



*Johnny Tremain:*  
A Story of Boston in Revolt  
Questions for Socratic Discussion  
by Ian Andrews



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# QUICK CARD



<i>Reference</i>	<i>Johnny Tremain: A Story of Boston in Revolt.</i> Esther Forbes. ISBN: 978-0-547-61432-8
<i>Plot</i>	Johnny Tremain, a talented young silversmith, must learn humility when an injury to his hand forces him to leave his apprenticeship; in his new job delivering messages for the Boston Revolutionaries, he begins to learn that some things are more important than success.
<i>Setting</i>	Boston, on the eve of the American Revolution, July 1773.
<i>Characters</i>	<p>Johnny Tremain – Protagonist. Young, headstrong, arrogant, and temperamental, Johnny spends the story maturing from a self-centered boy into a selfless patriot.</p> <p>Cilla Lapham – Johnny’s childhood friend and eventual love interest. Quiet, unassuming, and humble, Cilla is a foil for Johnny in nearly every way.</p> <p>Rab Silsbee – Johnny’s best friend and an older brother figure. Rab gets Johnny his job delivering papers and participating in Dr. Warren’s information network in support of the Revolution.</p> <p>Jonathan and Lavinia Lyte – Father and daughter, they are Johnny’s long lost relatives. Rich, haughty, and loyal to the British, the Lytes serve as an example to Johnny of the negative aspects of the life he thought he wanted.</p> <p>Isannah Lapham – Cilla’s littler sister, and eventually the ward of Lavinia Lyte.</p> <p>Dove – Johnny’s fellow apprentice and perpetrator of Johnny’s injury.</p> <p>Goblin – Johnny’s horse. Goblin’s temperament is much like his master’s and reflects Johnny’s growth over the course of the story.</p>
<i>Conflict</i>	<p>Man vs. Self: Will Johnny put away childish selfishness, and become a selfless man?</p> <p>Man vs. Man: Will the colonists win the war?</p>
<i>Theme</i>	Loyalty, Selflessness, and Humility
<i>Literary Devices</i>	<p>Symbolism</p> <p>Metaphor</p> <p>Simile</p>

# QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: SETTING



## **Where does this story happen? (1)**

*Johnny Tremain* is set in colonial Boston, Massachusetts, on the eve of the Revolutionary War (see question 2). Johnny lives by the docks, where all the businesses in the city congregate. As a result, the atmosphere of the beginning of the narrative bustles and hustles along with the industrious inhabitants of the city. Couple this with Johnny's youth, and the tale begins on an excited, adventurous note. Possibility suns herself on every wharf, and Johnny intends to woo her.

## **When does this story happen? (2)**

This historical fiction novel begins in July of 1773, extending through the spark of the American Revolution at Lexington in 1775. As readers, we see the conflict stirring through Johnny's eyes, as he becomes involved with delivering a Whig newspaper. His rides to villages in the countryside enable him to gather information, helping the political leaders of the nascent revolution to lay their plans.

Forbes uses Johnny's youth and immaturity to parallel the youth and immaturity of the young nation; both are impulsive, hotheaded, and in search of their identity. As the nation steps forward into maturity, so too does the protagonist.

Other important aspects of the setting are the class structures represented by the two prevalent political parties, the Whigs (soon to be patriots) and the Tories (British loyalists). Johnny's fixation for much of the first half of the story hinges on being recognized and accepted by his estranged relatives the wealthy Lytes, Tory merchants of high standing. At first the objects of Johnny's admiration and his hope for a prosperous and well respected future, the Lyte family's aristocratic snobbery and arrogance eventually become symbols of the very social and political structure that the Americans take up arms to abolish.

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# QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CHARACTERS



## **Who is the story about? (3) (Protagonist)**

Jonathan Lyte Tremain is the most talented, young silversmith's apprentice in the city of Boston, and he knows it. Forbes goes into beautiful detail as she describes Johnny's love for his art, and his extraordinary gift. When he is introduced into the story, he has nearly outstripped his master, formerly one of the finest smiths in the city, at age of only 14.

Unfortunately, Johnny's native talent has made him unbearably arrogant. He is confident, good looking, articulate, and smart as a whip, none of which leaves much room for healthy self-knowledge. Johnny lords it over not only the other two young smiths apprenticed to his master, but also over his master himself. The only member of the family capable of getting one over on Johnny is the master's young granddaughter, Priscilla, dubbed 'Cilla for short.

Johnny's talent also predisposes him to consider himself terribly important and to imagine a future in which he is one of the wealthiest and most influential people in the city, a fantasy made only more seductive by the fact that he has a back-up plan should all else fail. He shares his middle name, Lyte, with one of the wealthiest merchant families in the city.

