Charlotte's Web

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF E.B. WHITE

The sixth child born in his family, Elwyn Brooks White grew up in New York and went on to attend Cornell University. After graduating, he worked at newspapers and magazines around the country before landing at the prestigious *New Yorker* magazine in 1927. He rose to prominence as an editor there over the years, all the while composing essays, poetry, style books (*The Elements of Style* is a guide to American English usage that is still used as a gold standard today), and children's novels such as *Stuart Little*, *Charlotte's Web*, and *The Trumpet of the Swan*. White and his family maintained a second residence on a farm in Maine, where White was able to be in and around nature, one of his life's great passions. He passed away at the farm in 1985 after a struggle with Alzheimer's, having built a storied career encompassing awards such as the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the National Medal for Literature, and the Newbery Medal—the latter was a prize he earned in 1953 for *Charlotte's Web*, his best-known work to many Americans, which is now regarded as a classic of children's literature.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Charlotte's Web is given an ambiguous setting somewhere on a farm in rural America in the early 1950s. The novel seems to occur in a kind of nameless, idyllic postwar bubble, removed from the racial strife of the burgeoning civil rights movement, the economic misery of the Great Depression, and the emotional and political fallout of World War II. Through *Charlotte's Web*, E.B. White seemingly erases unsavory historical context and focuses entirely on his tranquil vision of the American countryside—and the relationships between the humans and animals that populate it.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Anthropomorphized animals—that is, animals imbued with human emotions, characteristics, thoughts, and language—are a staple of children's literature, and rightly so: by humanizing animals, writers are able to communicate the universality of pain and joy across species and demonstrate the innate worth of human and non-human life alike. Anthropomorphic animals also populate literature that is more allegorical and aimed mainly at adults, in novels like Richard Adams's *Watership Down* and George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. Other novels that carefully examine the struggles and triumphs of animals living in a human world—often getting help and support from their human counterparts, just as Fern helps Wilbur in *Charlotte's Web*—include E.B. White's own novels *Stuart Little* and *The Trumpet of the Swan*, as well as Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings's *The Yearling*, Wilson Rawls's *Where the Red Fern Grows*, and Kate DiCamillo's *Because of Winn-Dixie*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Charlotte's Web*
- **When Written:** Early 1950s
- **Where Written:** New York City and Maine
- **When Published:** October 15, 1952
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary, midcentury
- **Genre:** Young adult fiction; coming-of-age tale
- **Setting:** Rural America
- **Climax:** Wilbur wins a special prize at the county fair due to Charlotte's help in signaling, through her intricately-woven webs, how special he is to the humans around him.
- **Antagonist:** Templeton; aging
- **Point of View:** Third person

EXTRA CREDIT

Classic. *Charlotte's Web* occupies a unique space not just in the American literary canon, but also in the ranks of great world literature. It is one of the most popular children's books of all time, having sold more than 45 million copies worldwide and having been translated into 23 languages. It has been ranked as the best-selling children's paperback ever published, and has been widely adapted as a film, play, and even a video game.

PLOT SUMMARY

When the Arable family's hog welcomes a litter of spring piglets, Mr. Arable plans on killing the runt—a weakling who will only "make trouble" for the others. His eight-year-old daughter Fern, however, becomes emotional and distraught at the idea of death and demands Mr. Arable spare the pig. Mr. Arable agrees—on the condition that Fern accept responsibility for the pig, and make sure that he is fed and taken care of.

Fern falls in love with her new "baby" Wilbur, feeding him from a bottle and taking him on carriage rides with her dolls in cool spring afternoons. As spring turns to summer, though, Wilbur grows too big to live in the Arables' yard, and Fern's parents suggest she sell the pig to their neighbors and relatives, the Zuckermans. Homer Zuckerman offers Fern six dollars for Wilbur, and she takes the pig to live over on their farm, promising to visit as often as she can.

As Wilbur adjusts to his new life on the farm, he finds himself experiencing a series of highs and lows. He likes his dark, fragrant corner of the barn and enjoys Fern's frequent visits—but is often bored and lonely, and has trouble making friends with the other barnyard animals. The sheep are snobby, the cows are indifferent, and the goose and gander are busy hatching a nest full of eggs. Wilbur is given to fits of crying and despair, and in the midst of one of these fits one night, he hears a small voice call out to him, promising to be his friend.

In the morning, Wilbur is excited to meet his potential new friends, and runs throughout the barn looking for the source of the voice. He is surprised when he realizes it has come from a common gray barn spider who lives over the barn door. The spider introduces herself as Charlotte, and begins telling Wilbur about herself—and her peculiar eating habits, which include sucking the blood from flies and other small insects. Wilbur is nervous to have such a "bloodthirsty" friend, but grateful to have someone to talk to.

As summer arrives in earnest, Fern and her brother Avery spend more and more time at the Zuckermans' farm, playing in the barn and the fields beyond. One day, the goose eggs hatch, and seven goslings are born. One egg is a dud, and the goose and gander give it to the cunning hoarder rat Templeton who makes his nest beneath Wilbur's trough as a kind of peace offering—they warn him never to prey upon their goslings, and he reluctantly agrees to the truce. As Wilbur grows bigger with each passing day, he draws the concern of a kind old sheep who warns him that if he keeps getting fatter, Homer, his wife Edith, and their hired man Lurvy will surely kill him for meat come Christmastime. Charlotte comforts the hysterical Wilbur, assuring him that she will find a way to save his life.

Charlotte schemes day in and day out, and eventually settles on a plan that will save Wilbur—she worries, though, that she doesn't "have much time" to execute it. As soon as the plan is firm and her mind she sets to work. One morning, when Lurvy comes out to the barn with Wilbur's breakfast, he spies a "miracle": the words "SOME PIG!" have been threaded into **Charlotte's web**. Lurvy alerts Homer and Edith, who are forced to really consider Wilbur for the first time as they try to discern the meaning of the message—and its source. They agree that he is "some pig."

As word of the "miracle" spreads throughout town and many visitors descend upon the farm to glimpse it, only Fern knows what's happening: Charlotte is fooling the "gullible" humans into letting Wilbur live. Charlotte enlists the other animals' help in coming up with more words to describe Wilbur, so that she can weave more miraculous webs. She chooses as her next word "terrific," and tires herself out weaving the long and complicated web—but the plan continues to be a success as Homer orders Lurvy to start feeding Wilbur more often and putting fresh, sweet hay into his pen. Homer has decided to take Wilbur to the county fair in September to show him off.

Fern tells her parents the stories and conversations she overhears between the animals over at the barnyard, concerning her mother, Mrs. Arable. Mrs. Arable pays a visit to the town doctor, Dr. Dorian, who assures her that there's nothing to worry about—Fern will grow up and start playing with the other children in her own time. As summer winds down, Wilbur is the center of attention on the farm: he has grown big and beautiful, and entertains large audiences of people who come to see him and Charlotte's ever-changing webs. Wilbur is getting excited about the fair, but Charlotte won't commit to going—she is feeling tired lately, and knows that soon she must build her egg sac.

The night before the fair, everyone is excited and restless—humans and animals alike. Lurvy and Homer dream of the prizes Wilbur will win, while Fern and Avery dream of rides and games. Even Templeton the rat gets excited at the idea of going to a "paradise" full of food scraps and discarded junk. Charlotte has agreed to come, and on the morning of the festivities, she and Templeton scurry into Wilbur's crate. When the Arables arrive to drive with the Zuckermans out to the fairgrounds, Mr. Arable remarks on how large Wilbur has become, and what great ham and bacon the Zuckermans will get out of him come Christmas. The startled Wilbur faints as he overhears this.

Wilbur recovers, and after the Zuckermans and Arables pack him into his crate, they all head off for the fair. Fern and Avery immediately ask for money so that they can run off and play games, while the adults help Wilbur settle into his temporary pen. Charlotte takes up residence in the eave of a nearby shed, where she spots something upsetting: in the next pen over, there is an incredibly large pig named Uncle. Charlotte is determined, though, to ensure Wilbur takes home first prize anyway, and plans on spinning a web—even though she is "swollen" and "listless," she remains devoted to saving Wilbur's life.

That evening, as Fern rides the Ferris wheel with her friend Henry Fussy and Templeton raids the emptying fairgrounds for food and scraps, Charlotte gets to work on her new web: she is going to weave the word "humble," which she feels describes Wilbur perfectly. As night falls, the exhausted Charlotte starts a new project: she is making something for herself "for a change," and it is going to be her "masterpiece."

The next day, Charlotte has finished spinning an egg sac and filling it with over five hundred eggs. As the Arables and Zuckermans arrive at the fair and see the newest web, they are overcome with emotion—but devastated when they see that a blue ribbon has been pinned to Uncle's pen. Everyone is surprised when a voice over the loudspeaker calls them all to the judges' stand for a special announcement. As the group hurries Wilbur into his crate and hustles him over to the stand, Fern finds herself wishing she were up on the Ferris wheel again with Henry Fussy.

At the judges' table, Wilbur is awarded a special prize for his contribution to the success of the county fair and the local economy. Homer is awarded twenty-five dollars, and Wilbur gets a special bronze medal. After the ceremony, Wilbur returns to his pen and asks Charlotte if she's excited to return to the barn. Charlotte, though, replies that she won't be going home: she is dying, and has hardly enough strength to move her arms. Wilbur throws himself on the ground, hysterical, but Charlotte urges him to calm down. Wilbur decides that in light of all Charlotte has done for him, there must be one last thing he can do for her: he can bring her egg sac home. He enlists Templeton's reluctant help in fetching the egg sac down from the eave, and promises in exchange that Templeton can help himself to each of Wilbur's meals before Wilbur even touches them. Templeton scurries down with the egg sac and drops it at Wilbur's feet just as the Arables and Zuckermans return to the pen to load Wilbur up. He places the egg sac in his mouth for the journey home, and winks at Charlotte as he leaves. The next morning, she dies alone but in peace.

Back at the barn, life resumes as normal. Wilbur keeps watch over the egg sac and continues to grow larger. Even when winter descends, Wilbur remains happy and calm—he knows that because of Charlotte's help, his worth has been proved and his life is now safe. Fern and Avery come to the Zuckermans' to play at Christmastime, but Fern is no longer interested in the barnyard, or Wilbur himself.

Winter turns to spring, and, one morning, hundreds of tiny spiders begin to emerge from Charlotte's egg sac. Wilbur greets them all excitedly, but they soon launch threads of silk and float away on the warm spring wind. Only three of them stay behind—Wilbur helps them select the names Joy, Aranea, and Nellie, and he tells them all about how wonderful their mother was. Wilbur pledges his friendship to the spiders, and they pledge theirs in return. As the months and years go by, Wilbur lives a long and happy life and meets many of Charlotte's descendants—but none of them "ever quite [take] her place in his heart."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Wilbur – Wilbur the pig is the novel's central protagonist. The runt of his spring litter, Wilbur is rescued from slaughter when Fern Arable insists that her father let him live. Fern raises Wilbur as if he's a human baby, feeding him from bottles and taking him for carriage rides alongside her dolls and toys. Wilbur is saved from a grisly fate and given a plush life full of love and plenty—but when he begins to grow too large for life in the Arable home, he is moved to the Arables' relatives' farm, and must adjust to life among other animals rather than humans. Wilbur is sensitive, emotional, and dramatic, and as he struggles to make friends with the other barnyard animals, he is often given to loneliness and self-pity. When Wilbur makes friends with Charlotte the spider, an unlikely ally, he finds himself learning profound lessons about life and death, friendship and sacrifice, and the debt individuals (whether human or animal) owe to one another. Like Fern, Charlotte saves Wilbur from certain death by making a plea for his worth to his human owners, this time by broadcasting complimentary adjectives like "terrific" and "humble" to the Zuckermans using intricately woven **webs**. Through his friendship with Charlotte, Wilbur comes to see that true friendship is rooted in unconditional love and self-sacrifice, and also learns about the inevitability of death. Though his own life is spared (and even celebrated with a special prize at the county fair), Charlotte's short life span ends just as summer does, and Wilbur must return to the farm from the county fair by himself—and carry on Charlotte's legacy of fearlessness, kindness, and bravery even in the face of loneliness and despair.

Charlotte – Charlotte A. Cavatica, one of the novel's protagonists, is a common barn spider with a number of extraordinary gifts. Sensitive, practical, maternal, and wise, Charlotte introduces herself to Wilbur the pig shortly after he arrives at the Zuckermans' farm and becomes his guide and ally as he adjusts to his new life there. She teaches Wilbur many lessons about patience, keeping calm, and learning to be himself. When Charlotte and the others get word that the Zuckermans are planning to slaughter Wilbur at Christmastime, Charlotte begins devising a plan to save Wilbur's life. Eventually, Charlotte comes up with the idea to play a trick on the "gullible" humans by using her **webs** to communicate with them—she threads the words "some pig" into her web, shocking the Zuckermans and prompting them to announce that a "miracle" has occurred on their farm. As Charlotte creates more and more webs (which announce Wilbur as a "terrific" and "humble" pig,) she works quickly, knowing deep down that she doesn't "have much time" left—a spider's life span is short, and even as Charlotte dedicates her energies to saving Wilbur, she knows that it will soon be time for her to lay some eggs in a sac and then die. The tragic but touching friendship between Charlotte and Wilbur is one in which Charlotte sacrifices her time and energy to save Wilbur, despite knowing that the effort may be the defining one of her life. Through Charlotte and Wilbur's journeys, E.B. White points out the dignity and importance of all life, both human and animal, and shows what a transformative and vital force true friendship can be.

