

Love to Read

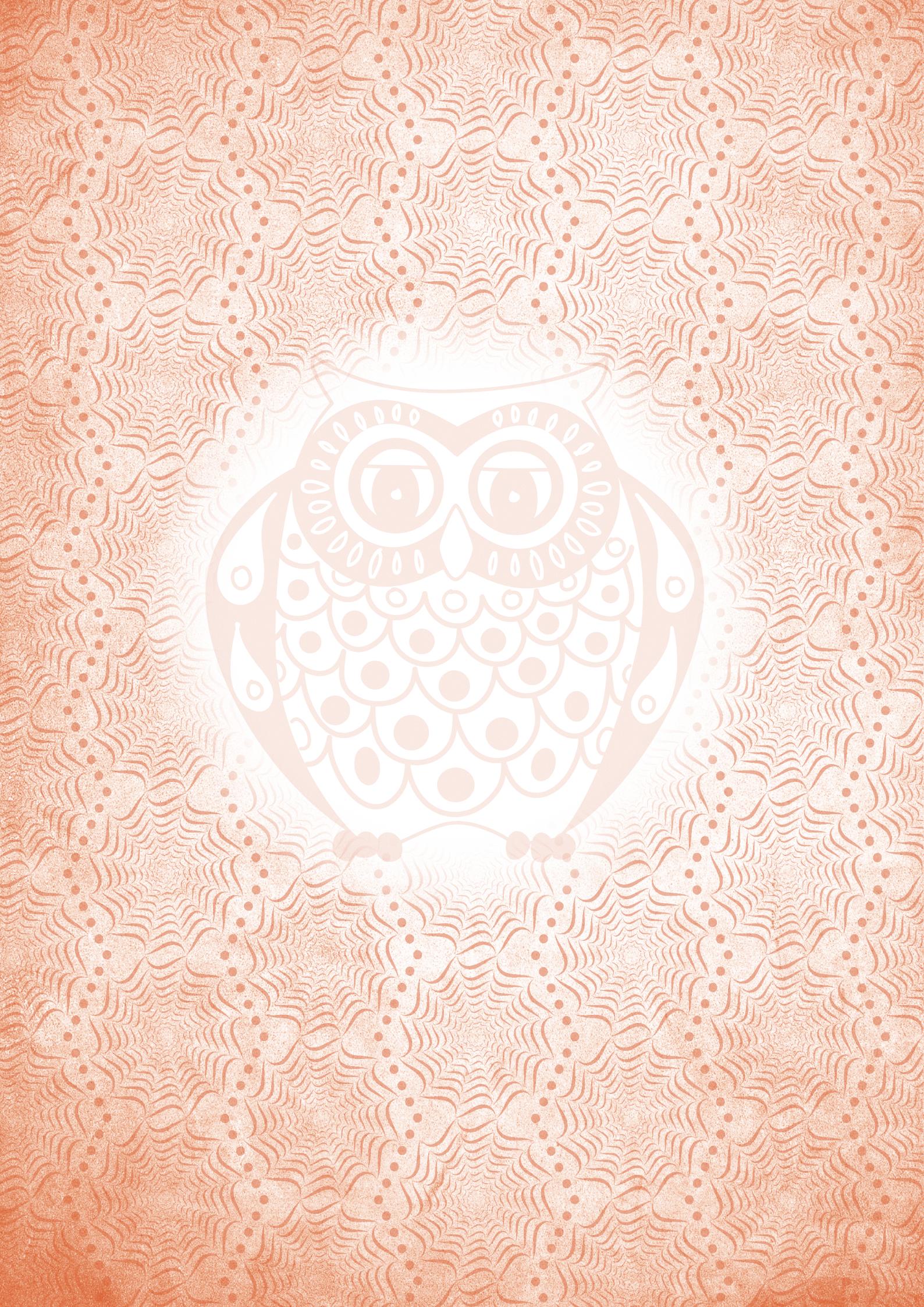


Charlotte's Web

1952

E. B. White

A gentle, life-affirming novel that doesn't shy away from the idea of death, using it instead as a reminder to appreciate and live your life the best way you can while you have it. A very easy and enjoyable class read with opportunities for readers to use lots of expression when reading aloud the voices of the various characters. It is a novel about friendship and growing up that will be appreciated by boys and girls.



