

Private Peaceful
by Michael Morpurgo
Cross-curricular Teaching Notes
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This is the story of the experiences of two brothers growing up at the turn of the twentieth century and of the tumultuous events of the First World War. It is a powerful account, stimulating both an emotional and intellectual response, which embraces many different subject areas. The text inspires a range of responses - artistic, musical and historical, as well as providing a wealth of linguistic and literary features for study.

Michael Morpurgo presents contrasts between the natural, timeless environment of a Devon childhood and the violent realities of war, through the eyes of a young, sympathetic narrator, Tommo Peaceful. His choice to portray the experience of training, fighting and dying in war time so sensitively ensures that the text makes difficult and challenging ideas.

The text is rich in material for study in English, Art, Citizenship, Drama, History, ICT and Music. Below is a selection of suggested activities, aimed at providing teachers with ideas for cross-curricular work in schools. Some are very short term, taking up perhaps just one lesson; others are much longer projects, offering teachers some flexibility in their planning.

English

- * Examine sections of the text where the author uses the present tense for Tommo's narrative, e.g. pages 21-23 where Tommo has his first fight. Discuss why Morpurgo has chosen to change tense here and what effect it creates. Pupils write their own account of an important experience, either autobiographical or fictional, using first person narrative and the present tense to create a dramatic effect of their own.
- * Consider the character of Charlie as seen through Tommo's eyes. What are his key characteristics? What episodes in his life reflect those characteristics? Does he change as he grows older or not? Write a character study of Charlie Peaceful, using quotations and references to the text to back up the points that are made. Write an introduction and conclusion to give a personal opinion of his character.
- * Read some of the poetry of Wilfred Owen and choose one of his poems to compare to a specific chapter in *Private Peaceful*. Compare and contrast the two texts in terms of style, language, form, technique and effectiveness. This could be a paired oral activity or a more formal essay.
- * Set up an imaginary Panel of Inquiry into the events leading up to the execution of Charlie. Decide as a class who should be summoned to appear before the Panel, which should consist of the Teacher in role and two pupils as Judges. Invite pupils to take the role of the various characters brought before the Panel to answer questions about their conduct, actions and decisions.
- * Read the descriptions of Grandma Wolf and Sergeant Hanley. How does the author make the reader dislike them? Write a description of a fictional character which is intended to make the reader dislike them. This may involve recounting an incident where the character is involved in action or dialogue or both.
- * In pairs, pupils choose to be either Molly or Charlie or Tommo or Mother. One pupil in the pair needs to be at war and the other back in England. Reread the letters reprinted in the story (pages 139-141) and discuss

the different styles used. Pupils write a sequence of letters to each other, in the style and character of their choice, describing life in the trenches and life in Devon.

* Analyse the style of writing used by the author in the description of the death and funeral of Tommo and Charlie's father (pages 14-17). He uses very short sentences, lots of commas, repetition, present tense, simple vocabulary, figurative language and graphic detail. Copy this style in writing a description of a dramatic or emotional event such as a sudden, tragic death.

* Write questions to put to one of the characters and carry out an interview in pairs, exploring the character's reaction to the events in the story. This could be written up and presented as a magazine article.

* Create a portfolio of documents relating to the life of Charlie Peaceful. This could include things like a birth certificate, school reports, employment records and references, signing up papers, letters, military records etc. Make them look as authentic as possible.

* Read the Declaration written by Siegfried Sassoon and compare it to the introductory words of Michael Morpurgo. Identify some of the rhetorical devices they both use and then use them to write a persuasive letter to a newspaper arguing for or against the execution of deserters in wartime.

* Design a map to show the two main settings of the novel (Devon and France). Label and annotate the map with as much detail as possible, using relevant quotations from the text. Add symbols to identify the themes or events associated with each place.

Art

The evocative descriptions and use of figurative language in *Private Peaceful* combine to inspire pupils' visual responses to the text. Moreover, the stark contrasts in theme and a widespread use of symbolism provides superb opportunities for pupils to creatively explore the ideas in the story.

* Create a collage of words and pictures to represent some of the key themes (e.g. death and life, courage and cowardice, loyalty and betrayal etc). Pupils can use mixed media, perhaps using paint, images from magazines or the internet, or even ceramics to make a patchwork of individual tiles. Encourage pupils to explore colour and tone in response to the contrasts in the text.

* Draw a still life of artefacts dating back to the First World War, e.g. helmet, grenade, boot, rifle; developing sketching techniques. Again, explore the possibilities of juxtaposing these images with a background of the natural beauty of the Devon countryside.

* In groups, choose 3 decisive moments in the text and draft an illustration for each. Decide which is the most effective and develop the illustration into a design for the front cover of the book.

