

Chapter 1

What Is Children's Literature?

Do you remember favorite books from your tender years? If so, you were a fortunate child whose response to delightful experiences with literature helped create a lifelong love of reading. The next question is: "What is Children's literature?" Before we can answer this question, we must define what literature is first.

Literature is thought, experience, and imagination shaped into oral or written language that may include visual images. There are different forms of literature, such as stories, ballads, family narratives, jokes, jump-rope jingles, street rhymes, videos, paintings, drawings, film, recorded books, and computer programs. Literature entertains listeners and readers, at the same time giving them access to the accumulated experience and wisdom of the ages. "Offering stories to children is the way our print-dominated society carries on a habit even older than writing and as common as bread—telling stories and listening to them" (Meek, 1997). Literature is central to education in that it contributes to readers' growing experiences—extending and enriching knowledge while stimulating reflection.

Stories are a natural part of life. Constructing stories in the mind is a fundamental way of making meaning (Wells, 1986). Through literature and language, people record, explain, understand, and control their experience. Authors reflect about experiences and events, organizing the significant episodes into a coherent sequence. The order and form thus created shows life's unity and meaning (Lukens, 1996). Reading what others have written about their experiences gives us insight about our-selves and helps put our own experiences in perspective. Clarissa Estes (1992) claims, "Stories are medicine. I have been

taken with stories since I heard my first. They have such power; they do not require that we do, be, act anything—we need only listen” (p. 5).

Stories are behind the daily news, the comics, and the sports report. When you ask a friend about her experiences in a typhoon, she creates a narrative to tell what happened, helping both of you understand her experience. People need to talk about their experiences in order to comprehend what occurred. Through telling, retelling, believing and disbelieving stories about each other’s past, future and identities, we come to know one another better.

Children’s literature is a part of the mainstream of all literature. It explores, orders, evaluates, and illuminates the human experience—its heights and depths, its pains and pleasures. Like adults, children learn about the breadth and depth of life from literature. Memorable children’s authors skillfully engage readers with the information, language, unique plots, and many-faceted characters they create. “By allowing our readers into the soul of a character we are letting them know more than life will ever divulge about another human being” (Paterson, 1981, p. 35).

Children’s literature is literature to which children respond; it relates to their range of experience and is told in language they understand. The primary contrast between children’s literature and adult literature takes into account the more limited life experience of the audience, which is significant since readers use experience to understand text. Katherine Paterson (1981), a noted children’s author, says that adult literature is analogous to a symphony orchestra: the themes, characters, plots, and subplots create harmonies like those found among the elements of a great orchestra. On the other hand, fine children’s literature has the qualities of the clear, true notes of a flute solo: its beauty and truth are not complicated by experiences that go beyond the readers’ ability to understand. Reading and listening to stories, children expand their background and generate

meanings that are the foundation for their response to literature, permitting them to comprehend more complex literature as they mature.

Response to Literature

Readers make books come alive. What they bring to literature is as important as the literary work itself. Readers relate the text they read to life as they know it in order to construct meaning within the text, using the author's words as meaning cues and constructing meaning for the words based on their personal knowledge, associations, and feelings. In this way, readers construct and confer meaning on the text rather than extracting a single, given meaning from it. Because each reader brings a different set of experiences to the text, different readers may create different meanings for the same text. In addition, because the meaning of a text depends on the reader's experience, the same reader may construct different meanings for the same text in separate readings of that text. "Each time we talk about a book we discover our sense of it, our ideas about it, our understanding of what it is and means, even the details we remember have changed and shifted and come to us in different arrangements, different patterns" (Chambers, 2003, p. 167).

The Power of Literature

Books enrich, broaden, and bring joy to children's lives (Paterson, 1981). However, isolating and identifying the values of children's literature is a daunting task because literature affects our lives so deeply. Literature motivates readers to think, enhances language and cognitive development, and stimulates thinking. It takes them beyond everyday experiences, broadening their background, developing their imagination and sense of humor, enabling them to grow in humanity and understanding. Literature can provide pleasure, relaxation, and opportunities for aesthetic responses. It expands knowledge and experience, helps

readers solve problems, and plays a significant role in children's developmental journey. Literature permits readers to walk in someone else's shoes for a time, thus giving them a better understanding of another's feelings. From this beginning, we can formulate some of the major values of children's literature: enjoyment, aesthetics, understanding, imagination, information and knowledge, cognition, and language.

Good books give readers pleasure. Some readers respond to an enjoyable book through total immersion, concentrating to the exclusion of all else, laughing or crying as the mood of the story shifts. Others find literary enjoyment from acquiring new, fascinating information from nonfiction. A well-written informational book piques interest in new topics and whets the appetite for more knowledge. For instance, the book *From Hand to Mouth* by James Gribble tells how knives, forks, spoons, chopsticks, and table manners were invented and explains why Americans hold their forks differently than Europeans.

Children respond emotionally to a good book. They enjoy a good laugh with Beverly Cleary's *Ramona Quimby Age 8* (Ramona cracks a raw egg on her head, thinking the egg was boiled) or Jack Prelutsky's poem *Rolling Harvey Down the Hill*. Books such as *The Lottery Rose* by Irene Hunt move readers to tears as they learn about the pain of an abused child's treatment at the hands of his mother and her boyfriend. Their sympathy grows as they learn about Georgie's experiences and their spirits soar as he works through his problems.