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

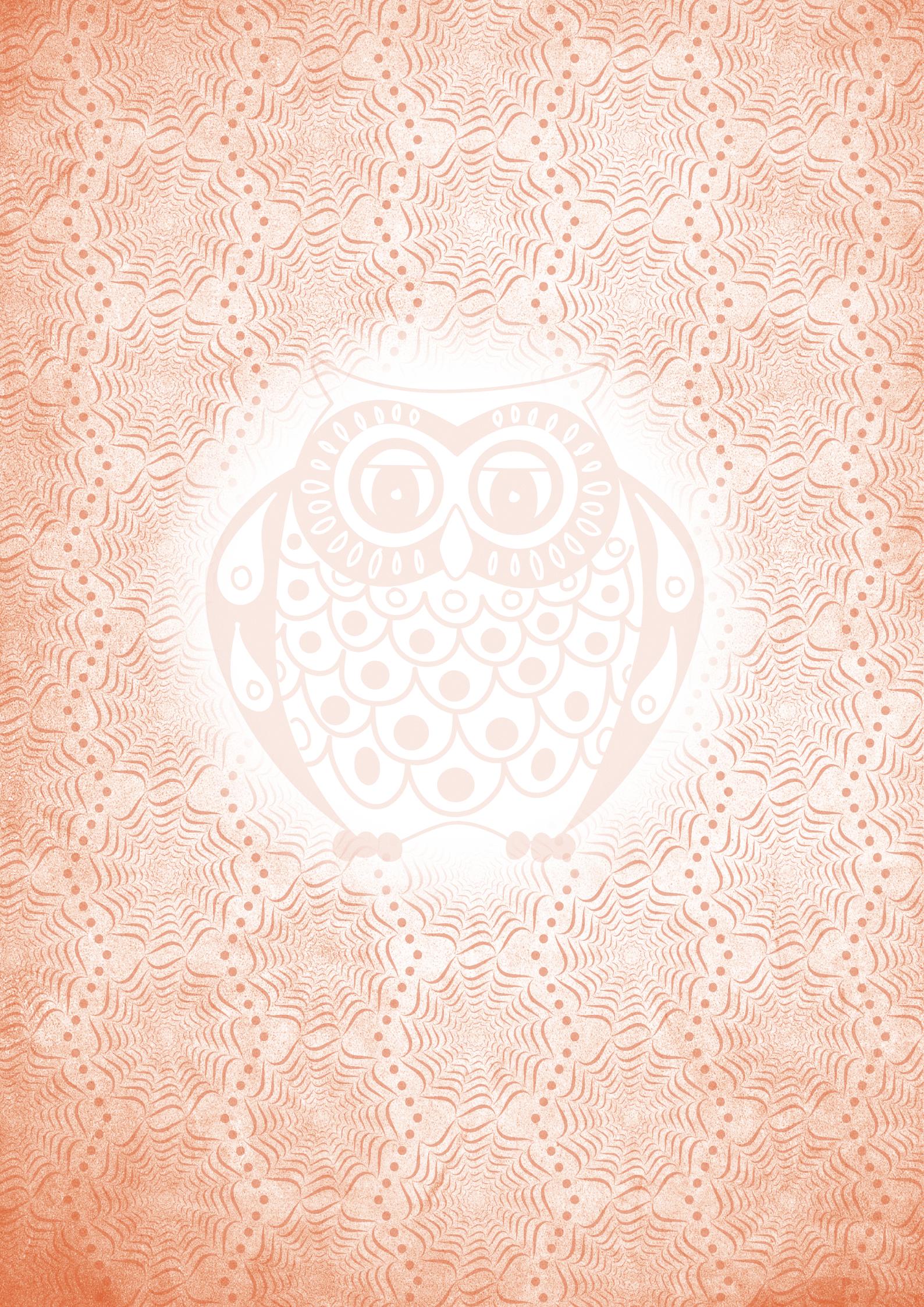
'I don't see why he needs an axe,' continued Fern, who was only eight.

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





Overview for teachers



Context

About the author

“...real life is only one kind of life - there is also the life of the imagination.”

Born in Mount Vernon, New York, Elwyn Brooks White attended Cornell University and was predominantly a journalist for most of his life, contributing articles for the famous *The New Yorker* magazine. He only began writing children's fiction when he was forty-five. His first novel, *Stuart Little* (1945) was followed by *Charlotte's Web* in 1952 - both now considered modern children's classics.

In 1970 he won the distinguished Laura Ingalls Wilder Award, given only every five years, and a Pulitzer Prize Special Citation in 1978. Even though his children's novels brought him success he remained publicity-shy, preferring to live and keep animals on his farm in Maine. He died of Alzheimer's disease in 1985.