On her deathbed, Johnny's mother gifted him a beautiful silver cup, with the Lyte family crest emblazoned on the side. Along with the cup, she revealed to Johnny that his middle name was not merely chosen, but was inherited. She herself was a lesser cousin to the wealthy family, and should Johnny need their help, this cup would prove his kinship and demand their acceptance.

Armed with his talent, his youthful arrogance, and his cup, Johnny's expectations are limitless, and his humility nowhere to be found.

## **Who else is the story about? (4)**

Rab Silsbee – Rab, an apprentice at his uncle's Whig newspaper, meets Johnny at a critical time. Johnny has looked high and low for a job to replace silver-smithing after injuring his hand, but refuses to accept the kind of work an injured man could expect: namely unskilled labor. We are introduced to Rab as Johnny approaches him to ask for work. Forbes spends significant time describing Rab's kind and deliberate personality, opposite to Johnny's surly smug attitude in just about every way. Johnny immediately respects Rab for his maturity and self-assurance, and the two strike up a relationship like

that between older and younger brother. It is because of his respect for Rab that Johnny eventually learns to treasure the principles of the Revolution and dares to lay his own life on the line for his country.

Priscilla Lapham – Cilla, granddaughter to Johnny’s master, provides something Johnny needs throughout the story: someone who knows him and who cannot be overawed by his wit and talent. From the start of the story, Cilla acts the foil to Johnny, ridiculing his arrogance and making him blush with frustration, despite the fact that underneath his mock anger he enjoys the attention. Cilla is smart, resourceful, and loves Johnny for who he is. Though their reunion does not take place inside the pages of our story, we are led to believe that Johnny and Cilla eventually marry.

Isannah Lapham – Isannah, Cilla’s little sister, holds a special place in Johnny’s heart. A beautiful, but sickly little girl, Isannah depends entirely on Cilla’s motherly attentions and revels in the capacity of both of her beauty and her illness to make her the center of attention. On the surface, Isannah is sweet, loving, and Johnny’s favorite little sister. But Johnny perceives a self-centeredness in her even from a young age that rears its head when Isannah is taken in by Lavinia Lyte. This experience with wealth and the coddling effect of being doted upon causes Isannah to reject everything about her upbringing, including her sister. This sad end to Johnny’s childhood connections serves to highlight the difference in his expectations as he grows: obsessed in his childishness with the wealth and status that his “family” connections could bring, Johnny’s experiences with the revolutionaries and his loss of Isannah teach him the value of loyalty and selflessness.

Dove and Dusty – Johnny’s fellow apprentices serve to highlight Johnny’s brilliant talent, and his unbearable arrogance. Though we do not necessarily know if either are talented enough to become smiths in their own right, we do know that neither are a match for Johnny’s intellect or for his gift. He treats them horribly. Dusty, the younger and more overawed of the two, leaves the narrative early to join His Majesty’s navy, while Dove, older and “loutish,” remains peripherally involved for much of the novel, keeping horses for English soldiers billeted across the road from Johnny’s eventual home at the Boston Observer. Dove is ill-tempered, petulant, and helpless. Hating Johnny for his attitude and his talent, Dove sets the trap that ruins Johnny’s hand. As Johnny grows into maturity, his attitude toward Dove softens, eventually leading him to look out for Dove’s well-being, though he never quite gets over his distaste for the boy. Additionally, Dove’s position as an assistant to the English soldiers allows Johnny to surreptitiously gather information to pass on to the revolutionaries.

Jonathan Lyte – Merchant Lyte symbolizes the life Johnny hopes to lead when his vaunted talent skyrockets him to fame and fortune. His company has made him one of the most admired men in the city, attended with fanfare wherever he goes. Johnny’s hero worship leads him to expect Merchant Lyte to be kind and even enthused to discover



another family member. Instead, he immediately berates Johnny for trying to con his way into an inheritance and disavows any knowledge of Johnny or his mother. Accusing him of stealing the silver cup, Merchant Lyte has Johnny imprisoned. This haughty behavior is only matched by Johnny's own haughty response.. Perhaps arrogance is a family trait?

Lavinia Lyte – If her father is the ideal of Johnny's hopes for his future, Miss Lyte demonstrates who Johnny would have been had he grown up in luxury (and incidentally who Isannah becomes over the course of the story). Lavishly beautiful, Lavinia has lived her life as the center of everyone's attention, and she does not mind that one bit. Even Johnny, a relative, cannot catch his breath when she looks at him, and her haughtiness only stokes the fire of yearning in the heart of whatever poor soul is presently at her mercy. Lavinia's personality and arrogance impact Isannah (see above) and further convict Johnny as he relinquishes his dream of being recognized as a Lyte.