Readers who experience pleasure in literature read more and more. The best literature is so enjoyable that they are oblivious to any value other than enjoyment. Books that obviously preach or teach are often too didactic to invite enjoyment. Unless children can relate to the ideas and experiences expressed, they will not listen to the voice of a work, and often they will not even finish reading it. Superb writers first and foremost share their stories with readers, who find these stories fascinating and come back for more.

Aesthetics pertain to the beauty readers perceive in a literary work. Literature is verbal art that leads readers to appreciate the beauty of language. It adds aesthetic dimensions to readers' lives, leading them to view their personal experiences in different ways. Fiction, nonfiction, and poetry are artistic interpretations of experiences, events, and people. Picture books add the dimension of visual art, which interacts with language to tell a story, create a poem, or impart information.

Readers have personal concepts of beauty that evolve from individual experiences and therefore exhibit considerable variation in literary appreciation. A book that transforms one person may not affect someone else. Of literature he considered second-rate, author W.H.Auden said, "That's just the way I always felt." But his response to first-rate literature was quite different: "Until now, I never knew how I felt. Thanks to this experience, I shall never feel the same way again" (Auden, 1956). Books that project beauty and truth to many different people become classics. In the United States, E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web* and Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* are considered classics because they have given so much to so many people for so many years.

Summary

Children's literature includes all types of books that entertain and inform children, including picture books, traditional literature, realistic fiction, historical fiction, biography, fantasy, poetry, and nonfiction, among other media such as narratives, videos, verbal stories, and the fine arts. The content of children's literature is limited only by the experience and understanding of the reader.

Literature has many personal values for children. Foremost among these are entertainment, aesthetics, thinking, and imagination. Learning is an important value of literature in elementary classrooms. Fine books can contribute to learning in language arts, social sciences, science, mathematics, and fine arts.

Assignment

Read the excerpt from E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web* for class discussion.

Chapter I Before Breakfast

"Where's Papa going with that ax?" said Fern to her mother as they were setting the table for breakfast. "Out to the hoghouse," replied Mrs. Arable. "Some pigs were born last night."

"I don't see why he needs an ax," continued Fern, who was only eight.

"Well," said her mother, "one of the pigs is a runt. It's very small and weak, and it will never amount to anything. So your father has decided to do away with it."

"Do *away* with it?" shrieked Fern. "You mean *kill* it?" Just because it's smaller than the others?"

Mrs. Arable put a pitcher of cream on the table. "Don't yell, Fern!" she said. "Your father is right. The pig would probably die anyway."

Fern pushed a chair out of the way and ran outdoors. The grass was wet and the earth smelled of springtime. Fern's sneakers were sopping by the time she caught up with her father.

"Please don't kill it!" she sobbed. "It's unfair."

Mr. Arable stopped walking.

"Fern," he said gently, "you will have to learn to control yourself."

"Control myself?" yelled Fern. "This is a matter of life and death, and you talk about *controlling* myself." Tears ran down her cheeks and she took hold of the ax and tried to pull it out of her father's hand.

“Fern,” said Mr. Arable, “I know more about raising a litter of pigs than you do. A weakling makes trouble. Now run along!”

“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*?”

Mr. Arable smiled. “Certainly not,” he said, looking down at his daughter with love. “But this is different. A little girl is one thing, a little runty pig is another.”

“I see no difference,” replied Fern, still hanging on to the ax. “This is the most terrible case of injustice I ever heard of.”

A queer look came over John Arable’s face. He seemed almost ready to cry himself.

“All right,” he said. “You go back to the house and I will bring the runt when I come in. I’ll let you start it on a bottle, like a baby. Then you’ll see what trouble a pig can be.”

When Mr. Arable returned to the house half an hour later, he carried a carton under his arm. Fern was upstairs changing her sneakers. The kitchen table was set for breakfast, and the room smelled of coffee, bacon, damp plaster, and wood smoke from the stove.

“Put it on her chair!” said Mrs. Arable. Mr. Arable set the carton down at Fern’s place. Then he walked to the sink and washed his hands and dried them on the roller towel.

Fern came slowly down the stairs. Her eyes were red from crying. As she approached her chair, the carton wobbled, and there was a scratching noise. Fern looked at her father. Then she lifted the lid of the carton. There, inside, looking up at her, was the newborn pig. It was a white one. The morning light shone through its ears, turning them pink.

“He’s yours,” said Mr. Arable. “Saved from an untimely death. And may the good Lord forgive me for this foolishness.”

Fern couldn't take her eyes off the tiny pig. "Oh," she whispered. "Oh, look at him! He's absolutely perfect."

She closed the carton carefully. First she kissed her father, then she kissed her mother. Then she opened the lid again, lifted the pig out, and held it against her cheek. At this moment her brother Avery came into the room. Avery was ten. He was heavily armed—an air rifle in one hand, a wooden dagger in the other.

"What's that?" he demanded. "What's Fern got?"

"She's got a guest for breakfast," said Mrs. Arable. "Wash your hands and face, Avery!"

"Let's see it!" said Avery, setting his gun down. "You call that miserable thing a pig? That's a *fine* specimen of a pig—it's no bigger than a white rat."

"Wash up and eat your breakfast, Avery!" said his mother. "The school bus will be along in half an hour."

"Can I have a pig, too, Pop?" asked Avery.

