Chapter 3

Character

In literature, the term **character** is used to mean a person, or in the case of children's literature, sometimes a personified animal or object. Each of the living beings in a story, play, or poem is a character.

When we add to the word *character* the word *development,* we have a literary term **character development**, which also has a special meaning. In life the development of a person's character or personality is a matter of growth and change. In literature, however, character development means showing the character—whether a person or animal or object—with the complexity of a human being. Each of us in real life is three-dimensional; that is, we are a mixture of qualities. None of us is completely generous; we have our limits. None of us is completely selfish; we have other traits. In the full development of character in the literary sense, the writer shows the whole, composed of a variety of traits like those of real human beings.

The writer has privileges and responsibilities in this matter of character development. Since we are following a central character in a story, it is the writer's obligation to make this person's thoughts and actions believable. On the other hand, if the character is less important, the writer has the privilege of making the character two-dimensional or even a representative of a class—for example, the bossy older brother, or the impish little sister. The importance of a character in a story—primary, secondary, minor, or background importance—determines how fully the character is developed and understood. The closer the character comes to the center of the conflict—and therefore the more important the character is—the greater is our need to know the complexity of the

character's personality. Conversely, the more the character functions merely as background, the less likelihood that the character needs to be developed.

Types of Characters

There are certain terms that describe the degree of character development and that refer to change or lack of it in a character in the course of a story. Briefly, ***a round character*** is one that we know well, who has a variety of traits that make him or her believable. A ***flat character*** is less well developed, and has fewer traits. A ***dynamic character*** is a round character that changes, while a ***static character***—either round or flat—is one that does not change in the course of the story.

Flat Character

Let us begin with the less important characters. They, too, are essential to the action, but since they are not fully developed, we call them ***flat.*** In most stories, we must have these flat characters to help carry the action, to show how the central character behaves or relates to others, to make the setting a believable place because in this setting live these people. Flat characters are quickly made known to the reader, and quickly assume their necessary places in the narrative so that the story can then focus on the central characters.

Fern in *Charlotte's Web,* for example, is a flat character, a child with an intense interest that absorbs her for a time. She treats Wilbur like a doll, listens to the animals' conversations, and reports them to incredulous parents. She plays and quarrels, loves the Ferris wheel, and the freedom of the Fair. However, Fern has few traits that distinguish her from other little girls. She remains a believable little girl but not a special one with extraordinary traits that distinguish her from the large class of characters known as "little girls." Wilbur's relationships and worries are the focus of the story, and the conflict goes on without Fern's being totally

aware of all that spiders and pigs mean to each other. She needs to be no more developed because this is not Fern's story.

When a character has very few individual traits, the character does not seem to exist as an individual human being. When the character seems only to have the few traits of a class or of a group of people, the character is called a ***stereotype.*** Each of us has a few mental stereotypes*:* for example, of politicians, mothers, athletes, or poets. When we examine these mental pictures and compare them to individuals we know, we find that each stereotype often is inaccurate and unjust. In literature, however, the stereotype, like the stock character who appears in many stories, is useful, since he or she quickly settles into background position and performs there in an easily understood role.

In *Charlotte's Web, Lurvy* is an example of a stereotype, in this case of a hired man. Lurvy has only the expected traits and does only the expected things. He nails down the loose board on Wilbur's pen, he slops Wilbur, he discovers the exploded dud. Lurvy is neither eloquent nor imaginative:

"I've always noticed that pig. He's quite a pig." "He's long, and he's smooth," said Zuckerman. "That's right," agreed Lurvy. "He's as smooth as they come. He's some pig." (White, 1993, p. 82)

As Lurvy's speech shows, stereotypes describe themselves by what they say as well as how they say it.

Occasionally the writer may use a *character foil,* a minor character whose traits are in direct contrast to a principal character, and thus highlight the principal. The snobbish lamb is as young and naive as Wilbur, but she is smug instead of humble. Pigs are little or nothing to her. Since the lamb is consistently disdainful, her behavior contrasts sharply to Wilbur's, and in this way she acts as a foil.

Stereotyping, or compressing people into flat caricatures that eliminate individual differences, is useful in literature for particular background figures that

fill narrow roles. Flat and stereotyped characters, however, are not suitable protagonists. We have noted the necessity for character and action to be unified. However, flat and stereotyped characters do not truly grow out of action, and action cannot grow out of their less-than-full human natures. It seems more descriptive of flat characters and action to say that they coexist; flat characters and stereotypes move over the surface of the action, rather than being integrated with the action. Flat characters, furthermore, make little contribution to our understanding of human nature. We gain little new understanding by following such a character, and the result may be a narrowing of our perceptions about people, rather than an expansion of our understanding of them.

Round Character

A ***round character*** is one that is fully developed; we know this character well. The many traits of the round character are demonstrated in the action of the story. We know appearance and actions, speeches and opinions, what others say and think about the character, and oftentimes what the writer thinks about him/her. The character is so fully developed that we may even be able to predict actions and reactions. Yet, like a real person, the character may surprise us or respond impetuously on occasion. It is as though we know the character so well that the character has become a real person, one we wish we could meet or might enjoy knowing.

In children's literature there are great many round characters that we may feel we know. However, in order to help us see clearly what is meant by a round character, compare the many traits of Wilbur, for example, to the few traits of Fern, or the stereotype Lurvy. From the first words of the first page when Fern asks where her father is going with the ax, we are anxious about Wilbur's fate. We soon discover that Wilbur's struggle is the conflict, and that he is therefore the ***protagonist,*** or central character. Tiny, dependent Wilbur has almost no life of his

own at the opening of the story, except to amuse himself like a toddler, finding the mud moist and warm and pleasantly oozy. When he goes to live in the barn, he becomes a bit more independent, but he is bored, unable to dream up anything exciting to do. Friends must introduce themselves to him. When he squeezes through the fence and is pursued, he has no idea what to do with freedom; and his constant appetite makes him captive again, since Lurvy's pail of slops is irresistible. Wilbur plans his day around his body: sleeping, eating, scratching, digging, eating, watching flies, eating, napping, standing still, eating. On the day that Wilbur wants love more than comfort and food, he has grown. But now he wonders uncertainly about friendship, which seems such a gamble. After Wilbur makes a friend, life becomes more exciting and he becomes confident enough to try spinning a web. Cheerfully, he tries and fails; humbly he admits that Charlotte is brighter and more clever. Wilbur's innocence and dependence are clear when he pleads for a story or a song, for a last bedtime bite, a last drink of milk, and calls out the series of quiet good-nights to Charlotte. Panic is wilbur's reaction to news of his destiny—the Arable's dinner table. But once he is assured that Charlotte can perform miracles he calms down to be patient, trusting, and humble. The congratulatory words in Charlotte's web make Wilbur an exemplary pig; he decides that if he is called "radiant," he must act radiant, and in his way he becomes radiant. Despite all the admiration Wilbur attracts, he remains modest. Happy and confident, he honestly admires Charlotte's peach-colored egg sac and gazes lovingly into the faces of the crowd. He looks both grateful and humble. Wilbur has enough traits to classify him as a round character.

Change in Character

If there is a unity of character and action, then the character is not only affected by the events, but his or her nature may bring about various events. Frequently, the events of the story may change a character.

When the word *dynamic* is used in ordinary conversation it may mean forceful, or perhaps exciting. However, in the context of literature, the word has special meaning, since a *dynamic character* is one who changes in the course of the action. He or she may change from being shy to being poised or even domineering; or from cowardly to brave, from selfless to selfish. The character may demonstrate a new realization about himself or herself, or about his or her personal values. He may show that he is now able to care for others as well as himself. Somehow, the events of the story and qualities of the character have effected some basic character change. The variety of possibilities for change is huge.

The character, of course, may grow older by an hour or by a decade in the course of the novel's action. However, the mere passage of time is not sufficient evidence of character change. Some people are as immature at 35 as they were at 17. On the other hand, we know some people who have been changed by a single event—a traumatic experience or a simple and joyous one that has brought a realization of some kind. It is not then the passage of time that is important in character change, but the impact of events on the character—the unity of character and action—creating new traits to supplant or alter the old. The character may not necessarily be aware of his or her own change, just as looking back we may see that we are different from what we once were, but cannot necessarily account for the *where* or *when* of our change. The essential matter is that we are different.

Wilbur changes. He is a believable character early in the story, although he is young and immature. The experience of receiving selfless friendship makes

him able to give selfless friendship. Slowly, as we watch this change occurring, Wilbur is altered by his part in the action, by his receiving so much. Now he is the same Wilbur, and yet not the same. To his early qualities of humility and naivete are added dependability and steadfastness, sacrifice and purpose. Even Wilbur's vocabulary matures. When first he hears the bad news, he is a panicky child:

"I can't be quiet," screamed Wilbur, racing up and down. "I don't want to die. Is it true . . . Charlotte? Is it true they are going to kill me when the cold weather comes?" (White, 1993, p. 50)

By the end of a summer of maturing, Wilbur responds to news that his dearest friend will die, and he knows that he must save the egg sac. Notice how his vocabulary has changed to adult words, and his tone has changed to reasonable persuasion:

"Listen to me! … Charlotte … has only a short time to live. She cannot accompany us home, because of her condition. Therefore, it is absolutely necessary that I take her egg sac with me. I can't reach it, and I can't climb. You are the only one that can get it. There's not a second to be lost….Please, please, please, Templeton, climb up and get the egg sac." (White, 1993, p. 167)

Wilbur does not scream; he uses "please" liberally. His desperation does not arise from his own need, but from the need of another. Once Charlotte had said to the screaming Wilbur that he was carrying on childishly. The new Wilbur tells Templeton to "stop acting like a spoiled child." Wilbur—who once planned his day around his slops—can now, out of deep concern for Charlotte, promise solemnly that Templeton may eat first and take his choice of all the goodies in the trough.