Goblin – Goblin is Johnny's horse and partner in the newspaper (and information) delivery business. Every bit as showy and temperamental as his owner, he is the envy of the regimentals: a high-stepping, beautiful, and difficult animal. Johnny and Goblin essentially grow up together. As Goblin learns to trust Johnny, Johnny gains confidence of a sort he has not had since his hand was burned; he begins to develop a healthy self-respect. He becomes a talented rider, partially due to Goblin's feistiness, regaining some of his confidence in the process.

Lieutenant Stranger – Stranger enters the story as a threat: he appreciates Goblin for his beauty, and threatens to commandeer him. When he sees how skittish Goblin is, however, he leaves Johnny to his horse and even strikes up a friendship with the pair, teaching them to jump. Forbes uses the Lieutenant to humanize the "enemy" British soldiers. As Johnny learns to jump his horse and aids Dove in his stable work, he begins to like Stranger and even to admire his dedication to his duty. Forbes does a beautiful job of painting the British as sympathetic characters. Although the redcoats are often presented in fiction as symbols of British oppression, in *Johnny Tremain* they are real people, some of them far from home, and all of them as terrified in the face of war as the revolutionaries.

Pumpkin – A young British regular, Pumpkin serves much the same purpose as Lieutenant Stranger. All Pumpkin wants out of life is a farm and the freedom to work it in peace. His distaste for the army and affinity for the colonies leads him to desert. Sadly, he is caught and shot, which affects Johnny deeply. His understanding of the war is largely informed by this short-lived friendship; he fights for the freedom of men everywhere, including the British.

Historical Characters:

Paul Revere – A noted silversmith, Revere attempts to convince Johnny to come and work for him in the beginning of the story. Little do either of them know that they will be working together on a far more important project in the future. Forbes gives Revere a crucial line: “There’s a time for the casting of silver, and a time for the casting of cannon” (Forbes, *A World to Come*, 211).

James Otis – Otis, an old man by the time of the battles at Lexington and Concord, was an early agent in fomenting the war. Forbes, a historian by training, accurately portrays his slightly contentious relationship to the younger Adams and Revere. Otis, however, holds the distinction of delivering Forbes’s thematic thrust in a speech before the Boston Tea Party (see theme).

Dr. Warren – Joseph Warren was one of the principal organizers of the revolutionary effort in Boston. He sent Paul Revere out on his noted ride and was commissioned as a Major General shortly before the Battle of Bunker Hill, where he, refusing to be anywhere but the thick of the fighting, was killed in action. His death became a rallying cry for the militia. In this story, Warren serves as a mentor to Johnny, providing an example of a man dedicated to something beyond his own concerns.

Sam Adams and John Hancock – Though neither play desperately important roles in Johnny’s story, their presence in the meetings of the Boston Observers accurately represents the historical roles both men played: philosophers, organizers, and leaders behind the revolution.

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# QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CONFLICT AND PLOT



## What does the protagonist want? (5)

Johnny wants to be the best silversmith in the city of Boston, along with all the advantages that such fame would bring him. This childish desire indicates a deeper yearning for respect: Johnny wants to be regarded by those around him as a man worthy of admiration. As he grows, however, he begins to see that the respect engendered by wealth and status is far less satisfying than the respect gained by being a man of character. By the end, Johnny wants nothing more than to sacrifice his own desires “so that a man can stand up” (Forbes, *A World to Come*, 212).

## Why can't he have it? (6)

Johnny cannot have what he wants because he is too prideful to succeed. In the beginning, the childish silversmith wants nothing in the world more than wealth and prestige. He wants to be recognized as he rides through the city in a lavish carriage, and he wants people to sit up and take notice when he walks into the room. This is not a remote wish, but is instead something of which he is arrogantly certain, even up to the point of refusing the aid of the finest smith in the city, Mr. Paul Revere. “I couldn't leave the Laphams, sir...if it wasn't for me, nothing would ever get done. They'd just about starve” (Forbes, *The Pride of Your Power*, 31). Johnny not only believes himself to be the only reason his master's business runs, but he evidently assumes that his own reknown is already grown enough to support their continued success. Readers both chuckle and cringe as Johnny pompously ignores a generous offer of the very life he plans to provide for himself.

