The Brothers, by Bjornstjerne Bjornson

Solomon wrote: “A brother offended is harder to be won than a strong city: and their contentions are like the bars of a castle” (Proverbs 18:19) This story vividly illustrations this proverb. More importantly, this narrative shows how personal choices rooted in the deadly sin of pride can turn minor misunderstanding into bitter rivalries.

The author of our story, Bjornson (1832-1910) began writing while still a child. Later he served as stage director of the national theater in Bergen, Norway, where he founded the Society for Norwegian Culture. Today he is recognized primarily for his folktales and poetry.

Character flaws are weaknesses or moral faults that are revealed about characters in a story. In “The Brothers” you read about two men who, although aware of their faults, seem unwilling to change. These flaws often lead to conflict between characters. All conflict falls under one of two types: external conflict, or conflict between a character and an outside force such as society or nature (or your own brother), which we call man vs. man, man vs. Nature, man vs. God; and internal conflict, which is conflict within a character’s mind between opposing thought and emotions, which we call man vs. self.

1. What initial character flaw or flaws do bother brothers demonstrate after their father dies and during the auction?

2. What conflicts are present within the story? Name at least one external conflict and one internal conflict.

3. Baard vows to God that he will make peace with his brother but cannot force himself to do so after church because “there was still something in the way.” What kept Baard from speaking to Anders?

4. What finally happens to the watch?

5. How is this ironic?

6. A tragedy may be defined as a narrative in which the consequences of the action are disastrous for the protagonist. In what way is “The Brothers” a tragedy?

7. Is the ending completely tragic? Explain why.