

Name _____ Class _____

Target Lesson: Analyzing Characters with “How to Ignore a House on Fire”

PART 1: Warm-Up

Directions: Look at the picture and answer the question.

In some families, older children are often asked to help their younger siblings with homework or chores.



“Untitled” by UNICEF Ethiopia is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

Today you’re going to read a vignette, or short written scene, about a teenager and their two younger siblings.

The title of this piece is “How to Ignore a House on Fire.” Make a prediction...

- Based on what you know so far, what do you think might happen in this story?

Take **three minutes** to write down your ideas.

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PART 2: Target Skill Video: Analyzing Characters

Directions: Watch the video and then answer the question.

1. Summarize the steps for analyzing characters in your own words.

Steps for Analyzing Characters:

1. Identify the characters the author introduces.
2. As you read, pay attention to how the characters react to:
 - other characters
 - the setting
 - the plot
3. Ask yourself: What do these responses reveal about the characters?



PART 3: Reading and Answering Questions

Directions: Read the text and answer the questions.

How to Ignore a House on Fire

by Nia Boulware

[1] You'll have to share the sidewalk with Danielle and Chris, who have been a power couple ever since eighth grade. They will be a few steps ahead of you, arguing over homecoming colors. Chris will want red and white, to match the football team's new uniform. He'll say it's team spirit. Danielle, on the other hand, will want something more practical. She'll wave her hands and use big words like "recalcitrant"¹ and "incompetent."² Your eyes will travel from Chris to Danielle and back again. You'll think about how, if it was up to you, you would let Danielle choose whatever color she wanted for homecoming. Danielle always looks good. Somewhere in this feud, Chris will look back at you for reassurance. There's no need to say anything, just nod and take his side. Do the same thing, seconds later, when Danielle looks back. Fake a chuckle when she scoffs and mouths, "he's so stupid." Your snicker will likely sound strange and awkward, but oh well.

[2] It won't be long before you'll have to cross on Acres Street and exchange your goodbyes. Danielle will hug you, smelling of an incense that burns your insides. Chris will ask if you're cool. Not just any cool, but the "I-know-what-you're-going-through cool." Danielle will be slightly behind him for support. Try not to look her in the eye. You'll be able to tell from the way she shifts in her Chucks whether or not Chris has told her. Say "Yeah," dap him up and hide your agitation. When

Paragraph 1

1. What does the main character's reaction to their friends reveal about them?

Need help with this skill? Review Part 2.

- A. The main character thinks it is important to ignore their friends.
- B. The main character thinks it is important to reassure their friends.
- C. The main character thinks it is important to tell their friends the truth.
- D. The main character thinks it is important to side with whoever is smartest.

¹ **Recalcitrant** (*noun*): a person with an uncooperative attitude

² **Incompetent** (*adjective*): not having the necessary skills to do something successfully

you turn to walk away, keep your shoulders from slumping and your head from dropping.

[3] When you reach your front steps, the “Taylor” welcome mat will crunch under your feet. Kneel down and grab its folded edge. You will have to vigorously shake the cobwebs and dust from underneath it. Roll it up and tuck it under your arm before you put your key in the door.

[4] The condo will smell like paint and plywood, but by now you’re used to it. Call out names and wait for a reply, even though you know none of your siblings will answer. Place the mat on its side next to the rest of the boxes.

[5] Spend your last night at the dining room table with your younger sister Alice and her long division homework. She’ll never get the opportunity to turn in it, that’s true, but you’ll want to ensure she doesn’t fall too far behind in her learning. She’ll shuffle tiny red and black eraser pieces around, and it’ll remind you of the time you found her in the neighbor’s backyard. She was by the rosemary bushes, playing with the carcasses of ladybugs. She told you Derrick needed them for good luck on his test. You didn’t have the heart to tell her it was the live ones that brought good luck. And telling the truth feels overrated nowadays anyhow.

[6] Tap your finger lightly on question number eight, and tell her to stay focused. Watch as her eyes circle the room. She’ll snifle. It’ll remind you to refill Derrick’s asthma pump tomorrow while you all still have insurance. Alice will look at you after she’s finished her stare-off with the desk lamp on the floor. Her eyes will be tight, her nose will be flared. Her heavy breathing and gaping bucktooth will be a sign she’s deep in thought. You’ll know she’s trying to find a way to ask about the

house. Try your best not to tense up if she questions why her room is not periwinkle anymore. Explain to her, for what seems to be the sixty-seventh time, that the house has to be completely white for the next family. Be honest when she asks you where your family will end up. Tell her that you honestly don't know, but you're sure there will be periwinkle walls in every room. Reach for your school bag and open the only pocket that still zips. Skip over your AP LIT homework and pull out the calculator that you've had since elementary school. Hand it to her. Make your way to the kitchen once Alice completes question nine without help. The options for dinner are the same as any night recently: cereal or oatmeal. Alice will want cereal, because somehow oatmeal reminds her of raisins. Pour a bowl for both Alice and yourself. Eat with her. She will most likely spill some on her plaid skirt. If she does, take a tattered rag from the counter and toss it at her. Tell her that you don't want anyone thinking of them as being dirty, not even strangers you'll never meet. She'll cut her teeth, and wipe wet and soggy O's into the floor. When you've seen enough of this, finish cleaning her mess, tell her to fix her attitude, and then make the last pack of Quaker Oats. Pour the contents into a styrofoam cup and carry it upstairs.

