



study guide

INTRODUCTION

This study guide is aimed at Key Stage 3 English and Media (with cross curricular links to Citizenship, History, Geography, Art and Science). Using a mixture of written, visual and interactive tasks, this study guide should inform pupils about the film, its subject and themes.

TEACHERS' NOTES

This study guide has been designed to meet a variety of curriculum needs, focusing on English and Media, Citizenship, History and Science at Key Stage 3. Tasks can be used either as one-off exercises, or as part of a more detailed scheme of work.

CURRICULUM LINKS:

- English/Media: Yr7: Word: 17, 20; Sentence: 12, 13b, d, e; 18; Reading: 1, 4, 6, 7, 10, 11, 12, 15, 20; Writing: 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16; Speaking and Listening: 1, 3, 4, 5, 11, 12. Yr8: Word: 8, 12, Sentence: 2, 9, 13; Reading: 1, 2, 8, 9, 10, 15, 16; Writing: 1, 3, 8, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15; Speaking and Listening: 3, 4, 5, 10, 12. Yr9: Sentence: 11; Reading: 1, 2, 4, 8, 10, 15; Writing: 1, 2, 4, 5, 9, 12, 13, 14; Speaking and Listening: 2, 5, 9
- Citizenship: KS3: 2a, b, c; 3a
- History: KS3: 1; 2a, b, c, d, e; 7a, b; 10; 13
- Geography: KS3: 1a, b, c, d, e, f; 2d; 3a, d, e; 5a, b; 6h

FILM SYNOPSIS

Directed by Chris Noonan (Babe) and starring Renée Zellweger (Cold Mountain, Bridget Jones's Diary) as Beatrix Potter and Ewan McGregor (Star Wars, Moulin Rouge!) as Norman Warne, *Miss Potter* is an inspirational story that follows Beatrix Potter's rise to being the most successful children's author of all time. The film tells the life story of the writer and illustrator of such stories as The Tale of Peter Rabbit and The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin. The film shows how she flouted convention, and developed her love for nature that extended beyond her talent as a wildlife artist to touch the hearts of generations of children. *Miss Potter* is a live action story where animation is used to bring Beatrix's characters to life, making this a magical film.

Certificate TBA. Running time TBA. UK Release Date 5 January 2007.

HOW TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT BEATRIX POTTER

A list of useful websites:

www.misspottermovie.co.uk
www.momentumpictures.co.uk
www.peterrabbit.com
wiredforbooks.org/kids.htm
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beatrix_Potter
www.hop-skip-jump.com/ – The World of Beatrix Potter Attraction
www.beatrixpottersociety.org.uk/

Geography

www.lakedistrictletsgo.co.uk/national_trust/nation_altrust_main.html
www.visitcumbria.com/bpotter.htm

History

www.nettlesworth.durham.sch.uk/time/victorian/vindex.htm
www.victorianweb.org/
www.victorianlondon.org/
www.fashion-era.com/a_womans_place.htm
www.channel4.com/history/microsites/H/history/guide19/part02.html
www.channel4.com/learning/microsites/Q/qca/victorians/

BEATRIX POTTER – THE CHILDREN’S AUTHOR

Beatrix Potter was the best-selling children’s author who wrote the ‘Peter Rabbit’ books. Her books were published over a hundred years ago, yet the tales continue to be loved by children of all ages. What do you think is the enduring appeal of Potter’s books?

Beatrix Potter wrote twenty-three books, including:

- The Tale of Peter Rabbit
- The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin
- The Tale of Two Bad Mice
- The Tale of Mrs Tigger-Winkle

You may remember some of the stories from when you were small. Potter’s stories were simple as they were aimed at the very young and it was the accompanying artwork that brought the characters to life. Her stories can be broken down into sections of events:

1. the introduction of a character and setting (e.g. naughty Peter Rabbit and Mr McGregor’s garden)
2. a problem is set up (e.g. the rabbits must stay out of mischief whilst their mother is out)
3. climax - usually a surprise and/or a chase (e.g. Mr McGregor chases Peter)
4. finally a resolution with a moral or lesson to be learned (e.g. Peter escapes, but is sent to bed and misses his treat – he must learn to keep out of mischief)



Choose a Beatrix Potter book and create a storyboard for a section of the book as if it were an animated scene from the *Miss Potter* film. Use the storyboarding resource at: www.filmeducation.org/secondary/StudyGuides/storyboard.pdf to help you. Remember to think carefully about camera angles and mise-en-scène.

task

Potter’s stories were enhanced by her beautiful drawings of her characters. She used anthropomorphism to make her animals come alive for children. This is when animals are depicted as having human characteristics. This is a technique that is commonly used for children’s animated films. Read one or two of her stories at wiredforbooks.org/kids.htm. How does she make her characters seem human? How many other children’s books can you think of that use this technique? Why do you think there have been a lot of children’s films in the last five years that have featured talking animals?

task

THE STORY OF BEATRIX POTTER

Miss Potter is based on true events that happened in Beatrix Potter's life, like a biography. However, unlike a biography, the film focuses on a few specific incidents that happened to her. Why do you think this is?

Director Chris Noonan had been aware of Beatrix Potter, without undue interest in her, until he read the screenplay of *Miss Potter*, when he found himself becoming fascinated by the woman, her life and her achievements. 'I don't think many people know a great deal about her life,' says Noonan. 'A vision of Beatrix that I've had from the beginning is a modern woman placed into the suffocating social environment of the turn of the twentieth century.'



task

Look at the timeline below and try to identify the events that occurred during Potter's life that may have contributed to the 'suffocating social environment' that Noonan describes.

Which female writers of today do you think will feature in films in years to come? Why?

