

# Before You Read

This selection also appears in *Elements of Literature*.

## Broken Chain by Gary Soto

### LITERARY FOCUS: CONFLICT

**Plot** is a series of related events that take place in a story. Through the plot we learn what happens to a story's characters. Most main characters in stories grapple with one or more conflicts as the action unfolds. **Conflict** is a character's struggle to get what he or she wants. An **external conflict** occurs when a character struggles against outside forces. An **internal conflict** occurs when a struggle takes place within a character's own mind. As the plot of a story unfolds, the character acts to resolve the conflicts. Here are some examples of external and internal conflicts:

| External Conflict  | Internal Conflict  |
|--|--|
| A camper goes on a hike, loses her compass, and can't find her way back. | An athlete can't decide whether to try out for the swim team or for the soccer team. |
| Two friends in a spelling bee compete for the grand prize.               | Someone who once nearly drowned has to overcome a fear of the water.                 |
| An office worker gets locked in a supply closet.                         | A young actor experiences stage fright.  |

### READING SKILLS: SUMMARIZING A PLOT

When you **summarize a plot**, you retell the main events in a story. Summarizing a plot helps you clarify what's happened to whom and when it happened. As you read "Broken Chain," look for Summarize notes in the margins. Then, use your own words to explain what has taken place.

#### SKILLS FOCUS

##### Literary Skills

Understand conflict.

##### Reading Skills

Summarize a story's plot.

##### Vocabulary Skills

Understand the history of English.

## VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT

## PREVIEW SELECTION VOCABULARY

Before you read "Broken Chain," preview these words from the story.

**apparent** (ə·per'ənt) *adj.*: visible.

*Alfonso was proud that the muscles on his stomach were apparent.*

**sullen** (sul'ən) *adj.*: grumpy; resentful.

*Ernie became sullen when the girls didn't show up for the date.*

**impulse** (im'puls') *n.*: urge.

*Alfonso regretted his impulse to clean his bike chain.*

**retrieved** (ri·trēvd') *v.*: got back.

*Alfonso retrieved the chain he had thrown away.*

**emerged** (ē·mərjd') *v.*: came out.

*Alfonso emerged from behind the hedge to meet Sandra.*

## CLARIFYING WORD MEANINGS: LATIN ROOTS

A long time ago ancient Romans conquered much of Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. As a result, their language, Latin, is reflected in many modern-day languages of those places. About 60 percent of the English language, for example, can be traced to Latin. Here are some examples, taken from the Vocabulary words above (the abbreviation *L* stands for "Latin").

| Word     | Origin                             | Latin Meaning |
|----------|------------------------------------|---------------|
| apparent | L <i>apparere</i>                  | "to appear"   |
| sullen   | L <i>solus</i>                     | "alone"       |
| impulse  | L <i>impellere</i>                 | "to drive"    |
| emerged  | L <i>e-</i> "out" + <i>mergere</i> | "to immerse"  |

Pause at the Word Study notes as you read "Broken Chain" to learn about the Latin origins of more words.

# Broken Chain

Gary Soto



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## IDENTIFY

Circle the name of the character introduced in the first paragraph. Underline two things he is doing to try to change the way he looks.

## VOCABULARY

**apparent** (ə-per'ənt) *adj.*: visible; easily seen; obvious.

## IDENTIFY

Why doesn't Alfonso dare to color his hair (lines 15–21)?

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"Broken Chain" from *Baseball in April and Other Stories* by Gary Soto. Copyright © 1990 by Gary Soto. Reproduced by permission of Harcourt, Inc.

Alfonso sat on the porch trying to push his crooked teeth to where he thought they belonged. He hated the way he looked. Last week he did fifty sit-ups a day, thinking that he would burn those already **apparent** ripples on his stomach to even deeper ripples, dark ones, so when he went swimming at the canal next summer, girls in cut-offs would notice. And the guys would think he was tough, someone who could take a punch and give it back. He wanted "cuts" like those he had seen on a calendar of an Aztec<sup>1</sup> warrior standing on a pyramid with a woman in his arms. (Even she had cuts he could see beneath her thin dress.) The calendar hung above the cash register at La Plaza. Orsua, the owner, said Alfonso could have the calendar at the end of the year if the waitress, Yolanda, didn't take it first.

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Alfonso studied the magazine pictures of rock stars for a hairstyle. He liked the way Prince looked—and the bass player from Los Lobos. Alfonso thought he would look cool with his hair razored into a V in the back and streaked purple. But he knew his mother wouldn't go for it. And his

1. **Aztec**: member of an American Indian people of what is now Mexico.