This scene points out the first reason why Johnny cannot have his heart's desire: his prideful belief in his own sufficiency causes him to stumble. In the first place, this leads to a dramatic reversal of his circumstances and prospects. Dove and Dusty, annoyed by Johnny's snotty attitude, hand Johnny a crucible with a crack in its side. Without his master looking over his shoulder, Johnny does not notice this 'mistake,' and as the silver heats, it spills all over the forge, burning his right hand so severely that his thumb heals tightly to the palm of his hand. He will never, apparently, work with silver again.

As you may expect, Johnny's first response to such a tragedy is to feel unutterably sorry for himself. After all, in his mind his talent deserves fame, wealth, and respect. He sees himself not as a smith in training, but as a genius waiting to be revealed to a world which will inevitably laud him. The injury to his hand, from his perspective, can only be an unfair and cruel punishment..

Johnny spends an entire summer moping around the docks, mourning his dream of success, and half-heartedly looking for work. But here again, his arrogance stands in his way. His malaise stems from feeling useless without his hand, but he is unwilling to accept any useful employment. The only jobs he is capable of require little skill, and therefore offer little in the way of glory or recognition, and he cannot bring himself to accept his changed circumstances.

Finally desperate, Johnny turns to his last resort. Taking the cup his mother gave to him, he decides to visit Merchant Lyte and reluctantly accept his position as a wealthy merchant in training. The irony of this “last ditch” effort should be apparent. Johnny’s back up plan, should all else fail him, is to claim relationship to the richest merchant in the city and join his household! It is not that Johnny can find no work, he simply is not willing to do the work he has been offered. Instead, his act of desperation is to search for another route to the wealth and power he believes was capriciously denied him, to preserve his identity as a noble, exceptional person.

Predictably, Johnny’s attempt fails. He is rejected outright by Merchant Lyte (even though the Merchant himself knows Johnny’s claims to be true). Forbes, however, is not done with her young protagonist yet. Johnny’s haughty attitude angers Lyte, who decides that refusing Johnny’s offer is not enough. Attempting to add literal injury to insult, he accuses Johnny of lying about his parentage and stealing the silver cup to make the con stick! Now in danger of being hung as a thief, Johnny’s pride has quite honestly nothing left to hold onto. Johnny has no choice but to rely upon his new friend Rab’s connections to secure a lawyer and upon Cilla’s resourceful testimony to free him from the charges. Finally humbled, Johnny accepts work with Rab as a delivery boy, and he settles into a common life he previously considered impossible.

It is at this crucial juncture that the deeper root of Johnny’s desires starts to show itself. Watching the revolutionaries plan their uprising, Johnny finds that he respects each of the patriots not for their positions in society, but instead for their principles. Rab, only slightly older than Johnny himself, stands a man in Johnny’s eyes simply because he knows what he believes and takes his identity from his convictions. This is a kind of maturity to which Johnny has never thought to aspire.

### **What other problems are there in the story? (7)**

**Johnny’s Injury:** In addition to serving as a symbol of the ill-effects of Johnny’s pride, the injury to his hand presents a serious logistical conflict in the plot. Apprenticeship in this era was one of a very few avenues to a profitable business, and thus a comfortable life. Having wasted the better part of his childhood learning a trade that, all at once, he will never be able to pursue, Johnny harbors some legitimate doubt as to whether or not he will be able to find a way to support himself.

**Johnny’s Loyalty to the Crown:** Though it takes little convincing to get Johnny to join the revolutionary cause, his loyalty remains somewhat confused. He was raised in a Tory family, after all, considering himself a loyal subject of King George. This tension in his

heart appears primarily in the context of his relationship with the British officer, Lieutenant Stranger, and with Pumpkin, a young British regular.

Johnny meets Stranger as he helps the hapless Dove with his work as a stable boy. Initially, Stranger threatens to ruin Johnny's new found livelihood (see Question 4), but after convincing the officer to let him keep Goblin, Johnny strikes up a friendship with the man. Stranger is kind to Johnny and not only watches out for him and his horse, but also takes them on long rides on the commons, teaching them to jump fences and enjoying a relationship that had relatively nothing to do with the war.

Forbes uses this relationship to draw out a tension Johnny feels heavily throughout the novel: as a revolutionary, Johnny bears the responsibility of driving the British out of Boston, but as a man, Johnny likes and respects the Lieutenant. He knows him to be a good man, diligent in his duty and loyal to his king. Do Johnny's newly minted principles demand that he view Stranger and his fellow British soldiers as enemies?

