

Unit focus: Myths And Legends
Text focus: Narrative (1110L)

STAGE 6

Lambton Worm

Many hundreds of years ago, in the north-east of England, there lived a man named John Lambton. As heir to the Lambton estate, he was a significant man, and so it came as a shock - one sunny Sunday morning - when he decided to skip the weekly church service and head down to the river to fish. On that fateful morning, John couldn't care less about the thoughts of the local congregation; he had heard rumours that the fish were in a particularly playful mood and he had set his mind to a morning of resting on the riverbank of the River Wear.

To reach the river, John had to pass through a small copse. It was whilst he was making his way through the dense trees that he stumbled upon an old man dressed in a dark grey robe. Nearly wholly hidden under a thick hood, his face was weathered and pocked with scars although his eyes glistened. When he spoke, his voice was filled with gravel and dust, "Do not forgo your duty to the church, Mr Lambton. If you venture out today, you will snare nothing but the devil." With his grim prophecy still whispering through the trees, the old man crumpled to dust which swiftly disappeared on the wind.

Never one to listen to the advice of others, John shrugged his shoulders and continued on his way to the river. As soon as he arrived, he lay down a blanket and cast out his line. In no time at all, he had succumbed to the warm spring weather and had drifted into a peaceful sleep. In the distance, the church bells cried out mournfully for their lost sheep.

Twang…John woke with a start as the line on his fishing rod was pulled taught. Somewhere in the murky water, a fish had taken the bait. Reeling in the line as quickly as he could, John failed to notice the strange old man dressed in his old robes standing silently behind him. A look of horror gripped John's face like a mask when he saw what he had reeled in. No fish had ever been caught that looked as unholy as what he held in his hands: where he expected to see the head of a fish, there was the flat, bulbous head of a salamander and on each side of its skull, nine holes bubbled as the creature breathed in the fresh air.

"If that worm isn't the devil, Mr Lambton," the old man said with hushed reverence, "then he doesn't exist."

"What should I do?" John asked. A dark feeling of regret gradually washed over him. What had he done?

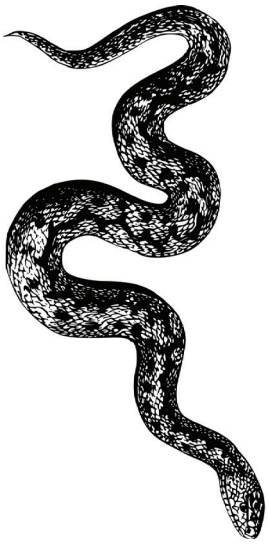
"The river is no place for the devil, cast him deep into the village well where he can do no harm." John was quick to act and - within the hour - the hideous beast had been dropped into the darkest shadows of the well.

For many years, the worm was nothing more than a memory for John and, soon enough, he left to fight in the

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Crusades. All the while, though, the worm was growing both in size and anger. It didn't enjoy living in such a small well; it was used to swimming free. By the time John finally returned from battle, the worm had grown to an enormous size and had left the well to terrorise the village. Over the years it had ripped up houses and destroyed farms: many men had travelled from all corners of the country to slay the Lambton Worm, but none had been successful.

Fearing that people would soon realise that he was at fault, John once again travelled into the copse to seek advice. This time he came across a haggard witch who told him that he must be the one to slay the beast whilst it drank in the river where it was caught and that, once it was dead, he must also kill the next living thing he saw. If he doesn't do this, she told him, his family would be cursed for generations. Acting on the witch's advice, John sought the help of the local blacksmith who fashioned him a suit of armour covered in sharp spikes.



Back at the river's edge, John finally came face to face with the worm that he had set loose so many years ago. Taking up his sword, he lunged into an epic battle. The worm tried again and again to squeeze him in its coils, but his spiked suit of armour simply pierced the creature's skin until, eventually, the worm lay dead. Before the battle, John had arranged with his father to release one of the family's hunting dogs so that he might kill it and end the curse: in his haste, his father forgot the agreement and raced out to meet his victorious son.

Not having the heart to kill his own father, John lay down his sword and the witch's curse lay on the Lambton family for many generations.

VOCABULARY

1. What is an heir?
2. Draw a picture of a "copse".
3. Rewrite the sentence "John woke with a **start**..." replacing the word in bold.
4. How else could you describe a "haggard old witch"?

VIPERS QUESTIONS

R What did John do that caused a shock?

R Why did John leave?

I Did John believe the witches curse? Explain.

P What kind of things might have happened to his family as a result of the curse?

S Write a summary of the story in one paragraph.

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Answers:

1. The next in line to a throne or seat of power

2. Any image of a small group of trees

3. Any word that indicated he woke quickly or with a jolt

4. Anything that implies the witch is scruffy or poorly presented

R: He skipped church

R: To fight in the crusades

I: Yes. He acted on her advice and sought the blacksmith to help him defeat the worm

P: Any suitable prediction

S: Any suitable summary

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