During winter Wilbur warms the egg sac with his breath in the cold barn. By the end of the story, it is Wilbur who offers the first mature greeting, a cheerful Hello! for the baby spiders. The change is significant, and it occurs slowly. It is convincing. Little by little events have molded a self-centered child into

responsible maturity; we believe in wilbur's maturity just as we believed in his childishness.

A static character is one that does not change in the course of the story. The conflict does not affect the character to make any impact upon personality or outlook. Flat characters—including stereotypes and foils—would not change; they are not well enough known for us to recognize changes or to care. A round character, too, may be unchanged by the conflict. In fact, even the protagonist may be unchanged by the action.

Although Charlotte is not the center of Wilbur's story, we know her consistent nature very well. Charlotte is not only motherly, but hard-working, and her web words prove it. She is the same wise and selfless character at the end of the story that she was at the beginning, and we therefore call her a static character.

It is not necessary that a story have a dynamic or changing character. In one story the round central character may change, and in another may not. The change or lack of it does not constitute a judgment about the quality of characterization. However, the static or dynamic nature of the protagonist does help the reader to see the action and to understand the idea behind it.

The number of round characters depends upon the complexity of the plot, and thus there can hardly be a firm rule about number. Certainly it is not feasible that every character be round. It seems evident, furthermore, that a large number of fully developed characters becomes highly distracting in a story for children. Even *Charlotte's Web*, which has three round characters, focuses more fully on Charlotte and Wilbur than on Templeton, important as he is.

Summary

In life and in books children can sense differences in human beings and are capable of recognizing and responding to well-developed character. Even in the simplest stories it is possible to find character that verifies truth about human nature. We meet these characters in action that seems part of their natures. We learn to know them—whether they be personified objects, real or personified animals, or human beings—by their appearances, words, actions, and thoughts, and the opinions of others about them. Round characters have many traits, while flat characters have limited development. Two kinds of characters that serve as background figures or contrasts are stereotypes and foils. Central characters in the action are round, so that by believing in their reality we are led to discover something about humanity, and are thereby convinced that the conflict in the story, like conflict in life, is significant. The round characters may or may not change, but if they do, we expect such change to be convincing.

We find great pleasure in reading about people like ourselves, being both wise and foolish, brave and cowardly, frightened and confident, lonely and secure. It is this pleasure of recognition that leads to understanding. Children as much as adults, or perhaps even more than adults, need the discovery of themselves as part of humanity. Conversely, they need the pleasure of discovering that humanity exists in themselves. If literature is to help children understand the nature of human beings, we need reality in the portrayal of character. Nothing—not style, nor conflict, nor adventure, nor suspense, nor vivid setting, nor laughter, nor tears—nothing can substitute for solid character development in creating a pleasurable and lasting literature for children as well as for adults.

Assignment

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

Chapter VI

Summer Days

The early summer days on a farm are the happiest and fairest days of the year. Lilacs bloom and make the air sweet, and then fade. Apple blossoms come with the lilacs, and the bees visit around among the apple trees. The days grow warm and soft. School ends, and children have time to play and to fish for trouts in the brook. Avery often brought a trout home in his pocket, warm and stiff and ready to be fried for supper.

Now that school was over, Fern visited the barn almost every day, to sit quietly on her stool. The animals treated her as an equal. The sheep lay calmly at her feet.

Around the first of July, the work horses were hitched to the mowing machine, and Mr.Zuckerman climbed into the seat and drove into the field. All morning you could hear the rattle of the machine as it went round and round, while the tall grass fell down behind the cutter bar in long green swathes. Next day, if there was no thunder shower, all hands would help rake and pitch and load, and the hay would be hauled to the barn in the high hay wagon, with Fern and Avery riding at the top of the load. Then the hay would be hoisted, sweet and warm, into the big loft, until the whole barn seemed like a wonderful bed of timothy and clover. It was fine to jump in, and perfect to hide in. And sometimes Avery would find a little grass snake in the hay, and would add it to the other things in his pocket.

Early summer day are a jubilee time for birds. In the fields, around the house, in the barn, in the woods, in the swamp—everywhere love and songs and nests and eggs. From the edge of the woods, the white-throated sparrow (which must come all the way from Boston) calls, “Oh, Peabody, Peabody, Peabody!” On an apple bough, the phoebe teeters and wags its tail and says, “Phoebe, phoe-bee!” The song sparrow, who knows how brief and lovely life is, says, “Sweet, sweet, sweet interlude; sweet, sweet, sweet interlude.” If you enter the barn, the swallows swoop down from their nests and scold. “Cheeky, cheeky!” they say.

In early summer there are plenty of things for a child to eat and drink and suck and chew. Dandelion stems are full of milk, clover heads are loaded with nectar, the Frigidaire is full of ice-cold drinks. Everywhere you look is life; even the little ball of spit on the weed stalk, if you poke it apart, has a green worm inside it. And on the under side of the leaf of the potato vine are the bright orange eggs of the potato bug.

It was on a day in early summer that the goose eggs hatched. This was an important event in the barn cellar. Fern was there, sitting on her stool, when it happened.

Except for the goose herself, Charlotte was the first to know that the goslings had at last arrived. The goose knew a day in advance that they were coming—she could hear their weak voices calling from inside the egg. She knew that they were in a desperately cramped position inside the shell and were most anxious to break through and get out. So she sat quite still, and talked less than usual.

When the first gosling poked its grey-green head through the goose’s feathers and looked around, Charlotte spied it and made the announcement.

“I am sure,” she said, “that 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!"

"Thank you, thank you, thank you,!" said the goose, nodding and bowing shamelessly.

"Thank you," said the gander.

"Congratulations!" shouted Wilbur. "How many goslings are there? I can only see one."

"There are seven," said the goose.

"Fine!" said Charlotte. "Seven is a lucky number."

"Luck had nothing to do with this," said the goose. "It was good management and hard work."

At this point, Templeton showed his nose from his hiding place under Wilbur's trough. He glanced at Fern, then crept cautiously toward the goose, keeping close to the wall. Everyone watched him, for he was not well liked, not trusted.

"Look," he began in his sharp voice, "you say you have seven goslings. There were eight eggs. What happened to the other egg? Why didn't it hatch?

"It's a dud, I guess," said the goose.

"What are you going to do with it?" continued Templeton, his little round beady eyes fixed on the goose.

"You can have it," replied the goose. "Roll it away and add it to that nasty collection of yours." (Templeton had a habit of picking up unusual objects around the farm and storing them in his home. He saved everything.)

"Certainly-ertainly-ertainly," said the gander. "You may have the egg. But I'll tell you one thing, Templeton, if I ever catch you poking-oking- oking your ugly nose around our goslings, I'll give you the worst pounding a rat ever took." And the gander opened his strong wings and beat the air with them to show his power. He was strong and brave, but the truth is, both the goose and the gander

were worried about Templeton. And with good reason. 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. Everybody knew it.

With her broad bill the goose pushed the unhatched egg out of the nest, and the entire company watched in disgust while the rat rolled it away. Even Wilbur, who could eat almost anything, was appalled. “Imagine wanting a junky old rotten egg!” he muttered.

“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.”

“What’s that mean?” asked Wilbur.

“It means nobody will be able to live here on account of the smell. A rotten egg is a regular stink bomb.”

“I won’t break it,” snarled Templeton. “I know what I’m doing. I handle stuff like this all the time.”

He disappeared into his tunnel, pushing the goose egg in front of him. He pushed and nudged till he succeeded in rolling it to his lair under the trough.

That afternoon, when the wind had died down and the barnyard was quiet and warm, the grey goose led her seven goslings off the nest and out into the world. Mr.Zuckerman spied them when he came with Wilbur’s supper.

“Well, hello there!” he said, smiling all over. “Let’s see. . . one, two, three, four, five, six, seven. Seven baby geese. Now isn’t that lovely!”

Chapter VII

Bad News

Wilbur liked Charlotte better and better each day. Her campaign against insects seemed sensible and useful. Hardly anybody around the farm had a good word to say for a fly. Flies spent their time pestering others. The cows hated them. The horses detested them. The sheep loathed them. Mr. and Mrs. Zuckerman were always complaining about them, and putting up screens.

Wilbur admired the way Charlotte managed. He was particularly glad that she always put her victim to sleep before eating it.