Fern Arable – The human protagonist of the novel, Fern Arable is an eight-year-old girl with an intense love of nature and animals. She saves Wilbur the pig from being slaughtered shortly after his birth and raises him herself for the first couple months of his life. Even after Wilbur is moved to the Zuckerman farm to live with Fern's Aunt Edith and Uncle

Homer, she continues to visit him each day, and remains invested in the adventures he has there as he adjusts to life on the farm—and confronts the idea that he may once again be in danger of being slaughtered for meat. Fern's obsession with Wilbur and the other barnyard animals concerns her parents, but by the end of the novel, Fern has begun to show signs of more investment in the human world—including a burgeoning crush on a local boy, Henry Fussy. White uses Fern as a proxy for his audience in many ways, highlighting the allure of the innocent, lush natural world while also pointing out how the human world inevitably draws people in as they grow older, causing them, in many cases, to forget their attachment to the simple joys of the quiet, parallel world of animals and nature.

Homer Zuckerman – Fern's uncle and Wilbur's second owner, Homer Zuckerman is a kind and practical man who runs a thriving farm and barnyard. Though Homer plans on fattening Wilbur up for meat, he is shocked, moved, and amazed at the sight of **Charlotte's web**, and believes that a "miracle" has touched his farm. As a result, he begins treating Wilbur with reverence and love and, after Wilbur is presented with a special prize at the county fair, decides to keep him around for life.

Dr. Dorian – The local doctor. He advises Mrs. Arable when she comes to him out of concern for Fern, who has been spending all of her time at the Zuckerman farm "talking" with the animals. Dr. Dorian assures Mrs. Arable that Fern will grow up when she's ready, and shouldn't be rushed.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Aunt Edith Zuckerman – Fern's aunt and Homer's wife. A kind woman who is slightly skeptical of the "miracle" of **Charlotte's web**, but who nevertheless supports her husband and even revels in the attention their farm and family begin to receive for Wilbur, the "terrific" pig they own.

Templeton – One of the novel's antagonists, Templeton is a selfish, conniving, barn rat who hoards food, knick-knacks, trash, and the other animals' cast-offs. He is helpful to Charlotte and Wilbur on occasion—but only when there's something in it for him.

Avery Arable – Fern's brother. An active, energetic, rough-and-tumble nature lover who enjoys frolicking in the fields and collecting creepy-crawly animals from the wild to keep in his pockets.

Mrs. Arable – Fern's mother. A kind woman who is made nervous by her daughter's preoccupation with the animal world over the human one. However, the local doctor, Dr. Dorian, advises her to sit back and let Fern grow up in her own time.

Nellie, Joy, and Aranea – Three of Charlotte's daughters, who like Wilbur so much that they decide to stay and live in the barn with him, even after all four hundred of their siblings balloon away in the wind.

Mr. Arable – Fern's father and Mrs. Arable's husband. He is a hardworking, practical man.

Lurvy – The Zuckermans' hired man who helps out on the farm with the animals.

Goose and Gander – A nervous, chatty pair of geese who live on the Zuckermans' farm with Wilbur, Charlotte, and the others.

The Old Sheep – A kindly and wise old sheep who lives on the Zuckermans' farm.

Uncle – A giant pig who takes first prize at the County Fair.

Henry Fussy – A friend (and possible love interest) of Fern's.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

FRIENDSHIP AND SACRIFICE

E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web* centers around the tender, life-changing friendship between a pig named Wilbur and a spider named Charlotte. Fittingly, the book's central theme is friendship—specifically the ways in which true friendship often involves self-sacrifice. Throughout his classic children's novel about the sacredness of kindness, love, and solidarity, White uses the many different kinds of friendships at the heart of the story to suggest that the rarest and truest of friends are those who are willing to put their hopes, dreams, and even their lives on the line for the ones they love.

There are many different kinds of friendships to be found within the pages of *Charlotte's Web*, and through the two central friendships Wilbur the pig experiences—with Fern Arable and with Charlotte the spider—White demonstrates the ways in which friendship and self-sacrifice can often go hand-in-hand. Wilbur and Fern's friendship begins when Fern, an eight-year-old girl, stops her father from unfairly killing the runt of their sow's newest litter. Fern feeds the newborn Wilbur from a bottle, gives him carriage rides alongside her favorite dolls, and makes sure his every need is met. Their friendship is a true one, but because Fern is Wilbur's first and only friend, he doesn't know yet how very lucky he is to have her—or how her friendship literally saved him. Fern has to adjust her own routines and responsibilities to make room for Wilbur in her life—a sacrifice she willingly undertakes as she bottle-feeds him three or four times each day and spends the heady first days of spring caring for Wilbur rather than frolicking with her brother Avery and their friends. Though Wilbur's friendship with Fern

will grow and change as the novel progresses, the fact that she loved him, stuck up for him, and used her voice to help him when he had none—sacrificing her time, her care, and her other friendships for his well-being—is a dynamic that will be repeated in Wilbur's friendship with Charlotte.

When Wilbur gets too big to be kept in the house, Mr. and Mrs. Arable force Fern to sell Wilbur for six dollars to their neighbors and family, the Zuckermans. As Wilbur moves to the Zuckerman farm, he goes through a major adjustment period. Fern visits most days, but can't be with Wilbur all the time, and he feels her absence profoundly even as he begins to enjoy his new routines. Surrounded everywhere by new animals but unable to make true friends with the gossipy geese, the standoffish sheep, or the conniving barn rat Templeton, Wilbur despairs that he'll never have a true friend again—until a friendly spider's voice in the dark whispers to him and tells him not to be afraid. When Wilbur meets the astute, practical, and inventive Charlotte, he feels rescued from loneliness. Wilbur loves Charlotte so much that he tries to emulate her by tying a string to his tail in hopes of spinning a web just like hers, and he hangs on her every word as she shares stories of her adventurous cousins and their spidery hijinks. Wilbur is devoted to Charlotte entirely, and when news arrives that Homer Zuckerman plans to slaughter Wilbur for meat at Christmastime, Charlotte knows she has to defend her friend. Though the conception and execution of her master plan—to spin into her **webs** impressive words which glorify Wilbur in the hopes of signaling to the farmers how special and deserving of life Wilbur is—wears Charlotte out both physically and emotionally, she sacrifices her own well-being for Wilbur. Her final act is to help him secure a special prize at the county fair by spinning one of her special webs from scratch there—too weak to return to the barn, having sacrificed the last bits of strength in her short life for Wilbur's security, Charlotte sends Wilbur home with the eggs she's laid, and dies alone on the fairgrounds.

In the novel's final pages, White shows Wilbur adjusting to life on the farm without Charlotte. When the egg sac hatches one day and Charlotte's children are born, Wilbur is happy—but when most of them balloon away on the wind, he is disheartened. Three of Charlotte's daughters, though, stay behind, and as Wilbur introduces himself to them he makes this pledge: "I was devoted to your mother. I owe my very life to her. She was brilliant, beautiful, and loyal to the end. I shall always treasure her memory. To you, her daughters, I pledge my friendship, forever and ever." Wilbur's devotion to Charlotte's daughters shows that he is willing to repay his debt to her by offering her daughters the same attention, respect, and devotion that she always showed to him.

Through Charlotte's Web, E.B. White shows that is a rare and beautiful thing to find someone who is willing to use their own talent, time, and effort to help or defend a friend in need. For the rest of his life, Wilbur remembers his special friendship with Charlotte fondly and humbly—and his gratitude to her for the sacrifices she made on his behalf during her short life enhances "the glory of everything" around him.

MORTALITY AND REBIRTH

Despite being a children's book, *Charlotte's Web* also has many important lessons to teach on the subject of mortality. E.B. White infuses the novel with happy moments of friendship, play, and the beauty of the natural world, while also communicating frightening lessons about sacrifice, growing up, and, most acutely, the idea of death as a necessary, normal part of life. Through the lives of his animal characters, E.B. White shows his young readers that though life is fleeting, its finite nature is actually a beautiful thing, ultimately arguing that without death and loss, there can be no rebirth or new growth.

Though a novel for children, *Charlotte's Web* announces itself from its very first lines as a book very much concerned with the practicalities of death and dying. White, writing about life on two neighboring farms in the American countryside, starkly portrays death as a natural and necessary part of life several times throughout the novel. The novel opens with the young Fern Arable watching her father head out to the shed with an ax in hand. When she asks what he plans to do with it, her mother tells her that he's going to slaughter the runt of their sow's newborn litter, as it's too small to thrive or even survive. Outraged, Fern chases after her father and begs him not to kill the animal—she is emotional at the thought of death and violence and tells her father she'll sacrifice her own time and energy to care for the pig rather than let him die. That the novel's narrative roots lie in its main character's close brush with death at birth sets up the idea that Wilbur will encounter the fact of death several more times as the novel progresses. Indeed, that is what comes to pass as White continues to demonstrate that death is a natural part of life; although death can be sad and frightening, the rebirth it makes room for is beautiful and sustaining.

The novel's next brush with mortality and the circle of life comes shortly after Wilbur meets his new friend Charlotte the spider at the Zuckerman farm. One of the first things Charlotte does after meeting Wilbur is show him how she kills her prey: she rather blithely demonstrates how she wraps up a fly in her **web**, injects him with an anesthetic, and them consumes him. Though Wilbur is horrified by Charlotte's "love [of] blood," she insists her way of life is necessary: if she didn't catch and eat bugs, they'd "increase and multiply" and eventually destroy the earth. Upon hearing this, Wilbur decides that perhaps Charlotte's web "is a good thing after all." Wilbur, having narrowly escaped an early, unfair death himself, is sensitive to the topic. He becomes faint when he hears Charlotte talking about the practicalities of her own survival—but is heartened

when he realizes that her contribution to the circle of life helps make room for lovely things to grow and thrive, and for the world to flourish.

The novel's heartbreaking climax arrives when Charlotte—her short life span coming to a close as summer ends and fall descends—chooses to spend her final days helping her friend Wilbur to secure his own safety by proving his worth as a prize pig. Charlotte knows that her days are coming to an end, but repeatedly shows through her words and her actions that she accepts her impending death with grace and determination to make the most of the time she has left. Though Wilbur is devastated to lose Charlotte, she has prepared him—as, perhaps White hoped, she would prepare his young readers—to face the devastation of death with clear eyes, acceptance, and gratitude rather than anger, misery, and pain. Wilbur himself has been saved from an early death, but is perhaps better prepared to bear witness to the circle of life in his remaining years because of the lessons that Charlotte has taught him. Moreover, Charlotte gives Wilbur something to take back to the farm as she lies dying at the fair—an egg sac filled with the eggs that will soon hatch into her children. Charlotte's death means the end of her physical life—but her legacy will live on both through Wilbur's memories of her and through the many children she is sending out into the world. Most of Charlotte's children leave the barn soon after hatching, but three—Nellie, Joy, and Aranea—stay behind to live with Wilbur. The circle of life goes on, as the barn—and the wider world—remains a place of continual renewal and rebirth.

Though *Charlotte's Web* focuses on mature themes, such the frightening fact that death comes for all living things, White softens the heavy topic by pointing out that the other side of death is rebirth. Just as the seasons change from winter to spring, enlivening the world with new buds, new lambs, new goslings, and new birds, so too does Wilbur's view of life flourish when he sees the natural order in earnest, unafraid and accepting of whatever is to come.

THE NATURAL WORLD

Throughout *Charlotte's Web*, E.B. White swings back and forth between the human world and the animal world with supreme ease. The narrative relays the joys and concerns of its human characters' lives just as easily as it inhabits and enlivens the inner lives and thoughts of pigs, spiders, and rats. Through the book, White argues that the mysterious workings of the natural world and the lives of animals are just as complex, profound, and worthy of justice, dignity, and respect as human lives.

Though the novel opens in the realm of the human world, the action quickly transitions to the animal world when Wilbur the pig goes to stay on the Zuckerman farm. There, his interactions with the other barnyard animals are at turns tender and tenuous. As Wilbur learns how to get along on the farm, his every emotion and observation is given just as much weight as the feelings of the human characters in the novel—if not even more. The animals on the Zuckerman farm are, in White's careful hands, tenderly anthropomorphized. They have memories, feelings, and concerns that expand beyond the bounds of instinct and survival. For instance, Wilbur "faints" whenever anyone around him talks about matters too painful for him to conceive of, such as his own possible slaughter. Though White uses the novel to normalize death in the natural world, he also shows that animals value their lives and long to protect them just as intensely as humans do—Wilbur's exaggerated, funny fainting spells show his sensitivity, and demonstrate that even though he's a dirty pig who loves eating slop and rooting in manure, he has a delicate disposition. In another humorous instance, when Charlotte points out a nervous gander's tendency to repeat his words several times, the gander replies, "It's my idio-idio-idiosyncrasy." Instances like this show that the animals have distinct personalities complete with points of pride and insecurities alike. While this kind of thinking is exaggerated in the animals for comedic effect, and to make them feel more familiar to White's young readers, his effort in giving the animals deep inner worlds shows his reverence for the lives of animals and the ways in which they experience the world that they share with their human counterparts.