"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!"

But Fern couldn't eat until her pig had had a drink of milk. Mrs. Arable found a baby's nursing bottle and a rubber nipple. She poured warm milk into the bottle, fitted the nipple over the top, and handed it to Fern. "Give him his breakfast!" she said.

A minute later, Fern was seated on the floor in the corner of the kitchen with her infant between her knees, teaching it to suck from the bottle. The pig, although tiny, had a good appetite and caught on quickly.

The school bus honked from the road.

“Run!” commanded Mrs. Arable, taking the pig from Fern and slipping a doughnut into her hand. Avery grabbed his gun and another doughnut.

The children ran out to the road and climbed into the bus. Fern took no notice of the others in the bus. She just sat and stared out of the window, thinking what a blissful world it was and how lucky she was to have entire charge of a pig. By the time the bus reached school, Fern had named her pet, selecting the most beautiful name she could think of.

“Its name is Wilbur,” she whispered to herself.

She was still thinking about the pig when the teacher said: “Fern, what is the capital of Pennsylvania?”

“Wilbur,” replied Fern, dreamily. The pupils giggled. Fern blushed.

Chapter II

Wilbur

Fern loved Wilbur more than anything. She loved to stroke him, to feed him, to put him to bed. Every morning, as soon as she got up, she warmed his milk, tied his bib on, and held the bottle for him. Every afternoon, when the school bus stopped in front of her house, she jumped out and ran to the kitchen to fix another bottle for him. She fed him again at suppertime, and again just before going to bed. Mrs. Arable gave him a feeding around noontime each day, when Fern was away in school. Wilbur loved his milk, and he was never happier than when Fern was warming up a bottle for him. He would stand and gaze up at her with adoring eyes.

For the first few days of his life, Wilbur was allowed to live in a box near the stove in the kitchen. Then, when Mrs. Arable complained, he was moved to a

bigger box in the woodshed. At two weeks of age, he was moved outdoors. It was apple-blossom time, and the days were getting warmer. Mr. Arable fixed a small yard specially for Wilbur under an apple tree, and gave him a large wooden box full of straw, with a doorway cut in it so he could walk in and out as he pleased.

“Won’t he be cold at night?” asked Fern.

“No,” said her father. “You watch and see what he does.”

Carrying a bottle of milk, Fern sat down under the apple tree inside the yard. Wilbur ran to her and she held the bottle for him while he sucked. When he had finished the last drop, he grunted and walked sleepily into the box. Fern peered through the door. Wilbur was poking the straw with his snout. In a short time he had dug a tunnel in the straw. He crawled into the tunnel and disappeared from sight, completely covered with straw. Fern was enchanted. It relieved her mind to know that her baby would sleep covered up, and would stay warm.

Every morning after breakfast, Wilbur walked out to the road with Fern and waited with her till the bus came. She would wave good-bye to him, and he would stand and watch the bus until it vanished around a turn. While Fern was in school, Wilbur was shut up inside his yard. But as soon as she got home in the afternoon, she would take him out and he would follow her around the place. If she went into the house, Wilbur went, too. If she went upstairs, Wilbur would wait at the bottom step until she came down again. If she took her doll for a walk in the doll carriage, Wilbur followed along. Sometimes, on these journeys, Wilbur would get tired, and Fern would pick him up and put him in the carriage alongside the doll. He liked this. And if he was very tired, he would close his eyes and go to sleep under the doll’s blanket. He looked cute when his eyes were closed, because his lashes were so long. The doll would close her eyes, too, and Fern would wheel the carriage very slowly and smoothly so as not to wake her infants.

One warm afternoon, Fern and Avery put on bathing suits and went down to the brook for a swim. Wilbur tagged along at Fern's heels. When she waded into the brook, Wilbur waded in with her. He found the water quite cold—too cold for his liking. So while the children swam and played and splashed water at each other, Wilbur amused himself in the mud along the edge of the brook, where it was warm and moist and delightfully sticky and oozy.

Every day was a happy day, and every night was peaceful.

Wilbur was what farmers call a spring pig, which simply means that he was born in springtime. When he was weeks old, Mr. Arable said he was now big enough to sell, and would have to be sold. Fern broke down and wept. But her father was firm about it. Wilbur's appetite had increased; he was beginning to eat scraps of food in addition to milk. Mr. Arable was not willing to provide for him any longer. He had already sold Wilbur's ten brothers and sisters.

"He's got to go, Fern," he said. "You have had your fun raising a baby pig, but Wilbur is not a baby any longer and he has got to be sold."

"Call up the Zuckermans," suggested Mrs. Arable to Fern. "You Uncle Homer sometimes raises a pig. And if Wilbur goes there to live, you can walk down the road and visit him as often as you like."

"How much money should I ask for him?" Fern wanted to know.

"Well," said her father, "he's a runt. Tell your Uncle Homer you've got a pig you'll sell for six dollars, and see what he says."

It was soon arranged. Fern phoned and got her Aunt Edith, and her Aunt Edith hollered for Uncle Homer, and Uncle Homer came in from the barn and talked to Fern. When he heard that the price was only six dollars, he said he would buy the pig. Next day Wilbur was taken from his home under the apple tree and went to live in a manure pile in the cellar of Zuckerman's barn.

