see Charlotte's messages, they begin to think there is a miracle surrounding the piglet and decide to enter Wilbur into the County Fair. Wilbur, thanks to Charlotte's help, wins a prize at the fair and the assurance he won't be slaughtered for bacon.

Fern Arable

Fern is an eight-year-old girl who saves Wilbur's life in the beginning of the novel. Fern is the daughter of John and Mrs. Arable and the sister of Avery Arable. She is a courageous young girl who befriends not only Wilbur but the rest of the barn animals as well.

Fern's mother becomes distraught over her daughter's behavior and questions her overactive imagination when Fern discusses the conversations and events at Mr. Zuckerman's barn. Fern eventually visits the Zuckerman's barn less as she grows older and begins noticing boys, such as Henry Fussy.

John Arable

John Arable is the father of Fern and Avery. Mr. Arable is convinced to refrain from killing the runt of his pig litter by his daughter in the beginning of the novel, and agrees to turn the piglet over to Fern's care, in the hopes she will come to understand "what trouble a pig can be" (Chapter 1, p. 6).



Mrs. Arable

Mrs. Arable is the mother of Fern and Avery and the wife of John Arable. Mrs. Arable is a typical farmwife who worries about her children, particularly Fern. When Fern begins describing the animals of Mr. Zuckerman's barn talking, Mrs. Arable scolds her daughter for making up stories. When Fern insists she isn't fibbing, Mrs. Arable begins to worry about Fern's imagination and discusses the issue with Dr. Dorian, the family physician, who reassures her she has nothing to worry about.

Avery Arable

Avery is the ten-year-old brother of Fern. Mrs. Arable describes her son to Dr. Dorian, saying Avery "gets into poison ivy and gets stung by wasps and bees and brings frogs and snakes home and breaks everything he lays his hands on. He's fine" (Chapter 14, p. 108). When Fern gets to keep Wilbur as a baby piglet, Avery is jealous, wanting a pig to raise of his own.

Avery comes close to destroying Charlotte and her web when he attempts to catch the large spider above the pigpen. Fortunately for Charlotte, Avery loses his balance and comes crashing down, breaking a rotten goose egg and runs from the barn.

Homer Zuckerman

Homer Zuckerman is Fern's uncle who buys Wilbur from his niece and keeps the piglet in his barn cellar. Mr. Zuckerman allows Charlotte to come and visit the pig, but she is not allowed to enter Wilbur's pen or take him out. Mr. Zuckerman is married to Edith Zuckerman and has a hired man, Lurvy, who assists on the farm.

When the mysterious messages begin to appear in the spider web over Wilbur's pigpen, Mr. Zuckerman believes a miracle has taken place and decides to enter his now-famous pig in competition at the County Fair. When Wilbur wins an honorary prize at the fair, Mr. Zuckerman is overwhelmed with joy and decides to keep Wilbur instead of slaughtering the pig for food.

Lurvy

Lurvy is Mr. Zuckerman's hired man who works on the farm. Lurvy is responsible for feeding Wilbur his slops and building the crate which will transport Wilbur to the County Fair.



Charlotte A. Cavatica

Charlotte is a large gray spider “about the size of a gumdrop,” who lives in the rafters above Wilbur’s pigpen in the barn cellar. Charlotte befriends Wilbur, who at first is disturbed by the bloodthirsty nature of the spider. Charlotte, however, proves her friendship and loyalty to Wilbur, saving his life by spinning messages into her web to trick the Zuckermans into wanting to keep the pig.

Charlotte accompanies Wilbur to the County Fair, despite the fact that she is about to build her egg sac and will die shortly thereafter. While at the fair, Charlotte lays her eggs in the rafters before becoming too weak to move. Wilbur convinces Templeton the rat to bring Charlotte’s egg sac down to him, which Wilbur then transports back to the barn cellar and guards until the spiders hatch in the spring.

Templeton

Templeton is a gluttonous rat with few morals aside from helping himself. Templeton is happy to tunnel to Wilbur’s trough and eat his food but never offers anything in return. The rat agrees to assist Charlotte by getting scraps of newspapers from the town dump only after much coercing. Templeton returns with several unsuitable phrases and words such as “Crunchy” and “Preshrunk” before finally bringing Charlotte a clipping which reads “With radiant action.”

Templeton’s one selfless act is at the County Fair, when he revives the fainted Wilbur by biting his tail. Later, when Wilbur begs Templeton to fetch Charlotte’s egg sac from the rafters at the fair, Templeton only agrees after Wilbur promises to give the rat first choice of his slops every day thereafter.