When Charlotte plots to show the humans how important and special Wilbur is in order to convince them to keep him alive rather than slaughter him for meat, White is consciously engaging in a kind of wish-fulfillment: if only animals could make their case for their own lives, and express to their human owners how "terrific," "humble," or otherwise spectacular, strange, and wonderful they are. His own reverence for the natural world is reflected in his animal characters' desire to broadcast their innate worth to the humans around them. Charlotte's loving descriptions of Wilbur, embroidered in the gossamer threads of her **webs**, are designed to shake the humans from their complacency and force them to think about what animals truly are capable of. Though the humans debate back and forth whether a spider really could spell, or whether a pig really could be "humble," by the end of the novel their worldview is indeed altered: they understand that animals, and nature more widely, are often overlooked and decided for. The humans appreciate the animals around them more deeply because of Charlotte's messages—this is evidenced in the Zuckermans' choice to keep Wilbur alive, and in the county fair judges' decision to award Wilbur a special prize and point out how his special story has enriched all their lives by giving them a touching tale to hold on to (not to mention a boost to the local economy through the droves of people who have come to the fair for a look at the "terrific" pig.)

White's reverence for the natural world is clear not just in his descriptions of the anthropomorphized animal characters

which populate his novel, but even in his writing about the birds in the background, with their distinct and beautiful cries, his images of swaying summer grasses and ripe berries full of bugs, and his musings on the ways in which the natural world must unfortunately often exist at the mercy of humans. In imbuing noisy pigs, creepy spiders, and fearsome rats with fears, hopes, and dreams, White demonstrates the dignity in all life—not just human life—and attempts to impart to his young readers the inherent worth of all nature's creations.

GROWING UP

Style E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web* is a unique coming-of-age tale in that it explores what it means to grow up from two very different points of view: Fern Arable, an eight-year-old girl, and Wilbur, a young spring pig. Fern and Wilbur grow up side-by-side but separated by the divide between the human world and the animal world. Nevertheless, they face many of the same challenges and fears as they come into their own: loneliness, fear of death, fear of change, and the struggle for connection with those around them. Through Fern and Wilbur's twinned stories, White argues that though growing up can be painful and uncertain, there is beauty and hope in the process of learning, growing older, and moving on from one's childhood.

From the moment Fern rescues Wilbur, the runt of his litter, from being slaughtered, the two are fast friends. As a year in their very different—but in many ways similar—lives go by, Fern and Wilbur's parallel experiences show how each of them are starting to grow up and come into their own. The things they see, do, and feel change them a little bit every day, and by the end of the novel, both characters are wiser in the ways of the world. At the start of the novel, Fern Arable is eight years old. Very much still a child, she experiences intense emotions and a vivid fantasy life. As the novel progresses, Fern's ability to hear the animals speak—and her willingness to share the "conversations" she overhears with her family—signal that she is young at heart, and even serve to worry her mother Mrs. Arable that Fern isn't progressing or growing up at the right pace. Mrs. Arable visits with the town doctor, Dr. Dorian, and the man tells her that everything will be fine; Fern will grow up in her own time. "I don't think you have anything to worry about," the man says: "Let Fern associate with her friends in the barn if she wants to [...] It's amazing how children change from year to year." By the novel's end, the excitement of the county fair has drawn Fern out of herself a bit, and allowed her to interact with other children her own age—notably her classmate Henry Fussy, on whom she seems to develop a bit of a crush. As Fern has spent the better part of her year alongside Wilbur at the Zuckermans' barnyard, learning the same lessons about friendship, community, and mortality as he learns, she has indeed grown up significantly—she is ready to begin to take her place in the world, and to relinquish some of the crutches of her childhood. The Fern who was so overemotional that she couldn't bear the thought of a piglet going to slaughter has now gained an education in the ways of the natural world and the human one as well, and is ready to take them all in stride.

Wilbur is a newborn at the start of the novel, and over the course of the story—which follows roughly a year in his life—he matures from defenseless, pampered piglet into a "terrific" and "humble" pig whose kindness, empathy, and zeal for life are apparent to all who meet him. When Wilbur first arrives on the Zuckerman farm, he still has a lot to learn—he is skittish, overemotional, judgmental, and often impolite without meaning to be. He has trouble making friends and suffers a good deal of loneliness and insecurity. In other words, Wilbur is a child. As his friendship with the wise, thoughtful Charlotte deepens—and he learns from her lessons of life, death, friendship, and sacrifice, as well as the importance of self-awareness and self-assurance—he does indeed experience a kind of coming-of-age. Wilbur becomes more confident after winning a special prize at the county fair, and learns that there are things more important than his own enjoyment of life: when he realizes that Charlotte is dying, he does everything in his power to ensure that her egg sac will make it back from the fairgrounds to the barn intact, though the maneuver requires teamwork, self-sacrifice, and patience. By the novel's end, Wilbur is still the same sensitive and dramatic pig he was in his "youth." Even though he has suffered fear, loss, pain, rejection, and worry, he has come to see that on the other side of his tumultuous first year, there is peace, wisdom, and joy. As he looks around the farmyard, he sees the "glory" of the world around him and feels content, though his "childhood" and innocence are behind him forever.

As Fern and Wilbur "grow up" over the course of the novel, White celebrates the simple joys of childhood both practical and emotional: for both Fern and Wilbur, frolicking in the fields, eating wild fruits and berries, and engaging in physical play are as emblematic of childhood as are tears, self-pity, and squeamishness at any mention of death or suffering. By the end of the novel, both Fern and Wilbur have grown up quite a great deal—though they're still young, they are ready to move on from the comforts of their respective childhoods and use the wisdom they've gleaned to see the world through fresh, mature eyes.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

CHARLOTTE'S WEB

The central symbol throughout *Charlotte's Web* is the titular web—really a series of webs—woven by

the wise, practical, inventive Charlotte. These webs, woven deftly but not without effort, come to symbolize the desire for animals to have the inherent dignity and worth of their lives recognized by the humans who would kill them for reasons both utilitarian and careless. Through the words she weaves on her web, Charlotte attempts to trick the "gullible" human owners of the Zuckerman farm into believing a "miracle" has occurred. Charlotte hopes that they will see Wilbur the pig as special, "terrific," and "humble," and thus spare his life instead of slaughtering him for meat come Christmastime. Charlotte knows that Wilbur's life is valuable and worth saving, and believes that he is truly the things she says he is in her webs—at the same time, she knows that the humans in charge of Wilbur's life and death will never see these things on their own, and must be shocked out of their complacency and relative contempt for animal life through something miraculous. The webs symbolize a kind of wish-fulfillment on the part of E.B. White, a naturalist and animal lover throughout his long life—if only animals could speak up on their own behalves, and broadcast to indifferent or ill-meaning humans how valuable, special, and worthy their lives are.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the HarperCollins edition of *Charlotte's Web* published in 1952.

Chapter 1 Quotes

"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 1will 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."

Related Characters: Fern Arable, Mr. Arable (speaker), Wilbur

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

This passage, taken from the opening lines of the novel, introduces several of its major characters and themes. When a litter of pigs is born on the Arable family's small farm, Mr. Arable knows that the runt of the litter will only "make trouble" for the other pigs—but his daughter Fern is indignant at the "terrible case of injustice" and demands the runt be allowed to live. Mr. Arable sees the moment as an opportunity to teach his young daughter some responsibility—he tells her that the pig can live, if she'll promise to take care of it. Fern is so committed to helping Wilbur live that she is willing to sacrifice her own time and energy to ensure his safety. She sees the beauty in and the inherent worth of animals and the natural world, and is determined to make sure that Wilbur is afforded the same privileges and dignity any human being would be.

Chapter 2 Quotes

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.

Related Characters: Wilbur, Fern Arable

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

As spring goes by, Fern grows more and more invested in Wilbur's well-being. As she cares for him, she treats him like a human baby, coddling and feeding him from a bottle, and even takes him for walks along with her humanoid dolls. Fern clearly has respect and even reverence for Wilbur, and

as she gives him the foundation for a dignified life, she is instilling in him self-confidence, self-worth, and an emotional connection to humans which will serve him well over the course of his tumultuous first year. Wilbur is as devoted to Fern as she is to him, and together, they build a friendship based on sacrifice, admiration, and mutual love for one another in spite of the fact that they belong to different worlds.

Chapter 5 Quotes

"You mean you eat flies?" gasped Wilbur.

"Certainly. […] I have to live, don't I? […] 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 in sects. 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.

[…]

"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."

Related Characters: Charlotte , Wilbur (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 39-40

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Wilbur—who has been feeling lonely and dejected since his arrival on the Zuckerman farm down the road from the Arable family—finally manages to make a friend. The friendship is an unlikely one, though—his new comrade is named Charlotte, and she is a barn spider who is "bloodthirsty" and vicious when she needs to be. As Charlotte and Wilbur get to know one another, she tries to impress upon him the dignity of her own existence in spite of the ways in which it differs from Wilbur's own. As Wilbur develops an understanding of Charlotte, he comes to respect her—even though she's different from him. Charlotte is teaching Wilbur about the ways of the natural world—and the banality of death and mortality—and in this way is helping him to grow up.

Chapter 6 Quotes

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.

Related Characters: Fern Arable

Related Themes:

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

Even after Wilbur moves to the Zuckermans' farm, Fern continues to visit him "almost every day." She loves being at the barnyard, and hanging around Wilbur and the other animals. She has a reverence and appreciation for them, and loves silently observing their interactions and overhearing their "conversations." Just as Fern treats the animals as her equal, they, too, begin to treat her as their own equal and respect and revere her. Fern's desire to occupy the world of the animals around her rather than the human world shows how deeply she respects and loves nature—a trait she shares with the novel's author, E.B. White.

"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.

Related Characters: Goose and Gander, Templeton (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 45-46

Explanation and Analysis

Though a children's novel, *Charlotte's Web* never shies away from confronting mortality, moral ambiguity, and the more gruesome aspects of animal life. Just as the novel opens with Mr. Arable's plan to slaughter Wilbur and progresses to show Charlotte's blithe, banal rundown of the process by which she kills and eats her prey, it now demonstrates that even between the animals who coexist on the Zuckermans' farm, there are tensions and seeds of mistrust. The greedy, conniving rat Templeton is only ever looking out for himself—and the goose and gander, as well as all the other barnyard animals, are well aware of the brutality which lies just beneath the surface of their happy little world.

Chapter 7 Quotes

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.

Related Characters: Wilbur, The Old Sheep (speaker), Lurvy, Aunt Edith Zuckerman, Homer Zuckerman, Fern Arable

Related Themes:

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the old sheep sets in motion the catalyst which will propel the novel's action forward by revealing that Homer Zuckerman plans to slaughter Wilbur for meat come winter. Wilbur, who has been treated with dignity and respect normally reserved for humans all his life, can hardly believe that he is going to meet with such a fate. He has been living happily and naively on the farm, but his ignorance is now shattered by the painful realization that his new owners do not see him as the special, spectacular animal his beloved Fern knows him to be. Again, the novel does not shy away from the more gruesome aspects of animal life.

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."

Related Characters: Charlotte , The Old Sheep, Wilbur (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

Charlotte vows, in this passage, to find a way to protect Wilbur from the horrible fate of being slaughtered. Though Charlotte is moved by Wilbur's distress, she is not one to indulge "childish" behavior or hysterics, and urges Wilbur to be mature, practical, and calm—all the things that she herself is in the face of danger. Charlotte's staunch determination—as well as how deeply she cares for Wilbur—are palpable, and yet she never allows herself or the pig to give into fear or catastrophizing. Charlotte's cool and calm nature is an example to Wilbur of what it means to grow up, and to leave the hysteria and raw emotion of "childhood" behind.

Chapter 8 Quotes

"I worry about Fern," [Mrs. Arable] 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 Fem 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 nor mal. You know perfectly well animals don't talk."

Mr. Arable grinned. "Maybe our ears aren't as sharp as Fern's," he said.

Related Characters: Mr. Arable, Fern Arable, Mrs. Arable (speaker), Dr. Dorian

Related Themes:

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

As Fern tells her parents about the conversations she overhears and the things she sees the animals doing over at the barnyard, her mother Mrs. Arable becomes concerned that Fern is spending too much time with the animals—and that constructing lives, identities, and dialogues for them is hampering her chances of having a normal childhood. Mr. Arable, however, is bemused by his daughter's behavior, and actually wonders if perhaps she's more attuned to the "truth" of the world than they are. Mrs. Arable sees Fern's youth and naivete as a liability, while Mr. Arable sees it as a strength. Mr. Arable's attitude reflects the novel's broader emphasis on the complex, profound nature of the animal world, which human beings are often too preoccupied to notice.

Chapter 10 Quotes

"Hey, look at that big spider!" [Avery] 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.

Related Characters: Avery Arable, Fern Arable (speaker), Charlotte , Wilbur

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 71-72

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Avery—who has been trapping snakes, frogs, and fish all summer and collecting them in his pockets—catches a glimpse of Charlotte hanging over the barn door and decides to capture her for himself. Fern, having overheard the animals' recent conversations, knows that Wilbur's very fate rests on Charlotte's ability to devise and execute a plan to save him. If Avery captures Charlotte, Charlotte won't be the only one who dies—Wilbur will be doomed, too. As Avery tries to close in on Charlotte, however, nature retaliates in its own fortuitous way—when he crushes the dud goose egg, it releases a terrible scent, scaring Avery away and sparing Charlotte's life. This passage reflects the fact that Avery and Fern both love the natural world but in very different ways: where Fern is happy to listen to and learn from nature, Avery seeks to capture and control it.

