

TEACHERS' NOTES

MICHAEL  
MORPURGO  
Beowulf

Illustrated by  
MICHAEL FOREMAN

9781406348873 • £7.99 • Paperback • 9 years +



WALKER  
BOOKS

***These notes have been written by the teachers at the CLPE to provide schools with ideas to develop comprehension and cross-curricular activities around this text. They build on our work supporting teachers to use quality texts throughout the reading curriculum. They encourage a deep reading of and reflection on the text, which may happen over a series of reading sessions, rather than in just one sitting. We hope you find them useful.***

In fifth-century Denmark, a murderous monster stalks the night, and only the great prince of the Geats has the strength and courage to defeat him. Beowulf's terrifying quest to destroy Grendel, the foul fiend, a hideous sea-hag and a monstrous fire-dragon is the oldest surviving epic in British literature. Artfully retold and magnificently illustrated, this companion volume to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is made instantly accessible to children by a formidable children's book partnership.

These notes have been written with children in Upper Key Stage 2 in mind but you will need to adapt them as appropriate to the age and experience of your children.

*The story contains scenes of graphic violence in keeping with the original story.*

## **Before You Start:**

- As you read through the book it would be helpful to use a group Reading Journal to organise and store discussions and responses to the text. Children could also be asked to consider the writer's use of language, how he creates particular effects or images, and how he captures the rhythm and flow of what would have originally been an oral text.
- The origin of *Beowulf* in epic poetry means that you will need to consider how you wish children to engage with the text. The sessions below propose a blend of reading aloud and discussing key passages; allowing time for pupils to read sections of the text independently and work into performance readings; summarizing and clarifying; revisiting key passages and episodes and engaging in specific activities to deepen response and comprehension.
- To support children's overview of the story and location in time and place, it would be helpful to create: a geographical storymap, that shows modern Denmark and southern Sweden (the location of Geatland) together with the British Isles for reference (e.g., those shown [on this page](#)); a simple cast of characters, perhaps as pen portraits grouped according to the groups to which they belong, e.g., Beowulf and his men; the court at Heorot; Beowulf's own court in Geatland.

## **Session 1: Entering the world of the story: cover and pages 11 to 15**

- Begin by sharing the cover, and asking children to consider it carefully, reading what messages it might contain about the book they are about to read. Ask the children to make predictions of what the story could be about and to justify their responses, drawing out any connections they may make to other stories and characters they know. Record the children's responses around a copy of the cover and return to these as you read the book, comparing the children's initial thoughts to how the story actually unfolds.
- Encourage them to look in detail at all aspects of the cover, the layout and typography as well as the



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illustration. Invite them to begin by considering the monsters, what clues they might get from their body language, any associations they have with these creatures. Consider what clues to the story the archer's body language, facial expressions and clothing might offer. Look more widely at the layout: *Where do you think they are standing, what is the landscape they are standing in? What else do you notice about the cover, the typeface used for the title Beowulf and the illustrator 'Michael Foreman'?* Consider where and when they think the story might be set, and what leads us to think this.

- Ask whether they have heard of the author Michael Morpurgo – the third Children's Laureate – or possibly read other stories by him, including *Warhorse*, adapted for the stage and screen. *What does your knowledge or experience of his other books lead you to expect here?* Similarly, they may know the illustrator Michael Foreman, and have expectations about the book based on other works of his that they know.
- Consider also the back page and blurb, inviting the children to reflect on this second illustration of the warrior, and what his dress and appearance suggest about him and the story in which he will play a role. If they know the legend of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, also shown on the back cover, they might get a clue that this will be legend of heroic bravery and daring. Unpick Michael Morpurgo's exhortation to **Hear and listen well**, asking children how it feels to be addressed like this. *What kind of a tale do you think he is proposing to share, and how much do you enjoy stories that inspire fear, that **trouble and terrify us**? Why do you think people enjoy horror stories, scary movies, theme park rides that inspire fear? Does the cover and what you have read make you want to read the story? Why? Why not?*
- Turn to Michael Foreman's evocative illustration of a longship sailing across the first double-page spread, into the story, then nearing the shore in the second, asking children how this sits with what they have discussed so far, and their predictions and speculations about the story. Turn to the contents page, and invite them to consider the three parts: *what do you think each might be about, how might they be linked? Are there any words or phrases that puzzle you at this stage, e.g., **sea-hag, death-dragon**?*
- As you read through the story pick out key vocabulary that the children may not be familiar with or may not fully understand in the historical context, for example **hag, mead-hall, slaughterhouse, lute, rafter, talon, resplendent**, and longer phrases like **vaulted cavern**. Note these in the Reading Journal and then follow up on deepening children's understanding of new and unfamiliar vocabulary, using artefacts, photographs and video sources to bring these words to life and support the pupils in using them in context. Pupils can then begin to take ownership for picking out and discussing words and possible meanings and finding ways to confirm meanings throughout the story, enriching and enlarging their repertoire of historical vocabulary.
- Read aloud the opening of the first part 'Beowulf and Grendel, the Monster of the Night', from page 13 to page 15, ... **a land of sweet content**. Allow time and space for children to reflect on what they have heard, and to tune into the distinctive rhythm and tune of the story. Support them to discuss what they think is happening in the pages they have heard, who and what are the main characters and ideas of the story so far, and what is the mood of the story.
- Encourage them to consider the setting in time and place of the story – **the fifth century after the birth of Christ** and **the ancient Viking lands of the Danes and the Geats, the Angles and the Jutes** – and to share what they know about the ideas, living conditions and social organisation associated with that world, and how these