Chapter III

Escape

The barn was very large. It was very old. It smelled of hay and it smelled of manure. It smelled of the perspiration of tired horses and the wonderful sweet breath of patient cows. It often had a sort of peaceful smell—as though nothing bad could happen ever again in the world. It smelled of grain and of harness dressing and of axle grease and of rubber boots and of new rope. And whenever the cat was given a fish-head to eat, the barn would smell of fish. But mostly it smelled of hay, for there was always hay in the great loft up overhead. And there was always hay being pitched down to the cows and the horses and the sheep.

The barn was pleasantly warm in winter when the animals spent most of their time indoors, and it was pleasantly cool in summer when the big doors stood wide open to the breeze. The barn had stalls on the main floor for the work horses, tie-ups on the main floor for the cows, a sheepfold down below for the sheep, a pigpen down below for Wilbur, and it was full of all sorts of things that you find in barns: ladders, grindstones, pitch forks, monkey wrenches, scythes, lawn mowers, snow shovels, ax handles, milk pails, water buckets, empty grain sacks, and rusty rat traps. It was the kind of barn that swallows like to build their nests in. It was the kind of barn that children like to play in. And the whole thing was owned by Fern's uncle, Mr. Homer L. Zuckerman.

Wilbur's new home was in the lower part of the barn, directly underneath the cows. Mr. Zuckerman knew that a manure pile is a good place to keep a young pig. Pigs need warmth, and it was warm and comfortable down there in the barn cellar on the south side.

Fern came almost every day to visit him. She found an old milking stool that had been discarded, and she placed the stool in the sheepfold next to Wilbur's pen. Here she sat quietly during the long afternoons, thinking and

listening and watching Wilbur. The sheep soon got to know her and trust her. So did the geese, who lived with the sheep. All the animals trusted her, she was so quiet and friendly. Mr. Zuckerman did not allow her to take Wilbur out, and he did not allow her to get into the pigpen. But he told Fern that she could sit on the stool and watch Wilbur as long as she wanted to. It made her happy just to be near the pig, and it made Wilbur happy to know that she was sitting there, right outside his pen. But he never had any fun—no walks, no rides, no swims.

One afternoon in June, when Wilbur was almost two months old, he wandered out into his small yard outside the barn. Fern had not arrived for her usual visit. Wilbur stood in the sun feeling lonely and bored.

“There’s never anything to do around here,” he thought. He walked slowly to his food trough and sniffed to see if anything had been overlooked at lunch. He found a small strip of potato skin and ate it. His back itched, so he leaned against the fence and rubbed against the boards. When he tired of this, he walked indoors, climbed to the top of the manure pile, and sat down. 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. He walked out to the yard again.

“When I’m out here,” he said, “there’s no place to go but in. When I’m indoors, there’s no place to go but out in the yard.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, my friend, my friend,” said a voice.

Wilbur looked through the fence and saw the goose standing there.

“You don’t have to stay in that dirty-little dirty-little dirty-little yard,” said the goose, who talked rather fast. “One of the boards is loose. Push on it, push-push-push on it, and come on out!”

“What?” said Wilbur. “Say it slower!”

“At-at-at, at the risk of repeating myself,” said the goose, “I suggest that you come on out. It’s wonderful out here.”

“Did you say a board was loose?”

“That I did, that I did,” said the goose.

Wilbur walked up to the fence and saw that the goose was right—one board was loose. He put his head down, shut his eyes, and pushed. The board gave way. In a minute he had squeezed through the fence and was standing in the long grass outside his yard. The goose chuckled.

“How does it feel to be free?” she asked.

“I like it,” said Wilbur. “That is, I *guess* I like it.” Actually, Wilbur felt queer to be outside his fence, with nothing between him and the big world.

“Where do you think I’d better go?”

“Anywhere you like, anywhere you like,” said the goose. “Go down through the orchard, root up the sod! Go down through the garden, dig up the radishes! Root up everything! Eat grass! Look for corn! Look for oats! Run all over! Skip and dance, jump and prance! Go down through the orchard and stroll in the woods! The world is a wonderful place when you’re young.”

“I can see that,” replied Wilbur. He gave a jump in the air, twirled, ran a few steps, stopped, looked all around, sniffed the smells of afternoon, and then set off walking down through the orchard. Pausing in the shade of an apple tree, he put his strong snout into the ground and began pushing, digging, and rooting. He felt very happy. He had plowed up quite a piece of ground before anyone noticed him. Mrs. Zuckerman was the first to see him. She saw him from the kitchen window, and she immediately shouted for the men.

“Ho-*mer!*” she cried. “Pig’s out! Lurvy! Pig’s out! Homer! Lurvy! Pig’s out. He’s down there under that apple tree.”

“Now the trouble starts,” thought Wilbur. “Now I’ll catch it.”

The goose heard the racket and she, too, started hollering. “Run-run-run downhill, make for the woods, the woods!” she shouted to Wilbur. “They’ll never-never-never catch you in the woods.”

The cocker spaniel heard the commotion and he ran out from the barn to join the chase. Mr. Zuckerman heard, and he came out of the machine shed where he was mending a tool. Lurvy, the hired man, heard the noise and come up from the asparagus patch where he was pulling weeds. Everybody walked toward Wilbur and Wilbur didn't know what to do. The woods seemed a long way off, and anyway, he had never been down there in the woods and wasn't sure he would like it.