Chapter 11 Quotes

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.

[...]

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.

Related Characters: Homer Zuckerman, Lurvy (speaker), Charlotte , Wilbur

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 77-79

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Lurvy—the Zuckermans' hired man—and Homer Zuckerman himself catch a glimpse of Charlotte's first special web for the first time. They are stunned and a bit troubled by the miraculous writing on the web—their dumbfounded reactions please Charlotte, and let her know that her plan, still in its early stages, is already starting to work. Homer and Lurvy don't yet know what the web means, how it came to be, or that the "miracle" will be repeated several times before summer reaches its end—but they are star struck and speechless, and most important of all forced to confront that there is something exceptional going on amongst the animals on their farm. Charlotte's cleverness may save Wilbur—and also instill more respect in human beings for the complexities of nature that they often overlook.

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.

Related Characters: Wilbur, Charlotte , Fern Arable

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 84-85

Explanation and Analysis

As news of the web—and Wilbur's specialness—spread throughout the town, more and more visitors come to see him, and show up to church on the first Sunday after the web's debut to hear the minister deliver his thoughts on the event being widely hailed as a "miracle." As Fern listens to all the hubbub surrounding her animal friends, she is happy and feels excited to be in on the secret—but at the same time senses that things are changing not just for the animals, but for her as well. She will never be truly "alone" with them the way she was before. For a long time, Fern was the only one who saw how special they all were. Now that other people are coming around and starting to understand the dignity and value of Wilbur's life, Fern is no longer the only one who loves and appreciates him: she is just one of many.

Chapter 13 Quotes

"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.

"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."

Related Characters: Wilbur, Charlotte (speaker), Templeton

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 100-101

Explanation and Analysis

There are a lot of things at work in this passage, which occurs after Templeton brings back from a nearby shed a box of soap flakes which describes "new radiant action" guaranteed by its product. In order to determine if "radiant" is the right word to describe Wilbur, Charlotte orders Wilbur to do a series of jumps, flips, and tricks. Charlotte wants to make sure that the words she's writing about Wilbur are true—she wants to save his life, but she doesn't want to lie or exaggerate in her webs' proclamations. After the gauntlet of tricks, Charlotte is less than satisfied with Wilbur's "radiance"—but as a consequence of being allowed to show off, jump around, and have a little fun, Wilbur admits that he does in fact feel newly radiant. Charlotte is happy and surprised to see how her words and actions affect Wilbur. Her webs—and her desire to build them and spread the word about Wilbur's greatness—are convincing not just the humans around them of Wilbur's worth, but are

helping Wilbur to feel a renewed sense of self-confidence as well.

Chapter 14 Quotes

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."

[…]

"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. "Hmm. Remarkable. Well, I don't think you have anything to worry about. Let Fern associate with her friends in the bam 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."

Related Characters: Dr. Dorian, Mrs. Arable (speaker), Henry Fussy, Fern Arable

Related Themes:

Page Number: 110-111

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mrs. Arable plays a visit to the town doctor, Dr. Dorian, to ask him some questions about Fern. Mrs. Arable has been concerned all spring and summer about Fern's intense involvement with Wilbur and the other animals on the Zuckermans' farm, and worries that her daughter is not developing normally or growing up at the right speed. Dr. Dorian, though—like Mr. Arable—wonders whether Fern is actually gaining a different type of wisdom than her peers, and perhaps just growing up in a different way than the other children around her. Doctor Dorian also urges Mrs. Arable not to wish for Fern to grow up too quickly—he assures the woman that in time, her daughter will change right before her very eyes. This passage again reflects the novel's broader reverence for the complexity of the natural world, which it further suggests is something people all too often overlook. It also underscores the poignant nature of growing up, which will, indeed, eventually lead Fern away from Wilbur and her animal friends.

Chapter 18 Quotes

"What are you doing up there, Charlotte?"

"Oh, making something," she said. "Making something, as usual."

"Is it something for me?" asked Wilbur.

"No," said Charlotte. "It's something for *me*, for a change."

"Please tell me what it is," begged Wilbur.

"I'll tell you in the morning," she said. "When the first light comes into the sky and the sparrows stir and the cows rattle their chains, when the rooster crows and the stars fade, when early cars whisper along the highway, you look up here and I'll show you something. I will show you my masterpiece."

Related Characters: Charlotte , Wilbur (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 143

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Charlotte—who has, for weeks, been devoting most of her time and energy to coming up with ideas for new webs to advertise Wilbur's success and worth and then painstakingly weaving them—finally does something for herself. She is preparing to weave an egg sac and fill it with hundreds of eggs, which will hatch come the springtime. Wilbur is so used to Charlotte constantly scheming, working, and sacrificing on his behalf that he is surprised to find her devoting herself so passionately to something that has nothing to do with him—but Charlotte is adamant about reclaiming this time for herself, and even declares that the egg sac will be her "masterpiece," more beautiful and more personal an achievement than any of her webs. Though *Charlotte's Web* revolves heavily around friendship and sacrifice, in this passage, Charlotte stops her

sacrificing for a moment to take care of herself.

Chapter 19 Quotes

❝ The Zuckermans and the Arables stared at the tag. Mrs. Zuckerman began to cry. Nobody said a word. They just stared at the tag. Then they stared at Uncle. Then they stared at the tag again. Lurvy took out an enormous handkerchief and blew his nose very loud— so loud, in fact, that the noise was heard by stableboys over at the horse barn.

"Can I have some money?" asked Fern. "I want to go out on the midway."

"You stay right where you are!" said her mother. Tears came to Fern's eyes.

"What's everybody crying about?" asked Mr. Zuckerman. "Let's get busy! Edith, bring the buttermilk!"

Mrs. Zuckerman wiped her eyes with her handkerchief. She went to the truck and came back with a gallon jar of buttermilk.

"Bath time!" said Zuckerman, cheerfully.

Related Characters: Homer Zuckerman, Mrs. Arable, Fern Arable (speaker), Uncle, Wilbur, Lurvy, Mr. Arable, Aunt Edith Zuckerman

Related Themes:

Page Number: 150

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Zuckermans and Arables arrive at Wilbur's pen on the second day of the county fair to find some devastating news—Uncle has been awarded first prize, and Wilbur has lost. The members of the two families' reactions are important—Fern doesn't much care, as over the course of the summer she has grown up and detached herself from her preoccupation with Wilbur and all of the other animals, while Homer Zuckerman, who had presumably been raising Wilbur as meat for slaughter, doesn't care for a very different reason: he has come to love Wilbur so much and believe so deeply that he is truly the things Charlotte's webs say he is that the pig is valuable and special to him with or without a blue ribbon on his pen. This passage shows that there are many different kinds of "growing up" that can be done—and that Wilbur and Charlotte's campaign to prove Wilbur's worth to the Zuckermans has worked better than they ever hoped it would.

Chapter 20 Quotes

❝ "Ladeez and gentlemen," said the loud speaker, "we now present Mr. Homer L. Zuckerman's distinguished pig. The fame of this unique animal has spread to the far corners of the earth, attracting many valuable tourists to our great State."

[...]

"This magnificent animal," continued the loud speaker, "is truly terrific. Look at him, ladies and gentlemen! Note the smoothness and whiteness of the coat, observe the spotless skin, the healthy pink glow of ears and snout."

[...]

"Ladeez and gentlemen," continued the loud speaker, "I must not take any more of your valuable time. On behalf of the governors of the Fair, I have the honor of awarding a special prize of twenty-five dollars to Mr. Zuckerman, together with a handsome bronze medal suitably engraved, in token of our appreciation of the part played by this pig—this radiant, this terrific, this humble pig—in attracting so many visitors to our great County Fair."

Related Characters: Homer Zuckerman, Wilbur

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 157-158

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Wilbur is awarded a special prize at the county fair. Though he lost first prize to a larger pig named Uncle, the judges choose to award Wilbur and Mr. Homer Zuckerman a special award for all they have done to help the publicity and economy of the town and the county fair. In the end, then, E.B. White relays a somewhat cynical message about worth and recognition. Though Wilbur is truly all the things Charlotte's webs broadcasted him to be—terrific, radiant, and humble—in the end, his worth is determined through how much money and fame he has brought to the local economy. His worth is determined in human terms, and in showing this, White is questioning just what worth really is if it's measured in dollars and cents.

Chapter 21 Quotes

"Why did you do all this for me?" [Wilbur] asked. "I don't deserve it. I've never done anything for you."

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

Related Characters: Charlotte , Wilbur (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 164

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Wilbur, having just won a special prize at the county fair, asks his friend Charlotte why she has showed him so much kindness and sacrificed so much to ensure his survival. Charlotte's answer is a profound and complex one. She replies that she liked Wilbur and wanted him to live because she cared for him—but also admits that in helping him, she made herself feel good. In broadcasting Wilbur's worth to others, Charlotte herself was able to feel worthy and useful; in lifting Wilbur up, she was able to uplift herself. Charlotte has sacrificed much of her time and energy for Wilbur, but, in the end, she has gotten something out of it too—she has bolstered her own legacy and made her short life worthwhile. This reflects the novel's broader assertion of the power and importance of friendship.

He carefully took the little bundle in his mouth and held it there on top of his tongue. He remembered what Charlotte had told him—that the sac was waterproof and strong. It felt funny on his tongue and made him drool a bit. And of course he couldn't say anything. But as he was being shoved into the crate, he looked up at Charlotte and gave her a wink. She knew he was saying good-bye in the only way he could. And she knew her children were safe.

"Good-bye!" she whispered. Then she summoned all her strength and waved one of her front legs at him. She never moved again. Next day, as the Ferris wheel was being taken apart and the race horses were being loaded into vans and the entertainers were packing up their belongings and driving away in their trailers, Charlotte died. The Fair Grounds were soon deserted. The sheds and buildings were empty and forlorn. The infield was littered with bottles and trash. Nobody, of the hundreds of people that had visited the Fair, knew that a grey spider had played the most important part of all. No one was with her when she died.

Related Characters: Charlotte , Wilbur

Related Themes:

Page Number: 170-171

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Wilbur has grown distressed at the realization that Charlotte, not long for the world, will not make it back to the barn with him. Having grown up, though, due to Charlotte's advice and influence, Wilbur knows that the one thing he can do for Charlotte to repay her for all her help is to calmly help her get her egg sac back to the barn safe. As Wilbur leaves Charlotte behind, she fades away and dies. As the county fair is dissembled and packed up, suddenly unremarkable and forgotten, so too does Charlotte quietly slip out of existence unnoticed. Her life, though, was full of dignity and importance—even if that dignity was not recognized or appreciated by anyone other than the friend for whom she sacrificed her final days. Her quiet, poignant end reflects the novel's assertion that the natural world is full of wonder and complexity that human beings often fail to notice.

Chapter 22 Quotes

❝ As time went on, and the months and years came and went, [Wilbur] was never without friends. Fern did not come regularly to the barn any more. She was growing up, and was careful to avoid childish things, like sitting on a milk stool near a pigpen. But Charlotte's children and grandchildren and great grandchildren, year after year, lived in the doorway. Each spring there were new little spiders hatching out to take the place of the old. Most of them sailed away, on their balloons. But always two or three stayed and set up housekeeping in the doorway.

Mr. Zuckerman took fine care of Wilbur all the rest of his days, and the pig was often visited by friends and admirers, for nobody ever forgot the year of his triumph and the miracle of the web. Life in the barn was very good—night and day, winter and summer, spring and fall, dull days and bright days. It was the best place to be, thought Wilbur, this warm delicious cellar, with the garrulous geese, the changing seasons, the heat of the sun, the passage of swallows, the nearness of rats, the sameness of sheep, the love of spiders, the smell of manure, and the glory of everything. Wilbur never forgot Charlotte. Although he loved her children and grandchildren dearly, none of the new spiders ever quite took her place in his heart. She was in a class by herself. It is not often that someone comes along who is a true friend and a good writer. Charlotte was both.

Related Characters: Nellie, Joy, and Aranea , Goose and Gander, Templeton, Homer Zuckerman, Charlotte , Fern Arable, Wilbur

Related Themes:

Page Number: 183-184

Explanation and Analysis

In the novel's final passages, E.B. White shows just how profoundly Wilbur's life has been influenced by his pivotal friendship with Charlotte the spider. Even as his first friend Fern grows up and abandons her "childish" love of animals, Wilbur finds himself surrounded by friendship and love in the form of Charlotte's many descendants. Even though Wilbur is bolstered by their company, none of them can ever replace their ancestor Charlotte—a spider who sacrificed her life on Wilbur's behalf and showed him how rare true and meaningful friendship is. Wilbur's life is a long and happy one—and he thinks each day of how he owes his ability to experience the "glory" of his surroundings to Charlotte herself.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1: BEFORE BREAKFAST

One morning, as Fern Arable and her mother Mrs. Arable are setting the table for breakfast, Fern's father Mr. Arable heads out to the hoghouse with an ax. When Fern asks why he's bringing the weapon along, Mrs. Arable explains that a litter of pigs was born last night, and Mr. Arable is going outside to "do away" with the runt. Fern is angry and indignant, and though her mother tries to comfort her by telling her that the small pig would die anyway, Fern follows her father outside and tries to wrestle the ax from his hands as she cries. Mr. Arable protests that "a weakling makes trouble," but Fern begs Mr. Arable to be fair. She asks if her father would have killed her if she had been born little, and Mr. Arable tries to explain that "a little girl is one thing, [but] a little runty pig is another."

