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## Exploring conflict and resolve through quality children's literature

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## Exploring conflict and resolve through quality children's literature

### Abstract

This paper explores the value of story structure in offering insights into human conflict and its resolve and in providing bounds in which children can explore these conflicts. A search for quality literature judged appropriate for the intellectual development of middle childhood (ages nine to eleven) will be conducted. The potential offered by these selected works in relating that characters create action and therefore resolve will be investigated.

EXPLORING CONFLICT AND RESOLVE  
THROUGH QUALITY CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

A Graduate Project  
Submitted to the  
Department of Curriculum and Instruction  
In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in Education  
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by  
Frances D. Kennedy  
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Children's Literature

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirement for  
the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

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"Literature is the imaginative shaping of life and thought into the forms and structures of language. The province of literature is the human condition: with all its feelings, thoughts, and insights" (Huck et al., 1987, p. 49). Quality literature helps develop the imagination and provides vicarious and universal experiences that offer children a fuller understanding of themselves and others (Huck et al., 1987).

This paper explores the value of story structure in offering insights into human conflict and its resolve and in providing bounds in which children can explore these conflicts. A search for quality literature judged appropriate for the intellectual development of middle childhood (ages nine to eleven) will be conducted. The potential offered by these selected works in relating that characters create action and therefore resolve will be investigated.

#### STRUCTURE IN LITERATURE AND THE DEVELOPING CHILD

Students in middle childhood (ages nine to eleven) benefit from understanding the structure offered in stories. Because of their emerging intellectual abilities, they are able to deal with the elements of a whole unit and to compare and contrast elements in different works. Three elements essential to understanding the structure of a story are characterization, plot and theme.

#### Value of Structure in Literature

Language gives form and structure to thinking. According to Lukens (1986), language in the form of literature sorts out life's

clutter, focuses and heightens the action of life, and reveals human nature. Huck et al. (1987) relates that storytelling is as old as the human race. People are storytellers, but it is literature that brings order to the tales they tell. Literature lets the reader sort out the confusion of reality; language brings order to chaos.

Literature, according to Sloan, (1984) is crucial to the development of imagination. A well developed imagination is imperative for the development of coping devices that enable children to deal with reality. Through literature, children are put in touch with their imaginations. Using their imaginations, children create worlds that are to their liking. Imaginative structures give rise to options, and imagined options assist children when faced with reality. Imagination gives freedom of choice.

Literature sets no limits. Literature breaks the time/space barrier. Readers can be thrust back to the beginning of time or travel into the future. Literature makes possible an identification with the emotions and thinking of others, creates opportunities for adventure, and allows taking a risk without any strings attached. Through literature children can try on roles, struggle against the forces of nature, and confront societies' institutions without the consequence of change. Literature makes anything possible (Huck et al., 1987; Lukens, 1986; Sloan, 1984).

Literature reflects life, but quality literature is more than a mere reflection. Literature brings shape and organization to life. Literature sets bounds, discards the clutter, and molds the significant of life into coherency. Literature provides a condensed version of life that allows insight into human behavior. This focus allows a view of not only what humans do, but why they do it (Huck et al., 1987 and Lukens, 1986).

#### Intellectual Development and Understanding of Story

Children, ages nine to eleven, are acquiring intellectual abilities that allow them to have much more in-depth understandings of literature works. Their thought is characterized as flexible and reversible; therefore, they are able to see the structure of a work, identify with different viewpoints, and compare and contrast elements in different works (Huck et al., 1987).

#### Important Elements in Story Structure

Many elements can contribute to a work's strength. Three elements--characterization, plot, and theme--commonly contribute to the understanding that characters create action and therefore resolve.

#### Characterization

Credible, believable characters provoke action. Action and character are integrated so the action seems inevitable. Change in character must be evident enabling the reader to see and understand it. Character personalities are revealed by how they

speak, look, and act and by what other characters and the author say about them (Lukens, 1986).

Lukens (1986) lists four types of characters: round, flat, dynamic, and static. The degree of character delineation depends on the importance of the character to the story. Round characters are intertwined with story action and are fully developed. As the audience reads the work, round characters become real. A dynamic character is one that changes as the conflict emerges and is resolved. It is inevitable that dynamic characters are also round characters. Not all stories have dynamic characters, and all the characters in a story are not dynamic. Static characters are not involved in conflict and do not change. Characters described as flat are least important and are not well developed; they are necessary to the story because they help reveal the central character. Flat characters can be stereotypes or foils but do not grow out of action; they provide background for the story.