“It’s real thoughtful of you to do that, Charlotte,” he said.

“Yes,” she replied in her sweet, musical voice, “I always give them an anaesthetic so they won’t feel pain. It’s a little service I throw in.”

As the days went by, Wilbur grew and grew. He ate three big meals a day. He spent long hours lying on his side, half asleep, dreaming pleasant dreams. He enjoyed good health and he gained a lot of weight. One afternoon, when Fern was sitting on her stool, the oldest sheep walked into the barn, and stopped to pay a call on Wilbur.

“Hello!” she said. “Seems to me you’re putting on weight.”

“Yes, I guess I am,” replied Wilbur. “At my age it’s a good idea to keep gaining.”

“Just the same, I don’t envy you,” said the old sheep. “You know why they’re fattening you up, don’t you?”

“No,” said Wilbur.

“Well, I don’t like to spread bad news,” said the sheep, “but they’re fattening you up because they’re going to kill you, that’s why.”

“They’re going to *what?*” screamed Wilbur. Fern grew rigid on her stool.

“Kill you. Turn you into smoked bacon and ham,” continued the old sheep. “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.”

“Mr.Arable?” sobbed Wilbur. “Fern’s father?”

“Certainly. When a pig is to be butchered, everybody helps. I’m an old sheep and I see the same thing, same old business, year after year. Arable arrives with his .22, shoots the…”

“Stop!” screamed Wilbur. “I don’t want to die! Save me, somebody! Save me!” Fern was just about to jump up when a voice was heard.

“Be quiet, Wilbur!” said Charlotte, who had been listening to this awful conversation.

“I can’t be quiet,” screamed Wilbur, racing up and down. “I don’t want to be killed. I don’t want to die. Is it true what the old sheep says, Charlotte? Is it true they are going to kill me when the cold weather comes?”

“Well,” said the spider, plucking thoughtfully at her web, “the old sheep has been around this barn a long time. She has seen many a spring pig come and go. If she says they plan to kill you, I’m sure it’s true. It’s also the dirtiest trick I ever heard of. What people don’t think of!”

Wilbur burst into tears. “I don’t *want* to die,” he moaned. “I want to stay alive, right here in my comfortable manure pile with all my friends. I want to breathe the beautiful air and lie in the beautiful sun.”

“You’re certainly making a beautiful noise,” snapped the old sheep.

“I don’t want to die!” screamed Wilbur, throwing himself to the ground.

“You shall not die,” said Charlotte, briskly.

“What? Really?” cried Wilbur. “Who’s going to save me?”

“I am,” said Charlotte.

“How?” asked Wilbur.

“That remains to be seen. But I am going to save you, and I want you to quiet down immediately. You’re carrying on in a childish way. Stop your crying! I can’t stand hysterics.”

Chapter VIII

A Talk At Home

On Sunday morning Mr. and Mrs. Arable and Fern were sitting at breakfast in the kitchen. Avery had finished and was upstairs looking for his slingshot.

“Did you know that Uncle Homer’s goslings had hatched?” asked Fern.

“How many?” asked Mr. Arable.

“Seven,” replied Fern. “There were eight eggs but one egg didn’t hatch and the goose told Templeton she didn’t want it any more, so he took it away.”

“The goose did what?” asked Mrs.Arable, gazing at her daughter with a queer, worried look.

“Told Templeton she didn’t want the egg any more,” repeated Fern.

“Who is Templeton?” asked Mrs.Arable.

“He’s the rat,” replied Fern. “None of us like him much.”

“Who’s ‘us’?” asked Mr.Arable.

“Oh, everybody in the barn cellar. Wilbur and the sheep and the lambs and the goose and the gander and the goslings and Charlotte and me.”

“Charlotte?” said Mrs.Arable. “Who’s Charlotte?”

“She’s Wilbur’s best friend. She’s terribly clever.”

“What does she look like?” asked Mrs.Arable.

“Well-l,” said Fern, thoughtfully, “she has eight legs. All spiders do, I guess.”

“Charlotte is a spider?” asked Fern’s mother.

Fern nodded. “A big grey one. She has a web across the top of Wilbur’s doorway. She catches flies and sucks their blood. Wilbur adores her.”

“Does he really?” said Mrs.Arable, rather vaguely. She was staring at Fern with a worried expression on her face.

“Oh, yes, Wilbur adores Charlotte,” said Fern. “Do you know what Charlotte said when the goslings hatched?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea,” said Mr.Arable. “Tell us.”

“Well, when the first gosling stuck its little head out from under the goose, I was sitting on my stool in the corner and Charlotte was on her web. She made a speech. She said: ‘I am sure that every one of us here in the barn cellar will be gratified to learn that after four weeks of unremitting effort and patience on the part of the goose, she now has something to show for it.’ Don’t you think that was a pleasant thing for her to say?”

“Yes, I do,” said Mrs.Arable. “And now, Fern, it’s time to get ready for Sunday School. And tell Avery to get ready. And this afternoon you can tell me more about what goes on in Uncle Homer’s barn. Aren’t you spending quite a lot of time there? You go there almost every afternoon, don’t you?”

“I like it there,” replied Fern. She wiped her mouth and ran upstairs. After she had left the room, Mrs.Arable spoke in a low voice to her husband.

“I worry about Fern,” she said. “Did you hear the way she rambled on about the animals, pretending that they talked?”

Mr. Arable chuckled. “Maybe they do talk,” he said. “I’ve sometimes wondered. At any rate, don’t worry about Fern—she’s just got a lively imagination. Kids think they hear all sorts of things.”

“Just the same, I *do* worry about her,” replied Mrs. Arable. “I think I shall ask Dr. Dorian about her the next time I see him. He loves Fern almost as much as we do, and I want him to know how queerly she is acting about that pig and everything. I don’t think it’s normal. You know perfectly well animals don’t talk.”

Mr. Arable grinned. “Maybe our ears aren’t as sharp as Fern’s,” he said.

Chapter IX

Wilbur’s Boast

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. Charlotte liked to do her weaving during the late afternoon, and Fern liked to sit nearby and watch. One afternoon she heard a most interesting conversation and witnessed a strange event.

“You have awfully hairy legs, Charlotte,” said Wilbur, as the spider busily worked at her task.

“My legs are hairy for a good reason,” replied Charlotte. “Furthermore, each leg of mine has seven sections—the coxa, the trochanter, the femur, the patella, the tibia, the metatarsus, and the tarsus.”

Wilbur sat bolt upright. “You’re kidding,” he said.

“No, I’m not, either.”

“Say those names again, I didn’t catch them the first time.”

“Coxa, trochanter, femur, patella, tibia, metatarsus, and tarsus.”

“Goodness!” said Wilbur, looking down at his own chubby legs. “I don’t think *my* legs have seven sections.”

“Well,” said Charlotte, “you and I lead different lives. You don’t have to spin a web. That takes real leg work.

“I could spin a web if I tried,” said Wilbur, boasting. “I’ve just never tried.”

“Let’s see you do it,” said Charlotte. Fern chuckled softly, and her eyes grew wide with love for the pig.

“O.K.,” replied Wilbur. “You coach me and I’ll spin one. It must be a lot of fun to spin a web. How do I start?”

“Take a deep breath!” said Charlotte, smiling. Wilbur breathed deeply. “Now climb to the highest place you can get to, like this.” Charlotte raced up to the top of the doorway. Wilbur scrambled to the top of the manure pile.

“Very good!” said Charlotte. “Now make an attachment with your spinnerets, hurl yourself into space, and let out a dragline as you go down!”

Wilbur hesitated a moment, then jumped out into the air. He glanced hastily behind to see if a piece of rope was following him to check his fall, but nothing seemed to be happening in his rear, and the next thing he knew he landed with a thump. “Ooomp!” he grunted.

Charlotte laughed so hard her web began to sway.

“What did I do wrong?” asked the pig, when he recovered from his bump.

“Nothing,” said Charlotte. “It was a nice try.”

“I think I’ll try again,” said Wilbur, cheerfully. “I believe what I need is a little piece of string to hold me.”

The pig walked out to his yard. “You there, Templeton?” he called. The rat poked his head out from under the trough.

“Got a little piece of string I could borrow?” asked Wilbur. “I need it to spin a web.”

“Yes, indeed,” replied Templeton, who saved string. “No trouble at all. Anything to oblige.” He crept down into his hole, pushed the goose egg out of the way, and returned with an old piece of dirty white string. Wilbur examined it.

“That’s just the thing,” he said. “Tie one end to my tail, will you, Templeton?”

Wilbur crouched low, with his thin, curly tail toward the rat. Templeton seized the string, passed it around the end of the pig’s tail, and tied two half hitches. Charlotte watched in delight. Like Fern, she was truly fond of Wilbur,

whose smelly pen and stale food attracted the flies that she needed, and she was proud to see that he was not a quitter and was willing to try again to spin a web.

While the rat and the spider and the little girl watched, Wilbur climbed again to the top of the manure pile, full of energy and hope.