"Get around behind him, Lurvy," said Mr. Zuckerman, "and drive him toward the barn! And take it easy—don't rush him! I'll go and get a bucket of slops."

The news of Wilbur's escape spread rapidly among the animal on the place. Whenever any creature broke loose on Zuckerman's farm, the event was of great interest to the others. The goose shouted to the nearest cow that Wilbur was free, and soon all the cows knew. Then one of the cows told one of the sheep, and soon all the sheep knew. The lambs learned about it from their mothers. The horses, in their stalls in the barn, pricked up their ears when they heard the goose hollering; and soon the horses had caught on to what was happening. "Wilbur's out," they said. Every animal stirred and lifted its head and became excited to know that one of his friends had got free and was no longer penned up or tied fast.

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."

The cocker spaniel was sneaking up on him from one side, Lurvy the hired man was sneaking up on him from the other side. Mrs. Zuckerman stood ready to head him off if he started for the garden, and now Mr. Zuckerman was coming down toward him carrying a pail. "This is really awful," thought Wilbur. "Why doesn't Fern come?" He began to cry.

The goose took command and began to give orders.

“Don’t just stand there, Wilbur! Dodge about, dodge about!” cried the goose. “Skip around, run toward me, slip in and out, in and out, in and out! Make for the woods! Twist and turn!”

The cocker spaniel sprang for Wilbur’s hind leg. Wilbur jumped and ran. Lurvy reached out and grabbed. Mrs. Zuckerman screamed at Lurvy. The goose cheered for Wilbur. Wilbur dodged between Lurvy’s legs. Lurvy missed Wilbur and grabbed the spaniel instead. “Nicely done, nicely done!” cried the goose. “Try it again, try it again!”

“Run downhill!” suggested the cows.

“Run toward me!” yelled the gander.

“Run uphill!” cried the sheep.

“Turn and twist!” honked the goose.

“Jump and dance!” said the rooster.

“Look out for Lurvy!” called the cows.

“Look out for Zuckerman!” yelled the gander.

“Watch out for the dog!” cried the sheep.

“Listen to me, listen to me!” screamed the goose.

Poor Wilbur was dazed and frightened by this hullabaloo. He didn’t like being the center of all this fuss. He tried to follow the instructions his friends were giving him, but he couldn’t run downhill and uphill at the same time, and he couldn’t turn and twist when he was jumping and dancing, and he was crying so hard he could barely see anything that was happening. After all, Wilbur was a very young pig—not much more than a baby, really. He wished Fern were there to take him in her arms and comfort him. When he looked up and saw Mr. Zuckerman standing quite close to him, holding a pail of warm slops, he felt relieved. He lifted his nose and sniffed. The smell was delicious—warm milk,

potato skins, wheat middlings, Kellogg's Corn Flakes, and a popover left from the Zuckermans' breakfast.

"Come, pig!" said Mr. Zuckerman, tapping the pail. "Come pig!"

Wilbur took a step toward the pail.

"No-no-no!" said the goose. "It's the old pail trick, Wilbur. Don't fall for it, don't fall for it! He's trying to lure you back into captivity-ivity. He's appealing to your stomach."

Wilbur didn't care. The food smelled appetizing. He took another step toward the pail.

"Pig, pig!" said Mr. Zuckerman in a kind voice, and began walking slowly toward the barnyard, looking all about him innocently, as if he didn't know that a little white pig was following along behind him.

"You'll be sorry-sorry-sorry," called the goose.

Wilbur didn't care. He kept walking toward the pail of slops.

"You'll miss your freedom," honked the goose. "An hour of freedom is worth a barrel of slops."

Wilbur didn't care.

When Mr. Zuckerman reached the pigpen, he climbed over the fence and poured the slops into the trough. Then he pulled the loose board away from the fence, so that there was a wide hole for Wilbur to walk through.

"Reconsider, reconsider!" cried the goose.

Wilbur paid no attention. He stepped through the fence into his yard. He walked to the trough and took a long drink of slops, sucking in the milk hungrily and chewing the popover. It was good to be home again.

While Wilbur ate, Lurvy fetched a hammer and some 8-penny nails and nailed the board in place. Then he and Mr. Zuckerman leaned lazily on the fence and Mr. Zuckerman scratched Wilbur's back with a stick.

"He's quite a pig," said Lurvy.

“Yes, he’ll make a good pig,” said Mr. Zuckerman.

Wilbur heard the words of praise. He felt the warm milk inside his stomach. He felt the pleasant rubbing of the stick along his itchy back. He felt peaceful and happy and sleepy. This had been a tiring afternoon. It was still only about four o’clock but Wilbur was ready for bed.

“I’m really too young to go out into the world alone,” he thought as he lay down.

Chapter IV

Loneliness

The next day was rainy and dark. Rain fell on the roof of the barn and dripped steadily from the eaves. Rain fell in the barnyard and ran in crooked courses down into the lane where thistles and pigweed grew. Rain spattered against Mrs. Zuckerman’s kitchen windows and came gushing out of the downspouts. Rain fell on the backs of the sheep as they grazed in the meadow. When the sheep tired of standing in the rain, they walked slowly up the lane and into the fold.

Rain upset Wilbur’s plans. Wilbur had planned to go out, this day, and dig a new hole in his yard. He had other plans, too. His plans for the day went something like this:

Breakfast at six-thirty. Skim milk, crusts, middlings, bits of doughnuts, wheat cakes with drops of maple syrup sticking to them, potato skins, leftover custard pudding with raisins, and bits of Shredded Wheat.