### Plot

If children are to identify conflict and resolve in a story, they need to see what characters do and what happens to them as a result of their actions. A well-developed plot that logically grows out of characters' decisions facilitates this understanding. Lukens (1986) relates, "In a progressive plot, suspense pulls the reader through rising action to the central climax, where conflict is resolved in a manner foreshadowed and thus inevitable; the last



questions are usually answered in a denouncement with its closed ending" (p. 87).

### Theme

Theme is the main idea of the story. It reveals the author's purpose for writing the story. Explicit themes are often found in children's literature; they are openly stated to assure the audience's identification of the story's message. A single correct interpretation of theme should not be expected, for each reader brings a personal interpretation to the text. In fact, quality literature interests readers in returning to find other messages.

## STUDY OF STORY STRUCTURE TO ACHIEVE UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN CONFLICT AND ITS RESOLVE

To assist students (ages nine to eleven) in exploring human conflict within the bounds of a story, a series of proposed lessons involving experiences with quality picture books were developed. Picture books offer concise well-developed units that can be read in a period and then discussed.

### Story Elements

#### Characterization

David Elkind (1970) says that children, ages nine to eleven, have a cognitive conceit as they begin to acquire reasoning powers. They enjoy thinking they are more intelligent than adults or peers. These children often like books about young, problem-solving protagonists. Examples are Nat Crawford in Cynthia

Rylant's Miss Maggie and Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge in Mem Fox's book by the same name. Herbert Binns, a personified animal, is a resourceful protagonist who overcomes the actions of antagonists in Herbert Binns and the Flying Tricycle, by Caroline Castle and Peter Weevers.

Miss Maggie. Nat Crawford is afraid and ashamed to be associated with Miss Maggie, a lonely, eccentric old lady who is looked after by his grandparents. Nat is often sent to Miss Maggie's rotting log house with a gallon of buttermilk or a crock of green beans. He has never had the courage to venture farther than the front porch even though he desperately wants to confirm the rumor that Miss Maggie keeps a mouse-eating, black snake hanging from her rafters. Nat is humiliated when his grandfather drives Miss Maggie to town. He waits in the truck, so no one will think the tobacco-spitting old lady is his relative. But one winter morning, Nat has the courage to listen to his heart instead of his head. When he sees no smoke coming from Miss Maggie's chimney, he crosses the snowy field and enters her house though fearful of what he might find. He does not find the black snake; he finds a pathetic old lady in deep despair, mourning the death of her only companion, Henry, a starling. Knowing Miss Maggie will not survive if she remains there, Nat takes her and her frozen Henry to his grandfather's farm. During the winter, a special relationship develops. When summer comes, Miss Maggie

has two new friends--Nat and the black snake he found for her, which he named Henry.

As the plot develops, several of Nat's traits are revealed through his actions and speech. Through his efforts to rescue Miss Maggie (a round character), he learns more about her. As a result, he overcomes his ignorance and acquires a friend. A reader considering and reconsidering this fine story can discover several themes. The analysis of this work is depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Miss Maggie  
Author--Cynthia Rylant  
Illustrator--Thomas DeGrazia  
Genre--Realistic Fiction

<u>Character</u> (Round and dynamic)	<u>Action</u>	<u>Resolve</u>
Nat - afraid and ashamed of Miss Maggie	Rescues Miss Maggie	Becomes Miss Maggie's friend

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Theme                      Growing up: Judgments should be made on more than appearances and rumor.