“Everybody watch!” he cried. And summoning all his strength, he threw himself into the air, headfirst. The string trailed behind him. But as he had neglected to fasten the other end to anything, it didn’t really do any good, and Wilbur landed with a thud, crushed and hurt. Tears came to his eyes. Templeton grinned. Charlotte just sat quietly. After a bit she spoke.

“You can’t spin a web, Wilbur, and I advise you to put the idea out of your mind. You lack two things needed for spinning a web.”

“What are they?” asked Wilbur, sadly.

“You lack a set of spinnerets, and you lack knowhow. But cheer up, you don’t need a web. Zuckerman supplies you with three big meals a day. Why should you worry about trapping food?”

Wilbur sighed. “You’re ever so much cleverer and brighter than I am, Charlotte. I guess I was just trying to show off. Serves me right.”

Templeton untied his string and took it back to his home. Charlotte returned to her weaving.

“You needn’t feel too badly, Wilbur,” she said. “Not many creatures can spin webs. Even men aren’t as good at it as spiders, although they *think* they’re pretty good, and they’ll *try* anything. Did you ever hear of the Queensborough Bridge?”

Wilbur shook his head. “It is a web?”

“Sort of,” replied Charlotte. “But do you know how long it took men to build it? Eight whole years. My goodness, I would have starved to death waiting that long. I can make a web in a single evening.”

“What do people catch in the Queensborough Bridge—bugs?” asked Wilbur.

“No,” said Charlotte. “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.”

“What does sedentary mean?” asked Wilbur.

“Means I sit still a good part of the time and don’t go wandering all over creation. I know a good thing when I see it, and my web is a good thing. I stay put and wait for what comes. Gives me a chance to think.”

“Well, I’m sort of sedentary myself, I guess,” said the pig. “I have to hang around here whether I want to or not. You know where I’d really like to be this evening?”

“Where?”

“In a forest looking for beechnuts and truffles and delectable roots, pushing leaves aside with my wonderful strong nose, searching and sniffing along the ground, smelling, smelling, smelling…”

“You smell just the way you are,” remarked a lamb who had just walked in. “I can smell you from here. You’re the smelliest creature in the place.”

Wilbur hung his head. His eyes grew wet with tears. Charlotte noticed his embarrassment and she spoke sharply to the lamb.

“Let Wilbur alone!” she said. “He has a perfect right to smell, considering his surroundings. You’re no bundle of sweet peas yourself. Furthermore, you are interrupting a very pleasant conversation. What were we talking about, Wilbur, when we were so rudely interrupted?”

“Oh, I don’t remember,” said Wilbur. “It doesn’t make any difference. Let’s not talk any more for a while, Charlotte. I’m getting sleepy. You go ahead and

finish fixing your web and I'll just lie here and watch you. It's a lovely evening." Wilbur stretched out on his side.

Twilight settled over Zuckerman's barn, and a feeling of peace. Fern knew it was almost suppertime but she couldn't bear to leave. Swallows passed on silent wings, in and out of the doorways, bringing food to their young ones. From across the road a bird sang "Whippoorwill, whippoorwill!" Lurvy sat down under an apple tree and lit his pipe; the animals sniffed the familiar smell of strong tobacco. Wilbur heard the trill of the tree toad and the occasional slamming of the kitchen door. All these sounds made him feel comfortable and happy, for he loved life and loved to be a part of the world on a summer evening. But as he lay there he remembered what the old sheep had told him. The thought of death came to him and he began to tremble with fear.

"Charlotte?" he said, softly.

"Yes, Wilbur?"

"I don't want to die."

"Of course you don't," said Charlotte in a comforting voice.

"I just love it here in the barn," said Wilbur. "I love everything about this place."

"Of course you do," said Charlotte. "We all do."

The goose appeared, followed by her seven goslings. They thrust their little necks out and kept up a musical whistling, like a tiny troupe of pipers. Wilbur listened to the sound with love in his heart.

"Charlotte?" he said.

"Yes?" said the spider.

"Were you serious when you promised you would keep them from killing me?"

"I was never more serious in my life. I am not going to let you die, Wilbur."

“How are you going to save me?” asked Wilbur, whose curiosity was very strong on this point.

“Well,” said Charlotte, vaguely, “I don’t really know. But I’m working on a plan.”

“That’s wonderful,” said Wilbur. “How is the plan coming, Charlotte? Have you got very far with it? Is it coming along pretty well?” Wilbur was trembling again, but Charlotte was cool and collected.

“Oh, it’s coming all right,” she said, lightly. “The plan is still in its early stages and hasn’t completely shaped up yet, but I’m working on it.”

“When do you work on it?” begged Wilbur.

“When I’m hanging head-down at the top of my web. That’s when I do my thinking, because then all the blood is in my head.”

“I’d be only too glad to help in any way I can.”

“Oh, I’ll work it out alone,” said Charlotte. “I can think better if I think alone.”

“All right,” said Wilbur. “But don’t fail to let me know if there’s anything I can do to help, no matter how slight.”

“Well,” replied Charlotte, “you must try to build yourself up. I want you to get plenty of sleep, and stop worrying. Never hurry and never worry! Chew your food thoroughly and eat every bit of it, except you must leave just enough for Templeton. Gain weight and stay well—that’s the way you can help. Keep fit, and don’t lose your nerve. Do you think you understand?”

“Yes, I understand,” said Wilbur.

“Go along to bed, then,” said Charlotte. “Sleep is important.”

Wilbur trotted over to the darkest corner of his pen and threw himself down. He closed his eyes. In another minute he spoke.

“Charlotte?” he said.

“Yes, Wilbur?”

“May I go out to my trough and see if I left any of my supper? I think I left just a tiny bit of mashed potato.”

“Very well,” said Charlotte. “But I want you in bed again without delay.”

Wilbur started to race out to his yard.

“Slowly, slowly!” said Charlotte. “Never hurry and never worry!”

Wilbur checked himself and crept slowly to his trough. He found a bit of potato, chewed it carefully, swallowed it, and walked back to bed. He closed his eyes and was silent for a while.

“Charlotte?” he said, in a whisper.

“Yes””

“May I get a drink of milk? I think there are a few drops of milk left in my trough.”

“No, the trough is dry, and I want you to go to sleep. No more talking! Close your eyes and go to sleep!”

Wilbur shut his eyes. Fern got up from her stool and started for home, her mind full of everything she had seen and heard.

“Good night, Charlotte! Said Wilbur.

“Good night, Wilbur!”

There was a pause.

“Good night, Charlotte!”

“Good night, Wilbur!”

“Good night,”

“Good night,”

Chapter X

An Explosion

Day after day the spider waited, head-down, for an idea to come to her. Hour by hour she sat motionless, deep in thought. Having promised Wilbur that she would save his life, she was determined to keep her promise.

Charlotte was naturally patient. She knew from experience that if she waited long enough, a fly would come to her web; and she felt sure that if she thought long enough about Wilbur's problem, an idea would come to her mind.

Finally, one morning toward the middle of July, the idea came. "Why, how perfectly simple!" she said to herself. "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."

Wilbur walked into his yard just at that moment.

"What are you thinking about, Charlotte?" he asked.

"I was just thinking," said the spider, "that people are very gullible."

"What does 'gullible' mean?"

"Easy to fool," said Charlotte.

"That's a mercy," replied Wilbur, and he lay down in the shade of his fence and went fast asleep. The spider, however, stayed wide awake, gazing affectionately at him and making plans for his future. Summer was half gone. She knew she didn't have much time.

That morning, just as Wilbur fell asleep, Avery Arable wandered into the Zuckerman's front yard, followed by Fern. Avery carried a live frog in his hand. Fern had a crown of daisies in her hair. The children ran for the kitchen.

"Just in time for a piece of blueberry pie," said Mrs.Zuckerman.

"Look at my frog!" said Avery, placing the frog on the drainboard and holding out his hand for pie.

"Take that thing out of here!" said Mrs.Zuckerman.

“He’s hot,” said Fern. “He’s almost dead, that frog.”

“He is not,” said Avery. “He lets me scratch him between the eyes.” The frog jumped and landed in Mrs.Zuckerman’s dishpan full of soapy water.

“You’re getting your pie on you,” said Fern. “Can I look for eggs in the henhouse, Aunt Edith?”

“Run outdoors, both of you! And don’t bother the hens!”

“It’s getting all over everything,” shouted Fern. “His pie is all over his front.”

“Come on, frog!” cried Avery. He scooped up his frog. The frog kicked, splashing soapy water onto the blueberry pie.

“Another crisis!” groaned Fern.

“Let’s swing in the swing!” said Avery.

The children ran to the barn.

Mr.Zuckerman had the best swing in the country. It was a single long piece of heavy rope tied to the beam over the north doorway. At the bottom end of the rope was a fat knot to sit on. It was arranged so that you could swing without being pushed. You climbed a ladder to the hayloft. Then, holding the rope, you stood at the edge and looked down, and were scared and dizzy. Then you straddled the knot, so that it acted as a seat. Then you got up all your nerve, took a deep breath, and jumped. For a second you seemed to be falling to the barn floor far below, but then suddenly the rope would begin to catch you, and you would sail through the barn door going a mile a minute, with the wind whistling in your eyes and ears and hair. Then you would zoom upward into the sky, and look up at the clouds, and the rope would twist and you would twist and turn with the rope. Then you would drop down, down, down out of the sky and come sailing back into the barn almost into the hayloft, then sail out again (not quite so far this time), then in again (not quite so high), then out again, then in again, then out, then in; and then you’d jump off and fall down and let somebody else try it.

