

Charlotte's Web

(fragment)

by E.B. White

Age category: 14 year olds – 7th or 8th graders

*[Elwyn Brooks White was born in Mount Vernon, New York, on July 11, 1899, the youngest child of a large family. After graduating from Cornell University in 1921, White worked in various jobs, before joining the staff of the newly established magazine New Yorker. There he met his wife, Katherine Sergeant Angell, who was the magazine's literary editor. They married in 1929. In 1939, White moved to a farm in North Brooklyn, Maine, and continued his writing career. Between writing columns, White also published children's books: **Stuart Little** (1945), **Charlotte's Web** (1952), and **The Trumpet of the Swan** (1970). In these works White explored such themes as loyalty, tolerance, and rural living. White died of Alzheimer disease on October 1, 1985.] (Bush)*

Charlotte's Web depicts the adventures of a little girl named Fern, who lives on a farm with her family, where she is surrounded by a large number of animals, some of them with great qualities.

"Where's Papa going with the ax?" said Fern to her mother as they were setting the table for breakfast.

"Out to the hoghouse," replied Mrs. Arable. "Some pigs were born last night."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mr. Arable stopped walking.

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

"Control myself?" yelled Fern. "This is a matter of life and death, and you talk

about controlling myself." Tears ran down her cheeks and she took hold of the ax and tried to pull it out of her father's hand.

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

"But it's unfair," cried Fern. "The pig couldn't help being born small, could it? If I had been very small at birth, would you have killed me?"

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

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

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

TASKS:

1. Match the words on the left column with their correct meaning, on the right column, having the text above as a support.

1. Ax	a. A small shelter for pigs.
2. Hoghouse	b. The smallest and weakest young animal in a group.
3. Runt	c. A loud cry, yell.
4. Pitcher (of cream)	d. The offspring produced at one birth by an animal that usually gives birth to more than one offspring.
5. Shriek	e. A tool with a blade and a handle, used for felling trees or chopping wood.
6. Sopping	f. extremely wet; soaked.
7. Litter	g. An open vessel with a handle and a spout for pouring.

2. Use 5 of these words to create sentences of your own.

3. Complete the next sentences with your own ideas. Originality is appreciated!

a. If I lived on farm, I.....

- b. If I were an animal at the Zoo, I
- c. If I were a pig, I
- d. If I could speak to my pet, I
4. Put the letters in the following words into the correct order and write them into the gaps. All the words are related to domestic animals and the majority of them appear in the next chapters of *Charlotte's Web*.
- e.g.: nypo – pony
- a. ogsoe –
- f. gip –
- b. sehpe –
- g. cwo –
- c. hsore
- h. spderi –
- d. enh –
- i. moseu –
- e. ckdu –
- j. ebe –
5. Consider yourself a reporter who has to gather information about the events that occurred in the text above. Think that you interview a neighbour who knows all the details of what happened there. Use at least once the **5 Ws**: who, what, where, when and why, in order to get the detailed events of the text.
- e.g.: **Reporter:** *Who tried to kill the little pig?*
Neighbour: *Mr. Arable.*
6. How do you think the story ends? Does the little pig get killed or not? Try to write your own short ending of the story, between 5 and 10 lines.
7. If you were to be the animal to be sacrificed, what arguments would you bring to make Mr. Arable change his mind? Bring at least 3 arguments to prove your point.
8. Make a brief characterization of Fern, in terms of age, attitude and behaviour. (5 lines)

9. What do you think about Fern's comparison of human beings with animals towards the end of the fragment: "If I had been very small at birth, would you have killed me?" Should humans and animals be treated as equal?
10. Is a pig proper as a pet? Would you keep one? Are children closer and more affectionate to animals than adults are?

TEACHER'S GUIDE

1. 1 – e 5 – c
 2 – a 6 – f
 3 – b 7 – d
 4 – g

2. My father bought me an ax with which I cut down three trees in the forest. I think that the worst punishment for a human being is to live in a hoghouse, near pigs.

Usually at the countryside, the runt is sacrificed because there are weak chances of it to survive.

When she found out that she took a bad mark, she shrieked in front of her colleagues and everybody was watching her.

After raining cats and dogs, when I got home, my feet were sopping.

3. a. If I lived on farm, I would always ride a horse on the fields.
 b. If I were an animal at the Zoo, I would definitely try to escape and regain my freedom.
 c. If I were a pig, I would be so afraid of Christmas.
 d. If I could speak to my pet, I would tell him to be more responsible.

4. a. ogsoe – goose f. gip – pig
 b. sehpe – sheep g. cwo – cow
 c. hsore – horse h. spderi – spider
 d. enh – hen i. moseu – mouse
 e. ckdu – duck j. ebe – bee

5. **Reporter:** *Who intended to kill the pig?*

Neighbour: My friend and neighbour, Mr. Arable.

Reporter: *What did he want to do in this sense?*

Neighbour: He wanted to take his life with an ax.

Reporter: *Where did this take place?*

Neighbour: It took place in the hoghouse.

Reporter: *Why did he do that?*

Neighbour: The pig was a runt and it was considered to have small chances of survival.

Reporter: *When were all these things taking place?*

Neighbour: It happened at breakfast, in the early morning.

Reporter: *Who intended to rescue the little pig?*

Neighbour: Well, Fern, Mr Arable's eight years old daughter, did.

Reporter: *Why would she do that?*

Neighbour: Because she loves animals a lot and could not stand the idea of a little pig being killed.

Reporter: *Who else was there?*

Neighbour: Fern's mother.

Reporter: *What was she doing all this time?*

Neighbour: Her mother was preparing the breakfast and tried to convince Fern that this is the proper solution for a runt: to be killed.

Reporter: *What was the girl's reaction?*

Neighbour: She yelled and reacted violently and headed for the hoghouse to stop her father.

Reporter: *What did she manage to do?*

Neighbour: She had a conversation with her father in which she said that the pig has the right to live just as any other human being, while her father tried to convince her that it is not the same.

6. At this section each student is invited to have a personal opinion regarding the end of the story. There are accepted both the ideas of the pig being rescued and getting killed, as long as they are coherently expressed.

7. There are chances for the pig to become healthier and grow larger, therefore it will bring a bigger profit for the family; the profit would be bigger than the losses, so it is worth the risk.

By giving the pig the chance to survive, Mr. Arable would make his daughter happy, and it is not proper to disappoint a little child.

Before taking a life and death decision, Mr. Arable should be really certain that there is no point in keeping the pig, but here he just presupposes that the pig is not going to live.

Everyone deserves a second chance, so why not a pig?

8. Fern is definitely the main character of this fragment. Even though she is just 8 years old, she displays a well-developed system of thought, which is obvious in the last part of the fragment where she tries to support her idea that a pig deserves to live just as a human being does. Moreover, her attitude is strong, but her behaviour is childish, obvious when she overreacts to her father's decision of killing the pig. Her parents still regard her as being childish especially when her mother tells her that she should stop yelling, while her father tells her to control herself.

9. Students are invited to offer their own opinions regarding the animal rights, as long as their arguments are strong and coherent.

10. Every kind of answer is accepted as long as it is coherent.

Reference List

- Bush, Catherine. *Charlotte's Web – Study Guide*. Online: <http://bartertheatre.com/teachers_students/documents/StudyGuideCharlotteWeb.pdf> [2 Jul 2010]