

Setting/Time and Place: Where in the World Are We?



"My first landmark would be the elves' Forest. After the Forest I would come to another fork. The road to the left, which I was not to take, led to the Fens, where the ogres lived. The road on the right would take me to the giants. When the cows became as big as barns, I would be there."

—Ella, *Ella Enchanted*

The kingdom of Kyrria, where Ella's story takes place, exists in a world of its own. Ruled by King Jerrold, the kingdom is home to humans, fairies, ogres, gnomes, giants, and many other creatures. Kyrria is not unlike the medieval settings of many familiar fairy tales: There are castles, quests, and traveling knights, as well as a titled class supported by traders and merchants like Ella's father. There are tapestries and dragons. But in this country, the dragons are real.

We learn very soon that Ella lives in a place where people have fairy godmothers, centaurs snack on apples, and elves make pottery. This is the reality of the story, and we believe in Ella's

world from the beginning—*of course* she has a fairy godmother! *Of course* there are centaurs and a dragon in the royal menagerie!

Ella lives in Frell, an important town in Kyrria. She grows up in her father's manor house. The family is well-to-do because Sir Peter is a successful trader. Their household staff includes a cook (Mandy), maids, and other servants. The house has "forty-two windows and a fireplace in every room," according to Hattie.

The throw rug that used to lie under Lady Eleanor's chair in the great hall features a scene of a hound and hunters chasing a boar. There is nothing remarkable about it until the day of Lady Eleanor's funeral, when the rug comes alive for Ella. She feels the movements and emotions of characters in the scene, and she feels as if she's been "in the rug." Mandy tells her that it is a silly rug, a fairy joke. In Ella's world, magic is an everyday thing.

A long walk from Ella's home takes her to the old castle, which is said to be haunted. Abandoned when King Jerrold was a boy, the castle is reopened "on special occasions, for private balls, weddings, and the like." The castle's overgrown gardens feature a grove of candle trees, "small trees that had been pruned and tied to wires to make them grow in the shape of candelabra." Ella goes here to make a wish because she wants to "make it in the place where it would have the best chance of being granted."

The new castle, where Prince Charmont and his parents live, is nearby. Ella and Char's second meeting takes place in the royal menagerie, just outside the palace walls. It is one of the places Ella loves best, and she wants to say good-bye to it before she

leaves for school. Except for the hydra and the baby dragon, the exotic animals—“the unicorn, the herd of centaurs, and the gryphon family”—live on an island surrounded by an extension of the castle moat.

Ella attends a finishing school in the town of Jenn, reached after a long trip south of Frell. Except for the enormous ornamental shrubs (pruned to look like “wide-skirted maidens”) outside it, the school is an ordinary wooden house. Her “lavender cloud” of a bedroom and the topiary seem to be the only things about her school’s physical environment that impress Ella.

Since the story is told from Ella’s point of view, we only know what she tells us. Her time at school is so unpleasant that she doesn’t pay much attention to her surroundings—she just tries to survive. Similarly, during the time when she slaves for “Mum Olga,” her focus is on getting through the days, and not on her surroundings. We learn little about the house where she lives with her stepmother and stepsisters.

When Ella heads off to find Lucinda, her travels take her through the part of Kyrria where the giants live. She knows she’ll be getting close when the cows become as big as barns. Human guests at the giants’ wedding struggle with knives and forks the size of axes and shovels. The size of the giants and their things gives us an idea of what it’s like to be Ella in their midst.

The kingdom closest to Kyrria is Ayortha, home of Ella’s school friend, Areida. Char spends a year in Ayortha as a guest of the royal court on a sort of royal exchange program. Ayorthaians are known for their wonderful singing and for their unusual attitude

toward speech. From Char’s letters to Ella, we learn that the kind and smiling Ayorthaians “think before they speak, and often conclude . . . that nothing need be said.” The ordinary Ayorthaians are talkative, but the nobles at court are not, usually uttering a single word at a time, or maybe a phrase. “Once a week they utter a complete sentence. On their birthdays they grant the world an entire paragraph,” Char writes in a letter to Ella.