Mothers for miles around worried about Zuckerman's swing. They feared some child would fall off. But no child ever did. Children almost always hang onto things tighter than their parents think they will.

Avery put the frog in his pocket and climbed to the hayloft. "The last time I swang in this swing, I almost crashed into a barn swallow," he yelled.

"Take that frog out!" ordered Fern.

Avery straddled the rope and jumped. He sailed out through the door, frog and all, and into the sky, frog and all. Then he sailed back into the barn.

"Your tongue is purple!" screamed Fern.

"So is yours!" cried Avery, sailing out again with the frog.

"I have hay inside my dress! It itches!" called Fern.

"Scratch it!" yelled Avery, as he sailed back.

"It's my turn," said Fern. "Jump off!"

"Fern's got the itch!" sang Avery.

When he jumped off, he threw the swing up to his sister. She shut her eyes tight and jumped. She felt the dizzy drop, then the supporting lift of the swing. When she opened her eyes she was looking up into the blue sky and was about to fly back through the door.

They took turns for an hour.

When the children grew tired of swinging, they went down toward the pasture and picked wild raspberries and ate them. Their tongues turned from purple to red. Fern bit into a raspberry that had a bad-tasting bug inside it, and got discouraged. Avery found an empty candy box and put his frog in it. The frog seemed tired after his morning in the swing. The children walked slowly up toward the barn. They, too, were tired and hardly had energy enough to walk.

"Let's build a tree house," suggested Avery. "I want to live in a tree, with my frog."

"I'm going to visit Wilbur," Fern announced.

They climbed the fence into the lane and walked lazily toward the pigpen. Wilbur heard them coming and got up.

Avery noticed the spider web, and, coming closer, he saw Charlotte.

“Hey, look at that big spider!” he said. “It’s tremenjus.”

“Leave it alone!” commanded Fern. “You’ve got a frog—isn’t that enough?”

“That’s a fine spider and I’m going to capture it,” said Avery. He took the cover off the candy box. Then he picked up a stick. “I’m going to knock that ol’ spider into this box,” he said.

Wilbur’s heart almost stopped when he saw what was going on. This might be the end of Charlotte if the boy succeeded in catching her.

“You stop it, Avery!” cried Fern.

Avery put one leg over the fence of the pigpen. He was just about to raise his stick to hit Charlotte when he lost his balance. He swayed and toppled and landed on the edge of Wilbur’s trough. The trough tipped up and then came down with a slap. The goose egg was right underneath. There was a dull explosion as the egg broke, and then a horrible smell.

Fern screamed. Avery jumped to his feet. The air was filled with the terrible gases and smells from the rotten egg. Templeton, who had been resting in his home, scuttled away into the barn.

“Good *night*!” screamed Avery. “Good *night*! What a stink! Let’s get out of here!”

Fern was crying. She held her nose and ran toward the house. Avery ran after her, holding his nose. Charlotte felt greatly relieved to see him go. It had been a narrow escape.

Later on that morning, the animals came up from the pasture—the sheep, the lambs, the gander, the goose, and the seven goslings. There were many complaints about the awful smell, and Wilbur had to tell the story over and over again, of how the Arable boy had tried to capture Charlotte, and how the smell of

the broken egg drove him away just in time. “It was that rotten goose egg that saved Charlotte’s life,” said Wilbur.

The goose was proud of her share in the adventure. “I’m delighted that the egg never hatched,” she gabbled.

Templeton, of course, was miserable over the loss of his beloved egg. But he couldn’t resist boasting. “It pays to save things,” he said in his surly voice. “A rat never knows when something is going to come in handy. I never throw anything away.”

“Well,” said one of the lambs, “this whole business is all well and good for Charlotte, but what about the rest of us? The smell is unbearable. Who wants to live in a barn that is perfumed with rotten egg?”

“Don’t worry, you’ll get used to it,” said Templeton. He sat up and pulled wisely at his long whiskers, then crept away to pay a visit to the dump.

When Lurvy showed up at lunchtime carrying a pail of food for Wilbur, he stopped short a few paces from the pigpen. He sniffed the air and made a face.

“What in thunder?” he said. Setting the pail down, he picked up the stick that Avery had dropped and pried the trough up. “Rats!” he said. “Fhew! I might a’ known a rat would make a nest under this trough. How I hate a rat!”

And Lurvy dragged Wilbur’s trough across the yard and kicked some dirt into the rat’s nest, burying the broken egg and all Templeton’s other possessions. Then he picked up the pail. Wilbur stood in the trough, drooling with hunger. Lurvy poured. The slops ran creamily down around the pig’s eyes and ears. Wilbur grunted. He gulped and sucked, and sucked and gulped, making swishing and swooshing noises, anxious to get everything at once. It was a delicious meal—skim milk, wheat middlings, leftover pancakes, half a doughnut, the rind of a summer squash, two pieces of stale toast, a third of a gingersnap, a fish tail, one orange peel, several noodles from a noodle soup, the scum off a cup of cocoa,

an ancient jelly roll, a strip of paper from the lining of the garbage pail, and a spoonful of raspberry jello.

Wilbur ate heartily. He planned to leave half a noodle and a few drops of milk for Templeton. Then he remembered that the rat had been useful in saving Charlotte's life, and that Charlotte was trying to save *his* life. So he left a whole noodle, instead of a half.

Now that the broken egg was buried, the air cleared and the barn smelled good again. The afternoon passed, and evening came. Shadows lengthened. The cool and kindly breath of evening entered through doors and windows. Astride her web, Charlotte sat moodily eating a horsefly and thinking about the future. After a while she bestirred herself.

She descended to the center of the web and there she began to cut some of her lines. She worked slowly but steadily while the other creatures drowsed. None of the others, not even the goose, noticed that she was at work. Deep in his soft bed, Wilbur snoozed. Over in their favorite corner, the goslings whistled a night song.

Charlotte tore quite a section out of her web, leaving an open space in the middle. Then she started weaving something to take the place of the threads she had removed. When Templeton got back from the dump, around midnight, the spider was still at work.

Chapter XI

The Miracle

The next day was foggy. Everything on the farm was dripping wet. The grass looked like a magic carpet. The asparagus patch looked like a silver forest.

On foggy mornings, Charlotte's web was truly a thing of beauty. This morning each thin strand was decorated with dozens of tiny beads of water. The web glistened in the light and made a pattern of loveliness and mystery, like a delicate veil. Even Lurvy, who wasn't particularly interested in beauty, noticed the web when he came with the pig's breakfast. He noted how clearly it showed up and he noted how big and carefully built it was. And then he took another look and he saw something that made him set his pail down. There, in the center of the web, neatly woven in block letters, was a message. It said:

SOME PIG!

Lurvy felt weak. He brushed his hand across his eyes and stared harder at Charlotte's web.

"I'm seeing things," he whispered. He dropped to his knees and uttered a short prayer. Then, forgetting all about Wilbur's breakfast, he walked back to the house and called Mr.Zuckerman.

"I think you'd better come down to the pigpen," he said.

"What's the trouble?" asked Mr.Zuckerman. "Anything wrong with the pig?"

"N-not exactly," said Lurvy. "Come and see for yourself."

The two men walked silently down to Wilbur's yard. Lurvy pointed to the spider's web. "Do you see what I see?" he asked.

Zuckerman stared at the writing on the web. Then he murmured the words "Some Pig." Then he looked at Lurvy. Then they both began to tremble. Charlotte,

sleepy after her night's exertions, smiled as she watched. Wilbur came and stood directly under the web.

"Some pig!" muttered Lurvy in a low voice.

"Some pig!" whispered Mr.Zuckerman. They stared and stared for a long time at Wilbur. Then they stared at Charlotte.

"You don't suppose that that spider …" began Mr.Zuckerman—but he shook his head and didn't finish the sentence. Instead, he walked solemnly back up to the house and spoke to his wife. "Edith, something has happened," he said, in a weak voice. He went into the living room and sat down, and Mrs.Zuckerman followed.

"I've got something to tell you, Edith," he said. "You better sit down."

Mrs.Zuckerman sank into a chair. She looked pale and frightened.

"Edith," he said, trying to keep his voice steady, "I think you had best be told that we have a very unusual pig."

A look of complete bewilderment came over Mrs.Zuckerman's face. "Homer Zuckerman, what in the world are you talking about?" she said.

"This is a very serious thing, Edith," he replied. "Our pig is completely out of the ordinary."

"What's unusual about the pig?" asked Mrs.Zuckerman, who was beginning to recover from her scare.