Citizenship

The new requirements for Citizenship in schools lend themselves well to a cross-curricular approach. Morpurgo's novel contributes in several different ways to these concepts: the text serves as an introduction for pupils to the ideas of individual rights and responsibilities; of one's duty to one's country; of identity and social class and of the morality of war. *Private Peaceful* presents the opportunity to analyse these and draw comparisons with our modern society and attitudes nearly a century later

* Organise a class discussion or more formal debate to analyse the issues of war, conscription, democracy, gender etc with the given motion: **It is the duty of every man to fight for his country.**

* Put together a selection of newspapers, magazines, radio programmes or television documentaries which relate to current or recent conflicts and read, listen or view them in groups. Examine the justification for each war and compare to the reasons the two world wars were fought. Is there a moral argument for war? Under what circumstances would pupils be prepared to fight?

* Make a chart to show the social hierarchy portrayed in *Private Peaceful*, including as many characters as possible, however minor. Try to make a similar chart using characters from a modern novel or people in the local community. Are there any parallels? What has changed, if anything?

Drama

Conflict is the basic ingredient of all drama and *Private Peaceful* is about the ultimate of conflicts - war. However, it also demonstrates a wide range of other, more subtle conflicts: between innocence and experience, man and nature, loyalty and betrayal, the social classes and more. As such it is a treasure chest of starting points for dramatic exploration, with pupils encouraged to empathise with and examine the characters and experiences described from the inside.

* In groups, write the script for a radio dramatisation of *Private Peaceful*. Choose one of the battle scenes and adapt the dialogue from the text, adding to it where necessary to give essential information about setting, characters etc. Include in the script stage directions and sound effects. Perform and record the scene.

* Individual pupils choose a character they have responded to well and develop a Talking Heads style monologue to explore the character's reactions to the events of the story as well as creating a fuller background to the life, beliefs, values and opinions of that character. This can be scripted or improvised, depending on the confidence and abilities of pupils.

* The trial of Charlie Peaceful is only recounted indirectly in the book. Discuss what form the trial is likely to have taken and who might have been present. Act out, in groups, a Trial Scene, focusing on creating an atmosphere of suspense and conflict. If possible, go on to develop an Execution Scene, perhaps using just mime.

History

The events of *Private Peaceful*, although fictional, are based on meticulous historical research and a careful concern for detail. Thus the text provides pupils with an invaluable insight into the realities of the First World War, through the very personal experiences of the Peaceful brothers, and allows them the chance to evaluate this literary account alongside other, more textbook based, sources of information about the war.

* The author developed his story from a small number of facts about soldiers shot for cowardice and desertion in the First World War. He has made his own interpretation of those facts. What are the facts? What is known about these men? How else could the facts be interpreted? Write a short alternative account of the story of Charlie Peaceful, based on the facts. Which is most convincing?

* Pupils use a variety of sources (encyclopedia, internet, CD Rom, photographs, text books etc) to research the period of history covered in *Private Peaceful*, focusing on one particular area, e.g. war, employment, education, domestic life etc. Create a large poster to display information, concentrating on brief, bite-size information, including quotations from the text.

* With particular reference to the opening chapters of the book, draw up a chart to compare the education system and experience of school described by Tommo with the pupils' own experience 100 years later. This should include some mention of Big Joe and provision of special needs education. This could be written up as an essay or provide material for class discussion.

ICT

ICT has a unique and central place in the curriculum, essential as it is to all other subject areas. Pupils studying *Private Peaceful* can use ICT in two major ways: using CD Roms and the Internet as sources for wide-ranging research to obtain information on the topics raised in the text; and using a variety of ICT tools to present information in appropriate forms for different purposes and audiences.

* Devise a propaganda leaflet to persuade young men to sign up for the Army. Consider what facts to include – and what to leave out. Use persuasive language and explore other methods of persuasion such as the inclusion of images, style of font, size of lettering, headings etc. Use appropriate programme such as DTP.

* Research the First World War on the internet, refining the search to focus on specific aspects such as a particular battle, conscription, treatment of deserters, uniforms and provisions, medical action, weaponry etc. Cut and paste information into an organised document with pupils writing their own introductions.

* Use PowerPoint or equivalent to present an argument either for or against the execution of soldiers for desertion and cowardice.

Music

Much like Art and Drama, Music is a valuable medium for imaginative response to the powerful and evocative ideas and emotions portrayed in *Private Peaceful*. The story contains a wealth of material for creative, musical exploration, particularly in its use of contrasts and symbolism; concepts which are shared by literature and music. Through improvisation, composition and performance, pupils can express their response to the ideas, settings and moods, whilst developing their skills and technique.

* As a class decide which are the key moments in the novel, e.g. the death of Tommo's father, meeting Molly, signing up to fight etc. Choose no more than 10. Compose a tone poem to incorporate these significant moments and combine them into a coherent piece of music. Pupils can work individually composing all 10 sequences or small groups could work on a single sequence and then link them together as a class.

* Recreate the experience of a bombardment during the war. Use as wide a range of instruments as possible, experimenting with the type of sound each produces. Improvise and choose the most effective combination for a whole class or small group performance.

* Consider some of the major themes in *Private Peaceful* - death, life, family loyalty, fear, passion, grief etc and try to develop musical symbols for each, using keyboards or any other one instrument. As with the other suggested Music ideas, words could be added to enhance the performance; either words chosen and quoted directly from the text or pupils' own poetry or prose.

Private Peaceful by Michael Morpurgo

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