On the eve of the battles of Lexington and Concord, Johnny darts about the city, gathering information on troop numbers and movements. As he slouches by a regiment preparing to march into the countryside, Forbes describes the confusion in Johnny's heart:

“Five mounted men. The sun was bright that day with only breeze enough to ruffle the horses' manes, flaunt scarlet riding capes, float the flag of England. Johnny was an Englishman. The sullen, rebellious people standing about watching Percy and his staff approaching, waiting for the brigade to march, all were Englishmen. That flag—it stood for the Magna Carta, the Bill of Rights, Charles the First's head upon a block, centuries of struggle for ‘English liberty’” (Forbes, *Yankee Doodle*, 262).

Johnny was not only raised as an Englishman, but feels his kinship with these soldiers keenly. They are his countrymen, as thoroughly as any of the revolutionaries.

This conflict grows all the more poignant in the character of Pumpkin. One imagines him as a pudgy, good-natured boy, who has fallen deeply in love with the countryside surrounding Boston. He does not care one whit for the Crown's holdings, nor does he care to win glory or honor on the field. All in the world that Pumpkin wants is “[a] farm of my own. Cows. Poor folks can't get all that over in England...I'm no soldier, I'm a farmer. I hate the smell of gunpowder. What I like is manure” (Forbes, *The Scarlet Deluge*, 228-9). Pumpkin trades his uniform for one of Johnny's smocks and is caught making a bid for precisely the kind of freedom Johnny and his friends are beginning to fight. He is killed as a deserter two chapters later.

Both these relationships draw Johnny's attention to the underlying struggle not only for American freedom, but for the ideal of liberty that should be the possession of all men.

### How is the main problem solved? (9)

Johnny's destroyed pride begins to reshape itself into healthy self-respect under the influence of Rab and the job he provides for Johnny at the Boston Observer, a Whig newspaper. Forbes describes Rab as a person whose primary gift of character is to notice others in their fears and in their delights. He sees into the heart of others and finds a way to encourage their self-worth. Johnny stands in desperate need of this very kind of encouragement, and he admires Rab deeply from the first.

Rab first provides Johnny with a job: settling him atop the temperamental horse Goblin, Rab sends Johnny out to deliver newspapers all over the countryside, gathering information for the revolutionaries as he goes. This addresses the heart of Johnny's insecurity immediately, as he must use both his good hand and his bad hand to control the skittish horse. As Johnny learns to ride, he entirely forgets his maimed hand, and so too his shattered identity.

Forbes offers evidence of Johnny's conversion in a pivotal scene at the Lyte Mansion, where he and Cilla have just watched Isannah accompany Johnny's older cousin Lavinia to a ship bound for England. Wary of the coming conflict, many of the wealthy Tory families in the city have fled to the motherland, and the Lytes are no exception. As the pair walk around the now deserted mansion, Johnny finds his silver cup and a Bible containing his genealogy: between the two, these offer all the proof he needs to claim the Lyte house and all that may remain of his family's legacy after the war ends. Faced with the possibility of actualizing his dream of "being a Lyte," Johnny turns away:

“ ‘No. I'm better off without it. I want nothing of them. Neither their blood, nor their silver...I'll carry that hamper for you, Cil. Mr. Lyte can have the old cup.’

He put his hands on the mantelpiece and his forehead on his hands. He stood like that a long time. His grandfather had built this great house. His mother had played on the floor of this kitchen...Does it matter? Does it—or doesn't it? No. He answered his own question aloud, and took from his pocket the heavy pages he had cut from the Bible, all written over with the names of his genealogy. He could not think now why he had ever cut them out. Slowly, tearing each sheet to ribbons, he fed them to the fire upon the hearth” (Forbes, *A World to Come*, 193).

Newly freed from his self-obsession, Johnny begins to be more and more closely involved in the meetings of the Sons of the Revolution, a cadre who meet above the print shop at the Observer. At one of these meetings, an older revolutionary named James Otis stands to remind the young men gathered there of their purpose.

“ ‘It is all so much simpler than you think,’ he said. He lifted his hands and pushed against the rafters. ‘We give all we have, lives, property, safety, skills...we fight, we die, for a simple thing. Only that a man can stand up’” (Forbes, *A World to Come*, 212).

With these words ringing in his mind, Johnny begins to realize that his respect for Lieutenant Stranger must turn into love for him and a willingness to fight for his liberty

as well as American liberty. He considered that even the men who shot Pumpkin stood in need of the same freedoms that Pumpkin was sought.