In this world, as in our own, there is a variety of languages spoken by different people (and nonhumans). As Ella encounters different people and beings, she learns their languages: Gnomic, Ayorthaian, Ogrese, Elfian, Abdegi, and more. Languages can reveal much about the cultures of those who speak them. We can also learn about characters through the *way* they use their language. The author has written a story that is rich not only in characters, but also in its cultures, creating a complete, believable world.

Thinking about the setting

- Does Ella’s world, which is so different from our own, feel real to you?
- Do the different characters and their languages contribute to your impression of the world around Ella?
- Do we learn things about the narrator based on the way she describes the setting?

Themes/Layers of Meaning: Is That What It *Really* Means?



"I was made anew. Ella. Just Ella. Not Ella, the slave. Not a scullery maid. Not Lela. Not Eleanor. Ella. Myself unto myself. One. Me."

—Ella, *Ella Enchanted*

A story's theme is its main idea. It is an author's general statement (or statements) about life. Four important themes in Ella's story are being your own person, the power of words, humor, and love.

Being your own person: independence versus obedience

Ella isn't the only one who suffers from the curse of obedience. Many of us feel as though we're under a kind of curse—one that makes us feel obligated to meet everybody's expectations, to be the person others want us to be. There is a struggle between the parts of us that are obedient and the parts of us that need to be independent, to be who *we* want to be.

Because of the fairy's curse, Ella is a person who must constantly fight with herself. She is also "in danger at every

moment”; vulnerable to the commands of others. “If you commanded me to cut off my own head, I’d have to do it,” Ella tells the reader. Her need to be independent makes her life even more difficult. If she were less independent and intelligent, the curse of obedience might seem less oppressive to her. However, her independent nature makes her rebel against the curse and find a way to remove it so she can be her own person.

Ella has fought the fairy’s “gift” all her life. With those she loves and trusts, Ella turns obedience into a game. Mandy’s gentle orders, like “Hold this bowl while I beat the eggs,” are met with a playful resistance—Ella will hold the bowl, but walk around with it so that Mandy has to follow her around the kitchen. Although she is being obedient, she is doing it in a way that makes the action her own. Lady Eleanor encourages Ella’s attempts to be independent. She seems to understand how hard life is for her daughter.

This game of defiance and obedience is a way for Ella to be her own person, if only for a moment. She can resist direct commands by waiting until the last possible second to obey, but resistance costs her so much “—in breathlessness, nausea, dizziness, and other complaints. . . . Even a few minutes [are] a desperate struggle.” Ella feels physical consequences, as well as emotional ones, when she fights against her own will to obey a command.

At school, she retaliates against Hattie’s barrage of commands with pranks such as releasing spiders into her bed. These are the only weapons available to Ella in her struggle for independence.

However, they won't work with her teachers. Playing a "tiresome game," she must remind herself constantly to follow their endless orders so she doesn't stand out. The other girls seem to have no trouble obeying the teachers. It is Ella, who has no choice but to obey, who has such difficulty doing it.

Ella becomes a perfect student, but anger continues to build inside her. At night, she imagines what she would do if she were free of the curse. "At dinner I'd paint lines of gravy on my face and hurl meat pasties at Manners Mistress," Ella tells the reader.

Ella's decision to leave school to find Lucinda may be the biggest and most important decision she has ever been able to make for herself. But when she arrives at the giants' wedding, she receives what may be the most dangerous order anyone has ever given her—Lucinda's order to be *happy* about being obedient. "She turned you from half puppet to all puppet," Mandy tells her. Even her father finds Ella's joyful obedience strange, though he tries to benefit from it by arranging a profitable but loveless marriage.

While slaving for her stepfamily, Ella has to cope with something else: Char's love. As long as she is under Lucinda's spell, it is dangerous for Ella to marry Char. If anyone outside her family were to discover her obedience, she could be used as a weapon against Char and the entire kingdom. Ella could be ordered to do anything. Unable to act out of her own free will and be herself, she can't be with the person she loves. She can't live the life she wants.

Char's marriage proposal takes the form of an unintentional order: "Say you'll marry me." This is a threat to Ella, who believes they are all doomed if she says yes. He is "too precious to lose . . . too precious to marry." Their marriage could destroy him. A battle rages inside her. The obedient Ella and the independent, *real* Ella are fighting as never before. Trying to resist speaking, she finds inside herself "room for only one truth: I must save Char."

