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# Teaching Literary Elements With Short Stories

By Tara McCarthy



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# Setting

The setting is the backdrop of a story. It can define the actions of the characters, as well as paint an inspiring canvas against which the characters relate, move, and deal with their conflicts and problems. The setting transports readers to places only in their imaginations, including exotic locales and periods of the past. To help students investigate story setting and the literary elements involved, invite them to read “A Secret for Two” by Quentin Reynolds.

## Story Summary ■ ■ ■

Pierre has worked for many years as a milkman in Montreal, making deliveries to his longtime customers. His milk wagon is drawn by a horse named Joseph, who has learned the route so well that he stops by instinct. Together, Pierre and Joseph demonstrate a love, trust, and efficiency that is compelling to all. One morning, Pierre learns that Joseph has died. Distraught by the news, Pierre stumbles into the street, where he is hit and killed by a truck. Only then do we learn that Pierre has been blind for years. Because Joseph knew the milk route so well, Pierre’s blindness was a secret between the two.

## Literary Elements—Setting ■ ■ ■

As students appreciate Pierre’s story, they will explore literary elements that build the story setting.

- ◆ **Location.** In which country does this story take place? How does this add to the story?
- ◆ **Time Period.** Does this story take place in the past or the present? Why could it not take place in the present? How does the time period add to the story?
- ◆ **Atmosphere.** How would you describe the atmosphere of the story? For example, is it friendly? kind? frightening? anxious?
- ◆ **Ethnic Details:** To make a setting come alive, stories often include words that reflect a culture, such as simple phrases in foreign languages and food names. Character names may also reflect ethnic background.

# A Secret for Two

by Quentin Reynolds

Montreal is a very large city, but, like all cities, it has some very small streets. Streets, for instance, like Prince Edward Street, which is only four blocks long, ending in a *cul-de-sac*.<sup>\*</sup> No one knew Prince Edward Street as well as did Pierre Dupin, for Pierre had delivered milk to the families on the street for thirty years now.

During the past fifteen years the horse which drew the milk wagon used by Pierre was a large white horse named Joseph. In Montreal, especially in that part of Montreal which is very French, the animals, like children, are often given the names of saints. When the big white horse first came to the Provinciale Milk Company he didn't have a name. They told Pierre that he could use the white horse henceforth. Pierre stroked the softness of the horse's neck; he stroked the sheen of its splendid belly and he looked into the eyes of the horse.

"This is a kind horse, a gentle and faithful horse," Pierre said, "and I can see a beautiful spirit shining out of the eyes of the horse. I will name him after good St. Joseph, who was also kind and gentle and faithful and a beautiful spirit."

Within a year Joseph knew the milk route as well as Pierre. Pierre

I. The location and time period of a story is the setting. Where and when does this story take place? How do you know?

<sup>\*</sup> *cul-de-sac*: dead end

used to boast that he didn't need reins—he never touched them. Each morning Pierre arrived at the stables of the Provincale Milk Company at five o'clock. The wagon would be loaded and Joseph hitched to it. Pierre would call "*Bonjour, vieille ami*,"\* as he climbed into his seat and Joseph would turn his head and the other drivers would smile and say that the horse would smile at Pierre. Then Jacques, the foreman, would say, "All right, Pierre, go on," and Pierre would call softly to Joseph, "*Avance, mon ami*,"\*\* and this splendid combination would stalk proudly down the street.

The wagon, without any direction from Pierre, would roll three blocks down St. Catherine Street, then turn right two blocks along Roslyn Avenue; then left, for that was Prince Edward Street. The horse would stop at the first house, allow Pierre perhaps thirty seconds to get down from his seat and put a bottle of milk at the front door and would then go on, skipping two houses and stopping at the third. So down the length of the street. Then Joseph, still without any direction from Pierre, would turn around and come back along the other side. Yes, Joseph was a smart horse.