Major historical events

1865 Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* is published

1888 Louis Le Prince produces the world's first motion picture

1861-1865 American Civil War

1883 the volcano Krakatoa erupts, killing 36,000 people

1860 Florence Nightingale founds school for nurses

1876 Alexander Graham Bell invents the telephone

1850

1860

1870

1880

1890

1866 born in London

1881 aged 15, begins journal

1872 brother Walter Bertram born

Beatrix Potter's life

1882 first family holiday to the Lake District



task

Can you think of a person that would make an interesting subject for a film? They needn't be famous! Sketch out a persuasive speech that will convince the producers (the rest of your class) that your chosen subject is deserving of having their life story turned into a film. Remember that a film must tell an interesting story, so that people will want to pay to watch it. Your speech should include the following:

- Brief synopsis of the story of your subject's life (i.e. the main events) – you need to emphasise why this would make an interesting story (e.g. dramatic events, romantic events, comic events)
- Who you would cast in the main roles, and why?
- What you would include or exclude in the story (many films alter the storyline slightly for dramatic effect)? You might like to compare the treatment of Beatrix's life with that of JM Barrie in *Finding Neverland* (especially focusing on the fantasy elements)
- How would you bring to life aspects of your subject's story? Think about location and historical context
- Use persuasive techniques: rhetorical questions, repetition, opinion as fact, superlative, emotive language, pronouns
- Create a mock-up of a poster for your film, using the *Miss Potter* poster as a template

ces
ure

1903 the Wright brothers
make the first aeroplane flight

1901 Queen
Victoria dies

1914-18
First World War

1939-1945
Second World War

1900 1910 1920 1930 1940 1950

July 1905 Norman Warne, her publisher,
proposes marriage **August 1905** Norman dies

1902 The Tale of Peter
Rabbit is published
commercially

1913 Beatrix marries
William Heelis

1909 Beatrix buys
a farm in Sawrey,
Lake District

1918 Bertram dies

1943 Beatrix
dies, leaving her
farm and 4000
acres of land to
the National Trust

VICTORIAN ENGLAND

Beatrix Potter was born into an affluent middle-class family in 1866. Although this meant that she had a privileged upbringing, the fact that she was a woman prevented her from following her fascination with nature and art into any kind of formal education.

task

Look at this image from *Miss Potter*. The producers have painstakingly recreated a Victorian setting. Look in detail at the mise-en-scène and identify what indicates that the film is set in this era.



HOME LIFE

Beatrix would spend most of her day with her governess and brother – only seeing her parents on special occasions and at bedtime. She was not close to her mother, but she was to her father who was an enthusiastic amateur artist and Beatrix took after him in this respect. Children were supposed to be ‘seen and not heard’. How did this limitation on pursuing her interests affect what she did with her life? How did she flout convention? Her parents held great sway over her late into her life. How is this shown in the film?

A WOMAN'S PLACE

In Victorian times, a woman's place was thought to be in the home, cooking, cleaning and looking after children (or, if they were upper class, managing a team of household servants). Women could not vote or own property. It was not considered necessary that they should be educated to the same level as boys. Beatrix did not go to school; instead she was educated at home by a governess. Although Beatrix was not subject to some of the terrible conditions that faced children of the poor, she was still ‘trapped’ by the fact that she was female.

task

Write a newspaper review of the first publication in 1902 of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*. Write it as if you were an affluent middle-class Victorian gentleman. What will your opinion be of Beatrix Potter and her stories? Will you consider it ‘sweet’ that she is able to amuse herself?

It is a little known fact that her interest in nature meant that she was one of the first people to notice the relationship between algae and lichen; perhaps you could mention this in the article and suggest that producing children's stories is a more suitable activity for a lady than amateur botany! Plan your article before you write it and don't forget to include a quotation!

task

From the age of fifteen, Beatrix kept a diary, written in a complex code. This code was only cracked after her death. Imagining that you are Beatrix Potter, choose one of the following events from your life and write your own diary extract:

- Your first family trip to the Lake District (1882)
- Your long term governess Miss Hammond is replaced by Annie Carter (1883)
- The publication of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (1902)
- The proposal of marriage from Norman Warne and your parents' reaction to it (1905)
- The death of Norman Warne (1905)

As you write, try to imagine yourself in Beatrix's shoes. This should be written in the first person and you must remember the time at which it is set (use the section on Victorian England in this study guide to help you).

INSPIRING LOCATIONS

Beatrix Potter loved the countryside, particularly the Lake District, where she lived in the latter part of her life. The beauty of this part of England has inspired many English writers, including Wordsworth and Coleridge. Why do you think this kind of landscape had such an effect on them? What kind of environment inspires you?



task

Design a tourist guide for the Lake District. This should include: local attractions, places to stay, climate and wildlife. You could include The World of Beatrix Potter Attraction (www.hop-skip-jump.com) and conservation in the local area (Potter was one of the founders of the National Trust). Remember to use emotive language and imperative verbs that will encourage visitors to come to the Lake District (e.g. '*Come to the Lakes and experience the holiday of a lifetime!*')

Extension task – organising a debate

Consider the impact of the making of the film *Miss Potter*. How will it affect the environment? Brainstorm some aspects of the area that will be affected, both positive and negative (e.g. increase in visitors means more money for the local economy). Set up a debate, imagining that you are members of the Lake District council and have been asked to consider the application of a production company to come and film in the area. One team should argue for allowing filming and the other team against. The teacher could act as chairman and the rest of the class should contribute by being members of the public, asking questions of both sides of the panel. Vote for the most convincing argument at the end.

FILM EDUCATION... has provided the unique connection between the UK film industry and education for over twenty years. Our universal support from within both education and the film industry stands testimony to our achievements.

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