What's the story about?

After being rescued from slaughter by the farmer's daughter, Fern, Wilbur - a piglet and the runt of the litter - is sold to her uncle for six dollars and goes to live in a barn cellar, visited by Fern less and less.

Desperately lonely and depressed, he calls out for a friend and finds one in the maternal and intelligent barn-spider, Charlotte. Upon discovering he is to be slaughtered at Christmas, he is naturally distraught, but Charlotte reassures him that she will find a way to help him survive. Her friendship relaxes and sustains Wilbur and when Charlotte comes up with a cunning plan, writing laudable messages about Wilbur in her web to persuade the farmer not to kill him, Wilbur takes on the qualities of these words and finally begins to believe in himself. Charlotte's plan is a success. Her words and Wilbur become famous, so much so that not only does he live, but he also wins a special prize at the County Fair.

However, all is not fun at the fair and Charlotte, having come to the end of her natural life span, dies alone there. With the bribed help of the selfish rat, Templeton, Wilbur manages to rescue Charlotte's egg sac and returns to the farm where all of Charlotte's children are born. After Wilbur's initial delight at seeing them hatch, they all leave him, except for three who become his friends, though he acknowledges that they can never replace the original and best friend he ever had, Charlotte.

Themes to look out for

- Friendship
- Life and Death
- Change
- Growing up



Literary techniques

Presentation of character is achieved through

- What the character says
- What the character does
- What other characters say about them
- How other characters react to them
- How they are described in the narrative



Characters

Wilbur

The runt of the litter saved from slaughter by Fern. Lover of fun and mischief, he adores Fern and is desperately lonely, depressed and bored when he is sold to the Zuckermans and separated from his protector. His ebullience returns when he forms a strong and loving friendship with Charlotte. Sensitive and anxious, he comes to depend on Charlotte enormously, her strength gives him strength and soon he begins to have the self-belief Charlotte wants him to have. He is indeed 'Some Pig'.

Charlotte

A very wise, pragmatic and loyal friend to Wilbur. Although only a tiny barn-spider, she takes charge of situations and the animals. Motivated by love for Wilbur, she does all she can to save him from slaughter by showing everyone how special he is through the 'miracle' words she weaves in her web. And, knowing that she is dying, she selflessly agrees to go to the County Fair with Wilbur because he needs her there. With great pathos, she dies alone, but her loyalty is repaid by Wilbur when he does all he can to save her egg sac and watch over her babies until they are hatched.



Templeton

Templeton the rat displays the more selfish and resentful qualities of human nature, only prepared to help if there is something in it for him. He is skillfully managed by Charlotte, but Wilbur has to resort to blackmail in order for Templeton to respond to his desperate, heart-rending pleas for help. No matter how repugnant he may be, he does appear necessary to the success of Charlotte and Wilbur's plans.

Fern

Kind, loving and nurturing, Fern rescues Wilbur from slaughter and acts as a mother figure in the early part of the novel, putting forward the idea that all life is worth saving. However, her role diminishes greatly very early on and at the County Fair she is more interested in boys than Wilbur, showing she has changed, is growing up and moving on.



Setting

The setting can

- Be a backdrop to the action
- Reflect characters' experiences
- Symbolise ideas the author wishes to convey
- Have its own culture and values
- Cause conflict and distress



The Zuckerman's farm

The farm acts as a platform to show the beauty of nature in the changing seasons, reinforcing the writer's idea about the ephemeral qualities of life. Every now and again, wonderfully descriptive and lyrical passages are devoted to describing the natural world, a protest to the growing industrialisation happening in post-war America and a reminder of what might be lost.

Within the farm is the barn where Wilbur lives. White creates an idyllic vision of farm life, its smells, animals and work, 'pleasantly warm in winter...pleasantly cool in summer...' and attractive to life: 'It was the kind of barn that swallows like to build their nests in. It was the kind of barn that children liked to play in'. Captured and contained, the author uses Wilbur's captivity to touch upon the ideas of freedom and loneliness.

It is a place where different animals with human qualities, ideas and emotions congregate, allowing the author to gently and simply present the best and worst about humanity. Charlotte and Wilbur display love and loyalty, qualities that will help mankind survive, whereas the old sheep is needlessly spiteful to vulnerable Wilbur when she gleefully informs him that he will be slaughtered at Christmas. Templeton, though a necessary cog in the wheel, is completely self-centered and without empathy. But love shines through and while Templeton ends fat, friendless and cynical, Wilbur is spiritually enriched and loved for the rest of his days.

