

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Reluctant Dragon (Unabridged)

by
Kenneth Grahame

Book Information

Kenneth Grahame, The Reluctant Dragon (Unabridged)
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A young boy and St. George find a way to calm frightened townspeople and spare the life of a harmless dragon.

Topics: Fairy Tales, Fairy Tales (All);
Fantasy/Imagination, Dragons; Read Now
with Power Up Recommended Lists, See
All Sides

Main Characters

Maria the Boy's mother, who approves of the Boy's relationship with the dragon but is fearful of encountering the dragon herself

St. George the knight whom the townspeople persuade to rid them of the dragon

the Boy an insightful young lad who helps St. George and the dragon stage a fight that will satisfy the villagers

the dragon an intellectual creature who prefers poetry and conversation to terrorizing and fighting

the shepherd the Boy's father, who discovers the dragon in a cave

Vocabulary

affable pleasant or friendly
antediluvian taking place before the Biblical flood
Downs an area of rolling hills, especially in England
gentry an upper or ruling class of people
immured confined or enclosed
pestilential deadly
rapine pillage; the taking of things by force
sward a grassy area of land

Synopsis

A shepherd returns one day to his cottage on the outskirts of an English village and excitedly tells his wife and son that he has seen a strange creature in a cave on the Downs. He says that the creature is as big as four cart-horses and is covered in scales. His son, who is knowledgeable about natural history and fairy tales because he reads voraciously, calmly announces that it is only a dragon.

The next evening, the son, who is known as the Boy, visits the Downs to meet the dragon. The dragon is pleased to have company and to learn that he and the Boy share a love of poetry. The dragon explains that he plans to make the cave his permanent home because there he can enjoy peace and avoid fighting, which other dragons enjoy. The Boy cautions the dragon that the people of the area will not like the idea of him settling there and will want to kill him. The dragon does not take the warning seriously, however, as he is convinced that humans will recognize his fine character.

As the Boy has predicted, when the villagers learn of the dragon they immediately determine to get rid of it. Since none of them are brave enough to face the dragon, though, they ask St. George to defeat the monster for them. The Boy tells the dragon that he must fight St. George, but the dragon refuses and sends the Boy to arrange peace between him and the knight.

When the Boy explains to St. George that the people of the village invented the stories of the dragon's terrible deeds, St. George sympathizes with the dragon's plight. The Boy takes the knight to visit the dragon. There they create a plan for staging a fight that will satisfy the citizens' thirst for battle without seriously injuring the dragon. The knight will spear the dragon in the thick folds of skin under his neck, and the dragon will confess his wrongs and agree to change his ways. The dragon will then be led to the victory banquet in the village. Thus, the dragon will be able to enjoy being accepted into Society and will no longer be bored.

The next morning, the people of the village surround the cave at a distance to watch the battle. The

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dragon puts on a dramatic performance, and on cue, the knight spears and defeats the dragon. Followed by the crowds, St. George leads the dragon to the village. At the village inn, St. George rebukes the people for making up stories and encourages them to befriend the dragon now that he has decided to behave himself.

The dragon makes the Boy promise to accompany him home after the banquet. The dragon falls asleep immediately after the banquet, however. The Boy will not leave the dragon and break his promise, but he is already late going home and knows his mother will be worried about him. St. George finds the Boy in tears and helps him escort the dragon back to his cave.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

When the Boy and dragon meet, the dragon asks if the Boy has ever tried to make up poetry. The Boy says he has written poetry, that his parents are kind, "but somehow they don't seem to --." The dragon agrees, saying, "They don't seem to, and you can't argue with 'em about it." If the Boy and dragon were to finish this sentence, what would they say and why?

Students' answers will vary. Students may suggest that the sentence be completed with the word(s) "understand," "listen," or "appreciate the beauty of the words," etc. The Boy and dragon share a common interest but realize that not all people "see" things in the same way they do. Many people are either too practical or too busy to be bothered with poetic thoughts.

Literary Analysis

What is the author's purpose in making a dragon the central character of the story?

The author uses the dragon to raise the issue of prejudice. The villagers have preconceived ideas about dragons and assume the dragon is dangerous even though he has never hurt anyone. In fact, the townspeople even make up stories to justify their fears. St. George, on the other hand, overcomes his prejudice by listening to and accepting facts and rejecting fear inspired by ignorance.

Inferential Comprehension

The Boy said, "Rules always come right if you wait quietly." Are the conventional rules of a fairy tale followed in this story? Why or why not?

The Boy's statement is ironic because the rules of a traditional knight and dragon fairy tale are not followed. For example, the shepherd's son spends much of his time reading books and writing poetry rather than working with his father in the fields. The dragon is a peace-loving animal with a taste for the arts and society rather than a ferocious monster. The knight becomes sympathetic toward the dragon and pretends to fight it rather than killing it in bloodthirsty combat. And finally, the villagers are willing to accept the dragon as a friend and equal rather than continuing to view it as an evil and dangerous creature.

Constructing Meaning

Have you ever persuaded someone to do something they did not want to do? What was it and what strategy did you use to persuade this person?

Answers will vary. The students should give a specific example of a strategy they employed to persuade someone to do something the person did not want to do. The students may have used gentle persuasion, pleading, threats, or bribery to get the other person to perform a task or request.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Literary Features The dragon

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and the Boy are fond of poetry. Discuss the characteristics of sonnets. Then read several sonnets aloud, discussing and interpreting them as a class.

Making Predictions The story ends with the dragon returning to his cave after enjoying a banquet with the villagers. Have each student speculate about possible future events that take place involving the Boy, the dragon, and the villagers. Ask each student to write a brief story to share with the rest of the class.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors St. George is a knight who has come to rescue a village. Have the students read about how young men became knights, the duties of knights, and the equipment knights used in battle. The students can put the information they learned on posters that can be displayed in the classroom.

Responding to Literature The dragon spent many evenings telling the Boy stories of past times. Storytelling is not enjoyed just by the very young; people of all ages appreciate a good story. Have the students choose a favorite story and perform it for the class, using gestures and voice inflections for emphasis. Perhaps younger students at the school would enjoy hearing the stories, too, and could be invited to the classroom.