"Well, I don't really know yet," said Mr.Zuckerman. "But we have received a sign, Edith—a mysterious sign. A miracle has happened on this farm. There is a large spider's web in the doorway of the barn cellar, right over the pigpen, and when Lurvy went to feed the pig this morning, he noticed the web because it was foggy, and you know how a spider's web looks very distinct in a fog. And right spang in the middle of the web there were the words 'Some Pig.' The words were woven right into the web. They were actually part of the web, Edith. I know, because I have been down there and seen them. It says, 'Some Pig,' just as clear

as clear can be. There can be no mistake about it. A miracle has happened and a sign has occurred here on earth, right on our farm, and we have no ordinary pig."

"Well," said Mrs.Zuckerman, "it seems to me you're a little off. It seems to me we have no ordinary *spider.*"

"Oh, no," said Zuckerman. "It's the pig that's unusual. It says so, right there in the middle of the web."

"Maybe so," said Mrs.Zuckerman. "Just the same, I intend to have a look at that spider."

"It's just a common grey spider," said Zuckerman.

They got up, and together they walked down to Wilbur's yard. "You see, Edith? It's just a common grey spider."

Wilbur was pleased to receive so much attention. Lurvy was still standing there, and Mr. and Mrs.Zuckerman, all three, stood for about an hour, reading the words, on the web over and over, and watching Wilbur.

Charlotte was delighted with the way her trick was working. She sat without moving a muscle, and listened to the conversation of the people. When a small fly blundered into the web, just beyond the word "pig," Charlotte dropped quickly down, rolled the fly up, and carried it out of the way.

After a while the fog lifted. The web dried off and the words didn't show up so plainly. The Zuckermans and Lurvy walked back to the house. Just before they left the pigpen, Mr.Zuckerman took one last look at Wilbur.

"You know," he said, in an important voice, "I've thought all along that that pig of ours was an extra good one. He's a solid pig. That pig is as solid as they come. You notice how solid he is around the shoulders, Lurvy?"

"Sure. Sure I do," said Lurvy. "I've always noticed that pig. He's quite a pig."

"He's long, and he's smooth," said Zuckerman.

“That’s right,” agreed Lurvy. “He’s as smooth as they come. He’s some pig.”

When Mr.Zuckerman got back to the house, he took off his work clothes and put on his best suit. Then he got into his car and drove to the minister’s house. He stayed for an hour and explained to the minister that a miracle had happened on the farm.

“So far,” said Zuckerman, “only four people on earth know about this miracle—myself, my wife Edith, my hired man Lurvy, and you.”

“Don’t tell anybody else,” said the minister. “We don’t know what it means yet, but perhaps if I give thought to it, I can explain it in my sermon next Sunday. There can be no doubt that you have a most unusual pig. I intend to speak about it in my sermon and point out the fact that this community has been visited with a wondrous animal. By the way, does the pig have a name?”

“Why, yes,” said Mr.Zuckerman. “My little niece calls him Wilbur. She’s a rather queer child—full of notions. She raised the pig on a bottle and I bought him from her when he was a month old.”

He shook hands with the minister, and left.

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 that the Zuckermans had a wondrous pig. People came from miles around to look at Wilbur and to read the words on Charlotte’s web. The Zuckermans’ driveway was full of cars and trucks from morning till night—Fords and Chevvies and Buick roadmasters and GMC pickups and Plymouths and Studebakers and Packards and De Sotos with gyromatic transmissions and Oldsmobiles with racket engines and Jeep station wagons and Pontiacs. The news of the wonderful pig spread clear up into the hills, and farmers came rattling down in buggies and buckboards, to stand hour after hour

at Wilbur's pen admiring the miraculous animal. All said they had never seen such a pig before in their lives.

When Fern told her mother that Avery had tried to hit the Zuckermans' spider with a stick, Mrs.Arable was so shocked that she sent Avery to bed without any supper, as punishment.

In the days that followed, Mr.Zuckerman was so busy entertaining visitors that he neglected his farm work. He wore his good clothes all the time now—got right into them when he got up in the morning. Mrs.Zuckerman prepared special meals for Wilbur. Lurvy shaved and got a haircut; and his principal farm duty was to feed the pig while people looked on.

Mr.Zuckerman ordered Lurvy to increase Wilbur's feedings from three meals a day to four meals a day. The Zuckermans were so busy with visitors they forgot about other things on the farm. The blackberries got ripe, and Mrs.Zuckerman failed to put up any blackberry jam. The corn needed hoeing, and Lurvy didn't find time to hoe it.

On Sunday the church was full. The minister explained the miracle. He said that the words on the spider's web proved that human beings must always be on the watch for the coming of wonders.

All in all, the Zuckermans' pigpen was the center of attraction. Fern was happy, for she felt that Charlotte's trick was working and that Wilbur's life would be saved. But she found that the barn was not nearly as pleasant—too many people. She liked it better when she could be all alone with her friends the animals.

Chapter XII

A Meeting

One evening, a few days after the writing had appeared in Charlotte's web, the spider called a meeting of all the animals in the barn cellar.

"I shall begin by calling the roll. Wilbur?"

"Here!" said the pig.

"Gander?"

"Here, here, here!" said the gander.

"You sound like three ganders," muttered Charlotte. "Why can't you just say 'here'? Why do you have to repeat everything?"

"It's my idio-idio-idiosyncrasy," replied the gander.

"Goose?" said Charlotte.

"Here, here, here!" said the goose. Charlotte glared at her.

"Goslings, one through seven?"

"Bee-bee-bee!" "Bee-bee-bee!" "Bee-bee-bee!" "Bee-bee-bee!" "Bee-bee-bee!" "Bee-bee-bee!" "Bee-bee-bee!" said the goslings.

"This is getting to be quite a meeting," said Charlotte. "Anybody would think we had three ganders, three geese, and twenty-one goslings. Sheep?"

"He-aa-aa!" answered the sheep all together.

"Lambs?"

"He-aa-aa!" answered the lambs all together.

"Templeton?"

No answer.

"Templeton?"

No answer.

"Well, we are all here except the rat," said Charlotte. "I guess we can proceed without him. Now, all of you must have noticed what's been going on

around here the last few days. The message I wrote in my web, praising Wilbur, has been received. The Zuckermans have fallen for it, and so has everybody else. Zuckerman thinks Wilbur is an unusual pig, and therefore he won't want to kill him and eat him. I dare say my trick will work and Wilbur's life can be saved.

"Hurray!" cried everybody.

"Thank you very much," said Charlotte. "Now I called this meeting in order to get suggestions. I need new ideas for the web. People are already getting sick of reading the words 'Some Pig!' If anybody can think of another message, or remark, I'll be glad to weave it into the web. Any suggestions for a new slogan?"

"How about 'Pig Supreme'?" asked one of the lambs.

"No good," said Charlotte. "It sounds like a rich dessert."

"How about 'Terrific, terrific, terrific'?" asked the goose.

"Cut that down to one 'terrific' and it will do very nicely," said Charlotte. "I think 'terrific' might impress Zuckerman."

"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. Does anybody here know how to spell 'terrific'?"

"I think," said the gander, "it's tee double ee double rr double rr double eye double ff double eye double see see see see see."

"What kind of an acrobat do you think I am?" said Charlotte in disgust. "I would have to have St. Vitus's Dance to weave a word like that into my web."

"Sorry, sorry, sorry," said the gander.

Then the oldest sheep spoke up. "I agree that there should be something new written in the web if Wilbur's life is to be saved. And if Charlotte needs help in finding words, I think she can get it from our friend Templeton. The rat visits the dump regularly and has access to old magazines. He can tear out bits of

advertisements and bring them up here to the barn cellar, so that Charlotte can have something to copy."

"Good idea," said Charlotte. "But I'm not sure Templeton will be willing to help. You know how he is—always looking out for himself, never thinking of the other fellow."

"I bet I can get him to help," said the old sheep. "I'll appeal to his baser instincts, of which he has plenty. Here he comes now. Everybody keep quiet while I put the matter up to him!"

The rat entered the barn the way he always did—creeping along close to the wall.

"What's up?" he asked, seeing the animals assembled.

"We're holding a directors' meeting," replied the old sheep.

"Well, break it up!" said Templeton. "Meetings bore me." And the rat began to climb a rope that hung against the wall.

"Look," said the old sheep, "next time you go to the dump, Templeton, bring back a clipping from a magazine. Charlotte needs new ideas so she can write messages in her web and save Wilbur's life."

"Let him die," said the rat. "I should worry."

"You'll worry all right when next winter comes," said the sheep. "You'll worry all right on a zero morning next January when Wilbur is dead and nobody comes down here with a nice pail of warm slops to pour into the trough. Wilbur's leftover food is your chief source of supply, Templeton. *You* know that. Wilbur's food is your food; therefore Wilbur's destiny and your destiny are closely linked. If Wilbur is killed and his trough stands empty day after day, you'll grow so thin we can look right through your stomach and see objects on the other side."

Templeton's whiskers quivered.

"Maybe you're right," he said gruffly. "I'm making a trip to the dump tomorrow afternoon. I'll bring back a magazine clipping if I can find one."

“Thanks,” said Charlotte. “The meeting is now adjourned. I have a busy evening ahead of me. I’ve got to tear my web apart and write ‘Terrific.’”