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might affect the story they are about to read. *How do you think this story might originally have been told, and what might it tell us and the people who first heard it about the world they lived in?*

- Consider also the language of the story, with its alliterative epithets – **brave Beowulf battles, foul fiend, death-dragon of the deep** – and the Anglo-Saxon proper nouns that might be unfamiliar to us now (this [pronunciation guide](#) may be useful and many videos are available that offer guidance) – Scyld, Hrothgar, Healfdene – but have come down to us in many UK place names, and forenames and surnames. *How does the language make you feel and what is it like to hear this story read aloud? How might the way the story sounds be important for the storyteller and their audience?*
- End the session by inviting the children to reflect on the final sentence, **Truly it was a land of sweet content**. From your knowledge of other stories, how does this positive-sounding summary of events prepare you for what is to come? Can you think of other stories where everything is going well... before everything goes wrong? How does the fact the storyteller has already pre-warned you this will be a tale of **cruelty and courage** – another alliterative pairing – and the three **battles with the forces of darkness** make you respond to the idyllic picture that is painted here?

## Session 2: Pages 15 to 44

- Begin the session by asking the children to revisit their predictions from the end of the last session before reading aloud on from page 15, **To celebrate these years of prosperity...** to page 22 ... **this fearful monster** and sharing the illustrations of Grendel and the mead-hall Heorot. As before, allow time and space to reflect on what they have heard, and to summarise how the story has developed, with the mead-hall Hrothgar and his people have constructed and enjoyed, the nightly ravages of Grendel, and the **deep despair [of the] Danish king**.
- Support the children in beginning to explore their responses to the text with the help of what Aidan Chambers calls **'the four basic questions'**. These questions give children accessible starting points for discussion:
  - Tell me...
  - was there anything you liked about this text?
  - was there anything that you particularly disliked?
  - was there anything that puzzled you?
  - were there any patterns, any connections that you noticed?
- The openness of these questions, unlike the more interrogative 'Why?' question, encourages every child to feel that they have something to say. It allows everyone to take part in arriving at a shared view without the fear of the 'wrong' answer. As children reply it can be useful to write down what they say under the headings 'likes', 'dislikes', 'puzzles', 'patterns'. This written record helps to map out the children's view of the text and the important themes and ideas around the story from their perspective and is a way of holding on to ideas for later. Asking these questions will lead children inevitably into a fuller discussion than using more general questions.



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- As you read on through the story, the children will benefit from regular opportunities to return to these questions and share their personal responses to the key events and character developments as they occur.
- Read on from page 22 **By now the story of this dreadful tragedy...** to page 44 ... **in all the affairs of men**. Ask the children to summarise what has happened in these pages, how the story is moved forward, and the turn they expect events to take following the arrival of Beowulf in Denmark.
- Invite the children to share their initial impressions of Beowulf – his arrival on the Danish shore, his introduction of himself as a **fighter [...] warrior prince [...] an enemy of evil** (page 33) when he arrives at Heorot, and Hrothgar’s summary of the dire situation. *How do the dramatic arrival of the hero, and the speeches made by guest and host in Heorot, set the scene for what might be about to happen? Why do you think speeches might be used as a way to tell the story, what insights do they give you into the personalities of those who deliver them?*
- Provide copies of Beowulf’s first speech from page 32, **I have come...** to page 35 ... **turn out like that** while you re-read aloud and ask the children to **text mark**, looking at the language and structure of this part of the story and encouraging the children to identify features that stand out for them. You might also get the children to prepare their own **performance reading** of this section, thinking about how they might convey his character in their reading.
- End the session by asking the children to reflect on the events of the story so far and the character of Beowulf and to complete a **Role on the Wall** for him. To do this, have a prepared template of a man onto which the children can record their ideas. Ask the children to write words or phrases sharing what they know about his outward appearance or other information about him from the story events on the outside of the outline. Then, use these to begin to infer and deduce his internal feelings and characteristics and note these on the inside of the outline.
- To promote a higher level of thinking, ask the children to consider what we know from what they say and what is said about them by other characters and by the narrator, and what we have to infer from body language, gestures and actions. Support the children in making explicit links between the external and internal. For example, *what does something Beowulf does – his determination to destroy Grendel, his willingness to risk his own life – tell us about his personality? Or, how does Beowulf’s personality – his bravery and strength – make a specific action seem most likely?*
- Encourage the children to continue to return to the **Role on the Wall** as you continue to read the story, using a different colour each time to highlight the knowledge they gain as they read on.
- Finally, ask the children to predict what they think will happen next, as Beowulf and his men go to bed in Heorot that night.