20 father, who was puro Mexicano, would sit in his chair after work, **sullen** as a toad, and call him “sissy.”

Alfonso didn’t dare color his hair. But one day he had had it butched on the top, like in the magazines. His father had come home that evening from a softball game, happy that his team had drilled four homers in a thirteen-to-five bashing of Color Tile. He’d swaggered into the living room but had stopped cold when he saw Alfonso and asked, not joking but with real concern, “Did you hurt your head at school? ¿Qué pasó?”<sup>2</sup>

30 Alfonso had pretended not to hear his father and had gone to his room, where he studied his hair from all angles in the mirror. He liked what he saw until he smiled and realized for the first time that his teeth were crooked, like a pile of wrecked cars. He grew depressed and turned away from the mirror. He sat on his bed and leafed through the rock magazine until he came to the rock star with the butched top. His mouth was closed, but Alfonso was sure his teeth weren’t crooked.

40 Alfonso didn’t want to be the handsomest kid at school, but he was determined to be better looking than average. The next day he spent his lawn-mowing money on a new shirt and, with a pocketknife, scooped the moons of dirt from under his fingernails.

He spent hours in front of the mirror trying to herd his teeth into place with his thumb. He asked his mother if he could have braces, like Frankie Molina, her godson, but he asked at the wrong time. She was at the kitchen table licking the envelope to the house payment. She glared up at him. “Do you think money grows on trees?”

50 His mother clipped coupons from magazines and newspapers, kept a vegetable garden in the summer, and

### VOCABULARY

**sullen** (sul’ən) *adj.*: grumpy; resentful.

### IDENTIFY

What do you learn about Alfonso’s father in lines 22–29?

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### INFER

Re-read lines 44–55. Based on these details, what inference can you make about the family’s financial situation?

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2. ¿Qué pasó? (kā’ pä-só’): Spanish for “What happened?”





CLARIFY

Re-read lines 110–117.  
Why does Alfonso go to the back yard?

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INTERPRET

Underline Alfonso’s good deed in lines 118–128.  
What does it show about his character?

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WORD STUDY

*Observation* (äb'zər·vā'shən), in line 142, means “a comment or remark based on something you’ve seen.” It comes from Latin *observatio*, meaning “outward display.”

off the porch in a hurry because he knew his father would be in a bad mood. He went to the back yard, where he unlocked his bike, sat on it with the kickstand down, and pressed on his teeth. He punched himself in the stomach, and growled, “Cuts.” Then he patted his butch and whispered, “Fresh.”

After a while Alfonso pedaled up the street, hands in his pockets, toward Foster’s Freeze, where he was chased by a ratlike Chihuahua.<sup>7</sup> At his old school, John Burroughs Elementary, he found a kid hanging upside down on the top of a barbed-wire fence with a girl looking up at him. Alfonso skidded to a stop and helped the kid untangle his pants from the barbed wire. The kid was grateful. He had been afraid he would have to stay up there all night. His sister, who was Alfonso’s age, was also grateful. If she had to go home and tell her mother that Frankie was stuck on a fence and couldn’t get down, she would get scolded.

“Thanks,” she said. “What’s your name?”

Alfonso remembered her from his school and noticed that she was kind of cute, with ponytails and straight teeth. “Alfonso. You go to my school, huh?”

“Yeah. I’ve seen you around. You live nearby?”

“Over on Madison.”

“My uncle used to live on that street, but he moved to Stockton.”

“Stockton’s near Sacramento, isn’t it?”

“You been there?”

“No.” Alfonso looked down at his shoes. He wanted to say something clever the way people do on TV. But the only thing he could think to say was that the governor lived in Sacramento. As soon as he shared this observation, he winced inside.

7. **Chihuahua** (chi-wā'wā): small dog with large pointed ears.



**PREDICT**

Pause at line 184. Will Ernie let Alfonso borrow his bike? Tell what you think will happen next.

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**FLUENCY**

Re-read the boxed passage. As each speaker changes, think about who is speaking and how he might say the words. Then, read the passage aloud, trying to express the different feelings of the characters.

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his hands stuffed in his pockets. But when he looked back over his shoulder, the wind raking through his butch, Sandra wasn't even looking. She was already on her lawn, heading for the porch.

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That night he took a bath, pampered his hair into place, and did more than his usual set of exercises. In bed, in between the push-and-rest on his teeth, he pestered his brother to let him borrow his bike.