Breakfast would be finished at seven.

From seven to eight, Wilbur planned to have a talk with Templeton, the rat that lived under his trough. Talking with Templeton was not the most interesting occupation in the world but it was better than nothing.

From eight to nine, Wilbur planned to take a nap outdoors in the sun.

From nine to eleven he planned to dig a hole, or trench, and possibly find something good to eat buried in the dirt.

From eleven to twelve he planned to stand still and watch flies on the boards, watch bees in the clover, and watch swallows in the air.

Twelve o'clock—lunchtime. Middlings, warm water, apple parings, meat gravy, carrot scrapings, meat scraps, stale hominy, and the wrapper off a package of cheese. Lunch would be over at one.

From one to two, Wilbur planned to sleep.

From two to three, he planned to scratch itchy places by rubbing against the fence,

From three to four, he planned to stand perfectly still and think of what it was like to be alive, and to wait for Fern.

At four would come supper. Skim milk, provender, leftover sandwich from Lurvy's lunchbox, prune skins, a morsel of this, a bit of that, fried potatoes, marmalade drippings, a little more of this, a little more of that, a piece of baked apple, a scrap of upsidedown cake.

Wilbur had gone to sleep thinking about these plans. He awoke at six and saw the rain, and it seemed as though he couldn't bear it.

"I get everything all beautifully planned out and it has to go and rain," he said.

For a while he stood gloomily indoors. Then he walked to the door and looked out. Drops of rain struck his face. His yard was cold and wet. His trough had an inch of rainwater in it. Templeton was nowhere to be seen.

“Are you out there, Templeton?” called Wilbur. There was no answer. Suddenly Wilbur felt lonely and friendless.

“One day just like another,” he groaned. “I’m very young, I have no real friend here in the barn, it’s going to rain all morning and all afternoon, and Fern won’t come in such bad weather. Oh, *honestly!*” And Wilbur was crying again, for the second time in two days.

At six-thirty Wilbur heard the banging of a pail. Lurvy was standing outside in the rain, stirring up breakfast.

“C’mon, pig!” said Lurvy.

Wilbur did not budge. Lurvy dumped the slops, scraped the pail, and walked away. He noticed that something was wrong with the pig.

Wilbur didn’t want food, he wanted love. He wanted a friend—someone who would play with him. He mentioned this to the goose, who was sitting quietly in a corner of the sheepfold.

“Will you come over and play with me?” he asked.

“Sorry, sonny, sorry,” said the goose. “I’m sitting-sitting on my eggs. Eight of them. Got to keep them toasty-oasty-oasty warm. I have to stay right here, I’m no flibberty-ibberty-gibbet. I do not play when there are eggs to hatch. I’m expecting goslings.”

“Well, I didn’t think you were expecting wood-peckers,” said Wilbur, bitterly.

Wilbur next tried one of the lambs.

“Will you please play with me?” he asked.

“Certainly not,” said the lamb. “In the first place, I cannot get into your pen, as I am not old enough to jump over the fence. In the second place, I am not interested in pigs. Pigs mean less than nothing to me.”

“What do you mean, *less than nothing?*” replied Wilbur. “I don’t think there is any such thing as *less than nothing*. Nothing is absolutely the limit of

nothingness. It's the lowest you can go. It's the end of the line. How can something be less than nothing? If there were something that was less than nothing, then nothing would not be nothing, it would be something—even though it's just a very little bit of something. But if nothing is *nothing*, then nothing has nothing that is less than *it* is."

"Oh, be quiet!" said the lamb. "Go play by yourself! I don't play with pigs."

Sadly, Wilbur lay down and listened to the rain. Soon he saw the rat climbing down a slanting board that he used as a stairway.

"Will you play with me, Templeton?" asked Wilbur.

"Play?" said Templeton, twirling his whiskers. "Play? I hardly know the meaning of the word."

"Well," said Wilbur, "it means to have fun, to frolic, to run and skip and make merry."

"I never do those things if I can avoid them," replied the rat, sourly. "I prefer to spend my time eating, gnawing, spying, and hiding. I am a glutton but not a merry-maker. Right now I am on my way to your trough to eat your breakfast, since you haven't got sense enough to eat it yourself." And Templeton, the rat, crept stealthily along the wall and disappeared into a private tunnel that he had dug between the door and the trough in Wilbur's yard. Templeton was a crafty rat, and he had things pretty much his own way. The tunnel was an example of his skill and cunning. The tunnel enabled him to get from the barn to his hiding place under the pig trough without coming out into the open. He had tunnels and runways all over Mr. Zuckerman's farm and could get from one place to another without being seen. Usually he slept during the daytime and was abroad only after dark.

Wilbur watched him disappear into his tunnel. In a moment he saw the rat's sharp nose poke out from underneath the wooden trough. Cautiously Templeton pulled himself up over the edge of the trough. This was almost more

than Wilbur could stand: on this dreary, rainy day to see his breakfast being eaten by somebody else. He knew Templeton was getting soaked, out there in the pouring rain, but even that didn't comfort him. Friendless, dejected, and hungry, he threw himself down in the manure and sobbed.

Late that afternoon, Lurvy went to Mr. Zuckerman. "I think there's something wrong with that pig of yours. He hasn't touched his food."