The novel opens with a strikingly stark and practical examination of life and death. Mr. Arable sees death as necessary and unremarkable, but to Fern, the idea of taking life from a living thing is a horrible injustice. Fern's commitment to honoring animal lives as deeply as human ones is a proxy for E.B. White's thematic message about the beauty of natural world and the dignity of all life.

Fern says she sees no difference between a girl and a pig, and suddenly a strange look comes over her father's face. Mr. Arable softens, and agrees to let the runt live—if Fern promises to take care of it and feed it from a bottle, "like a baby." Fern heads back up to the house, and a while later, Mr. Arable brings in a carton containing the runt. Fern loves the pig at first sight, even though her brother Avery makes fun of it for being as small as a rat. Fern feeds the pig his bottle of milk before eating her own breakfast.

Fern is devoted entirely to the piglet and even puts its needs before her own. Even though everyone else sees the animal only as a scrawny runt, Fern is almost reverent in her care and attention towards it, giving the pig the dignity and love she knows it deserves.

The school bus arrives, and Fern and Avery run out to the road to meet it. On the way to school, Fern is so lost in her "blissful" thoughts about her new pig that she hardly notices anyone or anything else. She decides to name the pig Wilbur—"the most beautiful name she [can] think of"—and daydreams about what life with him will be like all day long.

Fern is in love with her new little pig—she is unfocused on and uninterested in the human world, and much more devoted to the natural world and its creatures.

CHAPTER 2: WILBUR

Over the next few weeks, Fern dotes on Wilbur and shows him love, devotion, and attention. She feeds him before she eats at each meal, and as the days get warmer and Wilbur moves from his carton in the kitchen to a large wooden box full of straw outside, she spends hours sitting with him, "enchanted" by his every move. She sees the pig as her "baby," and often even puts him in her little toy carriage and pushes him around with her dolls.

Fern continues to love, care for, and even anthropomorphize Wilbur, treating him like a human and giving him the attention and dignity often only reserved for human animals.

The happy days roll past quickly, and soon Wilbur is five weeks old. Summer is coming, and Wilbur has grown large. Mr. Arable has begun to feel that Wilbur is becoming a burden to feed and house, and Mrs. Arable suggests Fern sell Wilbur to their neighbors and relatives, the Zuckermans—Fern's Uncle Homer often raises pigs. Fern agrees to the arrangement, and sells Wilbur to Homer and Edith Zuckerman for six dollars. Fern vows to visit Wilbur at his new home as often as she can.

Nature always runs its course, and soon Fern is reminded that as much as she'd like her little pig to be a real baby, it is, at the end of the day, an animal. Fern promises to continue caring for Wilbur just as intensely and to not let distance come between them.

CHAPTER 3: ESCAPE

Wilbur's new home in the Zuckermans' barn is sweet-smelling and roomy. Wilbur lives in the lower part of the barn, directly beneath the cows, in a manure pile. Fern, as promised, visits Wilbur almost every day, and sits on an old milking stool at the edge of his pen to think, listen, and watch Wilbur play. The geese, sheep, and other animals soon take to Fern, and though she's not allowed to enter Wilbur's pen, she's happy just to sit beside him for hours at a time.

Fern is true to her word. Even though Wilbur is living amongst the animals now, she still treats him like a beloved friend, and sacrifices her own time to stay with him and continue to be a part of his life.

One afternoon in June, Fern does not arrive on time for her visit. The bored and confused Wilbur walks out to the small yard outside the barn, complaining about how there's "never anything to do" at the Zuckermans'. He laments that at only two months old, he is "tired of living," relegated to being trapped in a small yard. A nearby goose with a nervous voice shows Wilbur a loose board in the fence and urges him to push through it. Once free, though, Wilbur is unsure of where to go or what to do. The goose tells him that he can go anywhere he wants, and Wilbur begins exploring the fields of the farm, jumping and skipping with glee.

This passage makes it clear that the animals in the barnyard, though relatively happy, still yearn for freedom. Their lives in the barn are constricted and contained, and the dream of being free to roam is alive in all of them—even Wilbur.

Soon, Edith notices that Wilbur has gotten out and calls for Lurvy, the hired man, to go and catch Wilbur. As news of Wilbur's escape spreads throughout the farm, the other animals grow excited and watch as Edith and Lurvy work together to try and lure Wilbur back to the barn. Wilbur is uncomfortable with all the attention, and regrets ever trying to get "free." The animals cheer Wilbur on as he dodges the humans, but eventually he tires of being the center of attention. When Edith entices him with a bucket of slops, Wilbur falls for the bait and returns to the pigpen, even as the animals urge him to "reconsider" and run away.

Wilbur shows here that he is different from all the other animals—though the instinct to chase freedom is alive within him, he longs for company and comfort more than the free reign he'd have in the wild.

As Wilbur eats his snack, Lurvy and Edith repair the loose board in the pen and comment on what a "good pig" Wilbur will make. Wilbur feels safe, warm, happy, and content again, and decides that he is perhaps "too young to go out into the world alone" as he lies down, exhausted, for an afternoon nap.

Wilbur's journey mirrors the journey of a human child—he is experimenting with what it means to be free, learning what being cared for is worth, and making choices for himself rather than for others' approval.

CHAPTER 4: LONELINESS

The next day is dark, rainy, and gloomy, and Wilbur's whole routine for the day—breakfast, talking with Templeton the rat, napping outdoors in the sun, digging holes, and watching the birds and insects—is ruined. Wilbur feels bored and intensely lonely, and begins crying about how monotonous and solitary most of his days are. He is so depressed that he barely even touches the breakfast of slops Lurvy lays out for him—he wants love, not food.

Wilbur is a social pig, and has grown dependent on the attention and affection he gets from Fern. Emotional and given to dramatic behavior, Wilbur experiences any slight or disappointment as a major event.

Wilbur asks the goose to play with him, but she insists she needs to sit on her eggs. Wilbur tries to play with a lamb who retorts that pigs "mean less than nothing" to her. Wilbur even tries to engage Templeton the rat, but Templeton insists he doesn't know what it means to "play." Wilbur, feeling "friendless, dejected, and hungry," throws himself into the manure and sobs. In the midst of his misery, though, a small voice comes out of the darkness of the barn, pitying Wilbur for his loneliness. The voice offers to be Wilbur's friend—Wilbur asks who is speaking to him, but the mysterious voice tells Wilbur to go to sleep; they'll meet "in the morning."

Wilbur craves friendship, love, and attention. When denied it, he becomes despondent—but when a strange voice calls out to him, just the prospect of making a new friend is enough to sustain him through a dark, lonely, rainy night.

CHAPTER 5: CHARLOTTE

The night is long and passes fitfully. Wilbur keeps waking up at every tiny sound, anticipating the morning and the chance to greet his new friend. As soon as the sun comes up, Wilbur rises and starts looking all over the barn for the source of the voice, but can't see anything new or strange. He calls out and asks for "the party who addressed [him] at bedtime" to "make himself or herself known," but the other animals only yell at Wilbur to quiet down. Wilbur eats breakfast and wonders where his friend could be.

Again, Wilbur's attempts to find himself a friend are met with harshness and exasperation. Wilbur is sweet, earnest, and desperate for connection—human-like traits that grate on the other barn animals and alienate Wilbur from them.

After eating, Wilbur settles back down for a morning nap—just then, the mysterious voice greets him once again with a cry of "Salutations!" Wilbur looks for the source of the voice, and at last finds it in the doorway to the barn. Stretched across the entrance is a large **spider web**, and hanging down from the top is a grey spider "the size of a gumdrop." The spider introduces herself as Charlotte A. Cavatica, but tells Wilbur to call her Charlotte.

A pig raised by humans and a barn spider are an unlikely pair—but in making Charlotte and Wilbur friends, White is pointing out that even the most mismatched individuals can offer one another something.

Charlotte begins wrapping up a fly that's gotten caught in her web, and explains to Wilbur, step by step, the process through which she catches and consumes her prey. As Charlotte wraps the fly in threat and bites him, paralyzing him, Wilbur is horrified to learn that Charlotte eats all sorts of insects, draining their blood to keep herself alive. Charlotte blithely states that she can't change her nature—spiders have always been "trappers," and she herself sees the practice of catching and eating prey as "clever." Charlotte points out that someone brings Wilbur all his meals—she has to "live by [her] wits" and "take what comes." Charlotte also points out that if she and others like her didn't kill and eat insects, they'd take over the world and "wipe out everything."

Wilbur is squeamish and naïve, and doesn't yet truly understand that the natural world can be as vicious as it is beautiful. Charlotte is matter-of-fact, though, as she defends her way of life, pointing out that different animals must get by in the world in different ways. She also shows Wilbur that death is often necessary, echoing Mr. Arable's matter-of-fact approach to the idea of slaughtering Wilbur himself earlier in the novel.

The goose overhears this conversation and thinks to herself what an innocent and naïve little pig Wilbur is. He doesn't even know, the goose thinks to herself, that "Mr. Zuckerman and Lurvy are plotting to kill him" for meat around Christmastime. The goose shifts herself around her eggs, trying to keep them all warm.

The goose's reaction and thought process in this passage shows how the things about the natural world which humans perceive as brutal are often just part of life for animals. The goose feels sad about Wilbur's impending death—but also knows that she needs to focus on securing the safety of her own brood.

As Charlotte eats the fly, Wilbur lies down and closes his eyes. He thinks about how though he has at last made a new friendship, the friend he's found is "fierce, brutal, scheming, [and] bloodthirsty." He worries that he'll never learn to like Charlotte—but doesn't yet know that she will soon "prove loyal and true to the very end."

Wilbur is learning more about the world around him. He is still skeptical of the brutality that comes with growing up in the world of animals—but so grateful for the warmth of a new friendship that he's willing to put his fears and judgements aside.

CHAPTER 6: SUMMER DAYS

Summer comes to the farm, and "the days grow warm and soft." Flowers bloom, and everywhere, children free from school frolic and play in the fields. Fern visits the barn almost every day to sit quietly on her stool and watch Wilbur—all the animals at the Zuckermans' treat her "as an equal." Fern and Avery often help Homer harvest hay for the barn and spend their afternoons diving into the soft bundles. Avery catches snakes and bugs in his pockets to bring home, and he and Fern drink the milk and nectar of various plants around the farm.

Just as Fern treats the barnyard animals as equals, they too treat her as one of their own, and regard her with esteem. Fern and Avery are deeply immersed in the natural world as summer descends, and clearly have great love and respect for it.

One day in early summer, the goose eggs hatch. Everyone congratulates the goose and the gander on their new goslings. As Templeton scopes out the situation, he sees that one egg has not hatched—the goose casually remarks that it's a "dud," and tells Templeton that he can take it away and have it for the collection of bits and bobs he hoards. The gander, though, warns Templeton that if he ever pokes his "ugly nose" around the new goslings, there will be trouble. The other animals often worry about Templeton, who has "no morals, no conscience [and] […] no milk of rodent kindness."

Even in the bliss of high summer, with the joy of new birth in the air, there is, for the animals, the constant threat of subterfuge and brutality. The animals of the barnyard have learned how to live with one another, and make deals and sacrifices to appease each other's natural instincts.

As Templeton starts to roll the egg away, Charlotte worries aloud about what will happen if it breaks—the smell of a broken rotten egg is "a regular stink bomb." Templeton assures everyone he'll take good care of the egg, and as he stores it in his hidey-hole beneath Wilbur's trough, the other barn animals coo and fuss over the baby goslings.

Even as the animals celebrate the goose and gander's new goslings, the threat of the dud egg—and the death it represents—lingers over the barnyard.

CHAPTER 7: BAD NEWS

Wilbur and Charlotte grow closer each day. He even learns to appreciate her diet, as it keeps flies away from him and the other farm animals. As Wilbur's admiration for Charlotte grows, so does his girth—he becomes larger, gaining weight and sleeping almost all the time. One afternoon, an old sheep makes a comment on Wilbur's weight, and warns him sadly that Homer, Edith, and Lurvy are fattening him up so they can kill him and "turn [him] into smoked bacon." Wilbur becomes hysterical, running around the barn screaming about how he doesn't want to die.

Wilbur is beginning to accept some of the nastier parts of life among the animals—but when the old sheep reveals that Wilbur himself is not exempt from the cruelties of nature and the circle of life, he becomes despondent.

Charlotte urges Wilbur to be quiet. Wilbur asks Charlotte if what the old sheep has said is true. Charlotte, who has not been around very long, says she trusts the old sheep's word. As Wilbur throws himself on the ground, keening and crying, Charlotte urges the pig to pull himself together—she promises that she will find a way to save him.

Though Wilbur is unable to think straight when he hears the news about his owners' plans for him, Charlotte keeps her head and begins thinking practically right away about how to keep Wilbur both calm and safe.