When she finds the power to refuse Char's command, she finds herself "ready to defy anyone." The spell has been broken without a fairy's magic. Ella feels "larger, fuller, more complete, no longer divided against myself—compulsion to comply against wish to refuse." A "massive burden" has been shed. She is free to be herself and live her life as she chooses.

The power of words

Another theme running through the book is the power of words. This power is expressed in different ways. Ella's gift for languages and her ability to communicate with many kinds of people and creatures is one of her greatest strengths. It saves her life on at least one occasion. Not only can Ella speak Ogrese, for example, but she also figures out how to talk to the ogres using their own tricks. "My voice had been persuasive; might not persuasion have other uses? Could I mimic the ogres? Could I speak with their persuasive power?" By doing so, she saves her own life and the lives of Char and his knights.

For Ella and Char, words are an important way of learning about each other and about the world. They cement their relationship with letters. Their correspondence is rich and full of detail because they are interested in what goes on around them as well as inside them. The two reach out using words, even when they aren't separated.

Words can be used in different ways to achieve power. Hattie, Olive, and Dame Olga use words to make complaints and demands, and also to hurt others. Hattie and Olive, we learn, don't even use words very *well* to do this. The sisters are barely literate. We see this in their whiny letters to their mother, which are full of misspellings. Sir Peter uses words to get his way. He lies when he needs to, and he makes threats if he must.

Ella's whole story is set in motion by some poorly chosen words. The fairy Lucinda's thoughtless gifts have lasting consequences. Her words have great power, but she doesn't use them carefully. The results are disastrous; we see clearly that the wrong words can do harm. In *Ella Enchanted*, we see that *how* you say something can be just as important as *what* you say.

When Ella finally breaks the curse, she is fighting the words inside her. "Words rose in me, filled my mouth, pushed against my lips. . . . I swallowed, forcing them down, but they tore at my throat," she tells the reader. Ella knows that the words she uses at this moment will change her life forever. If she speaks the wrong words at the wrong time, obedience will have won. Her own words ("Say yes and be happy. Say yes and live. Obey.") are a threat. But they also help her to assert her newfound

power: “No! I won’t marry you! I won’t do it. No one can force me!” She calls out into the night, telling anyone who can hear that she won’t marry Char. And once she is free of the curse, she knows that it is safe for her to say what she wants to say, because she is speaking from her own heart and mind.

Humor

Throughout *Ella Enchanted*, Ella finds humor in many situations. Like many people, Ella uses humor as a way to cope with challenges. She rebels against Mandy’s orders with teasing and silliness. For relief, she clowns around and does imitations. And she can joke about a bad experience.

When she is taken prisoner by the ogres she manages to make *them* laugh, even though they plan to eat her.

I offered to share [my food] with them, but my only answer was a collective shudder.

“You might enjoy it,” I said. “Perhaps you’d find that you prefer broccoli to flesh and legumes to legs.”

The last suggestion made them laugh.

The youngest ogre told SEEf in Ogrese, “Maybe we should get to know our meals better. This one makes jokes.”

As a narrator, Ella often uses her wit to amuse herself and the readers of her story. Humor isn’t just a tool for her; it is an important part of her character. We see this throughout the book.

Ella uses humor in her descriptions of a scene. For example, she attempts to identify the fairies at the wedding by their small feet: “Ordinary foot. Small, but not small enough. Ordinary. Ordinary. Ordinary. Very tiny! Very tiny!”

Ella also uses humor in her interactions with other characters, whether or not the others are aware of it. The jokes she makes at her stepsisters’ expense go unnoticed by them, but not by the reader. Ella can make jokes at her own expense, too. She describes her attempts to sing notes in music class, although she cannot carry a tune and a classmate covers her ears. At last she thinks she can sing, but everyone around her thinks differently:

I hit the note. She played another. I sang it. She played a scale. I sang every note. I beamed. I’d always wished I could sing. I sang the scale again, louder. Perfect!

“That’s enough, young lady. You must sing when I tell you to, and not otherwise.”

