

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Black Cauldron by Lloyd Alexander

Book Information

Lloyd Alexander, The Black Cauldron
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In Prydain, a young Assistant Pig-Keeper achieves honor in a quest to destroy the evil Black Cauldron.

Award: Newbery Honor

Topics: Fantasy/Imagination, Misc./Other; Series, Chronicles of Prydain

Main Characters

Adaon a well-traveled and very knowledgeable soldier

Arawn the evil ruler of Annvin

Coll Dallben an elderly enchanter

Doli a grumpy dwarf member of the Fair Folk

Eilonwy a brave young princess

Ellidyr an arrogant young prince

Fflewddur a well-known bard

Gurgi a hairy little creature who often speaks in rhymes

Gwystyl Fair Folk guardian of a way post

Orddu, Orgoch, and Orwen three enchantresses from the Marshes of Morva

Prince Gwydion the well-respected warrior who leads the quest against Arawn

Taran the Assistant Pig-Keeper for Caer Dallben

Vocabulary

bard a wandering minstrel or poet

churl a rude, ill-mannered person

gird to attach with a belt

predicament a difficult situation

Synopsis

In the land of Prydain it becomes obvious to Prince

Gwydion that the evil Arawn is becoming too powerful. Arawn has been using the Black Cauldron, a magical kettle with the power to make the dead his slaves, to increase his army of evil warriors. Gwydion realizes the time has come to retrieve the cauldron and destroy it. He calls many to Caer Dallben to enlist a group of volunteers to join him in the quest. Several decide to help: Taran, the Assistant Pig-Keeper for the enchanter Coll Dallben; Ellidyr, the arrogant young son of a king; Adaon, a well-traveled warrior; Fflewddur, a famous bard; Doli, a grumpy dwarf of the Fair Folk; and the rulers King Smoit and King Morgant. Together they set out for Arawn's kingdom of Annvin. The plan to retrieve the cauldron goes well until the group discovers that it is already gone. Not knowing where it is, they are instructed by Gwydion to retreat to Caer Cadarn to regroup and decide how to locate the cauldron.

Taran and Ellidyr are left in the retreat path under the guidance of Adaon. Princess Eilonwy secretly joins them and wants to help. This group begins to retreat but is quickly attacked by a band of vicious Huntsmen, evil servants of Arawn. Doli surprises the Huntsmen by becoming invisible and attacking them, thus allowing the others to escape. Taran's group makes it to an area where Doli senses the presence of Fair Folk who can protect them. They seek refuge in a Fair Folk way post being guarded by Gwystyl, a seemingly weak and ineffective fairy guardian. Eventually Doli realizes that Gwystyl knows where the missing cauldron has gone and gets him to reveal the information. With the help of Gwystyl's magic dust, which makes their footprints disappear, the group heads out to the Marshes of Morva in hopes of recovering the cauldron and returning it to Caer Dallben.

The traveling is difficult and, along the way, Ellidyr, in search of personal glory, abandons the group and continues on his own. Adaon suffers a fatal stab in a battle with more Huntsmen, and the small group is left to continue on without their leader. Before he dies, Adaon gives Taran a magic brooch that heightens Taran's senses and gives him prophetic dreams. With the help of the brooch, the group safely arrives at the cottage of three enchantresses,

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Orddu, Orgoch, and Orwen. The enchantresses threaten to turn them into frogs until they learn that the group knows Coll Dallben. They tell of having known Dallben as a child and admit that they have the Black Cauldron. They refuse, however, to part with it until Taran offers his treasured brooch in exchange. Taran and the others believe the best thing to do is destroy the cauldron and return home. They quickly learn, however, that the only way the cauldron can be destroyed is by the willful sacrifice of a living human being climbing into the cauldron.

The group decides to return the cauldron to Caer Dallben for its protection. The trip is extremely difficult since the cauldron is of an immense size. At one point the cauldron becomes wedged in the rocks of a river. At this point Ellidyr reappears and offers to help free the cauldron if all the members of the group promise to let him take credit for its return to Caer Dallben. The group agrees, and the cauldron is successfully taken from the river. Not trusting the pledge made by the others, Ellidyr attacks Taran and rides off with the cauldron.