CHAPTER 8: A TALK AT HOME

One Sunday morning, Mr. Arable and Mrs. Arable are sitting at the breakfast table with Fern. She tells them excitedly about the goings-on over at the Zuckermans' farm, and relays the conversations she's been having with her animal friends. Both Mr. and Mrs. Arable are concerned by Fern's belief that she can communicate with the spiders, and off-put by the quirky personality traits she ascribes each of the barnyard animals.

Fern's ability to overhear the animals and learn about their lives and thoughts has been up to this point in the novel a beautiful thing taken for granted as fact. Fern's parents, though, question her abilities and doubt whether spending all her time with animals is good for her.

When Fern goes up to her room to get ready for Sunday school, Mrs. Arable expresses her worry about Fern's "rambl[ings]," but Mr. Arable assures his wife that Fern simply has a "lively imagination." Mrs. Arable wonders if she should talk to Dr. Dorian about Fern, but Mr. Arable simply wonders if their ears "aren't as sharp as Fern's."

Though Mrs. Arable believes that something is wrong with Fern, Mr. Arable is willing to concede that perhaps, even though Fern is a child, she is party to a kind of wisdom the two of them will never know.

CHAPTER 9: WILBUR'S BOAST

As the days pass by, Charlotte weaves and re-weaves her **webs** each time one of her prey disturbs its threads. Wilbur admires Charlotte's hard work and special talents, and begins wishing that he could spin a web, too. Charlotte amusedly begins instructing Wilbur in the steps while Fern chuckles along. Wilbur jumps around the barn with a piece of string borrowed from Templeton tied to his tail He has fun at first, but soon grows frustrated and begins to cry when he falls in front of all the other animals after jumping off a bale of hay. Wilbur admits that he just wants to be as clever as Charlotte, and was trying to show off.

Wilbur loves Charlotte so much that he longs to be like her. It's not just that Charlotte is smart and dexterous—it's that she is wise, calm, and mature in ways Wilbur is not. In trying to emulate his friend, Wilbur demonstrates just how much he admires Charlotte and wants to learn from her.

As twilight settles over the barn, Fern knows it is getting near time to leave, but can hardly "bear" leaving her friends. As the pleasant sounds and smells of dusk fill the bar, Wilbur remembers the old sheep's warning, and whispers to Charlotte that he doesn't want to die—he loves "everything about this place." Charlotte reminds Wilbur of her promise—she is not going to let him die and is hard at work on a plan for how to save him.

Even though Wilbur has learned more and more this summer about the cruelty and brutality of the natural world, he still finds his life beautiful and longs to keep living it.

Wilbur asks if he can do anything to help with the plan, and Charlotte encourages Wilbur to eat a lot, get plenty of sleep, stay healthy, and stop worrying. After going back out to his trough to eat some scraps, Wilbur bids Charlotte goodnight—still nervous about his fate. Fern heads for home as Wilbur settles in for the evening, "her mind full of everything she ha[s] seen and heard."

Wilbur is not the only one feeling both disturbed and helpless in the face of his impending death—Fern, too, is getting nervous about her friend's fate but is unsure of how to help.

CHAPTER 10: AN EXPLOSION

Day after day, Charlotte sits in her **web** deep in thought, trying to come up with a way to save Wilbur. Charlotte is "naturally patient," and never stresses or worries. Very early one morning, in the middle of July, the "perfectly simple" idea comes to her—she has come up with a way to fool the "gullible" humans. As Charlotte watches Wilbur sleep, she knows she must act quickly—summer is half gone, and Charlotte doesn't "have much time" left.

Charlotte's calm and patient nature comes in handy in this passage as she confronts the fact of her own imminent mortality. Charlotte knows her lifespan is short—but is determined to make the most of what time she does have left, and devote it all to saving Wilbur.

Later that morning, Fern and Avery come to the Zuckermans' and go up to the house to join Edith for pie. Avery has a frog in his hand and Fern is wearing a daisy chain in her hair. When the frog gets loose in the kitchen and hops around, Edith shoos the children from the house, and they run off to the barn to swing on the giant rope which hangs from the ceiling. After tiring of swinging, the children spend some time exploring the fields and eating berries, and then Fern heads back up to the barn to spend time with Wilbur. Avery joins her, and when he sees Charlotte hanging from the barn door, he becomes determined to catch her. Fern begs Avery to stop, but he begins climbing up on Wilbur's through to reach her **web**.

Fern and Avery love the natural world deeply, but in very different ways. Fern longs to appreciate it and adorn herself with it, while Avery wants to possess it and control it. He collects animals and tries to keep them in his pockets—and when he tries to claim Charlotte as his new prize, he is unaware of the careful balance he's disturbing in doing so.

Just as Avery is about to catch Charlotte, Wilbur's trough tips over—crushing Templeton's goose egg and releasing a horrible stink into the air. Avery runs away, laughing, and Fern follows him, clutching her nose and crying. The smell—and the story behind it—spread quickly across the farm, and all the animals lament the stench. When Lurvy comes out to bring Wilbur his dinner, he smells the rotten egg and discovers Templeton's nest. He kicks dirt into the hole, burying all of Templeton's possessions, and feeds Wilbur.

This passage shows how sometimes—just sometimes—nature conspires to protect itself. Though Avery's releasing of the "stink bomb" is a happy accident, the destruction of the egg serves to save Charlotte. This scene also how little care humans may have for the natural world, as Lurvy so quickly destroys Templeton's nest.

Wilbur laps up all of his food, and by the time he is finished, the stench in the barn has diminished somewhat due to Lurvy's burying off the egg. That evening, as the other animals begin to drowse and drop off into sleep, Charlotte sets to work. She tears out a section in the middle of her **web** and starts weaving something new in its place.

Perhaps motivated by her own close brush with death, Charlotte diligently sets to work on her plan to save Wilbur.

CHAPTER 11: THE MIRACLE

The next morning is foggy and wet, and the farm is covered in dew. Charlotte's **web** is "a thing of beauty," and each strand shines with beads of water. When Lurvy comes out to the barn with Wilbur's breakfast he stops short at the sight of it—not just because it is beautiful, but because two words have been woven into the web. At its center, in capital letters, Charlotte has written out: "SOME PIG!" Lurvy feels weak and faint, unsure of whether he's "seeing things." Forgetting all about Wilbur's breakfast, Lurvy goes back up to the house to fetch Homer—he says there's something the man needs to see. Together, they return to the barn and look at the web. At the sight of the words, they both start to "tremble," and the proud Charlotte looks on.

As Charlotte's plan makes itself known, it becomes clear just how important saving Wilbur's life is to her. She is sacrificing her time, her energy, and indeed her own living space on Wilbur's behalf—and is proud and happy to find that her plan is working, and the "gullible" humans are falling into her web just like the flies she catches as prey.

Homer goes back up to the house to tell Edith what's going on. He says they have received a "sign" about their "unusual pig." Homer declares that a "miracle has happened on [the] farm," and when he tells Edith about the **web**, she suggests they go take a look at the spider. Edith and Homer go down to the barn and look at Charlotte, who sits completely still as she feels them observing her.

There is some confusion among the humans as to whether the miraculous "sign" says more about the spider who wove it or the pig of which it speaks. What is clear to them, though, is that the natural world is full of more mysteries and miracles than they'd ever allowed themselves to see.

As they all head back up to the house, Homer tells Edith and Lurvy that he's "thought all along" that Wilbur is an "extra good" pig. The three of them agree that Wilbur is indeed "some pig." After changing into a suit, Homer goes to see the local minister and explain what has happened on the farm. The minister urges him to keep the news quiet while he thinks on what it means—he hopes he'll be able to talk about the incident in his sermon next Sunday, and tell the whole community about the Zuckermans' wonderful pig.

Charlotte's plan begins to work in earnest in this passage as the humans all begin talking, for the first time, about how special Wilbur really is. As the Zuckermans begin telling other people about the "miracle," news of Wilbur's worth spreads, further aiding Charlotte's mission to get people talking about him and seeing him as more than just meat.

Well before Sunday, however, word about the **web** has spread, and people begin coming from miles around to visit the Zuckerman farm and get a look not at the web but at their "wondrous pig." Homer is constantly busy entertaining friends and visitors, and he and Lurvy begin shaving more often and dressing in fine clothes. Homer instructs Lurvy to feed Wilbur four times a day instead of three, and in all the fuss over Wilbur, they even forget about their other duties on the farm.

Already, Charlotte's web is having a more far-reaching impact than she could have foreseen. Everyone's lives are being impacted by the effects of her web—and best of all, her goal of elevating Wilbur's worth in the eyes of his owners is coming to fruition.

That Sunday, church is full, and the minister instructs his parishioners to "always be on the watch for the coming of wonders." As Fern sits in church listening, she feels happy and relieved—Charlotte's plan is working. At the same time, she feels wistful, and misses when the Zuckermans' barn was ordinary and empty, and she could be "alone with her friends the animals."

Everything is changing—and Fern is feeling conflicted about how rapidly her little world is shifting. Though she's happy other people are seeing worth and wonder in the animal world, she longs for the days when she was the only one who understood just how special Wilbur and his friends all are.

CHAPTER 12: A MEETING

One evening, Charlotte calls a meeting of all the barn animals. She takes a roll call and finds that everyone is present except for Templeton. Charlotte announces that she has called the meeting in order to get suggestions from the other animals—she needs new ideas for another web in order to keep the momentum going and ensure that Wilbur's life is safe. The goose suggests writing "terrific" in the web, and Charlotte agrees that the word will impress Homer.

The effort to save Wilbur's life has been recognized by the human world—and thus Charlotte feels she needs to work even harder to keep her plans in motion. She enlists the help of the other animals now, too, and they gladly agree to help—they are all willing to sacrifice their time and energy for Wilbur.

There is one problem with the new idea—none of the animals know how to spell the word terrific. As they debate the spelling, Templeton returns to the barn, and the old sheep asks him if he'd be willing to bring back some newspaper or magazine clippings the next time he goes to the dump so that Charlotte can get more ideas—and the correct spelling—for new words. Templeton says he doesn't want to help, as he doesn't care if Wilbur lives or dies, but the sheep points out that Templeton will be sorry if Wilbur dies and there are no leftovers for Templeton to eat. Templeton reluctantly agrees to help the cause.

Templeton represents self-interest and greed. He is only interested in helping out the cause when there's something in it for him. Even though the other animals are excited to help Charlotte and Wilbur because they believe Wilbur's life should be saved, Templeton only cares about himself. All of the other animals have been able to overcome their drive for self-preservation above all else and help out the greater good—except for Templeton.


Charlotte adjourns the meeting and starts working on the web. Wilbur worries aloud, once again, that he is not terrific, but Charlotte sweetly tells him that she thinks he, her best friend, is "sensational."

Even when Wilbur doesn't feel he's worthy of everyone's time and attention, Charlotte assures him that he is.

CHAPTER 13: GOOD PROGRESS

Charlotte works hard on her **web** all through the night while the other barn animals sleep all around her. The process is long and boring, and Charlotte talks to herself "as though to cheer herself on" as she spells out the long word "terrific."

Charlotte undertook her last web with unreserved gusto. This web, though, poses a greater challenge, and she finds herself feeling weary, tired, and in need of motivation.

The next morning, when Lurvy arrives to bring Wilbur his breakfast, he is shocked to see Wilbur standing under the **web**, which now spells out "TERRIFIC." He calls Edith and Homer to show them the new "miracle," and then the Zuckermans call the Arables to tell them the news. Word of the new web spreads throughout town. That afternoon, Homer is overcome by what a "wonderful pig" Wilbur is, and instructs Lurvy to start using straw rather than manure for Wilbur's bedding. He also tells Lurvy that he wants him to build a crate for Wilbur, and to paint he words "Zuckerman's Famous Pig" on the side of it—Homer has decided to take Wilbur to the county fair in September.

Charlotte's plan is working in earnest now. Wilbur is not just a miraculous attraction any longer—his owners are beginning to recognize his worth outside of his appeal to others, and see that he really is as "terrific" as Charlotte is urging them to believe he is.

Templeton returns from the dump with some advertisements for Charlotte to look at. The words on the ads include "crunchy"—an unsuitable word that Charlotte worries would only remind the Zuckermans of bacon—and "pre-shrunk." Templeton goes to fetch some soap flakes from the woodshed—their box has writing on it. The box advertises "new radiant action," and Charlotte asks Wilbur to show off some radiant action. After his romp, Wilbur does indeed feel radiant.

This passage shows that Charlotte is truly determined to select the perfect words for Wilbur. She doesn't want to tell the Zuckermans, through her webs, that he's anything other than what he is—she wants to know if he really can be radiant, and thus worthy of being broadcasted as such.

As Wilbur settles in to sleep, he asks Charlotte to tell him a story. She begins telling him about a cousin of hers who once caught a fish in his web by weaving it across a river. The story is so great that Wilbur begs for another, and Charlotte tells him about another of her cousins: an "aeronaut" and "balloonist" who traveled the world by spinning out some thread and letting the wind pick it up and carry her all over. Charlotte then sings Wilbur a lullaby whose words urge him to sleep and ease his worries—things are going to be okay.

Charlotte's fantastical stories about her family's displays of intrepidness, bravery, and innovation show that Charlotte isn't the only spider who's tested the limits of what spiders can do—and how animals can make their way in the world.