Ella seems to connect best with other characters who have a sense of humor, like her mother, Mandy, Areida and, of course, Char. From their first meeting, the reader can tell that humor is a key ingredient in Ella and Char’s relationship. Laughter comes up in most scenes between them. Despite Ella’s sadness on the day of her mother’s funeral, Char can make her smile with his stories and his gentle teasing. She notices at that first meeting that his laugh isn’t ridiculing but “a happy laugh at a good joke.” Char also seems to know just what to say about her mother: that Lady Eleanor used to make him laugh.

In their correspondence, Ella and Char are witty, putting humor into their descriptions of their daily lives. The same sort of humor can be found in most of their conversations—they both make funny observations about the world around them, and they like to play with words. Humor is one of the things that bonds these two people. It is also one of Ella's most important qualities as a person and narrator. Her story would be very different without it.

Love

Ella and Char spend a lot of time thinking about what love means. Love, but not romance, because they have had very little time for romance in their courtship. But it seems to them that they have loved each other since the beginning. And love, they agree, “should not be dictated.” They are two independent people.

Love is an important theme in *Ella Enchanted* because of the power it has to affect people's lives in important ways. Her mother's love helps Ella to grow up as strong and confident as it is possible for her to be while under the curse. Mandy may be able to do magic, but it is the strength of her love that helps Ella through difficult situations. Sir Peter may be intelligent and strong-willed, but he does not love his daughter. It is the *absence* of his love that affects Ella.

In the end, it is love that enables Ella to break the fairy's spell. She is able to break it on her own because, finally, she has sufficient reason. “I'd had to have reason enough, love enough to do it, to find the will and the strength,” Ella tells the reader.

Up to this point, no event or person, however important, has been sufficient to end the curse. Ella's love for Mandy and her mother is great, but Ella was never in a position to do something so important for them that it would break the bonds of the fairy's curse.

Ella tells the reader: "My safety from the ogres hadn't been enough; zhulph's rescue hadn't been enough . . . my slavery to Mum Olga hadn't been enough. Kyrria was enough. Char was enough." When she chooses to rescue Char by refusing him, she also rescues herself.

Once she realizes she is free, Ella can act on her great love for Char yet again—by turning around and proposing to him. Love is a driving force, and along with the gift of her independence, it is also Ella's happy ending.

Thinking about the themes

- Is there one theme in *Ella Enchanted* that is more important to you than the others? What makes it important?
- How do you use humor to deal with events in your own life?
- If Ella's story were narrated by another character—Mandy, for example—what themes do you think that narrator would emphasize?
- Is choosing to obey someone different from being forced to obey? How?

Characters: Who Are These People, Anyway?



Ella *Enchanted* includes an enormous number of characters, both human and nonhuman. Here is a brief list of some of the major ones, followed by lengthier descriptions of the most important characters:

Ella of Frell	fifteen-year-old girl, narrator of the story
Sir Peter of Frell	Ella's father
Lady Eleanor	Ella's mother
Mandy	household cook (and Ella's fairy godmother)
Prince Charmont	son of King Jerrold, heir to the throne of Kyrria
Lucinda	fairy who gave Ella her "gift"
Dame Olga ("Mum Olga")	mother of Hattie and Olive, later Ella's stepmother
Hattie and Olive	Dame Olga's daughters
King Jerrold	king of Frell
Areida	Ella's best friend at school, an Ayorthaian
SEEF	ogre who "captures" Ella
Sir Stephan	one of Char's knights

Ella of Frell: The book's main character, Ella, is the fifteen-year-old daughter of Sir Peter and Lady Eleanor of Frell. A strong-willed, intelligent girl, she has been battling Lucinda's gift of obedience since birth. "Instead of making me docile, Lucinda's curse made a rebel of me," she tells the reader. "Or perhaps I was that way naturally."

Ella the rebel, the clumsy girl and bad dancer who describes herself as "skinny" and "spiky," looking like a grasshopper in a green dress, is an unusual fairy-tale heroine.

Raised by her mother and Mandy, the cook, Ella shares her mother's playfulness and sense of humor. As a young child she is ordered by Mandy to bring "more almonds" from the pantry. She returns with only two, following orders exactly "while still managing to frustrate the cook's true wishes." She and Mandy battle each other in this loving way, with Lady Eleanor laughing and egging them on.