190

“Come on, Ernie,” he whined. “Just for an hour.”  
“Chale,<sup>8</sup> I might want to use it.”  
“Come on, man, I’ll let you have my trick-or-treat candy.”  
“What you got?”  
“Three baby Milky Ways and some Skittles.”  
“Who’s going to use it?”  
Alfonso hesitated, then risked the truth. “I met this girl. She doesn’t live too far.”  
Ernie rolled over on his stomach and stared at the outline of his brother, whose head was resting on his elbow.  
“*You* got a girlfriend?”  
“She ain’t my girlfriend, just a girl.”  
“What does she look like?”  
“Like a girl.”  
“Come on, what does she look like?”  
“She’s got ponytails and a little brother.”  
“Ponytails! Those girls who messed with Frostie and me had ponytails. Is she cool?”  
“I think so.”  
Ernie sat up in bed. “I bet you that’s her.”  
Alfonso felt his stomach knot up. “She’s going to be my girlfriend, not yours!”  
“I’m going to get even with her!”

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8. **chale** (chă'lā): Spanish slang expression roughly meaning “it’s not possible.”

210

“You better not touch her,” Alfonso snarled, throwing a wadded Kleenex at him. “I’ll run you over with my bike.”

For the next hour, until their mother threatened them from the living room to be quiet or else, they argued whether it was the same girl who had stood Ernie up. Alfonso said over and over that she was too nice to pull a stunt like that. But Ernie argued that she lived only two blocks from where those girls had told them to wait, that she was in the same grade, and, the clincher, that she had ponytails. Secretly, however, Ernie was jealous that his brother, two years younger than himself, might have found a girlfriend.

220

Sunday morning, Ernie and Alfonso stayed away from each other, though over breakfast they fought over the last tortilla. Their mother, sewing at the kitchen table, warned them to knock it off. At church they made faces at one another when the priest, Father Jerry, wasn’t looking. Ernie punched Alfonso in the arm, and Alfonso, his eyes wide with anger, punched back.

Monday morning they hurried to school on their bikes, neither saying a word, though they rode side by side. In first period, Alfonso worried himself sick. How would he borrow a bike for her? He considered asking his best friend, Raul, for his bike. But Alfonso knew Raul, a paperboy with dollar signs in his eyes, would charge him, and he had less than sixty cents, counting the soda bottles he could cash.

230

Between history and math, Alfonso saw Sandra and her girlfriend huddling at their lockers. He hurried by without being seen.

240

During lunch Alfonso hid in metal shop so he wouldn’t run into Sandra. What would he say to her? If he weren’t mad at his brother, he could ask Ernie what girls and guys talk about. But he *was* mad, and anyway, Ernie was pitching nickels with his friends.

**IDENTIFY**

Re-read lines 181–210. Then, identify the **conflict** between the brothers. What two things are Alfonso and Ernie fighting over?

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**INTERPRET**

An **idiom** is a figure of speech—its actual meaning is different from its literal meaning. Underline the idiom in lines 231–232. Explain what it means.

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## Notes

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### IDENTIFY

Pause at line 256. When Sandra said she'd meet Alfonso and go bike riding with him, everything seemed to be going well. List the **complications** in the plot that have made Alfonso's situation increasingly desperate.

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### VOCABULARY

**impulse** (im'puls') *n.*: urge.

**retrieved** (ri·trēvd') *v.*: got back.

Alfonso hurried home after school. He did the morning dishes as his mother had asked and raked the leaves. After finishing his chores, he did a hundred sit-ups, pushed on his teeth until they hurt, showered, and combed his hair into a perfect butch. He then stepped out to the patio to clean his bike. On an **impulse**, he removed the chain to wipe off the gritty oil. But while he was unhooking it from the back sprocket, it snapped. The chain lay in his hand like a dead snake.

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Alfonso couldn't believe his luck. Now, not only did he not have an extra bike for Sandra, he had no bike for himself. Frustrated and on the verge of tears, he flung the chain as far as he could. It landed with a hard slap against the back fence and spooked his sleeping cat, Benny. Benny looked around, blinking his soft gray eyes, and went back to sleep.

Alfonso **retrieved** the chain, which was hopelessly broken. He cursed himself for being stupid, yelled at his bike



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for being cheap, and slammed the chain onto the cement.  
 260 The chain snapped in another place and hit him when it  
 popped up, slicing his hand like a snake's fang.

"Ow!" he cried, his mouth immediately going to his  
 hand to suck on the wound.