On their way back to Caer Dallben, Taran's group encounters King Morgant. They follow him, believing the king is a friend of the group. When they reach his encampment, he has them bound and reveals that he plans to keep the cauldron and use it to gain power. They are thrown into a tent where they find Ellidyr also bound and unconscious. Shocked at the turn of events, Taran tries to plan his next move. While he thinks, Doli appears and unties the group. At this Ellidyr awakens and admits he took the cauldron to steal honor, but swears he did not intend to use it for evil. Before Taran can stop him, Ellidyr rushes out of the tent and climbs into the cauldron. The cauldron is destroyed and Ellidyr loses his life. While this is happening, King Smoit and Prince Gwydion arrive and attack King Morgant's troops. King Morgant and many of his men are killed. Gwydion declares that Ellidyr and Morgant will be honored, despite the transgressions they may have committed against others.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Both Taran and Ellidyr search for honor and glory among men. Explain why this is important to each character.

Taran holds the position of Assistant Pig-Keeper, which in his mind lacked nobility. He desires to prove he can manage the harder tasks of manhood. Ellidyr is the youngest son of a king who does not hold much value in the land. Ellidyr is trying to regain what his family has lost, thus making his title more meaningful.

Literary Analysis

The antagonist in a story is the character who creates the conflict for the central figure in the story. Who are the antagonists in this story and what gives each one this distinction?

Since Taran is the central figure, Ellidyr is one antagonist. He creates conflict for Taran by insulting him and continually competing with Taran for glory and honor. Arawn is another antagonist since he has the cauldron and sends his evil creatures to attack Taran. King Morgant becomes an antagonist when he seizes the cauldron and tries to make Taran serve him.

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Inferential Comprehension

Orddu, Orgoch, and Orwen do not tell Taran and the others about how the cauldron must be destroyed until after Taran agrees to make the exchange for the brooch. Would anyone in the group have made the deal if they had known that information ahead of time? What other options might they have been able to employ?

Taran might have made the deal anyway because he wanted to be sure the cauldron got in the hands of Dallben. The other group members might or might not have made the deal. They could have decided to return to Caer Dallben to seek Dallben's help, assuming the cauldron was safe with the enchantresses..

Constructing Meaning

Eilonwy is angry with Taran for dragging her into the foolish trek through the Marshes of Morva. Why does she blame him? Would you have gone with Taran or sought Prince Gwydion's help?

Eilonwy has the freedom to go where she wishes, but she blames him for dragging her along because she feels a sense of responsibility to help Taran, her friend. Students could argue that they would or would not have gone along. Some reasons to go with Taran stem from a sense of friendship and loyalty to one's friends, the desire for honor in completing such a difficult task, or fear of being left alone if one did not go along. Some reasons to go find Gwydion lie in the great dangers at the Marshes of Morva, their inexperience in deadly situations, and their being outnumbered by the enemy.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Ellidyr assumes everyone should respect him and treat him well because he is a prince. He assumes his family name gives him clout but he personally has never earned any. Have the students discuss this idea and list examples of real people or characters who assumed the same or were given honor as a birthright, such as the British royal family. Discuss whether this is fair and what the

benefits and difficulties of such a life would be.

Understanding the Author's Craft The author writes the story from a third-person point of view. Have the students retell the story in either a summary or short narrative from the point of view of the character of their choice.

Comparing and Contrasting Have the students brainstorm a list of people in today's society who they believe are honorable. Compare and contrast these people to generate a list of qualities that define what honor means to them. Students may then compare the characters from the story to their new criteria for honor to determine if they would be honorable by the students' standards.

Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning The book states that Taran senses the group is near the marshes long before they reach them. He notices the birds that live in marshes flying around, a distinctive scent in the air, the sponginess of the ground, and the noises of the animals. Have the students choose an area they are familiar with and describe the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and feel of this place.