Elderly

Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge. Miss Nancy has lost her memory. It is sad but not surprising since she is ninety-six years old. Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge, who is not very old, loves Miss Nancy and sets out to help her find it; he is successful. First, he asks others, "What is a memory?" He receives a variety of answers, for example, it's something warm, it's something from long ago, it's something that makes you laugh,

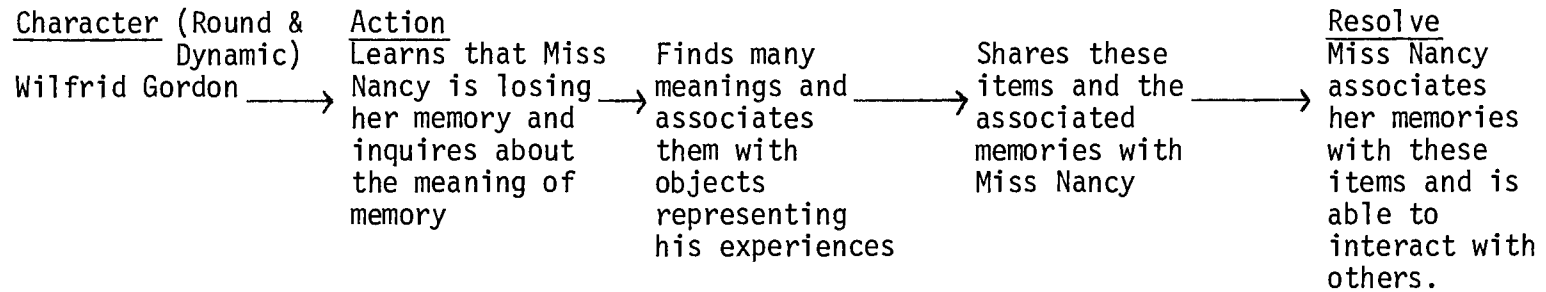
it's something very precious. Second, Wilfrid Gordon gathers his memories represented by shells, a puppet, a medal, a freshly laid egg, and his football into a basket and takes them to Miss Nancy. Then as he shares these memories Miss Nancy's memory returns. As she removes the items from the basket, she associates a memory from her past with each of them.

Because of Wilfrid Gordon's efforts he influences Miss Nancy to respond, and as a result she becomes involved in reality again. Miss Nancy, a round character, moves from a static to a dynamic state as Wilfrid's intervenes.

Herbert Binns and the Flying Tricycle. Herbert Binns, an inventor, works to create a flying tricycle. While he is working, he is spied upon by some jealous neighbors who plot to hamper his dream of flying his invention. They remove a part from the tricycle, so it will not fly. Expecting Herbert Binn's failure, they accompany him to a high hill where he plans to take off. To their surprise, Herbert sails off into the horizon (depicted in an illustration) because being a careful, thorough fellow, he discovered the prank and replaced the part.

Figure 2

Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge  
Author--Julie Vivas  
Genre--Realistic Fiction

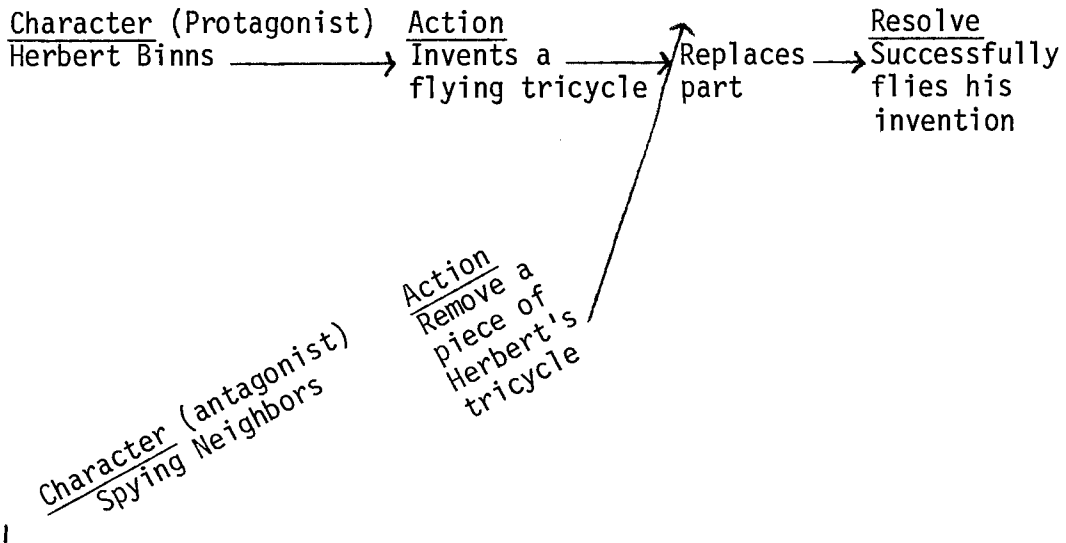


Theme

Growing up: Everyone has something to offer.  
Elderly  
Memories

Figure 3

Herbert Binns and the Flying Tricycle  
 Author/Illustrator--Caroline Castle and Peter Weevers  
 Genre--Modern Fantasy



Theme                      Good overcomes evil through simple virtues.