The county fair

The only time Wilbur is seen outside the confines of the farm. It is a place where the author can re-introduce Fern and show her growing up, her interest now in boys rather than Wilbur. The County Fair is a place where Wilbur is publicly awarded for being himself, but also acts as a place of distress since he is separated from Charlotte. He has no choice but to return to the farm, leaving Charlotte alone to die.

Narrative techniques

Written in the third person narrative, the author or narrator adopts an omniscient (all-knowing) position, presenting everything, all the action and thoughts of each character, to the reader, so that the reader sees things from a different perspective. Sometimes the author may tell the story without bias; sometimes the author makes their presence felt. Although the narrator in *Charlotte's Web* seldom comments on characters or actions, preferring to present the ideas themselves, he does on rare occasions give the reader insight into the future, for example at the end of Chapter V he informs the reader that Charlotte '...was to prove loyal and true to the very end'.

Structure

Structure is the order or pattern in which a novel is put together and should

- Maintain the interest of the reader
- Move the action from one episode to the next
- Arouse a reader's interest in character or situation
- Create a moment of crisis
- Create expectation or surprise



The story is chronologically structured, following the four seasons in one year on a farm, each season symbolising a stage in the cycle of life. Most of the novel is dedicated to Spring (birth and new beginnings) and Summer (vitality and strength). Autumn and Winter, (change, death and vulnerability) are dealt with in the very last chapter, but not dwelt upon, before Spring emerges, and the cycle begins again, reflecting the author's matter-of-fact, but deeply appreciative attitude to the wonder of nature.

Within this structure, the author adds a complication: will Wilbur be slaughtered at Christmas or will Charlotte be able to save him? It is not until the end that the reader finds out that she has been successful.

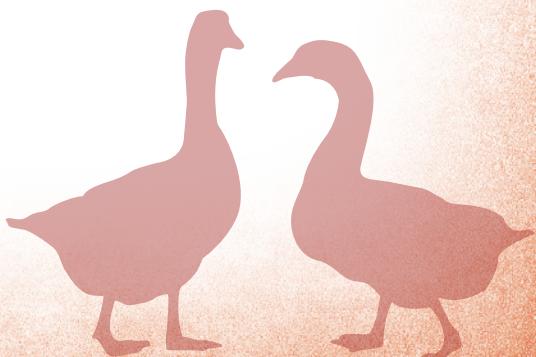
Language

Sounds are important in the novel and White makes use of alliteration and onomatopoeia to bring alive the unique and wonderful sounds of the birds, helping to create a sense of time and place. He also uses it for humorous purposes when he describes the enthusiastic way Wilbur approaches eating his food in Chapter X: 'Wilbur grunted. He gulped and sucked, and sucked and gulped, making swishing and swooshing noises, anxious to get everything at once'.

White rarely uses similes in the novel, but makes an exception when describing the morning of 'the miracle' of Charlotte's web words in Chapter XI to show that something special, other-worldly and beautiful is about to be revealed: 'The grass looked like a magic carpet. The asparagus patch looked like a silver forest...[Charlotte's web looked] like a delicate veil'. He manages to show magic in the mundane.

Wilbur's enthusiasm, anxiety and desperation is portrayed by the use of short sentences and exclamation marks.

White uses simple sentences to tell a simple tale and to slow down the pace, allowing him to observe and reflect upon the world around him.



Special feature

Repetition

Repetition is the simple repeating of a word, within a sentence or a poetical line in order to provide emphasis. Repetition, like listing, allows an author to put emphasis on words or ideas and can also add rhythm to a piece, especially a poem.

E. B. White's simple prose style is lyrical and poetic. One technique he regularly uses throughout the novel to achieve this style is the repetition of words and phrases.

- When describing the barn in Chapter III he repeats the phrases ‘...it smelled of...’, ‘...there was always...’, ‘...it was the kind of barn...’ and the word ‘pleasantly’ which helps to build the description, in this case emphasising a particular sense, as well as achieving a poetic rhythm that beguiles the reader, creating a sense of calm timelessness about the barn.
- Similarly, in Chapter IV, White repeats the word ‘Rain...’ in short sentences mimicking the abrupt, hard sound of rain beating down on lonely Wilbur.
- In the same chapter the phrase ‘...he planned...’ is repeated to emphasise Wilbur’s boredom and lack of stimulation in his life. Both are words with hard sounds, particularly the plosive ‘p’ in ‘planned’, reinforcing the lack of love in Wilbur’s existence at this time.
- This contrasts with the soft, lulling sound of the alliteration of the letter ‘s’ later in Chapter VI when ‘...swallows swoop down from their nests and scold,’ heralding the advent of Spring, ‘...everywhere love and songs and nests and eggs’. The repetition of the word ‘and’ here suggests abundance.