Wilbur blushed. “But I’m *not* terrific, Charlotte. I’m just about average for a pig.”

“You’re terrific as far as *I’m* concerned,” replied Charlotte, sweetly, “and that’s what counts. You’re my best friend, and *I* think you’re sensational. Now stop arguing and go get some sleep!”

Chapter XIII

Good Progress

Far into the night, while the other creatures slept, Charlotte worked on her web. First she ripped out a few of the orb lines near the center. She left the radial lines alone, as they were needed for support. As she worked, her eight legs were a great help to her. So were her teeth. She loved to weave and she was an expert at it. When she was finished ripping things out, her web looked something like this:

A spider can produce several kinds of thread. She uses a dry, tough thread for foundation lines, and she uses a sticky thread for snare lines—the ones that catch and hold insects. Charlotte decided to use her dry thread for writing the new message.

“If I write the word ‘Terrific’ with sticky thread,” she thought, “every bug that comes along will get stuck in it and spoil the effect.”

“Now let’s see, the first letter is T.”

Charlotte climbed to a point at the top of the left hand side of the web. Swinging her spinnerets into position, she attached her thread and then dropped down. As she dropped, her spinning tubes went into action and she let out thread.

At the bottom, she attached the thread. This formed the upright part of the letter T. Charlotte was not satisfied, however. She climbed up and made another attachment, right next to the first. Then she carried the line down, so that she had a double line instead of a single line. “It will show up better if I make the whole thing with double lines.”

She climbed back up, moved over about an inch to the left, touched her spinnerets to the web, and then carried a line across to the right, forming the top of the T. She repated this, making it double. Her eight legs were very busy helping.

“Now for the E!”

Charlotte got so interested in her work, she began to talk to herself, as though to cheer herself on. If you had been sitting quietly in the barn cellar that evening, you would have heard something like this:

“Now for the R! Up we go! Attach! Descend! Pay out line! Whoa! Attach! Good! Up you go! Repeat! Attach! Descend! Pay out line. Whoa, girl! Steady now! Attach! Climb! Attach! Over to the right! Pay out line! Attach! Now right and down and swing that loop and around and around! Now in to the left! Attach! Climb! Repeat! O.K.! Easy, keep those lines together! Now, then, out and down for the leg of the R! Pay out line! Whoa! Attach! Ascend! Repeat! Good girl!”

And so, talking to herself, the spider worked at her difficult task. When it was completed, she felt hungry. She ate a small bug that she had been saving. Then she slept.

Next morning, Wilbur arose and stood beneath the web. He breathed the morning air into his lungs. Drops of dew, catching the sun, made the web stand out clearly. When Lurvy arrived with breakfast, there was the handsome pig, and over him, woven neatly in block letters, was the word TERRIFIC. Another miracle.

Lurvy rushed and called Mr.Zuckerman. Mr.Zuckerman rushed and called Mrs.Zuckerman. Mrs.Zuckerman ran to the phone and called the Arables. The

Arables climbed into their truck and hurried over. Everybody stood at the pigpen and stared at the web and read the word, over and over, while Wilbur, who really *felt* terrific, stood quietly swelling out his chest and swinging his snout from side to side.

"Terrific!" breathed Zuckerman, in joyful admiration. "Edith, you better phone the reporter on the *Weekly Chronicle* and tell him what has happened. He will want to know about this. He may want to bring a photographer. There isn't a pig in the whole state that is as terrific as our pig."

The news spread. People who had journeyed to see Wilbur when he was "some pig" came back again to see him now that he was "terrific."

That afternoon, when Mr.Zuckerman went to milk the cows and clean out the tie-ups, he was still thinking about what a wondrous pig he owned.

"Lurvy! He called. "There is to be no more cow manure thrown down into that pigpen. I have a terrific pig. I want that pig to have clean, bright straw every day for his bedding. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," said Lurvy.

"Furthermore," said Mr.Zuckerman, "I want you to start building a crate for Wilbur. I have decided to take the pig to the County Fair on September sixth. Make the crate large and paint it green with gold letters!"

"What will the letters say?" asked Lurvy.

"The should say *Zuckerman's Famous Pig*."

Lurvy picked up a pitchfork and walked away to get some clean straw. Having such an important pig was going to mean plenty of extra work, he could see that.

Below the apple orchard, at the end of a path, was the dump where Mr.Zuckerman threw all sorts of trash and stuff that nobody wanted any more. Here, in a small clearing hidden by young alders and wild raspberry bushes, was an astonishing pile of old bottles and empty tin cans and dirty rags and bits of

metal and broken bottles and broken hinges and broken springs and dead batteries and last month's magazines and old discarded dishmops and tattered overalls and rusty spikes and leaky pails and forgotten stoppers and useless junk of all kinds, including a wrong-size crank for a broken ice-cream freezer.

Templeton knew the dump and liked it, there were good hiding places there—excellent cover for a rat. And there was usually a tin can with food still clinging to the inside.

Templeton was down there now, rummaging around. When he returned to the barn, he carried in his mouth an advertisement he had torn from a crumpled magazine.

"How's this?" he asked, showing the ad to Charlotte. "It says 'Crunchy.' 'Crunchy' would be a good word to write in your web."

"Just the wrong idea," replied Charlotte. "Couldn't be worse. We don't want Zuckerman to think Wilbur is crunchy. He might start thinking about crisp, crunchy bacon and tasty ham. That would put ideas into his head. We must advertise Wilbur's noble qualities, not his tastiness. Go get another word, please, Templeton!"

The rat looked disgusted. But he sneaked away to the dump and was back in a while with a strip of cotton cloth. "How's this?" he asked. "It's a label off an old shirt."

Charlotte examined the label. It said PRE-SHRUNK.

"I'm sorry, Templeton," she said, "but 'Pre-shrunk' is out of the question. We want Zuckerman to think Wilbur is nicely filled out, not all shrunk up. I'll have to ask you to try again."

"What do you think I am, a messenger boy?" grumbled the rat. "I'm not going to spend all my time chasing down to the dump after advertising material."

"Just once more—please!" said Charlotte.

“I’ll tell you what I’ll do,” said Templeton. “I know where there’s a package of soap flakes in the woodshed. It has writing on it. I’ll bring you a piece of the package.

He climbed the rope that hung on the wall and disappeared through a hole in the ceiling. When he came back he had a strip of blue-and-white cardboard in his teeth.

“There!” he said, triumphantly. “How’s that?”

Charlotte read the words: “With New Radiant Action.”

“What does it mean?” asked Charlotte, who had never used any soap flakes in her life.

“How should I know?” said Templeton. “You asked for words and I brought them. I suppose the next thing you’ll want me to fetch is a dictionary.”

Together they studied the soap ad. “With new radiant action,’” repeated Charlotte, slowly. “Wilbur!” she called.

Wilbur, who was asleep in the straw, jumped up.

“Run around!” commanded Charlotte. “I want to see you in action, to see if you are radiant.”

Wilbur raced to the end of his yard.

“Now back again, faster!” said Charlotte.

Wilbur galloped back. His skin shone. His tail had a fine, tight curl in it.

“Jump into the air!” cried Charlotte.

Wilbur jumped as high as he could.

“Keep your knees straight and touch the ground with your ears!” called Charlotte.

Wilbur obeyed.

“Do a back flip with a half twist in it!” cried Charlotte.

Wilbur went over backwards, writhing and twisting as he went.

“O.K., Wilbur,” said Charlotte. “You can go back to sleep. O.K., Templeton, the soap ad will do, I guess. I’m not sure Wilbur’s action is exactly radiant, but it’s interesting.”

“Actually,” said Wilbur, “I *feel* radiant.”

“Do you?” said Charlotte, looking at him with affection. “Well, you’re a good little pig, and radiant you shall be. I’m in this thing pretty deep now—I might as well go the limit.”

Tired from his romp, Wilbur lay down in the clean straw. He closed his eyes. The straw seemed scratchy—not as comfortable as the cow manure, which was always delightfully soft to lie in. So he pushed the straw to one side and stretched out in the manure. Wilbur sighed. It had been a busy day—his first day of being terrific. Dozens of people had visited his yard during the afternoon, and he had had to stand and pose, looking as terrific as he could. Now he was tired. Fern had arrived and seated herself quietly on her stool in the corner.

“Tell me a story, Charlotte!” said Wilbur, as he lay waiting for sleep to come. “Tell me a story!”

So Charlotte, although she, too, was tired, did what Wilbur wanted.

“Once upon a time,” she began, “I had a beautiful cousin who managed to build her web across a small stream. One day a tiny fish leaped into the air and got tangled in the web. My cousin was very much surprised, of course. The fish was thrashing wildly. My cousin hardly dared tackle it. But she did. She swooped down and threw great masses of wrapping material around the fish and fought bravely to capture it.”

“Did she succeed?” asked Wilbur.

“It was a never-to-be-forgotten battle,” said Charlotte. “There was the fish, caught only by one fin, and its tail wildly thrashing and shining in the sun. There was the web, sagging dangerously under the weight of the fish.”