“Johnny was an Englishman. The sullen, rebellious people standing about watching Percy and his staff approaching, waiting for the brigade to march, all were Englishmen. That flag—it stood for the Magna Carta, the Bill of Rights, Charles the First’s head upon a block, centuries of struggle for ‘English liberty.’ But over here there had grown up a broader interpretation of the word ‘liberty’: no man to be ruled or taxed except by men of his own choice. But we are still fighting for ‘English liberty’ and don’t you forget it. French slaves to the north of us, Spanish slaves to the south of us. Only English colonies are allowed to taste the forbidden fruit of liberty—we who grew up under England. Johnny thought of James Otis’s words. Upholding the torch of liberty—which had been lighted on the fires of England.

“Not since the soldiers had come to Boston had Johnny removed his hat when the British flag went by except once when it had been knocked off his head by a soldier. He started to remove it now—for the first time, and doubtless the last. Thought better of it—it was too late. He knew the shooting had begun” (Forbes, *Yankee Doodle*, 262).

Armed with a clear vision of the cause, and a clearer vision of himself, Johnny turns to his work, gathering information to make a dash out of the city at nightfall and find Dr. Warren.

### **How does the story end? (10)**

Johnny makes it out of the city that night and finds Dr. Warren on the morning after the battles of Lexington and Concord. Rab has been mortally wounded in the battle. As Johnny sits with Rab, the older boy gives him the musket he had never fired, passing the same torch of which Otis spoke to Johnny before sending him to find his family. When Johnny returns, he finds that Rab has died.

Dr. Warren, upon examination of Johnny’s hand, tells him that a simple operation can free Johnny’s thumb. Far from imagining the silversmith’s life he once longed to lead, all Johnny can ask is, “will it be good enough to hold this gun?” In this question, Forbes demonstrates Johnny’s growth: when presented with a renewal of his dream of success, he thinks first of the cause. He has outgrown his childish concerns, and become a man of principles.



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# QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: THEME



## What is the main idea of the story? (13)

Johnny spends the story learning what it means to be a man of principles. In the beginning, Johnny conceives of manhood as status. He holds up John Hancock, Jonathan Lyte, and Paul Revere as models, aspiring to their collective wealth and powerful personas about the city. But he does not really know what it means to be a man.

Interestingly, Forbes uses Paul Revere, one of Johnny's idols, to demonstrate the kind of manhood that Johnny comes to understand by the end of the novel. During the final meeting of the Sons of the Revolution, Otis directly addresses several of the founding fathers, including John Hancock and Paul Revere.

Turning to each of these men in turn, Otis points out their livelihoods, their reputations, and their passions as things that they have implicitly sacrificed in pursuit of liberty. The great men's responses are telling:

“Some of us will give our wits,’ [Otis] said, ‘some of us all our property. Heh, John Hancock, did you hear that? *Property*—that hurts, eh? To give one's silver wine-coolers, one's coach and four, and the gold buttons off one's satin waistcoats?’

Hancock looked him straight in the face, and Johnny had never before liked him so well.

‘I am ready,’ he said. ‘I can get along without all that.’

‘You, Paul Revere, you'll give up that silvercraft you love. God made you to make silver, not war.’

Revere smiled. ‘There's a time for the casting of silver, and a time for the casting of cannon. If that's not in the Bible, it should be.’

.... ‘It is all so much simpler than you think.’ [Otis] said. He lifted his hands, and pushed against the rafters. ‘We give all we have, lives, property, safety, skills...we fight, we die, for a simple thing. Only that a man can stand up.’”

(Forbes, *A World to Come*, 212).

Otis's speech, and these men's responses stick in Johnny's mind, and give context to his erstwhile confusing affection for British regulars like Pumpkin or Lieutenant Stranger. Rather than fighting for the ability to make money or for representation in the British government, Johnny sees Revere and Hancock laying aside their personal concerns altogether to secure freedom for everyone.

As Johnny watches the docks from the shadows, looking for a way out of the city to deliver information to Dr. Warren, he sees the British more clearly than he has before: as

men, just like him, in need of the very freedom Johnny's friends are laying down their lives to procure.

“Four more boats were coming in. Johnny dared move out onto the wharf, but he still kept well in shadow. More wounded. Could these be the very men who had started out so confidently? Bedraggled, dirty, torn uniforms, torn flesh, lost equipment. Faces ghastly with fatigue and pain. Some were twisting and crying out. The first two boats were filled with privates. They had been packed in, and now were being tossed ashore, like so much cordwood. Most of them were pathetically good and patient, but he saw an officer strike a man who was screaming.

Johnny's hands clenched. ‘It is as James Otis said,’ he thought. ‘We are fighting, partly, for just that. Because a man is a private is no reason he should be treated like cordwood’” (Forbes, *A Man Can Stand Up*, 282).