After a dab of iodine, which only made his cut hurt  
 more, and a lot of thought, he went to the bedroom to plead  
 with Ernie, who was changing to his after-school clothes.

"Come on, man, let me use it," Alfonso pleaded.  
 "Please, Ernie, I'll do anything."

Although Ernie could see Alfonso's desperation, he had  
 270 plans with his friend Raymundo. They were going to catch  
 frogs at the Mayfair canal. He felt sorry for his brother and  
 gave him a stick of gum to make him feel better, but there  
 was nothing he could do. The canal was three miles away,  
 and the frogs were waiting.

Alfonso took the stick of gum, placed it in his shirt  
 pocket, and left the bedroom with his head down. He went  
 outside, slamming the screen door behind him, and sat in the  
 alley behind his house. A sparrow landed in the weeds, and  
 when it tried to come close, Alfonso screamed for it to scam.  
 280 The sparrow responded with a squeaky chirp and flew away.

At four he decided to get it over with and started walking  
 to Sandra's house, trudging slowly, as if he were waist-deep  
 in water. Shame colored his face. How could he disappoint  
 his first date? She would probably laugh. She might even  
 call him *menso*.<sup>9</sup>

He stopped at the corner where they were supposed to  
 meet and watched her house. But there was no one outside,  
 only a rake leaning against the steps.

Why did he have to take the chain off? he scolded him-  
 290 self. He always messed things up when he tried to take them  
 apart, like the time he tried to repad his baseball mitt. He

9. **menso** (men'sd) *adj.*: Spanish for "stupid."

### EVALUATE

Pause at line 274. Why won't Ernie lend Alfonso his bike? What do you think of this reason?

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### WORD STUDY

The noun *desperation* (des'pər-ā'shən), in line 269, is from Latin *de-*, "without," and *sperare*, "to hope." What is a synonym for *desperation*?

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### IDENTIFY

Underline the details in lines 275–285 that show that Alfonso is upset.







# Skills Review

## Broken Chain

### VOCABULARY AND COMPREHENSION

**A. History of the English Language: Latin Roots** Write the word from the Word Bank that has the same root as the word in the middle column.

| Root                | Related Word | Word Bank Word |
|---------------------|--------------|----------------|
| <i>solus</i>        | solo         | 1.             |
| <i>apparere</i>     | disappear    | 2.             |
| <i>e- + mergere</i> | emergency    | 3.             |

#### Word Bank

apparent  
sullen  
impulse  
retrieved  
emerged

**B. Reading Comprehension** Answer each question below.

1. How do Alfonso and Sandra meet?

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2. Why do Alfonso and Ernie quarrel about Sandra?

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3. What conflict does Alfonso face when his bicycle chain breaks?

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4. At the end of the story, why does Ernie let Alfonso borrow his bike?

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**Vocabulary Skills**  
Understand the history of English.

## Part One

### COLLECTION 1

#### Broken Chain, page 4

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##### Page 6

###### IDENTIFY

Alfonso is the character introduced in the first paragraph. Details that show how he is trying to change the way he looks are “push his crooked teeth to where he thought they belonged” and “did fifty sit-ups a day.”

###### IDENTIFY

Alfonso wouldn't dare color his hair because his mother wouldn't like it and his father would “call him ‘sissy.’”

##### Page 7

###### IDENTIFY

Answers will vary. Possible responses: (1) Alfonso's father is happy and good-natured when he is successful. (2) Alfonso's father doesn't understand his son's fashion interests.

###### INFER

Possible response: The family doesn't have a lot of money.

##### Page 8

###### INTERPRET

Possible response: Three important things I've learned about Alfonso are (1) he cares about his appearance; (2) he has ideas about how to improve his appearance; (3) he works hard at improving his appearance.

A possible main idea about Alfonso's character is that he is resourceful and self-reliant.

##### Page 9

###### SUMMARIZE

Possible summary: After Alfonso has spent the morning worrying about the appearance of his hair and teeth, he goes out to clean his bicycle. While he is cleaning, his brother, Ernie, comes home. Ernie is angry because he and his friend Frostie were stood up by two girls they met at a Halloween party.

##### Page 10

###### CLARIFY

Possible response: Alfonso goes to the backyard to avoid his father, who is in a bad mood.

###### INTERPRET

Alfonso's good deed is that he “helped the kid untangle his pants from the barbed wire.” The deed shows that Alfonso is nice and helpful.