“How much did the fish weigh?” asked Wilbur eagerly.

“I don’t know,” said Charlotte. “There was my cousin, slipping in, dodging out, beaten mercilessly over the head by the wildly thrashing fish, dancing in, dancing out, throwing her threads and fighting hard. First she threw a left around the tail. The fish lashed back. Then a left to the tail and a right to the midsection. The fish lashed back. Then she dodged to one side and threw a right, and another right to the fin. Then a hard left to the head, while the web swayed and stretched.”

“Then what happened?” asked Wilbur.

“Nothing,” said Charlotte. “The fish lost the fight. My cousin wrapped it up so tight it couldn’t budge.”

“Then what happened?” asked Wilbur.

“Nothing,” said Charlotte. “My cousin kept the fish for a while, and then, when she got good and ready, she ate it.”

“Tell me another story!” begged Wilbur.

So Charlotte told him about another cousin of hers who was an aeronaut.

“What is an aeronaut?” asked Wilbur.

“A balloonist,” said Charlotte. “My cousin used to stand on her head and let out enough thread to form a balloon. Then she’d let go and be lifted into the air and carried upward on the warm wind.”

“Is that true?” asked Wilbur. “Or are you just making it up?”

“It’s true,” replied Charlotte. “I have some very remarkable cousins. And now, Wilbur, it’s time you went to sleep.”

“Sing something!” begged Wilbur, closing his eyes.

So Charlotte sang a lullaby, while crickets chirped in the grass and the barn grew dark. This was the song she sang.

“Sleep, sleep, my love, my only,

Deep, deep, in the dung and the dark;

Be not afraid and be not lonely!

This is the hour when frogs and thrushes

Praise the world from the woods and the rushes.

Rest from care, my one and only,

Deep in the dung and the dark!"

But Wilbur was already asleep. When the song ended, Fern got up and went home.

Chapter XIV

Dr. Dorian

The next day was Saturday. Fern stood at the kitchen sink drying the breakfast dishes as her mother washed them. Mrs.Arable worked silently. She hoped Fern would go out and play with other children, instead of heading for the Zuckermans' barn to sit and watch animals.

"Charlotte is the best storyteller I ever heard," said Fern, poking her dish towel into a cereal bowl.

"Fern," said her mother sternly, "you must not invent things. You know spiders don't tell stories. Spiders can't talk."

"Charlotte can," replied Fern. "She doesn't talk very loud, but she talks."

"What kind of story did she tell?" asked Mrs.Arable.

"Well," began Fern, "she told us about a cousin of hers who caught a fish in her web. Don't you think that's fascinating?"

"Fern, dear, how would a fish get in a spider's web?" said Mrs.Arable. "You know it couldn't happen. You're making this up."

"Oh, it happened all right," replied Fern. "Charlotte never fibs. This cousin of hers built a web across a stream. One day she was hanging around on the web and a tiny fish leaped into the air and got tangled in the web. The fish was

caught by one fin, Mother; its tail was wildly thrashing and shining in the sun. Can't you just see the web, sagging dangerously under the weight of the fish? Charlotte's cousin kept slipping in, dodging out, and she was beaten mercilessly over the head by the wildly thrashing fish, dancing in, dancing out, throwing …"

"Fern!" snapped her mother. "Stop it! Stop inventing these wild tales!"

"I'm not inventing," said Fern. "I'm just telling you the facts."

"What finally happened?" asked her mother, whose curiosity began to get the better of her.

"Charlotte's cousin won. She wrapped the fish up, then she ate him when she got good and ready. Spiders have to eat, the same as the rest of us."

"Yes, I suppose they do," said Mrs.Arable, vaguely.

"Charlotte has another cousin who is a balloonist. She stands on her head, lets out a lot of line, and is carried aloft on the wind. Mother, wouldn't you simply love to do that?"

"Yes, I would, come to think of it," replied Mrs.Arable. "But Fern, darling, I wish you would play outdoors today instead of going to Uncle Homer's barn. Find some of your playmates and do something nice outdoors. You're spending too much time in that barn—it isn't good for you to be alone so much."

"Alone?" said Fern. "Alone? My best friends are in the barn cellar. It is a very sociable place. Not at all lonely."

Fern disappeared after a while, walking down the road toward Zuckermans'. Her mother dusted the sitting room. As she worked she kept thinking about Fern. It didn't seem natural for a little girl to be so interested in animals. Finally Mrs.Arable made up her mind she would pay a call on old Doctor Dorian and ask his advice. She got in the car and drove to his office in the village.

Dr.Dorian had a thick beard. He was glad to see Mrs.Arable and gave her a comfortable chair.

“It’s about Fern,” she explained. “Fern spends entirely too much time in the Zuckermans’ barn. It doesn’t seem normal. She sits on a milk stool in a corner of the barn cellar, near the pigpen, and watches animals, hour after hour. She just sits and listens.”

Dr.Dorian leaned back and closed his eyes.

“How enchanting!” he said. “It must be real nice and quiet down there. Homer has some sheep, hasn’t he?”

“Yes,” said Mrs.Arable. “Bur it all started with that pig we let Fern raise on a bottle. She calls him Wilbur. Homer bought the pig, and ever since it left our place Fern has been going to her uncle’s to be near it.”

“I’ve been hearing things about that pig,” said Dr.Dorian, opening his eyes. “They say he’s quite a pig.”

“Have you heard about the words that appeared in the spider’s web?” asked Mrs.Arable nervously.

“Yes,” replied the doctor.

“Well, do you understand it?” asked Mrs.Arable.

“Understand what?”

“Do you understand how there could be any writing in a spider’s web?”

“Oh, no,” said Dr.Dorian. “I don’t understand it. But for that matter I don’t understand how a spider learned to spin a web in the first place. When the words appeared, everyone said they were a miracle. But nobody pointed out that the web itself is a miracle.”

“What’s miraculous about a spider’s web?” said Mrs.Arable. “I don’t see why you say a web is a miracle—it’s just a web.”

“Ever try to spin one?” asked Dr.Dorian.

Mrs.Arable shifted uneasily in her chair. “No,” she replied. “But I can crochet a doily and I can knit a sock.”

“Sure,” said the doctor. “But somebody taught you, didn’t they?”

“My mother taught me.”

“Well, who taught a spider? A young spider knows how to spin a web without any instructions from anybody. Don’t you regard that as a miracle?”

“I suppose so,” said Mrs.Arable. “I never looked at it that way before. Still, I don’t understand how those words got into the web. I don’t understand it, and I don’t like what I can’t understand.”

“None of us do,” said Dr.Dorian, sighing. “I’m a doctor. Doctors are supposed to understand everything. But I don’t understand everything, and I don’t intend to let it worry me.”

Mrs.Arable fidgeted. “Fern says the animals talk to each other. Dr.Dorian, do you believe animals talk?”

“I never heard one say anything,” he replied. “But that proves nothing. It is quite possible that an animal has spoken civilly to me and that I didn’t catch the remark because I wasn’t paying attention. Children pay better attention than grownups. If Fern says that the animals in Zuckerman’s barn talk, I’m quite ready to believe her. Perhaps if people talked less, animals would talk more. People are incessant talkers—I can give you my word on that.”

“Well, I feel better about Fern,” said Mrs.Arable. “You don’t think I need worry about her?”

“Does she look well?” asked the doctor.

“Oh, yes.”

“Appetite good?”

“Oh, yes, she’s always hungry.”

“Sleep well at night?”

“Oh, yes,”

“Then don’t worry,” said the doctor.

“Do you think she’ll ever start thinking about something besides pigs and sheep and geese and spiders?”

“How old is Fern?”

“She’s eight.”

“Well,” said Dr.Dorian, “I think she will always love animals. But I doubt that she spends her entire life in Homer Zuckerman’s barn cellar. How about boys—does she know any boys.?”

“She knows Henry Fussy,” said Mrs.Arable brightly.

Dr.Dorian closed his eyes again and went into deep thought. “Henry Fussy,” he mumbled. “Humm. Remarkable. Well, I don’t think you have anything to worry about. Let Fern associate with her friends in the barn if she wants to. I would say, offhand, that spiders and pigs were fully as interesting as Henry Fussy. Yet I predict that the day will come when even Henry will drop some chance remark that catches Fern’s attention. It’s amazing how children change from year to year. How’s Avery?” he asked, opening his eyes wide.

“Oh, Avery,” chuckled Mrs.Arable. “Avery is always fine. Of course, he 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.”

“Good!” said the doctor.

Mrs.Arable said goodbye and thanked Dr.Dorian very much for his advice. She felt greatly relieved.

(Source: White, E.B. 1993. *Charlotte’s web.* New York: Harper & Row, pp.42 – 112.)

Discussion Questions:

1. How many characters can you find in *Charlotte's Web?*
2. Who are they?
3. Evaluate the characters in *Charlotte's Web*. Who are flat, round, foil, stereotype, dynamic and static?
4. How were Charlotte, Wilbur and Templeton revealed?
5. Do you discover anything about human nature in the main characters of *Charlotte's Web?*
6. How do the characters in adult books differ from those in children's books?