With the pain and fear of the British soldiers firmly fixed in his mind, Johnny leaves Boston, making for the countryside, Rab, and Dr. Warren.

Forbes uses Johnny's immediate responses to Rab's death and to the revelation that his hand can be healed to demonstrate that he has finally come to a deep understanding of the principle quality of manhood: selflessness. As he takes a moment to compose himself outside the farmhouse, Johnny reflects on the countryside he has spent the last year riding with Goblin:

“Johnny stood upon the Green and looked about him. .... This was his land and these his people. The cow that lowed, the man who milked, the chickens that came running and the woman who called them, the fragrance streaming from the plowed land and the plowman. These he possessed. The skillful hands of the unseen gunsmith were his hands. The old woman throwing stones at crows who cawed and derided her was his old woman—and the crows his crows. The woodsmoke rising from the home-hearths rose from his heart. .... He felt nothing could hurt him on this day. Not Rab's death nor the surgeon's knife. .... True, Rab had died. Hundreds would die, but not the thing they died for. ‘A man can stand up...’” (Forbes, *A Man Can Stand Up*, 299).

Johnny Tremain becomes a man, as he finally realizes that he is only as worthy as the cause for which he lays down his life. The silver that has been his obsession, the friendship that has taught him to care for something beyond wealth, and even Johnny's life itself snap into focus as he encounters the value of simple liberty.

As Dr. Warren prepares to free Johnny's hand, we see that Johnny's heart has already been freed. He has outgrown his self-centered childishness and acquired the concerns of a noble, steadfast man, caring not for his own riches, prosperity, or reputation, but only for a just cause.

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# QUESTIONS ABOUT STYLE: LITERARY DEVICES



**Does the author use the characters and events in her story to communicate a theme that goes beyond them in some way? (17)**

This coming of age narrative focuses primarily on Johnny's struggle to come to maturity over the course of the story, but that does not prevent Forbes from commenting on the principles of the American Revolution. In fact, as readers watch Johnny come to an understanding of the importance of the Revolutionaries' mission, they sit under Forbes's tutelage and receive her interpretation of the historical period.

As mentioned above, Forbes takes great care to introduce the British not as a faceless opponent, but as a group of real, flesh and blood men. Not only that, but she takes care to paint them as patriots in their own right, committed to the crown and willing to die for their King. By restraining the readers' imaginations, requiring them to treat the British regulars humanely, Forbes makes a crucial point: the American ideal of personal liberty is not American at all. It is human. All men deserve to be free, and in throwing off tyranny, heroes like Paul Revere, John Hancock, and Dr. Warren publicly laid down their own safety to obtain a more universal freedom. This idea, far larger than the journey of the protagonist, is mirrored beautifully in his experiences.

***Symbolism: Does the author use any objects, persons, pictures, or things to represent an idea in the story? For example, darkness may be used to represent wickedness, light to represent truth or goodness, etc. (17i)***

Forbes uses imagery throughout the story, but there are three symbols that offer the reader perspective on Johnny's evolving concerns: Silver, Goblin, and Rab's musket.

**Silver:** Forbes uses silver as a potent symbol of Johnny's character. The metal is precious in and of itself, but grows in grace, beauty, and value when subjected to intense heat. Likewise, Forbes paints Johnny as an unrefined, but undeniably talented young man. In the beginning of the story, his obsession with silver draws attention to his immaturity: his character needs molding, and the swift reversal of his circumstance at the hands of the very thing in which he has been placing his faith offers just the kind of fire he needs. By the end of the story, silver, reintroduced into his life by an operation that could allow him to continue chasing his dream, draws attention to his re-formed priorities. His silver craft is not his first thought, but his second. He has emerged from the crucible of his experience with a purer heart and stronger character.

**Goblin:** Johnny’s showy, temperamental horse provides the reader with a perfect snapshot of his confusion and frustration in the aftermath of his injury. Losing his apprenticeship leaves Johnny utterly unsure of his value—he had wrapped up his identity in being the next great silversmith, and without that dream to chase, he is as skittish and distrustful as his mount. As he and Goblin learn to work together, however, they each grow to match one another: Johnny grows as a rider, offering his horse a firm hand to gentle his fear, and Goblin warms to Johnny’s leadership, giving him a purpose and a new confidence.