Uncle

Uncle is Wilbur’s competition at the County Fair. Uncle is a spring pig, like Wilbur, but is much larger and, according to Charlotte, much less pleasant in personality.

Henry Fussy

Henry Fussy is a boy who is Fern’s age. At the County Fair, Henry asks Fern to ride the Ferris wheel with him and Fern develops a crush on the boy.

Dr. Dorian

Dr. Dorian is the family physician for the Arables. When Mrs. Arable becomes concerned about Fern’s imagination and the time she spends in Zuckerman’s barn, she pays a visit to Dr. Dorian to discuss her daughter’s behavior. Dr. Dorian assures Mrs.

Arable she has nothing to worry about, and that Fern will outgrow her interest in the barn animals.



Objects/Places

Zuckerman's Barn

When Wilbur is a few weeks old, Mr. Arable tells Fern that he must be sold. Fern sells Wilbur to her uncle, Homer Zuckerman, and Wilbur is moved to a pigpen in the cellar of Zuckerman's barn.

Charlotte's Web

Charlotte's web hangs from the rafters above Wilbur's pigpen. When Wilbur turns to Charlotte for help after learning he will be slaughtered, Charlotte decides to create messages in her web praising Wilbur. Mr. Zuckerman and the townspeople marvel at the words "Some Pig!" "TERRIFIC," "RADIANT" and "HUMBLE" when they appear in the web, making Wilbur famous.

The Barn Cellar

The barn cellar is the area of the barn where Wilbur's pigpen is located. Also located in the cellar are a sheepfold for the sheep and all sorts of farm tools. Fern finds an unused milk stool here, which she places next to Wilbur's pen and sits on watching the pig every afternoon.

The Hayloft

Mr. Zuckerman's swing is arranged so that children can get on it from the hay loft and then jump down and sail through the barn door.

Slops

Slops are food for pigs. Lurvy is in charge of feeding Wilbur and brings him buckets of slops, which consist of leftovers, rotten food, and odds and ends.

Spinnerets

Spinnerets are a spider's silk-spinning organs. Charlotte uses her spinnerets to weave intricate messages for the Zuckermans to discover.



Templeton's Lair

The entrance to Templeton's home is located behind Wilbur's pig trough. Templeton's lair consists of an intricate system of tunnels which span from the farmhouse to the barn and beyond.

Dr. Dorian's Office

When Mrs. Arable becomes concerned about Fern's behavior and imagination, she goes to pay a visit to Dr. Dorian at his office in town.

Zuckerman's Swing

Mr. Zuckerman has the best swing in the county. It is a single long piece of heavy rope tied to the beam over the north doorway of the barn. At the bottom end of the rope is a fat knot to sit on.

The Town Dump

Templeton visits the town dump regularly, which is why he is solicited to obtain magazine and newspaper clippings for slogans for Charlotte's web.

The County Fair

When Wilbur becomes famous because of Charlotte's messages in her web, Mr. Zuckerman decides to enter Wilbur in a competition at the County Fair.

Ferris Wheel

While at the County Fair, Fern is invited by Henry Fussy to ride the Ferris wheel. This event has quite an impression on Fern, who remembers the night as one of the best in her life.

Themes

Friendship

Friendship and love are the central themes of *Charlotte's Web*. It is through the love of Fern and Charlotte that Wilbur is able to go on living, both in the beginning of the novel and in its ending.

Charlotte sums up the meaning of friendship in the novel's end in the lines, "'You have been my friend,' replied Charlotte. 'That in itself is a tremendous thing. I wove my webs for you because I liked you. After all, what's a life, anyway? We're born, we live a little while, we die. A spider's life can't help being something of a mess, with all this trapping and eating flies. By helping you, perhaps I was trying to lift up my life a trifle. Heaven knows anyone's life can stand a little of

that'." (Chapter 21, p. 158)

Along with friendship comes sacrifice. Charlotte proves her devotion to Wilbur by sacrificing the last of her energy in order to build one final web for her friend. Wilbur, in turn, sacrifices the first choice of dinner morsels to Templeton in exchange for the rat bringing him Charlotte's egg sac. The importance of friendship and love are illustrated in the novel's ending too, when Charlotte's three daughters remain with Wilbur in the barn. Although Charlotte's children and grandchildren are great friends to Wilbur, no one will ever replace Charlotte in his heart.

Language

The character of Charlotte embodies the themes of language and literature, as even her introduction is preceded by words accompanied by no imagery. Wilbur cannot see the spider in the dark who speaks to him until the following day when she confuses the young pig by using the word "salutations" as opposed to a simpler "hello" or "greetings." Charlotte is a storyteller and a writer and her strength comes from her agile mind as opposed to her physical being.