CHAPTER 14: DR. DORIAN

The next day, Fern is helping her mother with the dishes. She tells Mrs. Arable all about Charlotte and Wilbur—the beautiful friendship they have, and the stories Charlotte often shares. Mrs. Arable tells Fern that animals can't talk, and accuses her of making all her barnyard stories up. Mrs. Arable urges Fern to play outside with Avery and their schoolmates rather than spending all her time "alone" in the barn. Fern insists, though, that she isn't alone—the animals make the barn a "very sociable place." Fern finishes the dishes and goes off to the Zuckermans'. Mrs. Arable decides that it is time to pay a visit to Dr. Dorian, and heads into town to his office.

Even though Fern assures her mother that she's happy in the barn, and that she isn't feeling lonely at all, Mrs. Arable thinks there's something unnatural about Fern shirking the human world. She wants for her daughter to grow up amongst people like her, and to participate in the "real" world—she doesn't understand that Fern is indeed learning important lessons from her animal friends every day.

At Dr. Dorian's office, the doctor listens as Mrs. Arable airs her fears about Fern's abnormal involvement with the animals at the Zuckerman farm. Dr. Dorian is not concerned, though—he says that Fern must be having an "enchanting" time at the barn with the famous pig Wilbur and all of his other barnyard friends. Dr. Dorian has heard the news about the mysterious **webs** on the farm, and points out that it's not the words appearing on them that are a "miracle"—the miracle is the web itself. Dr. Dorian admits that even as a doctor, he doesn't know a lot about the mysteries of life—he concedes that he can't discount Fern's tales of talking animals, as "perhaps if people talked less, animals would talk more."

Dr. Dorian is more in Mr. Arable's camp than Mrs. Arable's. He, too, believes that Fern's involvement with the animals is actually healthy for her, and that she's perhaps even learning things from them that the human world could never offer her. This reflects the importance of cultivating respect for and appreciation of the natural world.

Dr. Dorian assures Mrs. Arable that as long as Fern is happy, healthy, and feeling well, she is more than fine. Dr. Dorian tells Mrs. Arable that Fern, a girl of eight, will probably be much more interested in playing with her human friends—and boys like her classmate Henry Fussy—soon enough, but her childhood and its fancies shouldn't be rushed. "It's amazing how children," he says, "change from year to year." At the end of the visit, Mrs. Arable leaves his office feeling relieved.

Mrs. Arable is relieved after talking to the doctor, and willing to allow her daughter a little more agency in her decisions. Mrs. Arable hasn't been convinced of the benefits of a life immersed in nature by nature itself, though, but rather by another human. As the novel goes on, Mrs. Arable's preconceptions about nature will be challenged, and she herself will be forced into a kind of growing up.

CHAPTER 15: THE CRICKETS

As the long days of summer wind down, crickets all across the countryside sing a song mourning the season's end. The animals wonder when the first frosts will arrive, and are sad summer has come to a close. Even humans, like Fern and Avery and Lurvy, hear the crickets' song, and know the heady, hazy days of vacation will soon be over.

E.B. White looks at the unstoppable progression of the seasons through the eyes of his characters. The changing seasons suggest a poignant reminder of mortality.

Wilbur is the center of attention on the farm and has grown to be a large and beautiful pig. More and more people have come to see the "radiant" animal, and Wilbur has been trying to live up to the words Charlotte has woven for him in her **webs**. Wilbur tries to show off and look pretty for the audiences who come to see him, but remains modest and quiet in private. He still fears that he will be killed by men, and often dreams of people chasing him with knives—but in the daytime, surrounded by his friends, he comes to learn that "friendship is one of the most satisfying things in the world." Wilbur is looking forward to the chance to "distinguish himself" at the county fair, and cement Homer's commitment to keeping him alive.

Wilbur still has some fears about his fate, but has been feeling better about things on the whole both because of the attention he's received from the humans who come to see him and from his barnyard friends, who support his cause and champion his worth at every turn.

One evening, Wilbur asks Charlotte if she'll be coming along to the fair, but she's unable to give him a straight answer. She replies that the fair comes at a "bad time for [her]," and that it will soon be "inconvenient" for her to leave the barn. Wilbur begs Charlotte to come along, but she protests that she has a lot of hard work coming up—she has to make an egg sac and fill it with eggs. Wilbur pleads with Charlotte, asking her to come to the fair and lay her eggs at the fairgrounds. Charlotte tells Wilbur that she can't promise him anything—she has to be ready to lay her eggs at a moment's notice—but urges him not to worry about things. As Wilbur happily goes about his evening, Charlotte worries, knowing that she won't be able to help Wilbur much longer.

Charlotte has made sacrifice after sacrifice for Wilbur, and is beginning to feel worn out and deprived of her own time. Charlotte is the character most attuned to the rhythms of the natural world—and the banality of life and death—and knows that in the limited time she has left there is only so much she can do. She has to decide whether she will continue to devote her life to Wilbur, or take some much-needed time for herself.

CHAPTER 16: OFF TO THE FAIR

The night before the county fair, everyone goes to bed early to get enough rest—humans and animals alike—but find that their dreams are full of fantasies of the fair. Lurvy dreams of playing games and winning prizes, while Homer dreams that Wilbur has grown to a giant size and won every prize. The animals are excited, too, and have a restless evening in the barn. In the morning, everyone starts getting ready. Fern and Avery take baths and put on their best clothes, as do their parents. Lurvy fills Wilbur's crate with fresh straw, and Edith gives Wilbur a buttermilk bath to make his filthy coat clean and shiny. Wilbur feels more "radiant" than ever after his bath, and his ears and snout shine pink and smooth as silk.

The fair is just as exciting to the humans as it is to the animals, and in the build-up to the event, E.B. White takes another opportunity to show how humans and animals are not so different after all. The air of excitement and anticipation in this passage is undercut by the sadness of Charlotte's dwindling lifespan—and the fear that Wilbur may yet be killed for the enjoyment of his human caretakers.

Edith and Homer head back up to the house to finish getting ready while the animals discuss who's going to the fair and who's staying behind. Charlotte, surprisingly, announces her intention to go along. Templeton says he has no interest in the fair, but when the old sheep tells him it's a "rat's paradise" full of food scraps and discarded junk, he becomes determined to go. Charlotte and Templeton hurriedly stow themselves away in Wilbur's crate, and warn him to put on a show of struggling when he's loaded into the crate so that the Zuckermans don't get suspicious or think Wilbur is "bewitched."

Just as he has several times throughout the novel, Templeton is only motivated to participate in the other animals' world when there's something in it for him. Whether or not Templeton will ever learn what it means to make a sacrifice on someone's behalf remains to be seen.

The Arables arrive to go with the Zuckermans to the fair, and everyone admires Wilbur's shiny new appearance—especially Fern, who thinks fondly of the day he was born. As Mr. Arable studies Wilbur, he tells Homer that he'll probably "get some good ham and bacon" when it comes time to kill Wilbur. At these words, Wilbur faints, sinking to his knees in the straw. Lurvy runs for a pail of water and throws it onto Wilbur as the Arables and Zuckermans fret, fuss, and argue about what's wrong with the pig.

Even though Wilbur has been feeling secure in Charlotte's plan's efficacy and pampered by Homer, Mr. Arable's comment throws him off his guard and shakes him to his core. Wilbur has been receiving praise and special treatment—but now he fears that his life is still not safe.

Once Wilbur gets to his feet, he is too exhausted to put on a show of struggle as he's loaded into the crate by Lurvy, Homer, and Mr. Arable. As the Zuckermans and Arables climb into the truck and set off, the barnyard animals all cheer for Wilbur and wish him good luck at the fair.

Everyone is excited for Wilbur to get off on his adventure, oblivious to the threat that still hangs over his head.

CHAPTER 17: UNCLE

The scene at the fair is jovial and bustling as the Zuckermans and the Arables arrive. The Ferris wheel is turning, and the smell of hamburgers fills the air. Mr. Arable and Mrs. Arable give the overexcited Fern and Avery some money to go off by themselves and play games, and the two children run off into the hubbub dreaming of rides, prizes, and treats. As Mr. and Mrs. Arable watch Fern and Avery get lost in the crowd, Mrs. Arable worries whether they'll be all right, but Mr. Arable answers that "they've got to grow up some time."

Though Mrs. Arable has been concerned for much of the novel that Fern isn't growing up fast enough, as her little girl heads out into the hustle and bustle of the fair, Mrs. Arable feels a twinge of anxiety and sadness that her daughter is indeed going to grow up sooner than later.

Crowds gather to watch as Wilbur is unloaded from his crate into his new pig pen. The pen is shady and grassy, and Wilbur is happy. Charlotte scurries up onto the roof of a nearby shed, but Templeton stays hidden in the crate, biding his time until evening. The Zuckermans and Arables go off to see the sights, leaving Charlotte and Wilbur alone. Charlotte tells Wilbur that she's worried: there is a pig in the next pen over, and he's "enormous"—much bigger than Wilbur. The indignant Wilbur begins to cry, and Charlotte goes off to get a closer look at the rival pig.

While Charlotte approaches the threat of a large neighboring pig with a clear, calm head, Wilbur is given to his usual drama and hysterics. He still has a lot of growing up to do, even though he's already come so far.

Charlotte drops into the pig's pen and engages him in conversation. He says he has no name, but asks to be called "Uncle." Uncle confirms that he is a spring pig, no older than Wilbur, and then Charlotte takes her leave of him. She returns to Wilbur and reports that though she doesn't much like Uncle, "he's going to be a hard pig to beat." Charlotte, though, has a plan to help Wilbur win first prize anyway. Wilbur asks when she'll spin a **web**, and Charlotte says she'll get to it later in the afternoon—but admits that she's feeling tired all the time lately, and is running out of energy. Wilbur takes a closer look at Charlotte and sees that she does indeed look "swollen and [...] listless."

Charlotte does not diminish the threat Uncle presents—but also doesn't allow it to defeat her and Wilbur outright. Instead she doubles down and commits to seeing her plan through—even though she's feeling tired and worn out, and seems to be nearing the end of her short life.

Throughout the day, as people mill about around Wilbur and Uncle's pens, Wilbur overhears them making remarks about how large Uncle is and grows worried about his chances of winning. At noon, Fern and Avery return from their romp and the whole family sits down for a picnic. Wilbur overhears them discussing when the judges are due to make their decision on which pig will take first prize—Homer says the announcement won't be made until tomorrow.

The atmosphere is happy but nerve-wracking as the first day of the fair speeds by. Wilbur truly believes that his fate hinges on whether or not he is chosen as the first-prize winner, and anxious to know whether all of Charlotte's hard work on his behalf will pay off.

CHAPTER 18: THE COOL OF THE EVENING

After the sun starts to set and the fairgrounds grow dark and shadowy, Templeton creeps out of Wilbur's crate and begins exploring. As he sets out, Charlotte, who has started weaving a new **web**, calls out to him to "bring [her] back a word"—she tells him that she is "writing tonight for the last time." The cool of the evening is welcome, and as the Ferris wheel's lights illuminate the night, Fern meets up with her friend Henry Fussy and rides it alongside him. As Mrs. Arable catches sight of Fern and Henry up at the top of the wheel, she feels happiness and relief that Fern is making friends.

This passage shows how the human world and the animal world exist alongside each other. Humans and animals delight in similar things—a cool evening, a new experience—and are not as different as one might think they are. Fern's burgeoning friendship with Henry Fussy signals that she is, however, leaving behind her preoccupation with the natural world, and giving herself over to the human one—she may even forget the lessons she has learned during her time with the animals.

Templeton raids the fairgrounds for scraps of food, and then brings Charlotte a piece of newspaper. The word on it is "humble," and Charlotte determines that it is the perfect word as it means both "not proud" and "near the ground"—both things describe Wilbur. Templeton heads back out to the fairgrounds to "make a night of it," knowing it will be a night of feasting he'll remember for the rest of his life.

Templeton helps Charlotte out only begrudgingly—he is a selfish creature, determined to provide only for himself and be beholden to no one.

Charlotte gets back to work and finishes her **web**, but in the dark of the night, no one notices. The Zuckermans and Arables pile into the truck and drive home for the night, and Wilbur feels grateful to have Charlotte's company in their absence. As he drifts off to sleep, he asks Charlotte to sing him a song, but she says she can't—she is too tired. Wilbur notices that her voice isn't coming from her web, and he is shocked that she has left it—she almost never does. Wilbur asks Charlotte if she thinks he'll really be allowed to live, and Charlotte replies that after Wilbur's big win tomorrow, there will be nothing to fear.

Though Charlotte is feeling tired and worn out, she continues to bolster Wilbur's confidence and reassure him in times of worry. She is a true friend, and her devotion to him even in a difficult moment in her own life shows just how much she cares for him.

Wilbur asks Charlotte what she's doing, and she says only that she's "making something." When Wilbur asks if it's something for him, Charlotte replies that she's making something for herself "for a change." She tells Wilbur that in the morning, she will show him her "masterpiece."

Charlotte acknowledges in this passage—for the first time, and with a slightly snappish energy—that with as much work as she's been doing for Wilbur, she should be allowed to have at least a small something to herself.

CHAPTER 19: THE EGG SAC

In the morning, as the birds begin to sing, Wilbur wakes up and looks around for Charlotte. When he spots her, he sees that she looks small and wan—beside her, though is a "curious object" which looks a lot like "cotton candy." When Wilbur asks Charlotte what the object is, she says it's her "magnum opus"—her greatest work. It is an egg sac full of five hundred and fourteen eggs. Wilbur compliments Charlotte's hard work and craftsmanship, and says he's looking forward to meeting all her children. Charlotte wistfully tells him they won't "show up" until the spring. When Wilbur asks Charlotte what's troubling her, she tells him not to pay attention to her—she's just feeling sad because she "won't ever see her children."