"Once heard, always remembered is the way with languages and me," says Ella of her gift for words. At first, she mimics the parrots in the royal menagerie, but soon she is speaking Gnomic. She quickly learns how to communicate with different kinds of people and creatures, which helps her throughout her adventures. Her ability to listen and understand draws people (and elves) to her. It also allows her to tame a band of ogres, keeping them from turning her into dinner.

Ella of Frell is a complicated person, who is both loving and angry. Living with a fairy's curse takes its toll on her. She can

be sarcastic and unkind. She bloodies the nose of a childhood friend who takes advantage of her. Ordered to pick up a dust ball, Ella grinds it into Hattie's face. More often she expresses her anger verbally, using her sharp wit to mock her tormentors. At one point, Ella tells Dame Olga that Hattie is "as clever as she is beautiful."

At the same time, Ella is brave, setting off alone on a journey into strange territory and fighting not just ogres but her own destiny. For Ella, the ultimate act of bravery—finding the strength and courage to break the curse—requires a battle with something invisible.

Ella's strength and independence continue to serve her well after her marriage to Char. Rather than taking a royal title, she becomes the Court Linguist and Cook's Helper. This complicated girl isn't your average princess.

Sir Peter of Frell: Ella's father is a clever and unethical businessman. When she was born, he was "away on a trading expedition, as usual," and he never learns about Lucinda's curse. As Mandy points out, he would just use her in his dishonest business dealings if he knew about it. The head maid thinks that on the inside, Sir Peter is just "ashes mixed with coins and a brain."

When we first meet Sir Peter, during his wife's funeral, he attempts to take his daughter's hand. Ella pulls away, and her father "never took my hand again." After the funeral, he presses the weeping Ella's face to his chest, but not to comfort her. He is

“only trying to muffle my noise.” He tells her to go away until she can be quiet.

Ella is uncomfortable with her father and doesn't trust him. Sir Peter tells her that he's selfish, impatient, and always gets his own way—and it's true. Also enterprising and strong-willed, he seems to appreciate those qualities in Ella. Yet he still seeks to control her. When he cannot manipulate her with gifts or flattery, he uses forceful commands. “The anger in his eyes was so tightly coiled that I didn't know what would happen if the spring were tripped,” she says of her father.

He may call her brave, but Sir Peter doesn't treat Ella with respect. He is willing to force her to marry an old man in order to restore his fortunes. When Sir Peter leaves after his wedding, he doesn't seem to care what happens to Ella when she's left with Dame Olga. Although he states that she should not be treated as a servant, Sir Peter doesn't respond to Ella's letter when she tells him that's exactly what's happening to her.

Mandy: The cook is “bossy, giving orders almost as often as she drew breath.” She has always been fiercely protective of Ella. After Lady Eleanor's death, Mandy seems to be the only person in Ella's world who is concerned about her well-being.

When Mandy reveals to Ella that she is her fairy godmother, Ella finds it hard to believe. “She couldn't be a fairy,” Ella thinks. “Fairies were thin and young and beautiful . . . who ever heard of a fairy with frizzy gray hair and two chins?” Chins and all, Mandy really is a fairy.

Mandy gives Ella one of the most useful tools she could possibly have: a magic book, which ensures that Ella has the information she needs to cope with the difficulties of her time at school. When Ella is turned into a servant by her stepfamily, it is Mandy who steps in and takes her on as an assistant cook so that she can keep an eye on Ella and protect her.

Her strong character and her sense of right and wrong are clearly shown when Mandy explains to Ella the difference between big and small magic. Mandy will not do big magic because big magic has big—and possibly dangerous—consequences.

Overall, Mandy's manner is gruff and she is abrupt and bossy even with her goddaughter. However, she is a wise and loving character who will do anything, *except big magic*, for her beloved Ella.

Prince Charmont: Heir to the throne of Kyrria, Char is both Ella's true love and her best friend. He is two years older than Ella and has a royal bearing like his father's. Like the king, he has tawny curls and swarthy skin—with a sprinkling of freckles across his nose that Ella finds "surprising on such a dark face."

Char is open and playful, with a talent for making people feel at ease. The first time he and Ella meet, he begins by telling her something nice about her mother: that she made him laugh. Later, he compliments Ella by saying she's as funny as Lady Eleanor was. Laughter is a word that comes up often in connection with Char. No one else seems to be able to make Ella laugh; humor is important in their relationship. Even in the

most difficult times, Ella and Char can find something to laugh about together. Plus, he's the only person apart from her mother who will slide down the banister with her!