Action

The Bedspread. In The Bedspread, by Sylvia Fair, two bored elderly sisters, each residing at different ends of the same bed, decide to decorate their halves with illustrations of their home. Their actions take different forms to achieve a similar goal: Maud creates her illustration with carefully executed stitches; Amelia focuses on her memories of her family's life in the house with invented stitches that were carelessly formed.

Figure 4

The Bedspread  
 Author/Illustrator--Sylvia Fair  
 Genre--Realistic Fiction

<u>Character</u>	<u>Action</u>	<u>Resolve</u>
Maud →	creates home with exacting embroidery →	created two stitchery interpretations
Amelia →	creates home with made-up stitches while remembering her family's experiences	

Theme                      Everyone has something to contribute.  
                                  Different interpretations extend an idea.

Other works with more elaborate parallel plots can be studied. Examples are John Burningham's Come Away from the Water, Shirley, Tomie de Paola's The Knight and the Dragon, Amy Schwartz's Bea and Mr. Jones, and Byrd Baylor's Amigo.

#### Theme

In comparing and contrasting characters' actions and the resulting resolve, books with common themes can be presented. The theme of survival is the underlying message in Lillie Chaffin's We Be Warm Till Springtime Comes and Leo Lionni's Frederick. In We Be Warm Till Springtime Comes, the young boy Jimmy Jack Blackburn strikes out to find fuel to heat the family's house. Lionni's motif Frederick, a mouse, conserves the sun rays, the

colors of the meadow, and words for the long winter. When the food collected by his fellow mice is depleted in the winter, Frederick shares his ideas that bolster their spirits. In contrast to Jimmy Jack and Frederick whose actions resolve their conflict, Louis (in Yorinks' Louis, the Fish) gives up and becomes a fish swimming in a tank after inheriting the family meat market which he despises. Alternatives to Louis' resolve might be suggested by the children.

#### Relating Elements in Story Structure to Students' Resolve of Conflict

After children have discussed and diagrammed characters' initiation of action to achieve resolve within the bounds of stories, they can list real-life conflicts--their own or others--and propose actions and resolves. This discussion and diagramming of real conflict can lead to many forms of expressive activity such as storywriting, dramatizing, reader's theatre, and illustrating.

#### CONCLUSIONS

The study of story structures to understand human conflict can be extended in several ways. Other characters and their actions resulting in resolve can be compared and contrasted. Patterns in the messages of authors can be examined by diagramming the structures of their stories, for example, Leo Lionni's modern fables. Cross-cultural study can be extended by examining the motifs' actions in creating resolve in different versions of a tale thus revealing universal truths.



Figure 5

We Be Warm Till Springtime Comes

Author--Lillie D. Chaffin

Illustrator--Lloyd Bloom

Genre--Realistic Fiction

<u>Character</u>	<u>Action</u>	<u>Resolve</u>
Jimmy Jack Blackburn	→ Digs coal to heat home	→ Survives the cold weather

Theme Survival: Coping with conflict

Frederick

Author/Illustrator--Leo Lionni

Genre--Modern Fable

<u>Motif</u>	<u>Action</u>	<u>Resolve</u>	
Frederick	→ Saves the sun's rays, colors of the meadow, and words	→ Shares them with his fellow mice in the winter	→ Family survives as their spirits are bolstered

Theme Survival: Coping with conflict

Louis, the Fish

Author--Arthur Yorinks

Illustrator--Richard Egielski

Genre--Modern Fantasy

<u>Character</u>	<u>Action</u>	<u>Resolve</u>
Louis	→ Inherits the family meat market which he despises	→ Fantasizes → Becomes a salmon swimming in an aquarium

Theme Denial of conflict: Retreating from life

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