### Session 3: Pages 44 to 66

- After reading on from page 44, **Up from his lair...** to page 52, ... **dying his death**, ask the children to summarise what they have read independently, so that they reach consensus on the events of that night, as Grendel arrives at Heorot and he and Beowulf engage in mortal combat, the monster invulnerable to all man-



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made weapons, and Beowulf tearing his arm from its socket so the monster flees to his death. Invite them to consider how the author captures the drama of the scene, and keeps the listener on the edge of their seat, even though we already know that Beowulf will be victorious. *Which words and phrases especially stand out for you that capture the deadly struggle?*

- Now go on to read to the end of the chapter, again asking the children to summarise the aftermath of Grendel's defeat, the feelings of all concerned the next morning, the impact on Beowulf and his men, on Hrothgar's people, and the celebration and stirring speeches that ensue. Share also Michael Foreman's evocative illustrations – of Grendel devouring Handscio on page 47; of Beowulf and Grendel locked in combat on page 51; of the maimed monster fleeing on page 53; the vignettes of Hrothgar and Beowulf side-by-side at the feast on page 57 and Grendel's arm on page 61; and the full-page spread of the feasting in Heorot on pages 64-65. *How do the illustrations add to or reinforce your engagement with and appreciation of the story you have read?*
- Invite the children to reflect on the events of the story to this point and to **write in role** as one of Beowulf's fellow Geats. Have them imagine they are sitting on one of the mead-benches, composing a letter home, recalling the key events since they set sail for Denmark, landed at the coast, arrived at Heorot and witnessed Beowulf's defeat of Grendel, then celebrated his feats. *What language might you borrow from the story to capture the drama of events, and how will you draw on your senses to give an authentic eye-witness account of all you have seen?*
- Revisit the Role on the Wall adding any insights you have gained into Beowulf's character from the events of the story to this point.
- End by re-reading the final sentence of the chapter on page 66, asking the children what they understand by the author's assertion that **the joy would be short-lived, the hope destroyed before even the night was over**. *What do you predict is about to happen?*

#### Session 4: Pages 67 to 109

- Begin by asking the children to recall their predictions from the end of the previous session, before reading the opening of the next part, 'Beowulf and the Sea-Hag', up to page 76, ... **ever wish to live**. Ask them to summarise what has happened at the start of this next section, Grendel's mother visiting to seek vengeance, snatch away Ashhere and reclaim her son's arm; Hrothgar filling in the previous history of the sea-hag, and Beowulf undertaking to defeat this monster as well.
- Use a **visualisation** exercise to deepen the children's response to the setting of the sea-hag's lair and unpick how the author has elicited the response. Read aloud from page 76, **Sensing danger all about them...** to page 80, ... **eager now to face the foe**. Ask the children to visualise the scene in their mind's eye as you are reading aloud, closing their eyes and picturing the scene unfolding as if it were a scene in a film. Read the section aloud two or three times and then ask them to describe to a partner what they pictured. You could give the children simple art materials to depict their visualisation.
- Following this, ask the children to share what they imagined and to identify key vocabulary or phrases which



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support their understanding or interpretation. For example, ... **cheerless cluster of ash trees...** or ... **dark, deep lake...** or .... **giant sea-serpent slithered to the surface...** or ... **grisly, grim and gruesome...** or ... **adorned with gold, richly carved with wild boars at bay.** Ask the children why these words or phrases in particular stood out to them.