Activities for children

Before reading

Ideas for getting started

Engaging with the world of the novel

Farm life

Find out about animal farming in America in the 1950s.

How have things changed?

What was life like in rural America for a child at this time?

What was it like to work on an American farm in the 1950s?

What jobs were boys and girls expected to do on a farm?

Debate

Is there anything wrong with being ‘weaker’ than others?

How important is it to have friends?

Should animals be farmed?

Is death to be feared?

Pictures and objects

Provide a medal, a picture of a spider's web, a toy pig (or a picture), a newspaper cut-out of the word 'terrific' and a picture of an axe and ask pupils how they might be connected.

Look at a selection of Walt Curlee's 'Rural Americana' paintings and discuss how rural life is depicted.

Display a set of cards, each showing a 'quality' e.g. loyalty, trust, greed. Working in small groups, invite pupils to rank what they consider to be the most important qualities in a friendship.

Explore a selection of Garth William's iconic illustrations for the novel. Put the pictures into an order to tell a story.

Facts

When did E. B. White live?

What other story is he famous for?

Find out about different breeds of pig and their care needs.

What is an Araneus Cavaticus?

Find out about the life span, habitats and unique features of spiders.

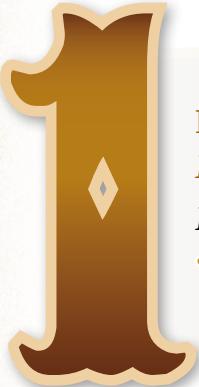
How does a spider spin a web?

What is a County Fair?

During reading

Stopping places

Developing understanding of narrative and literary techniques



Read to the end of Chapter I

Before Breakfast

Focus on...

- *First impressions*



Things to discuss

Themes: What themes do you think have been established in the first chapter?

Have you ever saved anything from death?

Character: Why might a runt, like Wilbur, be trouble for a farmer?

How would you describe the characters you have met so far?

Was Charlotte right to save the pig?

What role do you think Avery might play in the story?

Structure: What questions do you have about the opening of the novel?

Did the opening of the novel grab your attention? Why/why not?

Prediction: What kind of story do you think this is going to be?

Predict what you think might happen.

How might it end?



2

Read to the end of Chapter IV

Loneliness

Focus on...

- *The presentation of Wilbur and his situation*
- *The use of language*



Things to discuss

Character: How is Wilbur presented? How do you feel about his situation?

Have you ever felt depressed or lonely?

Who do you think ‘the voice’ belongs to at the end of Chapter IV?

Why do the animals have voices?

Setting: What is your impression of the Zuckerman’s farm? Is it a good place for Wilbur to be? Have you ever been on a farm? How successful has the author been in recreating the atmosphere of a farm?

