

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE STORY OF BEOWULF AND GRENDEL

Drama and writing in role.

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This drama lesson and the follow up can take place in a classroom.

- 1) **THE DRAMA CONTRACT:** Ask the children if, when the drama begins, they can imagine they are Scandinavian warriors meeting for a feast in a great hall. Explain that they will need to imagine that the classroom is a Great Hall with tables and benches. There will be no costumes or set, so they will have to imagine the hall. Talk about what that might look like, how they might be dressed, what they might eat and drink etc to create a picture of the setting. Show images if they are available. Explain that everything they use will be mimed but they must talk as if they were really there.
- 2) **Preparation:** Explain that the drama will begin as the feast starts. They should not move from their tables but can mime the actions and talk about the food and some of the brave things they have done that day. Discuss some examples of what they might talk about. Give the children a few minutes to think about what they will eat and what they will talk about when the drama comes to life. Ask them to fold their arms when ready. Move on to the next stage when most are ready.

BUILDING BELIEF – Dramatic Play

Ask the children to start with a freeze-frame of the feast. On the word *Action* from you the feast will come to life until you call *Freeze* again. Bring the drama to life for a short time only, then freeze to stop the drama and ask them to come out of the freeze.

Narrate what happened next in the drama –A sea captain arrived with an urgent message from a famous and brave warrior called Beowulf.

TEACHER IN ROLE to deepen the drama

Ask the children if they can accept that you will play the part of this sea captain when you wear an item of clothing such as a scarf or a cloak.

Explain that, on the word *Action* the hall will come to life again but this time the warriors are not feasting. They are listening to the sea captain.

A LETTER to move the drama on

Put on the item of clothing and read out the following letter to the warriors in role. Use a formal, serious tone but do not significantly change your voice or mannerisms as this can distract the children. You may want to roll up the letter beforehand and unroll it to read, as if it were a scroll.

Warriors of the Great Hall

I am a sea captain and I bring you this message from Beowulf the Dragonslayer, a brave warrior, a hero great and good and admired by all. As I speak he is preparing for an important mission.

These are the words of Beowulf. Listen well:

I, Beowulf, know that you wish to visit other lands to trade goods to make yourselves prosperous, but if you need to cross the sea, or travel to far away lands, you will need to have courage and bravery. You also need to be brave and fearless to defend your land from attacking tribes. I know that only the bravest will survive. You must all try to become the bravest warriors. I bring you a chance to face up to the worst of all your fears, and become even more brave, by accompanying me on a dangerous mission.

Here is the story of my mission. Listen well.

It all began many years ago, before I was born, when my father's tribe was at war with the Wylfings, one of the most powerful tribes in these parts. After my father killed one of the Wylfings tribesmen in battle, he knew his life was in danger, so he set off across the sea with my mother, to escape. A storm at sea brought them to the court of the Danish King Hrothgar, who gave them shelter. Hrothgar allowed them to live with him for 6 years and I was born in his court. After 6 years, Hrothgar helped us make peace with the Wylfings and we returned home. My parents are now dead, but I have never forgotten how Hrothgar saved their lives. Hrothgar and his people are now in great danger and he needs my help.

Do not be afraid at what I am now about to tell you, for although this story will test your bravery, I have a plan that will save us all from death.

Many years ago, King Hrothgar built a fine hall, for himself and his people. It is said that he took the gilded antlers of a fine stag and set them on the gable end of the hall and that is why he called his hall, Heorot the Hart. But he would be better living in a shepherd's hut than living in that Hall, for it is now the scene of death and bloodshed.

One night, when the warriors had drunk their fill of mead and were sleeping on the benches in the Hall, Grendel the monster, the Night Stalker, the Man Wolf, the Death Shadow, came out of his lair in the marshes and began creeping around outside the Hall. Grendel had heard the laughter from the feasting in the Hall and was hungry for human life. So swift was Grendel's attack, that no one outside the Hall heard any cries. But when dawn broke, 30 of Hrothgar's bravest warriors had been slaughtered. The walls were splashed with blood and you could see Grendel's bloodstained footprints from the marshes.

Grendel now has the taste for blood and returns every night to the Hall, looking for warriors. Many have tried to stay in the Hall overnight to fight Grendel, but no one has yet survived. The Hall now lies empty and Hrothgar and his people live in fear.

I Beowulf will kill Grendel. I will take my weapon and my long war-boat. I will take a small number of trusty men who have been with me on raids before, but I need more warriors.

Here is what you must do. Talk to each other and set down what your bravest deeds have been so far. I know many of you have fought off attackers to your village, or been together on small raids, fighting battles and saving each other. Tell me what you have done and I will take with me those of you whose stories tell me that you are brave. Only the brave can come with me to the Hall of King Hrothgar to kill the monster Grendel.

Leave your stories for the sea captain. He is my fellow warrior and I trust him to bring them safely to me.

Beowulf

Stop reading but stay in role and make it clear what Beowulf requires of them. Then take off the item of clothing to come out of role – saying the words “ *and the sea captain left the hall – freeze*’.

WRITING IN ROLE

Stop the drama and discuss the task. Talk about how warriors wanted to appear brave and would be honoured to go with Beowulf. Discuss how exaggerated tales of bravery were admired and included things like defeating dragons and monsters. They should plan and make their stories in a similar way to impress Beowulf.

Provide examples/ models of this kind of genre such as sagas etc and/or write one yourself as a model. Warriors might fight in pairs so children could plan a story as if they went together. The stories can be illustrated or written as graphic stories like comics as an option. Children may want to give themselves names using kennings similar to Beowulf the Dragonslayer.

Explain that each story of bravery will be sent to the sea captain.

When children have completed their stories, they can compose a letter to go with them, for the sea captain to take to Beowulf.

LINK TO TEXT

In order to find out what happened when Beowulf tried to kill Grendel, introduce the Anglo-Saxon poem of the story of Beowulf and Grendel in an accessible text such as:

- *BEOWULF* by Charles Keeping & Kevin Crossley Holland. (Oxford)
- It may also be interesting to dip into some original translations like *Beowulf: A verse translation* (Penguin Classics) to compare the style of storytelling.

REFLECTION

Specific reflection: Talk about heroic poems like Beowulf and Grendel and how some were exaggerated and invented for effect. Consider whether this ever happens today, maybe in a different way.

Universal reflection: Talk about the concepts of bravery and heroism today and in the past.

FREE RESOURCES/CPD

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RED SNOW and ANGEL’S CHILD

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