2. Could this be a hint about the "secret for two"?

Pierre would boast at the stable of Joseph's skill. "I never touch the reins. He knows just where to stop. Why, a blind man could handle my route with Joseph pulling the wagon."

So it went on for years—always the same. Pierre and Joseph both grew old together, but gradually, not suddenly. Pierre's huge walrus mustache was pure white now and Joseph didn't lift his knees so high or raise his head quite so much. Jacques, the foreman of the stables, never noticed that they were both getting old until Pierre appeared one morning carrying a heavy walking stick.

3. Direct dialogue is the exact words exchanged by story characters.

"Hey, Pierre," Jacques laughed. "Maybe you got the gout, hey?"

"*Mais oui*,"\*\*\* Jacques," Pierre said a bit uncertainly. "One grows old. One's legs get tired."

"You should teach that horse to carry the milk to the front door for you," Jacques told him. "He does everything else."

...story continues in full version...

\* *Bonjour, vieille ami*: Good morning, old friend

\*\* *Avance, mon ami*: Let's go, my friend.

\*\*\* *Mais oui*: Of course

# Present the Story

## Contrast Chart ■ ■ ■

Share with students that in “A Secret for Two” they will meet an old man named Pierre. Recall with students that in “La Bamba,” the young main character, Manuel, faced a challenge. Explain that in “A Secret for Two,” the older character faces a challenge as well. Help students predict what that challenge could be. Encourage students to think about older people they know and to consider their strengths along with the challenges they might face. List students’ ideas in a chart like the one shown here.

ANALYZING THE TRAITS OF OLDER PEOPLE	
<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Challenges</b>
Many life experiences	Might have failing health
Knowledge gained from those life experiences	Might need to earn a living, but have difficulty doing so
Appreciation for family and friends	Might need extra help doing day-to-day things

## Distribute Copies of the Story ■ ■ ■

Mention to students that for this story you want them to pay special attention to the setting. Explain that the story takes places in Montreal, Canada. Point out the italicized phrases and footnotes, preparing students for some French words. The words’ translations appear in the footnotes. Judging by the translations, speculate with students which language most people in Montreal probably speak. As students read, also ask them to figure out if the story takes place in the past or the present, and how they would describe the atmosphere of the setting.

## Challenge: What’s the “Secret”? ■ ■ ■

Finally, tell students that this story has a slight mystery. Review the book title, emphasizing the word *secret*. Encourage students to look for clues that might reveal what the secret is before they come to the end of the story.



# Read the Story

As students read the story together, refer to the margin notes to guide discussion.

## Margin Note 1:

**The location and time period of a story is the setting.**

**Where and when does this story take place?**

**Student Response:** Montreal, Canada; in the past. Because horses do not pull wagons through the city any longer.

**Further Discussion:** Make sure students understand that *when* a story takes place is just as important as *where* it takes place. As students continue to read, point out the many phrases that paint a picture of Montreal. Ask students if they picture a hustling, bustling city, like New York, or a more quaint, charming town. Which words develop this setting for them?

## Margin Note 2:

**Could this be a hint about the “secret for two”?**

**Further Discussion:** Mention to students that authors often include things for specific reasons. Yes, we can gather from Pierre’s words that Joseph is a trusty horse. But what other information does Pierre mention? Suggest to students that a clue appears in the sentence about the “secret.”

## Margin Note 3:

**Direct dialogue is the exact words exchanged by story characters.**

**Student Response:** Let students take turns playing the roles of Pierre and Jacques as they read the direct dialogue.

**Further Discussion:** Point out to students that even Jacques, Pierre’s boss, has noticed that Joseph is responsible for a large part of guiding Pierre’s route. Also call attention to what starts the dialogue—Pierre’s use of a walking stick. Speculate with students why someone might need a stick for walking.

## Margin Note 4:

**Here’s another clue to the “secret”!**

**Further Discussion:** The author is showing us that Pierre is a trustworthy employee. The author is showing us that Jacques is an understanding boss. Also encourage students to consider these actions as another clue to the “secret.”