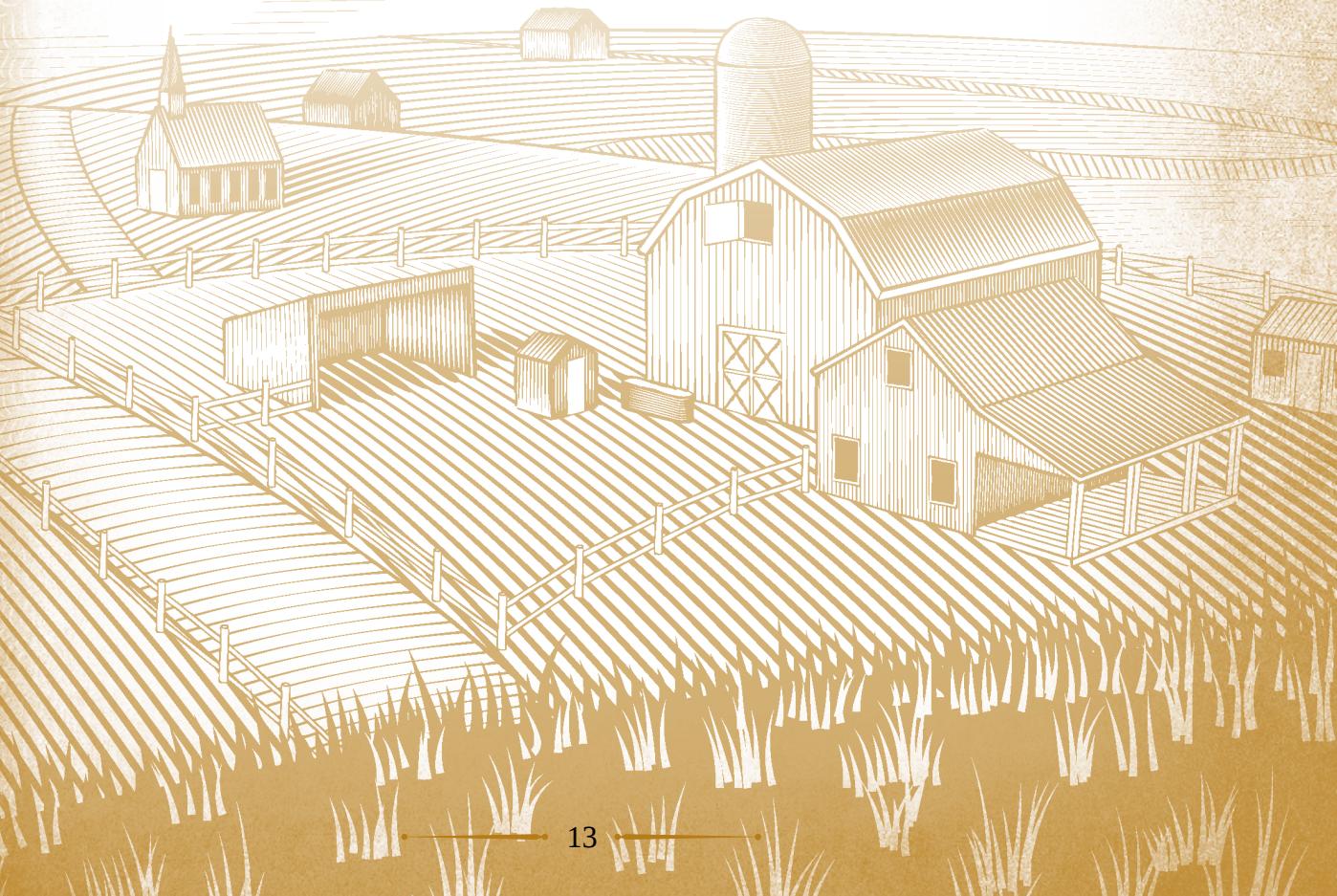
Structure: How does Chapter II make you feel? Were you surprised by the swiftness of Wilbur’s removal? Why do you think it happened so quickly?

Why do you think Fern is missing from the last two chapters?

Language: How is a sense of confusion presented when Wilbur escapes?

You could...

Consider White’s style of writing. Look at different examples of words and phrases repeated by E. B. White in the novel so far. Why does he use repetition so often? What effect does it have on you as a reader?



3

Read to the end of Chapter VIII

A Talk at Home

Focus on...

- *The presentation of Charlotte and Templeton*
- *The effects of knowing that Wilbur may be slaughtered*



Things to discuss

Theme: How is Charlotte presented? Do you like her? How might she save Wilbur?

How is Templeton presented? Do you like him? What role might he play in the novel?

Was the old sheep right to tell Wilbur about his planned slaughter? Or is it better to not know about harsh realities?

Setting: How are the early days of Summer on the farm presented? Pick out words or phrases to support your idea. What is your favourite/least favourite time of year and why?

Narrative: At the very end of Chapter V, the narrator, for the first time, gives the reader an idea of future events. Why do you think he does it at this particular time?

Structure: Why does the writer introduce the idea that Wilbur might be slaughtered later on? How does knowing about his planned slaughter affect the way you feel about the character?

Language: The author uses alliteration when describing the swallows in Chapter VI. What does the sound of the repetition of the letter 's' remind you of?

Theme: What do you think are the author's views on life?



4

Read to the end of Chapter XIII

Good Progress

Focus on...

- *Wilbur and Charlotte's friendship*



Things to discuss

Character: How might you describe Wilbur and Charlotte's relationship?

What do you think of their friendship?

Why does Wilbur always do as Charlotte tells him?

How far do you agree with Charlotte's philosophy 'Never hurry and never worry'? Tell me about any philosophies in life that you live by.