##### Page 11

###### SUMMARIZE

Possible summary: Alfonso meets Sandra when he helps her brother get off the fence. He talks with her while he walks her home. He finally gets up the nerve to ask her to go bike riding.

##### Page 12

###### PREDICT

Possible predictions: Ernie will lend his bike to Alfonso; Ernie will refuse, and Alfonso will have to find another bike.

##### Page 13

###### IDENTIFY

Alfonso and Ernie are fighting because Alfonso wants to use Ernie's bike and because Ernie claims that Sandra is the same girl who stood him up. Alfonso argues that she is not the same one.

###### INTERPRET

The idiom is “with dollar signs in his eyes.” This idiom means “anxious to make money.”

##### Page 14

###### IDENTIFY

Possible complications: Because Alfonso and Ernie get in a fight, Ernie won't lend Alfonso his bike. Then Alfonso breaks his bike chain and now has no extra bike for Sandra and no bike for himself.

##### Page 15

###### EVALUATE

Ernie won't lend Alfonso his bike because he needs it to go catch frogs at the canal. Most students will say this is not a good reason because Ernie could catch frogs at another time.

###### WORD STUDY

Possible synonyms for *desperation* are *hopelessness* and *panic*.

**IDENTIFY**

Details in lines 275–285 that show Alfonso is upset include “with his head down”; “slamming the screen door behind him”; “Alfonso screamed for [the sparrow] to scam”; “trudging slowly”; and “Shame colored his face.”

**Page 16****PREDICT**

Possible predictions: Sandra won’t care about the bike, and they’ll have fun without it; Ernie will offer his bike at the last minute, and Alfonso and Sandra will ride together.

**IDENTIFY**

Possible response: The climax, when the outcome of the main conflict is decided, occurs when Ernie offers Alfonso his bike.

**Page 17****EXTEND**

Answers will vary. Two possible endings: (1) Alfonso could apologize to Sandra for not bringing a bike but suggest instead that they go for a walk. She would forgive him and agree to go on a walk. (2) Alfonso could explain the situation to Sandra. Then she would laugh and fix the bike chain, muttering how boys can’t fix anything. Then they would go for a ride with her on the crossbar.

**Page 18****■ Possible Answers to Skills Practice****Plot Diagram (page 18)**

**Basic Situation and Conflict:** Alfonso meets Sandra and asks her to go bike riding, but he has only one bike.

**Complications (problems, events):** Ernie won’t lend Alfonso his bike; Alfonso breaks the chain on his bike. Alfonso goes to Sandra’s house to tell her they can’t go bike riding.

**Climax:** Ernie arrives in time to lend Alfonso his bike.

**Resolution:** Alfonso and Sandra go bike riding.

**■ Possible Answers to Skills Review****Vocabulary and Comprehension (page 19)**

- A. 1. sullen
2. apparent
3. emerged

- B. 1. Alfonso and Sandra meet when Alfonso helps Sandra’s brother untangle his pants from a barbed-wire fence.
2. Alfonso and Ernie fight over Sandra because Ernie thinks she might be one of the girls who stood him up.
3. The conflict Alfonso faces when his bicycle chain breaks is that he now has no bike to take Sandra riding.
4. (1) Ernie lets Alfonso borrow his bike because he wants to help his little brother out; (2) When Ernie sees that Sandra was not the girl who stood him up, he agrees to lend his bike to Alfonso.

**The Landlady, page 20****Page 21****IDENTIFY**

The name of the character is Billy Weaver. Possible details that establish the setting: “traveled down from London on the slow afternoon train”; “nine o’clock in the evening”; “the moon was coming up out of a clear stary sky over the houses opposite the station entrance”; “the air was deadly cold and the wind was like a flat blade of ice on his cheeks.”

**Page 22****INFER**

Possible response: Billy’s mood could be described as upbeat or eager.

**VISUALIZE**

Details that make the boardinghouse seem inviting and comfortable: “There was a vase of yellow chrysanthemums, tall and beautiful, standing just underneath the notice”; “Green curtains (some sort of velvety material) were hanging down on either side of the window”; “the first thing he saw was a bright fire burning in the hearth”; “in front of the fire, a pretty little dachshund was curled up asleep with its nose tucked into its belly”; [The room] “was filled with pleasant furniture”; “There was a baby grand piano and a big sofa and several plump armchairs.”

**Page 23****IDENTIFY**

Details that describe the benefits of staying at the pub: “a pub would be more congenial”; “There would be beer and darts”; “lots of people to talk to”; “it would probably be a good bit cheaper, too.”

**PREDICT**

Answers will vary.