"Give him two spoonfuls of sulphur and a little molasses," said Mr. Zuckerman.

Wilbur couldn't believe what was happening to him when Lurvy caught him and forced the medicine down his throat. This was certainly the worst day of his life. He didn't know whether he could endure the awful loneliness any more.

Darkness settled over everything. Soon there were only shadows and the noises of the sheep chewing their cuds, and occasionally the rattle of a cow-chain up overhead. You can imagine Wilbur's surprise when, out of the darkness, came a small voice he had never heard before. It sounded rather thin, but pleasant. "Do you want a friend, Wilbur?" it said. "I'll be a friend to you. I've watched you all day and I like you."

"But I can't see you," said Wilbur, jumping to his feet. "Where are you? And *who* are you?"

"I'm right up here," said the voice. "Go to sleep. You'll see me in the morning."

Chapter V

Charlotte

The night seemed long. Wilbur's stomach was empty and his mind was full. And when your stomach is empty and your mind is full, it's always hard to sleep.

A dozen times during the night Wilbur woke and stared into the blackness, listening to the sounds and trying to figure out what time it was. A barn is never perfectly quiet. Even at midnight there is usually something stirring.

The first time he woke, he heard Templeton gnawing a hole in the grain bin. Templeton's teeth scraped loudly against the wood and made quite a racket. "That crazy rat!" thought Wilbur. "Why does he have to stay up all night, grinding his clashers and destroying people's property? Why can't he go to sleep, like any decent animal?"

The second time Wilbur woke, he heard the goose turning on her nest and chuckling to herself.

"What time is it?" whispered Wilbur to the goose.

"Probably-obably-obably about half-past eleven," said the goose. "Why aren't you asleep, Wilbur?"

"Too many things on my mind," said Wilbur.

"Well," said the goose, "that's not *my* trouble. I have nothing at all on my mind, but I've too many things under my behind. Have you ever tried to sleep while sitting on eight eggs?"

"No," replied Wilbur. "I suppose it *is* uncomfortable. How long does it take a goose egg to hatch?"

"Approximately-oximately thirty days, all told," answered the goose. "But I cheat a little. On warm afternoons, I just pull a little straw over the eggs and go out for a walk."

Wilbur yawned and went back to sleep. In his dreams he heard again the voice saying, "I'll be a friend to you. Go to sleep—you'll see me in the morning."

About half an hour before dawn, Wilbur woke and listened. The barn was still dark. The sheep lay motionless. Even the goose was quiet. Overhead, on the main floor, nothing stirred: the cows were resting, the horses dozed. Templeton had quit work and gone off somewhere on an errand. The only sound was a slight scraping noise from the rooftop, where the weather-vane swung back and forth. Wilbur loved the barn when it was like this—calm and quiet, waiting for light.

"Day is almost here," he thought.

Through a small window, a faint gleam appeared. One by one the stars went out. Wilbur could see the goose a few feet away. She sat with head tucked under a wing. Then he could see the sheep and the lambs. The sky lightened.

"Oh, beautiful day, it is here at last! Today I shall find my friend."

Wilbur looked everywhere. He searched his pen thoroughly. He examined the window ledge, stared up at the ceiling. But he saw nothing new. Finally he decided he would have to speak up. He hated to break the lovely stillness of dawn by using his voice, but he couldn't think of any other way to locate the mysterious new friend who was nowhere to be seen. So Wilbur cleared his throat.

"Attention, please!" he said in a loud, firm voice. "Will the party who addressed me at bedtime last night kindly make himself or herself known by giving an appropriate sign or signal!"

Wilbur paused and listened. All the other animals lifted their heads and stared at him. Wilbur blushed. But he was determined to get in touch with his unknown friend.

"Attention, please!" he said. "I will repeat the message. Will the party who addressed me at bedtime last night kindly speak up. Please tell me where you are, if you are my friend!"

The sheep looked at each other in disgust.

“Stop your nonsense, Wilbur!” said the oldest sheep. “If you have a new friend here, you are probably disturbing his rest; and the quickest way to spoil a friendship is to wake somebody up in the morning before he is ready. How can you be sure your friend is an early riser?”

“I beg everyone’s pardon,” whispered Wilbur. “I didn’t mean to be objectionable.”

He lay down meekly in the manure, facing the door. He did not know it, but his friend was very near. And the old sheep was right—the friend was still asleep.

Soon Lurvy appeared with slops for breakfast. Wilbur rushed out, ate everything in a hurry, and licked the trough. The sheep moved off down the lane, the gander waddled along behind them, pulling grass. And then, just as Wilbur was settling down for his morning nap, he heard again the thin voice that had addressed him the night before.

“Salutations!” said the voice.

Wilbur jumped to his feet. “Salu-*what?*” he cried.

“Salutations!” repeated the voice.

“What are *they*, and where are *you?*” screamed Wilbur. “Please, *please*, tell me where you are. And what are salutations?”

“Salutations are greetings,” said the voice. “When I say ‘salutations,’ it’s just my fancy way of saying hello or good morning. Actually, it’s a silly expression, and I am surprised that I used it at all. As for my whereabouts, that’s easy. Look up here in the corner of the doorway! Here I am. Look, I’m waving!”