How can you tell Wilbur is scared and anxious in Chapter IX?

What more do you learn about Charlotte's and Wilbur's characters?

Structure: Why does E. B. White move the focus from the animals to the children in Chapter X?

Tone: How does E. B. White create humour in Chapter XI? Tell me about the most unbelievable thing you have ever seen.

Prediction: How might Charlotte's messages help Wilbur? What words would you choose?

What do you think will happen next?

You could...

Create a graph charting Wilbur's changing emotions at various points in the novel. Does he remind you of anyone you know?



5

Read to the end of Chapter XIX

The Egg Sac

Focus on...

- Changes in the novel



Things to discuss

Character: Is Charlotte's weariness anything to worry about? How does it make you feel about Charlotte and Wilbur? What do you think is going to happen to Charlotte?

How is Fern depicted now? How does the writer show she has changed?

Structure: How does it sound when Fern retells Charlotte's story to her mother in Chapter XIV? What did you think of her telling of the story? How did it differ to Charlotte's? What does her use of verbs and adverbs tell you about Fern?

There is a change of tone in Chapter XV. What might it signify?

Language: The writer uses lots of repetition in this section. Find examples and describe the effect it has on you.

Prediction: What prize do you think Wilbur has won?

How do you think the novel will end? How would you like it to end?

You could...

Discuss all the changes in this section of the novel and suggest what they might symbolise.



6

Read to the end of the novel

Focus on...

- *How the novel ends*
- *Your response to the novel as a whole*



Things to discuss

Character: How does Charlotte feel about dying?

How did you react to Charlotte's death?

Did it surprise you?

Is Templeton's behaviour in any way justified in Chapter XXI?

How did it make you feel about him?

The Story: Did the story turn out the way you expected?

What were your favourite scenes?

Which scenes could you identify with most?

Do you think the novel has a message? If so, what do you think it is?

Structure: Describe what you thought about the writer's decision to have Charlotte die alone. How did it make you feel?

E. B. White's publisher wanted him to change the ending believing it to be too bleak for children. He refused. Do you think he made the right choice?

Fern appeared to be quite an important character at the beginning of the novel, but then drifted out of the picture. Why do you think that was? Was it the right choice for the writer to make?

Theme: What are the writer's views on life and death? What are yours?

What other themes are explored in the novel? Have you ever written a story with a theme? How difficult is it to do?



After reading

Create & imagine

Developing a personal response to the novel

Creature comforts

Write a story that includes animal characters instead of humans.

Try and imitate White's storytelling style: keep it simple, use short sentences and repetition. Illustrate it too, like Garth Williams did, if you like.

Shape poetry

A shape poem is a type of poem that looks like the thing it is describing. Compose a shape poem about a pig, a spider or a web. Read and explore a range of shape poems for inspiration!

Making the news

Write a newspaper article or radio/TV news bulletin about Wilbur winning the Special Prize at the County Fair. Present your finished report to an audience.

Spider hunt

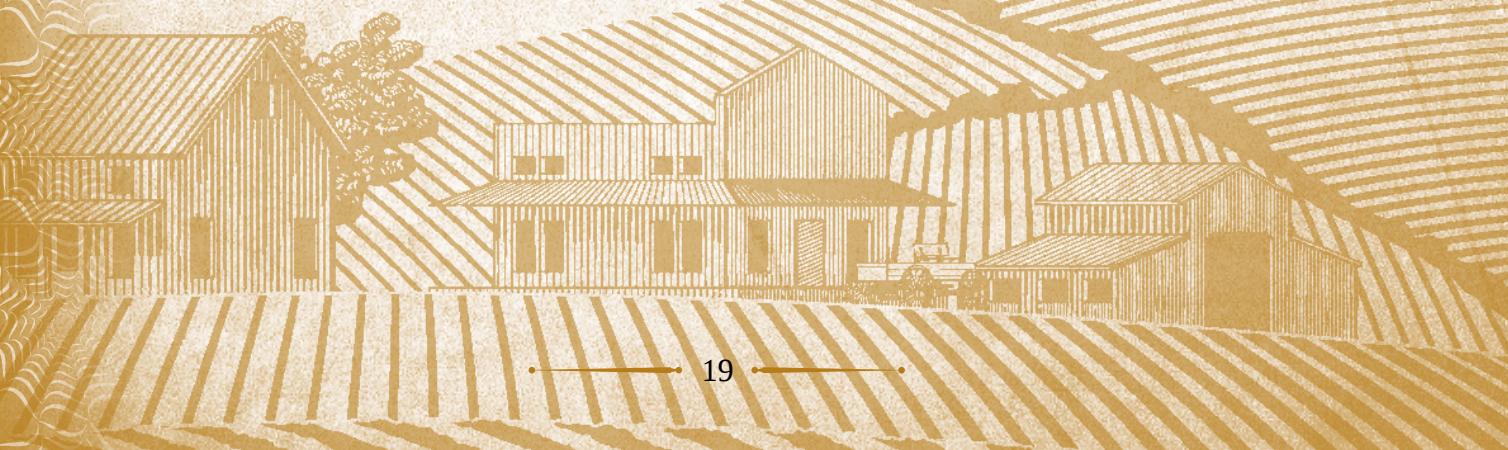
Go on a ‘spider hunt’. Record what you find using a digital camera. Upload images to a computer to create a digital presentation.