[7] Walk to your brother's door and open it slightly. Poke your head inside. Derrick won't notice. After his first asthma attack it's rare for him to notice anything anymore beyond his own well being. It's another annoyance about him that you'll have to overlook. He's thirteen now, so once he realizes you are there, you'll also have to apologize for forgetting to knock.

[8] It's the 28th of the month, so all of his clothes and dolls (what Derrick calls "collectables") should be packed away. Glance at his

Paragraph 6

2. Which statement best describes how the main character feels about their sister?

- A. The main character feels excited to help their sister with her math homework.
- B. The main character feels responsible for their sister's education and well being.
- C. The main character feels hopeful that helping their sister will make them look good.
- D. The main character feels bitter that they have to help their sister with her school work.

closet to make sure. Fingers crossed you'll find nothing but beige walls and brown boxes.

[9] Derrick will look up from the book he's reading, rub his eyes and fix his glasses. It'll be in that exact order. If his eyes are wide and still white, he'll be engulfed in whatever story he's reading. Keep the conversation short, bearing in mind that your presence is a reminder of things to come, and this alone might bring him to tears. However, if his eyes are red, you'll know he's already brought himself to tears. Tell him to man up. Remind him that Alice is downstairs. Tell him she can hear him whenever he is crying, even if she can't. Derrick will bow his head, and if it looks like he's going to break down in front of you, tell him that you have enough money saved up, that everything will be fine. Ask him if he's eaten anything. It doesn't matter how he answers. Place the oatmeal on his night stand anyway. Close his door.

[10] Head to your own room, even though it doesn't feel like it's yours anymore because you haven't slept there in weeks. If you're not spending nights pacing the floor after everyone is asleep, you're sleeping on Alice's bedroom floor, since she's started complaining about having nightmares.

[11] Stand in your doorway, take in what's left of the room. Touch the spaces on your wall where there were once posters of classic movies from the nineties. If you look close enough, you can still see where the tacks had been pushed into the wall. Open the white treasure chest that sits at the foot of your mattress. Your mother told you it used to belong to your grandma and before that, your great-grandma. You moved it into your room after your parents stopped coming home. You don't plan on taking it with you.

Paragraph 9

3. What do paragraphs 7-9 reveal about Derrick?

Complete the sentence starter:

Paragraphs 7-9 reveal that Derrick...

[12] Your hands will tremble when you open it, but ignore all that. Pick up the folded blue sticky note with “GOD never gives us any more than we can handle” scribbled in purple ink. You found that in your locker a week after your father was hospitalized. The handwriting was unrecognizable, although it’s pretty clear to you that it came from Connie. She often tried to invite you to her church lock-ins, vacation Bible schools, and missionary trips. Toss the note into the chest, on top of the unfinished sketch of your mom. Tell yourself you don’t have time to finish the sketch. That it’s not because you can’t remember the way her eyes curve or who inherited what from her. Tell yourself that it’s Alice who has her cheekbones and Derrick who has her jawline. Promise yourself it’s not the other way around.

[13] In the center of the chest you will find photographs of Gabby, an old friend you planned to never see again. Gabby was a senior when you were a sophomore. She was the one who ended it. Said the relationship was too platonic. This was news to you. There were always rumors of her hooking up with Chris, who conveniently carried her picture around shortly after the breakup. Bury those photos at the bottom of the trunk. You’ll discover an envelope there. Something your mother forgot to take with her. She forgot to take a lot of things with her. Open it and you’ll find two-hundred and eighty-three dollars, along with yours and Derrick’s birth certificates. An idea will come to you. Embrace it. Combining this money with your own will leave you with more than enough to catch a bus down to Florida. You can recall enough of your mother’s stories. Every now and then she talked about Ms. Amy and other longtime friends and family members in Pensacola. You don’t think it’ll be that hard to find them. There’s even a chance you’ll make it there and find her. Move with haste at this point. Put the envelope in a bag, along with a few pairs of outfits, a sketchbook and a

Paragraph 12

4. What do paragraphs 10-12 reveal about the main character’s parents? How does the main character feel about their parents?

pencil. Close the chest and grab the piece of sketch paper. Write 'To Danielle Alston,' put her address on there and stick it to the roof. You won't be able to think of anyone else you'd rather leave your things to. Call for Derrick and Alice. Tell them there's been a change of plan. You'll have to leave the boxes and the luggage behind. Tell them to pack a small bag of necessities only. Accept Derrick's *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* as a necessity. Take your sketchbook with you.

[14] Wake Derrick and Alice up at 6am, two hours before the sheriff's appointed pickup. This will leave enough time for them to shower and dress and complain. Usher them out the door after they've quieted down. Derrick will peer over his glasses before pulling them up to the bridge of his nose. It will remind you of your father. You'll reconsider things, but just for a moment. Remind Derrick that the sheriff is on his way. Tell him to keep up.

[15] It won't be long before Alice will get tired of walking. You'll have to carry her on your back. The rocking of your footsteps will slowly put her to sleep. You'll wonder if Danielle will ever get to the condo or the chest and finally understand. If she and Chris will stop by while strolling home without you one day. You hope they will walk through each room and distinguish it beyond it's chipped paint and peeling plywood. To know that it was no longer a home worth its title, and forgive you for ever leaving.

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Paragraph 15

5. How does the main character react to finding money at the bottom of the trunk? What does this reveal about them?

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PART 4: Assessment

Directions: Answer the questions.

1. Which **TWO** character traits describe the main character? Pick **TWO**.

- A. flirty
- B. defiant
- C. selfless
- D. uncaring
- E. humorous
- F. determined

2. How has their parents' absence influenced the main character of this story? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.