- What made them so vivid or memorable?
  - What impression is created by the author through the descriptions?
  - How do these descriptions make you feel?
  - What would you be thinking if you were an onlooker?
- Now read on through Beowulf's encounter with the sea-hag ending on page 87, the mail-shirt that saves him from her clutches, the legendary sword Hrunting that Unferth has offered to him useless against her strength. *Which words and phrases capture the rage that Beowulf feels as he faces death at the hands of Grendel's mother, and literally empowers him to wield the giant sword that he uses to slay then behead her?*
  - Read on from page 88 to the end of this part of the story. Allow the children time and space to reflect on what they have read, and seen in the illustrations, and to discuss how Hrothgar and all those at the surface might have felt waiting for Beowulf to resurface; the triumphant return to Heorot; Hrothgar's gratitude and Beowulf's longing to return home; then his triumphant return to Geatland and the court of Hygelac.
  - Encourage the children to reflect on Beowulf's own account of his deeds in Denmark as he recounts them to Hygelac to satisfy his **burning curiosity**. *How does Beowulf's version of the story compare with the one that you have witnessed? What do you think it tells us about his personality that he presents his amazing deeds in a relatively matter-of-fact way?* Revisit the Role on the Wall adding any insights you have gained into Beowulf's character from his defeat of the sea-hag and his retelling of his deeds to Hygelac's court.
  - End the session by re-reading the final paragraph on page 109, where **all seemed then peaceful and set fair**. Why do you think the author uses the word **seemed** rather than 'was'? What does this word choice, along with his assertion that **the fate [...] even of great heroes is forever fickle and fraught with danger**, suggest to you about the way the story might develop? What do you predict?

## Session 5: Pages 110 to 152

- After reading the final part of the story, 'Grendel and the Death-Dragon of the Deep', allow the children time and space to summarise the final episode, and to reflect on what they have read, how the resolution of the story has affected them, and how they feel about the book as a whole:
  - *How does the resolution of the story make you feel* (Beowulf becoming a popular successor to Hygelac; the discovery by the escaped slave of the treasure hoard guarded by a dragon inside the burial mound; Beowulf's decision to take on the death-dragon, even at the cost of his own life; his desertion by all of his hearth-men apart from young Wiglaf; Beowulf's passing and burial)?



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- Does the story, and this ending, remind you of other stories you know in books or films? Is this the kind of story ending you enjoy? Do you have any unanswered questions to discuss?
- Are you satisfied about the way the story ends? Do you feel this is the right outcome for Beowulf, for Wiglaf, for those who abandoned the king? Would you change anything? How do you think each of the characters feels at the end? How do you know?
- Invite the children to choose and read aloud short extracts of this final episode that they particularly enjoyed or found effective, sharing the reasons why they selected them. This could include further text marking, giving them insights, for example, into how the author sustains tension, paces action, or uses speeches for effect.
- Revisit Aidan Chambers' four basic questions, giving the children the opportunity to reflect.
  - Did you enjoy this story?
  - What puzzles did it contain?
  - What links do you see to other stories you already know?
- Revisit the Role on the Wall adding any insights you have gained into Beowulf's character from his final days as king and the outcome of this last challenge.

### After reading:

- Repeat the visualisation activity from Session 4 with different settings, e.g., Beowulf's arrival on the Danish shore, the interior of Heorot, the burial mound with the hoard-guarding dragon, the farewell to Beowulf... Consider how the author uses the different settings of Heorot, the underwater hiding-place of Grendel's mother, the dragon's underground lair and how important they think they are to the story. *What is the atmosphere of each place, and how does it affect the hero and the way the story plays out?*
- Review the story in chronological order and consider the different emotions that Beowulf has felt throughout the three episodes of the story, from the young warrior arriving in Denmark to vanquish Grendel then taking on the monster's mother, up to his later days as established king of the Geats facing the dragon, the high and low points, using the storymap to support recollection of key events and the Role on the Wall to support discussion of his emotional journey. Use hot-seating to explore the feelings of Beowulf or any of the characters further; in hot-seating one member of the group role-plays a central character and is interviewed by the other children. This activity involves children closely examining a character's motivation and responses. The children could work collaboratively to choose words that describe a character's emotions at different points of the story. Write these on post-it notes, then organise them to demonstrate shades of emotional intensity that they have felt in the story. You could also explore the emotional journey of other characters such as Hrothgar.
- If possible, leave copies of the book in the book corner for the children to revisit and re-read in independent reading time if they want to, by themselves or socially in a group or to take home and re-read for themselves.
- Through modelling, ask the children to describe their favourite part of the story. Provide the children with an oral scaffold for example: *the most memorable part of the story was... because...; my top moment in the story was...*




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*because...* and in pairs ask them to identify their favourite part of the narrative. Encourage children to give reasons for their choices and invite some children to share these.

