

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

Freak the Mighty

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Freak the Mighty

Notes

All references come from the Scholastic edition of *Freak the Mighty*, copyright 1993, by Rodman Philbrick.

Freak the Mighty is the story of Max and Freak, two best friends who become both literally and figuratively inseparable. Max has a very large, powerful body, but believes he lacks intelligence; Freak, on the other hand, has a tiny body but an enormous intellect. Together they complement one another, and when Freak is on Max's shoulders, they become like a single unit—an almost superhuman being. As “Freak the Mighty,” Max and Freak embark on quests together, “slaying dragons and fools and walking high above the world.” The “dragons” they slay are not just imaginary ones, however. The story is filled with real-life situations and obstacles that are far more frightening and traumatic than any imaginary quest. The value of friendship, the power of imagination, the importance of self-worth, and the persistence of truth are major themes in the novel.

Rodman Philbrick was born in Boston, Massachusetts in 1951. He began writing in the sixth grade, completed his first novel at age sixteen, and wrote several more books before he finally became published at age 28. Before achieving success as an author, Philbrick worked as a boatbuilder and a carpenter, among other things. Philbrick wrote primarily mystery and suspense novels for adults, and *Freak the Mighty*, published in 1993, was his first young adult novel. Since then, Philbrick has collaborated with his wife, Lynn Harnett, on several young adult series. He also has published novels under the pen names William R. Dantz and Chris Jordan. In 1998, Philbrick wrote a sequel to *Freak the Mighty* titled *Max the Mighty*. A filmed adaptation of *Freak the Mighty* was released in 1998 as well, and titled *The Mighty*.

The inspiration for the character of Freak (also known as Kevin in the novel) came from a boy that Philbrick knew. Like Freak, the boy suffered from Morquio Syndrome, a debilitating form of dwarfism involving impaired bone development, metabolic abnormalities, and the enlargement of the heart. The disease is progressive and potentially fatal, involves frequent surgeries, and becomes more life-threatening as the victim grows older.

The boy who was the inspiration for Freak was, like the character, abnormally short due to his illness. However, the boy was very smart, and he excelled in English and Science. He also had a big friend, like Max, who carried him around. Philbrick also notes that the boy's mother, like The Fair Gwen, was beautiful. However, with the exception of those facts, *Freak the Mighty* is an entirely fictional story, but one that emphasizes the real-life experiences of adolescence, coming to terms with one's unique qualities, and growing up with a close friend.

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Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. discuss how certain elements in the novel can be interpreted both literally and figuratively, defining the difference between these two levels of interpretation.
2. identify and cite examples, from the text, of the following literary terms:
 - alliteration
 - allusion
 - figurative language
 - foreshadowing
 - hyperbole
 - imagery
 - irony
 - metaphor
 - simile
3. describe the ways in which Max and Freak supplement each other to become a single unit that they refer to as “Freak the Mighty.”
4. compare and contrast the way Max deals with trauma and grief after the death of his mother with the way he ultimately deals with his grief over the death of Freak.
5. contrast Max’s and Freak’s self-image and discuss the necessity and value of self-worth.
6. identify the ways in which Max’s father uses religion as a tool for his own gain.
7. discuss the ways in which the author creates suspense for the reader, and cite examples of foreshadowing from the text.
8. discuss how Gram and Grim’s attitudes toward Max change as the novel progresses, and cite examples from the text that illustrate these changing attitudes.
9. discuss Freak’s fascination with robots, and explain how his fantasy of acquiring a bionic body helps both he and Max to deal with his illness.
10. discuss how *slaying dragons* is a metaphor for *conquering fears*, and specify who or what the real “dragons” in the novel are.

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Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Why is Freak so interested in knights and robots? What do they have in common, and what does Freak have in common with them?
2. Explain how Freak and Max, together, become “Freak the Mighty.” What skills does Freak have that Max lacks? What skills does Max have that Freak lacks?
3. Max tells the reader that one of the things he and Freak did together was slay dragons. According to Freak, dragons are symbols of fear. Explain how the following things can be compared to dragons, and explain how Max and Freak conquer them together.
 - Max’s father
 - Tony D.
 - illiteracy
 - disability
4. How does Freak help Max improve his reading skills? Why is Freak able to help Max when it seems that no one else ever could? How is Freak ultimately responsible for helping Max to write?
5. Why do you think Loretta and Iggy help Max? Do you think the newspapers were accurate in calling Loretta “the Heroic Biker Babe”?
6. How does Max’s relationship with Gram and Grim change throughout the novel? At what point do Gram and Grim first realize that their assumptions about Max were wrong?
7. Was Max ever really learning disabled? What evidence in the first half of the novel supports this idea, and what evidence in the second half refutes it?
8. Freak gives Max two special gifts—one on Christmas Eve and one when Max visits Freak in the hospital. What is similar about these two gifts? What is the most significant difference about them?
9. The following quotes appear in the text. Identify the speaker of each quote, describe the context in which it is said, and explain each quote’s meaning:
 - “Remembering is just an invention of the mind.”
 - “...it isn’t how long you’ve got that matters, it’s what you do with the time you have...”
 - “Nothing is a drag, kid. Think about it.”
 - “No one stays like they are...Everybody is always changing.”

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Chapter One – The Unvanquished Truth

Vocabulary

departed – the dead

duplex – a house divided into two separate residences

goon – a stupid or awkward person

persuaded – convinced

resembles – looks like

scowling – frowning; glaring

unvanquished – unbeaten or undefeated

1. Who is the narrator of the story? How does the reader know that the story is a first-person narrative, as opposed to a third-person narrative?

2. In the first paragraph, Max relates a great deal of information in just a few sentences. What does Max reveal about himself in this paragraph? What can the reader infer about Freak?

3. The significance of the novel's title, *Freak the Mighty*, is suggested in the first paragraph. How does Max introduce the idea of Freak the Mighty? What might the phrase imply about Max's and Freak's relationship with one another?

4. Who are Gram and Grim? What is their relationship to Max?

Chapter Seven – Walking High Above the World

Vocabulary

alternatives – options or choices
blubbering – crying
bugle – a trumpet-like instrument
cavalry – soldiers on horseback
converging – coming together
nanosecond – one-billionth of a second
perspective – a viewpoint
shrill – high-pitched
swaggering – walking in an conceited way; strutting
trajectory – route; path
urgent – needing immediate attention, like an emergency

1. How do Freak and Max work together as they run away from Tony and his gang? How are Freak and Max similar to a knight and his horse?

2. How do Freak and Max finally get away from Tony (also referred to as Blade)? How is their plan a very smart solution?

4. Why does the principal call Max to her office? What is Max's reaction to what she says?

5. When Max becomes conscious once more, he sees that the school nurse is crying. He automatically assumes that he must have hurt her, and he becomes afraid. Do you think Max hurt the nurse? If he did not, why is she crying?

6. What happens to Freak in the cafeteria? According to Max, what was the cause of this frightening episode? What do you think caused it?

4. Max thinks that he should feel happy about the news too, but he admits, “instead I feel really weird and worried...” What worries Max so much?

5. What suggests to the reader that Freak’s health is getting worse?

6. The title of the chapter, *The Accident of Nature*, refers to whom? What else might be significant about this phrase?