**Rab’s Musket:** Rab serves as Johnny’s inspiration. Even though the boy is only a year or two older than Johnny himself, he has a strength of character that Johnny lacks. His youthful idealism and energy are infectious, and Forbes sums them up in the symbol of his beloved musket. Acquired by Johnny from British regular, Pumpkin, the musket embodies the ‘torch of liberty, lit from the fires of England.’ In the final scenes of the story, Rab entrusts the musket, which he never fired, to Johnny. In so doing, he mentions aspects of the weapon that he improved, emphasizing the influence he has had on Johnny. Armed with his friend’s good will and with the emblem of their shared commitment to the Revolutionary cause, Johnny embarks on a life now marked by selfless idealism, rather than self-obsession.

**NOTES:**

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# QUESTIONS ABOUT CONTEXT

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## Who is the author? (18)

Esther Louise Forbes (b. June 28, 1891 – d. August 12, 1967) was a novelist by hobby but a historian by trade, which accounts for the sumptuous detail of the Colonial Boston of *Johnny Tremain*. Honored by the historical community for her biography of Paul Revere, entitled *Paul Revere and the World He Lived In*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for History in 1943, Forbes eventually became the first female member of the American Antiquarian Society. As author Gary D. Schmidt notes in his beautiful introduction to the 2011 edition of *Johnny Tremain*, Forbes penned the work in the midst of the confusion of the second World War. Her accomplishment was far deeper and more important than simply to usher the reader into the world of Revolutionary America; it was to remind the young people of her own era of the power of their own ideas and the dread importance of their own commitment to the cause of liberty. Schmidt writes, “She was, after all, speaking to all generations, hoping that whatever else the American experiment in democracy meant, it meant that the country would rise to challenge evil, that it would praise noble sacrifice, and that it would commit itself always to enable every man, woman, and child to stand up.”

# ESSAY QUESTIONS FOR WRITING ASSIGNMENTS



1. What image or symbol does the author use to demonstrate Johnny's growth over the course of the story, and what does that reveal about Forbes's idea of manhood? What makes a good man, according to Esther Forbes?
2. In the beginning of the novel, readers find Johnny obnoxious. Compare and contrast his character at the beginning of the novel to his character at the end of the novel. What kind of theme does Johnny's character development suggest? Support your answers from the text.
3. Forbes's setting plays a central role in moving the story along: the war is beginning even before Johnny is aware of it. Besides the historical importance of the setting, what other roles does setting play in the story? How does the author use the story's settings to reflect Johnny's growth into a mature man?





# STORY CHARTS

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The following pages contain story charts of the type presented in the live seminar *Teaching the Classics*. As is made clear in that seminar, a separate story chart may be constructed for each of the conflicts present in a work of fiction. In particular, the reader's decision as to the **climax** and central **themes** of the plot structure will depend upon his understanding of the story's central **conflict**. As a result, though the details of setting, characters, exposition, and conclusion may be identical from analysis to analysis, significant variation may be found in those components which appear down the center of the story chart: Conflict, Climax, and Theme. This of course results from the fact that literary interpretation is the work of active minds, and differences of opinion are to be expected – even encouraged!

For the teacher's information, one story chart has been filled in on the next page. In addition, a blank chart is included to allow the teacher to examine different conflicts in the same format.

# Johnny Tremain: A Story of Boston in Revolt by Esther Forbes: Story Chart

## SETTING

Revolutionary Boston; busy, industrious, textured with fascinating and historically accurate characters.

*Rising Action:* Johnny's hand is burned, ending his apprenticeship. His attempt to join his family, the Lyte's, is rejected, and he is forced to accept a job with the Observer. He is introduced to the Revolutionary cause and begins to deliver messages. He Participates in the Boston Tea Party.

*Climax:* Johnny rejects his chance to prove himself a Lyte, deciding that his identity as an American is more important. He accepts a mission to deliver information to Paul Revere and to Dr. Warren, disguising himself as a soldier to make it out of the city. Along the way, he realizes the truth that the British need this liberty as much as the colonists.

## CHARACTERS

*Dénouement:* Johnny finds Rab mortally wounded. Rab bequeaths his rifle to Johnny and sends him, symbolically and literally, to find his family.

## THEME:

A true man is a selfless man.  
Liberty is worth dying for.

## PLOT

*Exposition:* Johnny holds court in the Lapham's silver forge, ordering the other apprentices around and accepting a commission from John Hancock that his master would not support. Johnny's arrogance and obsession with building his own reputation leads him to work on Sunday against his master's wishes and the laws of the City of Boston.

*Conclusion:* Dr. Warren tells Johnny he can free his hand from the scarring. Johnny's only thought is for his usefulness to the cause of liberty.

## CONFLICT

Will Johnny grow into a man of conviction and character?

Will Johnny become a Lyte, or will he learn to "stand up"?

***Johnny Tremain: A Story of Boston in Revolt* by Esther Forbes: Story Chart**