Although Ella fears he will think her foolish for putting herself in danger just to attend the giants' wedding, Char actually admires her courage, saying to his knights, "If all the maids in Kyrria could tame ogres, we would have much less to do." While others want Ella to behave in certain ways, Char appreciates her need for freedom. He does have his flaws, though. He confesses to Ella that, while he is slow to anger, he is slow to forgive others.

Char is loyal to, and protective of, those he loves, but he is deeply hurt and angry when he thinks Ella has lied to him. "A thousand times a day I swear never to think of her." When Ella's identity is revealed at the third ball, however, he is overjoyed. Instead of being bitter or resentful, he is simply happy to be reunited with her.

Lucinda: Though we don't see much of her, Lucinda is one of the most important characters in the book; it is her action that sets Ella's story in motion. She "satisfies every cherished idea of a fairy," observes Ella when she sees Lucinda for the first time. Tall, graceful, and beautiful, Lucinda may look like an ideal fairy, but she uses her magic powers in less than ideal ways.

Lucinda's problem is that she is reckless; she doesn't stop to consider the consequences of her actions, and others must live with them. According to Mandy, Lucinda is a show-off who wants people to "thank her when she gives them one of her awful gifts."

In addition to the “gift” of obedience she gives Ella, we see how the consequences of her gifts affect other recipients, like the newlywed giants who will never be apart for even a minute.

Not until she has to spend time under some of her own spells does Lucinda understand what she’s been doing to others. “What did I bring on those poor, innocent people?” She vows never to do big magic again, although this means she can’t revoke Ella’s gift. However, she does her best, using small magic, to help Ella find her way out of the situation.

Dame Olga (“Mum Olga”): Ella’s stepmother has been called an “unpleasant conniver” by Sir Peter. When Ella first meets Dame Olga after Lady Eleanor’s funeral, she finds herself “engulfed from behind by two chubby arms.” Ella sees a “tall, plump lady with long and wavy honey-colored tresses” and a pasty white face “with twin spots of rouge on the cheeks.”

A titled lady of Frell, Dame Olga marries Sir Peter for his money and discovers—too late—that he doesn’t have any. But she is bound to him by Lucinda’s “gift” of love, so she takes out her frustration and disappointment on her stepdaughter, Ella. Learning from Hattie about Ella’s strange obedience, the previously “kittenish” Olga turns bossy and makes her stepdaughter into a servant. She is unkind to Ella from then on. Only when she sees Prince Charmont propose to her stepdaughter instead of Hattie or Olive does Dame Olga once again pretend to care for Ella.

Hattie and Olive: The spoiled daughters of Dame Olga, these are Ella's wicked stepsisters. She sees them as smaller versions of Dame Olga, "but without the rouge."

Hattie is about two years older than Ella. This girl has no regard for other people's feelings or privacy. In Ella's house for the first time, she insists on poking through the manor. She examines Lady Eleanor's gowns and speculates about how much things cost. At that first meeting, Hattie also brags about herself, saying she (Hattie) will live in the palace someday. Her prominent front teeth lead Ella to observe that she is "like a rabbit," but, because of her personality, "a fat one, the kind Mandy liked to slaughter for stew."

It is Hattie who figures out that Ella must obey direct orders, and she exploits this secret as often as possible. At school, she is clever enough to keep it a secret for her own benefit, and orders Ella around only in private. Hattie is secretly jealous of Ella, and her sense of power comes from bullying her "friend." Being in charge makes Hattie feel important.

Olive is about Ella's age. She is clueless, loud, and always saying the wrong thing at the wrong time. While not as cruel as her older sister, she is also not as clever. Olive sees what works for Hattie and tries to imitate her, with some success. Olive's main concerns seem to be money and food. She eventually marries an elderly man in exchange for a payment of twenty KJs a day and a white cake with every meal.

Thinking about the characters

- Does Ella share any of her father's characteristics, and if so, which ones?
- How would you describe Ella's personality? Do you see anything of yourself in her?
- The author uses physical descriptions to tell us something about certain characters' personalities. What are some of the other ways in which Gail Carson Levine reveals Ella's character to us?