- Michael Morpurgo's prose retelling is based on the longest epic poem in Old English (more than 3,000 lines long; and the first European poem not written in Latin or Greek). Old English was the language spoken in Anglo-Saxon England before the Norman Conquest. The author also acknowledges that he is inspired by recent retellings by Seamus Heaney, Rosemary Sutcliff, Kevin Crossley-Holland and Michael Alexander, of which the versions by Crossley-Holland and Sutcliffe would be accessible for the children to compare and contrast with this version. The only surviving manuscript of the poem – and even this thousand-year-old treasure was almost destroyed by fire in 1731 – is [held at the British Library](#), and has been digitised so children can enjoy looking at it and in [this article by linguist David Crystal](#) enjoy hearing it read in its Old English form, and exploring in [this short TED talk](#) where the English we speak today came from.
- Discuss the content of Beowulf and consider why it might have been passed down through the generations for a millennium. Did it have a particular theme or lesson that the audience might learn? Was it promoting a particular characteristic that might have been valued in Viking society? Why do you think stories like this were valued so highly? Did it remind you of other stories that you have heard before?
- Beowulf continues to be read and enjoyed a millennium after it was first retold by storytellers, and has influenced many popular modern stories, including the *Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien created his own translation and his dragon Smaug in *The Hobbit* draws directly on Beowulf's final exploit), *Game of Thrones* as well as role-play like Dungeons and Dragons and many video games. Invite children to explore the links between different hero myths they know. For your own information you may find [this short film on what makes a hero](#) useful.
- *Beowulf* has a history of at least 1000 years and its long oral tradition could be a spur to engage in storytelling. Children could choose their favourite part of the Beowulf legend to retell, or read and learn a myth about one of the Norse gods to retell to the class: some Viking myths and legends are listed on the next page.
- Model oral storytelling for the children yourself. When preparing to engage in storytelling, ensure that you know the shape of the story well, but don't feel that you need to learn the story 'word for word'. If you know the main events in the story, you will be able to effectively shape it for your audience. Model how to identify and summarise the key parts of a chosen story in a simple storymap upon which you can layer detail description and the story language they need to tell the story effectively. After telling the class your story, discuss what made it an effective retelling. What made it different from hearing a story read aloud? Were there any moments in the story that were particularly memorable? Were there certain phrases or descriptions that were impactful? What was most effective about the way the story was told — how did changes in the voice, altering dynamics or pitch, or using pauses, or body language, gesture or facial expression communicate meaning?
- Find out more about Michael Morpurgo, the third Children's Laureate, from the many sites that include articles and interviews, among them [his own website](#).
- Find out more about illustrator Michael Foreman from the [CLPE booklist](#).



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## Other suggested titles by Michael Morpurgo:

- *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, illustrated by Michael Foreman (Walker Books)
- *Arthur, High King of Britain*, illustrated by Michael Foreman (Egmont)
- *In The Mouth of the Wolf*, illustrated by Barroux (Farshore)
- *Kensuke's Kingdom*, illustrated by Michael Foreman (Farshore)
- *Private Peaceful* (HarperCollins)
- *The Amazing Story of Adolphus Tips*, illustrated by Michael Foreman (HarperCollins)
- *The Dancing Bear*, illustrated by Christian Birmingham (HarperCollins)
- *The Kites are Flying!*, illustrated by Laura Carlin (Walker Books)
- *The Mozart Question*, illustrated by Michael Foreman (Walker Books)
- *The Puffin Keeper*, illustrated by Benji Davies (Puffin)
- *The Wreck of the Zanzibar*, illustrated by Christian Birmingham (Egmont)
- *War Horse*, illustrated by Francois Place (Farshore)

## Other KS2-accessible versions of *Beowulf* for inter-textual comparison:

- *Beowulf*, Kevin-Crossley-Holland, illustrated by Charles Keeping (Oxford University Press)
- *Beowulf*, Rob Lloyd Jones, illustrated by Victor Tavares (Usborne)
- *Monster Slayer: A Beowulf Tale*, Brian Patten, illustrated by Chris Riddell (Barrington Stoke)
- *Beowulf, Dragon Slayer*, Rosemary Sutcliff (Puffin)

## Other suggested titles to further support the exploration of themes in the book:

- *Anglo-Saxon Boy*, Tony Bradman (Walker Books)
- *Viking Boy*, Tony Bradman (Walker Books)
- *Viking Boy: The Real Story*, Tony Bradman (Walker Books)



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