At last Wilbur saw the creature that had spoken to him in such a kindly way. Stretched across the upper part of the doorway was a big spiderweb, and hanging from the top of the web, head down, was a large grey spider. She was about the size of a gumdrop. She had eight legs, and she was waving one of them at Wilbur in friendly greeting. “See me now?” she asked.

“Oh, yes indeed,” said Wilbur. “Yes indeed!” How are you? Good morning! Salutations! Very pleased to meet you. What is your name, please? May I have your name?”

“My name,” said the spider, “is Charlotte.”

“Charlotte what?” asked Wilbur, eagerly.

“Charlotte A. Cavatica. But just call me Charlotte.”

“I think you’re beautiful,” said Wilbur.

“Well, I *am* pretty,” replied Charlotte. “There’s no denying that. Almost all spiders are rather nice-looking. I’m not as flashy as some, but I’ll do. I wish I could see you, Wilbur, as clearly as you can see me.”

“Why can’t you?” asked the pig. “I’m right here.”

“Yes, but I’m near-sighted,” replied Charlotte. “I’ve always been dreadfully near-sighted. It’s good in some ways, not so good in others. Watch me wrap up this fly.”

A fly that had been crawling along Wilbur’s trough had flown up and blundered into the lower part of Charlotte’s web and was tangled in the sticky threads. The fly was beating its wings furiously, trying to break loose and free itself.

“First,” said Charlotte, “I dive at him.” She plunged headfirst toward the fly. As she dropped, a tiny silken thread unwound from her rear end.

“Next, I wrap him up.” She grabbed the fly, threw a few jets of silk around it, and rolled it over and over, wrapping it so that it couldn’t move. Wilbur watched in horror. He could hardly believe what he was seeing, and although he detested flies, he was sorry for this one.

“There!” said Charlotte. “Now I knock him out, so he’ll be more comfortable.” She bit the fly. “He can’t feel a thing now,” she remarked. “He’ll make a perfect breakfast for me.”

“You mean you *eat* flies?” gasped Wilbur.

“Certainly. Flies, bugs, grasshoppers, choice beetles, moths, butterflies, tasty cockroaches, gnats, midges, daddy longlegs, centipedes, mosquitoes, crickets—anything that is careless enough to get caught in my web. I have to live, don’t I?”

“Why, yes, of course,” said Wilbur. “Do they taste good?”

“Delicious. Of course, I don’t really eat them. I drink them—drink their blood. I love blood,” said Charlotte, and her pleasant, thin voice grew even thinner and more pleasant.

“Don’t say that!” groaned Wilbur. “Please don’t say things like that!”

“Why not? It’s true, and I have to say what is true. I am not entirely happy about my diet of flies and bugs, but it’s the way I’m made. A spider has to pick up a living somehow or other, and I happen to be a trapper. I just naturally build a web and trap flies and other insects. My mother was a trapper before me. Her mother was a trapper before her. All our family have been trappers. Way back for thousands and thousands of years we spiders have been laying for flies and bugs.”

“It’s a miserable inheritance,” said Wilbur, gloomily. He was sad because his new friend was so bloodthirsty.

“Yes, it is,” agreed Charlotte. “But I can’t help it. I don’t know how the first spider in the early days of the world happened to think up this fancy idea of spinning a web, but she did, and it was clever of her, too. And since then, all of us spiders have had to work the same trick. It’s not a bad pitch, on the whole.”

It’s cruel,” replied Wilbur, who did not intend to be argued out of his position.

“Well, *you* can’t talk” said Charlotte. “*You* have your meals brought to you in a pail. Nobody feeds me. I have to get my own living. I live by my wits. I have to be sharp and clever, lest I go hungry. I have to think things out, catch what I can, take what comes. And it just so happens, my friend, that what comes is flies

and insects and bugs. And *furthermore*,” said Charlotte, shaking one of her legs, “do you realize that if I didn’t catch bugs and eat them, bugs would increase and multiply and get so numerous that they’d destroy the earth, wipe out everything?”

“Really?” said Wilbur. “I wouldn’t want *that* to happen. Perhaps your web is a good thing after all.”

The goose had been listening to this conversation and chuckling to herself. “There are a lot of things Wilbur doesn’t know about life,” she thought. “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.” And the goose raised herself a bit and poked her eggs a little further under her so that they would receive the full heat from her warm body and soft feathers.

Charlotte stood quietly over the fly, preparing to eat it. Wilbur lay down and closed his eyes. He was tired from his wakeful night and from the excitement of meeting someone for the first time. A breeze brought him the smell of clover—the sweet-smelling world beyond his fence. “Well,” he thought, “I’ve got a new friend, all right. But what a gamble friendship is! Charlotte is fierce, brutal, scheming, bloodthirsty—everything I don’t like. How can I learn to like her, even though she is pretty and, of course, clever?”

Wilbur was merely suffering the doubts and fears that often go with finding a new friend. In good time he was to discover that he was mistaken about Charlotte. Underneath her rather bold and cruel exterior, she had a kind heart, and she was to prove loyal and true to the very end.

(Source: White, E.B. 1993. *Charlotte’s Web*. New York: Harper & Row, pp. 1 – 41.)

Discussion Questions:

- (1) What is children's literature?
- (2) What value does *Charlotte's Web* have in children's lives?
- (3) What constitutes an authentic experience in children's literature?
- (4) Which values in literature are the most important in your opinion?
- (5) How is a good children's book like a good adult book? How is it different from an adult book?