Charlotte illustrates the power of words when, in Chapter 12, Wilbur questions labeling himself as "terrific." "'But Charlotte,' said Wilbur, 'I'm not terrific.' 'That doesn't make a particle of difference,' replied Charlotte. 'Not a particle. People believe almost anything they see in print'" (Chapter 12, p. 86).

Through Charlotte's voice, E. B. White expresses his own ideas about the power of language, words and storytelling. Just as White is the author of the novel, Charlotte is the author of her own story, and largely, that of Wilbur's.

Nature

E. B. White makes distinct juxtapositions between the world of man and the world of animals in *Charlotte's Web*. Charlotte discusses the pointlessness of man's constant search for something better, saying "with men it's rush, rush, rush, every minute" (Chapter 9, p. 58), while the animals of the farm take life slowly because they know they only have a short time in which to enjoy it. The laws of nature dictate the life of the animals on the farm, and White indicates this clearly through the actions and thoughts of the characters. What at first horrifies Wilbur about Charlotte is her bloodthirsty nature, but in time he comes to understand this is simply the way of life for a spider.

These principles of nature also dictate life, death, and the passing of time. With the spring comes new life, and it is at this time that Wilbur is born; it is in the fall that Charlotte dies, when the author describes the saddened song of the crickets and the transformation of the coming winter.

Nature and time also play a role in the life of people, and Fern's growing disinterest in the barn and its animals is an indication of this. Fern grows older and becomes interested in other things, namely Henry Fussy.

One of the central morals of the book is the acceptance of this passing of time and transformation. What makes life bearable, for Wilbur and for us, are friendship, love, and companionship. While the seasons bring change, death, renewal and transformation, love gives the characters meaning.



Style

Point of View

Charlotte's Web is written in third-person narrative with an omniscient point of view. The third-person omniscient is a narrative mode in which the reader is presented the story by a narrator with an overarching perspective, seeing and knowing everything that happens within the world of the story, including everything all of the characters are thinking and feeling. This narrative style is fitting for a children's tale, as it takes into account each character's thoughts and motivations.

While much of the novel revolves around the thoughts and actions of Wilbur, the narrator relates the inner thoughts of other characters as well, including Charlotte, Fern and Templeton. This style of narrative is straightforward and relates the story from a detached point of view, much in the way fairy tales are often told.

Setting

The setting of Charlotte's Web is that of two farmhouses in a small town. The action begins at the Arable farm and continues, once Wilbur is sold, at the Zuckermans' barn. Although there is no direct indication of the time period in which the story is set, clues in the language and actions indicate it takes place around the 1950s. E. B. White drew inspiration for the novel when he discovered a barn spider while taking slops to his own pig, so in one sense, the novel is set in the very realistic world of White's farmhouse in Maine.

White illustrates the Zuckerman barn in clarifying detail, describing the smells, sounds, tastes and sensations of each season as it comes and goes. Because this reality of farm life is so detailed, it gives the author freedom to explore the themes of mortality and nature in a straightforward fashion.

The different setting of the County Fair is significant because each main character undergoes a transformation in this location. Wilbur finally attains a prize and the security of life, while Charlotte faces her demise there. Fern's transition from childhood to adolescence is indicated at the fair as she obsesses over young Henry Fussy and has little regard over Wilbur's success.

Language and Meaning

E. B. White uses straightforward language in Charlotte's Web, as is typical in children's literature. However, as language is also a thematic backdrop in the story, it carries special significance, especially in the case of Charlotte. Charlotte introduces new and eloquent words to Wilbur and the other animals of the farm, and explains their meanings concisely. The power of words is important to the plot of the story, as Charlotte indicates



when she states that “People believe almost anything they see in print” (Chapter 12, p. 86).

The words chosen to describe Wilbur, such as “radiant” and “humble” have different meanings which each apply to the piglet. And while Charlotte is, most certainly, “bloodthirsty,” she is also loyal, kind, creative and intelligent. The moral here is that Wilbur and the rest of the characters learn to view language from all perspectives. Charlotte’s role in the narrative as an author and storyteller relating the world around her mirrors that of White himself.

Structure

Charlotte’s Web falls into the literary genre of the fable. Fables are fictional stories that often feature animals, plants, inanimate objects, or forces of nature which are anthropomorphized and that illustrate a moral lesson. The moral lesson of Charlotte’s Web is that of the power of love and friendship to overcome obstacles.

The novel consists of a simple, uncomplicated plot. The central conflict in the narrative centers on Wilbur’s fate. Will Charlotte be able to help Wilbur and save his life from the chopping block? This is the central concern of the book.