Though Charlotte has spent most of the novel working on Wilbur's behalf, in laying the egg sac, she has at last done something for herself—and yet the act seems born out of instinct, and its completion appears to have depleted Charlotte's energy. She knows she is not long for the world, and though nature dictates she must perpetuate her species, she is feeling weary and saddened about her role in the circle of life in this moment.

Charlotte explains to Wilbur that she is "slowing up" and "feeling her age"—but she doesn't want him to worry about her, as today is his special day. She urges him to take a look at the **web**, and as Wilbur peers at it, he thinks it's her most beautiful one yet, dazzling in the morning dew. As Wilbur admires the web, a bloated Templeton drags himself across the yard of the pen, returned from a night of feasting. He informs Wilbur that on his way back in he saw a blue ribbon hanging on Uncle's pen, and cruelly states that he wouldn't be surprised if, in the wake of Wilbur's loss, "Zuckerman changes his mind" about killing Wilbur. Charlotte urges the worried Wilbur to pay Templeton no mind.

This passage represents one of the novel's most intense moments of tension and worry. Charlotte is in decline, and Wilbur is concerned that Charlotte's work has all been for nothing in the end—Uncle has won, and Wilbur's worth and glory perhaps won't be recognized.

A little later, the Arables and Zuckermans arrive at the fairgrounds. Fern leaps out of the truck and points out the web, which has been woven to include the word "humble." Everyone "rejoice[s]" at "the miracle of the web," and Wilbur tries to look as humble as possible. As Lurvy feeds Wilbur, though, Avery points out the blue tag on Uncle's pen. The family is devastated, and Mrs. Arable even starts crying. Homer, though, remains cheerful as ever, and gives Wilbur yet another buttermilk bath. As he bathes the pig, fairgoers stop to look at Wilbur and comment on how clean and shiny he is. As the day goes by, more and more people express admiration for the "humble" Wilbur, even though Uncle is the bigger pig.

Even though Uncle has won the top prize, Homer does not love Wilbur any less or show any disappointment in him. Charlotte's plan has worked—in pointing out the different ways in which Wilbur is special and worthy, she has shown his owners that he is worth of dignity, respect, and care.

At the end of the morning, a voice on the loudspeaker calls Homer Zuckerman and his "famous pig" to the judges' booth, where a "special announcement" will soon be made. The Arables and the Zuckermans are so excited they can hardly move, but as reality settles in, they scramble and struggle to get Wilbur ready to face the judges. In the midst of all the commotion around Wilbur, though, a wistful Fern stares up at the Ferris wheel, wishing she were "in the topmost car with Henry Fussy at her side."

Even as the excitement regarding Wilbur mounts to a fever pitch, Fern finds herself feeling detached from the events of the animal world and more focused on her new friends in the human one. Just as Dr. Dorian predicted, she is growing up in her own time.

CHAPTER 20: THE HOUR OF TRIUMPH

At the judges' table, the fair managers announce that Wilbur is going to receive a "special award." Wilbur trembles, feeling "happy but dizzy." Together, the men help to unload Wilbur from his crate. Fern spots Henry Fussy and begs to go off and play with him—Mrs. Arable gives her forty cents and shoos her away from all the commotion.

As Wilbur's moment of triumph nears, Fern—who has grown up considerably in just a few short months—is more interested in her human friends than she is in seeing Wilbur's journey through. This reflects the inevitable march of time and nature of growing up.

Back at the pen, Charlotte listens to the loudspeaker calmly and happily, determined to enjoy her "hour of triumph." She hears the announcer present the Zuckermans' "distinguished pig" and laud his role in "attracting many valuable tourists" to the area—and the fair especially. The judges tell the gathered fairgoers that Wilbur is indeed "some pig," and celebrate how "terrific," "radiant," and indeed "humble" he is. The judges present Homer with a prize of twenty-five dollars, plus a special bronze medal. Wilbur, dizzied by all the praise, faints to the ground as the crowd erupts in cheers. Lurvy goes for a pail of water, but the cunning Templeton—who has come to see the spectacle—bites Wilbur on the tail, waking him from his "spell." As the judge ties the medal around Wilbur's neck, he blushes—the proud Homer Zuckerman feels that this is the "greatest moment" of his life.

In this passage, White takes a somewhat cynical view of Wilbur and Charlotte's triumph. Everyone agrees that Wilbur is special—but his worth is only cemented due to the fact that he brought tourism and material wealth to the area. His worth is being measured in human terms, and the people all around him still have trouble understanding the inherent dignity of all animal life—regardless of their contribution to the world of human beings.

CHAPTER 21: LAST DAY

After returning Wilbur to his pen, everyone goes off to find Fern, and Charlotte and Wilbur are left alone. Wilbur is happy and proud of the medal around his neck, but Charlotte is silent. When Wilbur asks her why she's being so quiet, she tells him that she feels tired—but peaceful, and grateful for Wilbur's success (which she sees, in part, as her success, too.) Charlotte is grateful that she has assured Wilbur's security and happiness—no one will harm him now, and he will "live to enjoy the beauty of the frozen world," and even the seasons to come.

Though Charlotte is quiet and clearly in pain, she is satisfied and happy—she has achieved the goal she set for herself, and has saved her friend. She always knew that her lifespan would be a short one, and in the brief time she had, wanted to ensure that Wilbur would live to see all the things she never would.

At Charlotte's beautiful description of the seasons and their changing, Wilbur becomes tearful and emotional. He asks what he ever did to deserve all of her help—he feels he hasn't done enough for her in return. Charlotte assures Wilbur, though, that his just being her friend is more than enough. In helping Wilbur, she has "lift[ed] up her life a trifle."

This passage shows that friendship is a sacred thing, and a true act of love. Even though Wilbur doesn't see how he's helped Charlotte, her life has been enriched by his presence—and her sacrifices on his behalf have helped to make her own life fuller.

Wilbur begins talking about how wonderful it will be for them to all return home to the farm together, but Charlotte announces that she will not be going back to the barn—in just a day or two, she'll be dead. She doesn't even have enough strength, she says, to climb down into the crate. Wilbur throws himself onto the ground in a fit of "pain and sorrow," and he sobs over the loss of his only "true friend." Charlotte, though, insists Wilbur stop making such a scene.

Wilbur is as dramatic as always as Charlotte at last tells him that she's dying. Wilbur is both selfless and selfish in this passage—he is mourning his loss of Charlotte rather that Charlotte's loss of life.

Wilbur is struck by an idea—if Charlotte can't bring her egg sac back to the barn, he will do it for her. He calls for Templeton and informs the rat of the situation. Charlotte is very sick, he says, and needs for Templeton to fetch her egg sac from the rafters of the shed. Templeton complains that the other animals are always calling upon him to do their dirty work, but Wilbur is desperate to secure his help before the Arables and Zuckermans return and prepare to drive back to the farm. Wilbur makes Templeton a deal: he promises that at every single meal, he will let Templeton have his fill of the slop before he himself even touches it. The greedy Templeton, excited, agrees to the deal and clambers up to the ceiling, where he detaches the egg sac and carries it back down between his teeth.

Wilbur sees that there is still time to repay Charlotte for all of her kindness and sacrifice by doing her one last favor. In order to secure help in completing it, Wilbur must make a sacrifice himself—something he gladly does knowing that just as Charlotte sacrificed her own time, energy, and happiness to ensure that his life would go on, he must now sacrifice those things to ensure that her lineage is protected as well.

Templeton creeps down and puts the egg sac at Wilbur's feet, complaining about the sticky feeling in his mouth. He climbs into Wilbur's crate just as Lurvy, Mr. Arable, and Homer Zuckerman return, followed by all the rest of the humans. Wilbur carefully takes the egg sac into his mouth and gently holds it on top of his tongue. As he is loaded into the crate, he looks up at Charlotte and gives her a wink—the only goodbye he can manage. Summoning the last of her strength, Charlotte waves goodbye to Wilbur with one of her legs. Charlotte never moves again—the next day, as the fairgrounds clear out, Charlotte dies peacefully. No one is with her when she passes—and no one knows that in all the goings-on at the fair, "a grey spider had played the most important part of all."

Charlotte's death is lonely and quiet, just as her life often was. During her short time alive, she spent most of it trying to help others—namely Wilbur. The sacrifices that have defined her life have made her a good and beloved friend, and yet she dies alone anyway. In this passage, White demonstrates the cruelty of the natural world alongside the beauty of a life lived with good intentions.

CHAPTER 22: A WARM WIND

Wilbur returns home to the barn, but his homecoming is a strange and bittersweet one. He places the egg sac in a safe corner, and then greets the geese and the sheep. Homer hangs Wilbur's medal on a nail over the pigpen for all to see.

Wilbur's safety has been secured, but he has lost his best friend. Charlotte died, but Wilbur will live—her sacrifice has made his continued existence possible.

As the days and weeks go by, Wilbur continues to grow larger in size, but doesn't worry that Homer will kill him for meat—he knows he is safe. Though Wilbur is happy and secure, he misses Charlotte badly, and spends many hours staring at the wispy remnants of her **web** over the barn door. Autumn turns to winter, and just before Christmas, Wilbur sees snow for the first time. He plays briefly in the snow with Fern and Avery, but Fern is still more interested in her memories of the fair, the Ferris wheel, and Henry Fussy than her old friends.

All of the characters are growing up in their own ways. Wilbur has become wiser and less nervous, while Fern and Avery have mostly left behind their preoccupation with the natural world and moved more firmly into the concerns of the human one.

All winter, Templeton gorges himself daily on Wilbur's food, and grows huge and fat. The old sheep chastises him for his greedy—and dangerous—eating habits, but the rat insists the "satisfaction" he gets from eating is more important to him than a long life. All winter, Wilbur guards the egg sac as if it were full of his own children, and even keeps it warm on frigid nights. One evening, at the sound of frogs in the field, the old sheep declares that spring is near. As the snows melt and the fields come back to life, the goose lays nine new eggs and the last threads of Charlotte's **web** float away.

As winter turns to spring, everything is reborn, and the natural world is restored to its glory. Though Charlotte's web blows away at last, new life comes to the farm, and the endless cycle of death and rebirth continues on.

One morning, Wilbur is amazed to see tiny spiders crawling out of the egg sac. They are grey and look just, Wilbur thinks, like Charlotte. He greets the spiders as they emerge in hundreds from the sac, and introduces himself as a good friend of their mother's. They wave at him, but don't say anything in return. For several days and nights they move silently around the barn, growing slowly. One morning, when Homer opens a door on the north side of the barn, a draft comes in. The air is warm and fragrant, and slowly, one by one, all of Charlotte's children launch threads of silk and float off into the air, waving goodbye as they go. Wilbur is distressed and calls for the children to come back, but they insist that it is time for them to go "out into the world to make webs for [them]selves."

Just as Fern and Avery have grown up and moved on from the world of their childhood, so too are Charlotte's children participants in the endless circle of birth, maturation, and death. They go off to seek their own lives and assert their independence, and though their departure pains Wilbur, they know it is necessary—their instincts guide them as their lives begin in earnest.

Wilbur is miserable as he watches all of the spiders float away, and cries himself to sleep during his midday nap. That afternoon, though, when he awakes, he hears a small voice cry out: "Salutations!" Two more voices greet Wilbur, and tell him that they like this place—and they like Wilbur, too. Wilbur looks up at the barn door to see that three of Charlotte's daughters have woven brand-new **webs** of their own. Wilbur is overjoyed that the spiders have chosen to stay and live in the barn with him.

Wilbur is the same dramatic pig he always has been, and is just as hungry for friendship and attention as ever. When Charlotte's daughters reveal themselves to him, he is delighted and comforted. Their presence—and their new webs—signify the novel's theme of mortality and rebirth, and show that even in the face of loss and despair, renewal is always possible.

The spiders name themselves Joy, Aranea, and Nellie with Wilbur's help. Wilbur's heart is full, and he tells all three of them how devoted he was to their mother, and how wonderful Charlotte was. He pledges his friendship "forever and ever" to the three tiny spiders, and they pledge theirs in return.

Wilbur cannot repay Charlotte for all she's given him—but he can pledge his devotion to her daughters, and help to make their lives happy and full.

As the months and years go by, Wilbur is always surrounded by friends. Though Fern does not come to the barn so much anymore, Charlotte's children—and their children, and their children's children—always decorate the barn door. Most of them float away, but two or three always stay and keep Wilbur company. Homer takes great care of Wilbur for the rest of his life, and they both continue to entertain admirers over the years. Wilbur is often overcome by his wonderful home and "the glory of everything" about it. He never forgets Charlotte, and though he loves her descendants fiercely, none of them "ever quite [take] her place in his heart."

As Wilbur's life goes on, he grows more and more mature and appreciative of the sacrifice his friend Charlotte made for him. Her efforts secured his safety, and even though she is gone, she remains alive in his heart and mind. She has helped him to be grateful for the beauty of the world around him, and has taught him what it means to be a good friend—as a result, Wilbur is a better pig and a better friend to all in need of friendship and attention.

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