Animal magic

*‘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 grown-ups.’ Chapter XIV*

Imagine overhearing some animals talking. What do you think they would be discussing? Improvise or develop a script showing ‘a conversation’ between family pets, farm animals or creatures in the wild. Read or act out your finished work for an audience.



Memorable quotes

'Why did you do all this for me?' he 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.'

'After all, what's a life, anyway? We're born, we live a little while, we die.'

'Trust me, Wilbur. People are very gullible. They'll believe anything they see in print.'

'Never hurry and never worry!'

'It is quite possible that an animal has spoken to me and that I didn't catch the remark because I wasn't paying attention.'

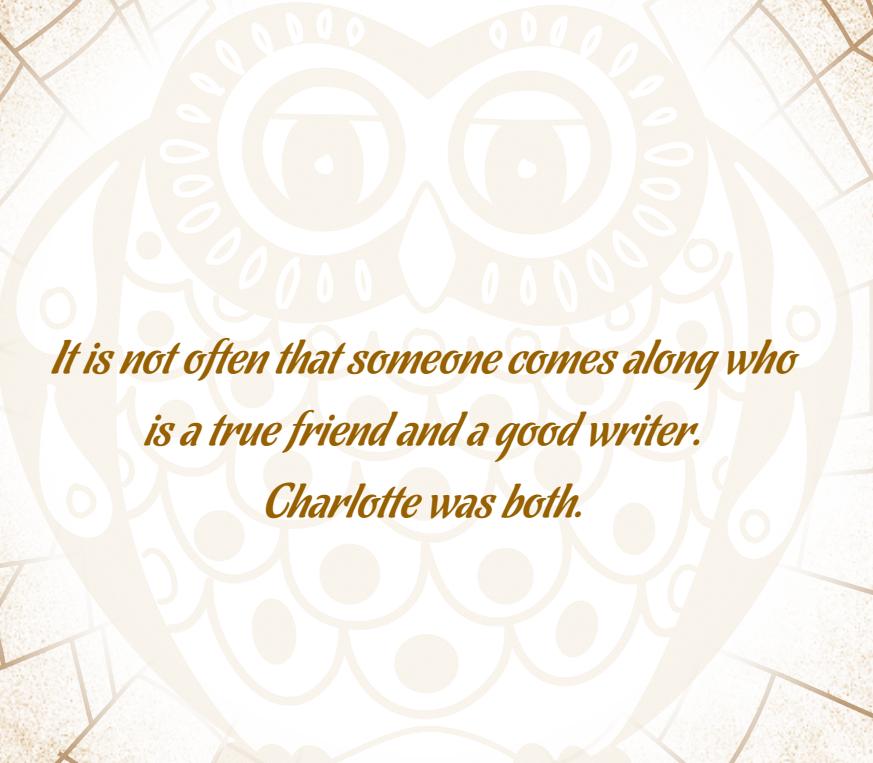
Wilbur didn't want food, he wanted love.

'If I can fool a bug... I can surely fool a man. People are not as smart as bugs.'

'Well, I am pretty, there's no denying that. Almost all spiders are rather nice looking.'







*It is not often that someone comes along who
is a true friend and a good writer.
Charlotte was both.*



“I don’t want to die! Save me, somebody! Save me!”

Wilbur, Charlotte’s Web

‘As a piece of work it is just about perfect, and just about magical in the way it is done.’

Eudora Welty, New York Times

‘A children’s book that has stood the test of time and never grows old.’

Pam Coughlan, School Library Journal

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