E. B. White follows a traditional plot structure in telling his tale. Chapters 1-8 consist largely of exposition, or the back-story of the characters. Upon Wilbur’s discovery of Zuckerman’s plan to kill him for Christmas dinner, the narrative transitions into rising action. The climax of Charlotte’s Web takes place at the County Fair, when it appears as though Wilbur’s competition, Uncle, has bested him. White concludes the story with the denouement, in which he relates Wilbur’s outcome, the birth of Charlotte’s children, and the years that follow in Zuckerman’s barn.



Quotes

But it's unfair,' cried Fern. 'The pig couldn't help being born small, could it? If I had been very small at birth, would you have killed me? (Chapter 1)

No, I only distribute pigs to early risers,' said Mr. Arable. 'Fern was up at daylight, trying to rid the world of injustice. As a result, she now has a pig. A small one, to be sure, but nevertheless a pig. It just shows what can happen if a person gets out of bed promptly. Let's eat! (Chapter 1)

He didn't feel like going to sleep, he didn't feel like digging, he was tired of standing still, tired of lying down. 'I'm less than two months old and I'm tired of living,' he said. (Chapter 2)

Wilbur didn't know what to do or which way to run. It seemed as though everybody was after him. 'If this is what it's like to be free,' he thought, 'I believe I'd rather be penned up in my own yard. (Chapter 3)

... when your stomach is empty and your mind is full, it's always hard to sleep. (Chapter 5)

A rat is a rat,' said Charlotte. She laughed a tinkling little laugh. 'But, my friends, if that ancient egg ever breaks, this barn will be untenable. (Chapter 6)

Almost all young pigs get murdered by the farmer as soon as the real cold weather sets in. There's a regular conspiracy around here to kill you at Christmastime. Everybody is in the plot - Lurvy, Zuckerman, even John Arable. (Chapter 7)

A spider's web is stronger than it looks. Although it is made of thin, delicate strands, the web is not easily broken. However, a web gets torn every day by the insects that kick around in it, and a spider must rebuild it when it gets full of holes. (Chapter 9)

They don't catch anything. They just keep trotting back and forth across the bridge thinking there is something better on the other side. If they'd hang head-down at the top of the thing and wait quietly, maybe something good would come along. But no – with men it's rush, rush, rush, every minute. I'm glad I'm a sedentary spider. (Chapter 9)

The way to save Wilbur's life is to play a trick on Zuckerman. If I can fool a bug,' thought Charlotte, 'I can surely fool a man. People are not as smart as bugs. (Chapter 10)

Secrets are hard to keep. Long before Sunday came, the news spread all over the county. Everybody knew that a sign had appeared in a spider's web on the Zuckerman place. Everybody knew the Zuckermans had a wondrous pig. (Chapter 11)

The crickets felt it was their duty to warn everybody that summertime cannot last forever. Even on the most beautiful days in the whole year - the days when summer is changing into fall the crickets spread the rumor of sadness and change. (Chapter 15)



No pig ever had truer friends, and he realized that friendship is one of the most satisfying things in the world. Even the song of the crickets did not make Wilbur too sad. (Chapter 15)



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

Discuss the differences between the world of humans and the world of animals in the narrative. How do the settings of the barn and the farmhouses differ? How does Fern feel about the community within the barn? How does she feel about her human community?

Topic 2

What is the significance of language in the novel? In what ways is Charlotte relative to E. B. White as the author of the story? What is notable about the stories Charlotte relates to Wilbur about her cousins?

Topic 3

How does Templeton differ from the other characters in the novel? What are Templeton's objectives? How do the other animals in the barn feel about Templeton? How does he feel about his community? Why does Templeton choose to help Charlotte and Wilbur?

Topic 4

Why does Fern's interest in Wilbur and the barn diminish as the story concludes? What transformation does Fern's character undergo and when and where does this take place? How does Wilbur feel about Fern's absence? Why?

Topic 5

How are the laws of nature portrayed in *Charlotte's Web*? What does the author write about the transformation of the seasons, the power of time and the elements of life and death? How does Charlotte feel as she is beginning to lose her strength?

Topic 6

Discuss the element of sacrifice in the novel. What sacrifices does Charlotte make and why? What does Wilbur sacrifice and for whom? How is sacrifice tied to the themes of nature and friendship in the story?



Topic 7

Discuss the reaction of the townspeople to the words in Charlotte's web. To what does Mr. Zuckerman attribute the "miracle" of the messages? From where do the townspeople believe the messages appeared? How do the words affect their judgment of Wilbur?