

# Gone to Sea

## Pre-reading

1.

Here are the first sentences from the short story called 'Gone to Sea' by Michael Morpurgo:

William Tregerthen had the look of a child who carried all the pain of the world on his hunched shoulders. But he had not always been like this. He is remembered by his mother as the happy, chortling child of his infancy, content to bask in his mother's warmth and secure in the knowledge that the world was made just for him. But with the ability to walk came the slow understanding that he walked differently from others and that this was to set him apart from everyone he loved.

**chortling:** laughing; happy  
**bask:** lie back in enjoyment  
**set apart:** make different

1. At approximately what age was William when it became clear that he was different from the rest of his family?
2. In which way was he different?

2.

William, or Billy, was the youngest of four boys who lived on a farm on the extreme south western tip of England, near Land's End in Cornwall. As he grew older and his difficulty in walking became more obvious, what do you think his older brothers did to help him, if anything, when they went to play? Think about this before reading the next piece of text.

But William was not a whole child; his left foot was turned inwards and twisted. He shuffled along behind his older brothers in a desperate attempt to stay with them and to be part of their world. His brothers were not hard-souled children, but were merely wrapped in their own fantasies. They were pirates and smugglers and revenue men, and the shadowing presence of William was beginning already to encroach on their freedom of movement. As he grew older he was left further and further behind and they began to ignore him, and then to treat him as if he were not there. Finally, when William was just about school age, they rejected him outright for the first time. 'Go home to Mother,' they said. 'She'll look after you.'

**shuffled:** walk with feet dragging on the ground  
**encroach:** limit  
**outright:** completely

1. What do you think is meant by '*not hard-souled children*'?
2. How do you think William felt about his treatment from his brothers?

3.

1. How do you think he was treated at school a) by his teachers and b) by the other students?
2. How did this affect the way that William thought about himself?

Now read a third section from the text and see if it agrees with what you said in answer to the two questions above.

On his way back from school that last summer, William tried to avoid the road as much as possible. Meetings always became confrontations, and there was never anyone who wanted to walk home with him. He himself wanted less and less to be with people.

3. What do you think the significance of *'that last summer'* might be?

4. Now you know a little about William and his circumstances, you are going to create a story about him. You can do this by answering the following questions about the story. The answers to the questions lie in your imagination, and perhaps also in the questions themselves.

You can work in pairs or in small groups. Don't write the story down (though you might want to make notes). Be prepared to tell your story to the rest of the class.

1. What was William doing on his way home from school when he thought no one was looking?
2. Who saw him?
3. What did (2) say to William? (note: they were complimentary)
4. What is the connection to (3) and William's first trip to the beach alone?
5. What did William do that his family had not let him do before?
6. Which creature helped him?
7. What did William's family say when he told them what he had been doing?
8. Why did William feel so bitter and what did he decide to do?
9. What happened to William and what did his family think?
10. What did (2) see and what did he tell William's family?
11. What did William's mother do?

# 'Gone to Sea'

## Context

### Ability and Disability

If you suddenly found yourself in a country where all the citizens could communicate effortlessly by telepathy as well as communicate in other ways, would you find yourself at a disadvantage? You probably would – you wouldn't know what was being talked about and decided unless the citizens chose to speak in a language you understood. Would this mean that your other abilities (that were fine in the country you come from) were any less useful? Probably not as your abilities to walk and talk and see and listen would in fact be needed to help you overcome the disadvantage of not being able to use telepathy.

The main question this raises is this: Can disability be caused by the environment around you?

### Survey

Look at your school environment. Would it cause problems for people with some form of physical disability?

What would be the problems for people:

- who need to use wheelchairs?
- who are visually impaired or blind?
- who are deaf or with impaired hearing?

Make a list of the problems you think they would encounter, and suggest some solutions to solving these problems.

Problems encountered	Possible solutions

## Exclusion in the Text

Look at this section from near the beginning of the story:

But William was not a whole child; his left foot was turned inwards and twisted. He shuffled along behind his older brothers in a desperate attempt to stay with them and to be part of their world. His brothers were not hard-souled children, but were merely wrapped in their own fantasies. They were pirates and smugglers and revenue men, and the shadowing presence of William was beginning already to encroach on their freedom of movement. As he grew older he was left further and further behind and they began to ignore him, and then to treat him as if he were not there. Finally, when William was just about school age, they rejected him outright for the first time. 'Go home to Mother,' they said. 'She'll look after you.'

William did not cry, for by now it came as no shock to him. He had already been accustomed to the aside remarks, the accusing fingers in the village and the assiduously averted eyes. Even his own father, with whom he had romped and gambolled as an infant, was becoming estranged and would leave him behind more and more when he went out on the farm. There were fewer rides on the tractor these days, fewer invitations to ride up in front of him on his great shining horse. William knew that he had become a nuisance. What he could not know was that an inevitable guilt had soured his father who found he could no longer even look on his son's stumbling gait without a shudder of shame. He was not a cruel man by nature, but he did not want to have to be reminded continually of his own inadequacy as a father and as a man.

You will need to interpret the text to answer the following questions adequately.

1. Why did William's brothers gradually start to ignore him? Why was the process slow?
2. Why was it not a shock to William when his brother's sent him home to Mother?
3. What reason might William's father have given for not inviting him onto the 'great shining horse'? Why did his father feel a sense of shame?

### A. Dialogue

Choose one of the following scenes to create a dialogue.

William and his brothers are going off on an adventure (*what adventure?*) The brothers get impatient with William not keeping up with them. Create the dialogue between William and his brothers which leads to William being sent home to his mother.

William's father is going to drive the tractor to plough the fields. William wants to go with him. William's father tells him that he hasn't got time to take him. (*Why is William's father feeling like this?*) Create the dialogue between William and his father

Act out your dialogues for other members of the class

### B. Resolution

What could William's family have done realistically to resolve the two situations above in a different way, or do you think this was the inevitable outcome? Is outside help required in situations like this, or should families be expected to resolve the problems on their own?

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## Wordwork

### Glossary

Here are some words from the text that may require explanation. The explanations given here are correct for the context of the story but may vary in other contexts.

assiduously averted eyes	carefully avoid looking (at William)
beckoning	welcoming gesture
chortling	laughing
cloaking	hiding
cormorants and shags	sea birds
cripple	(derogatory) word for disability
dread	intense fear
drudgery	boring, monotonous (tasks)
gingerly	carefully
gorse and bracken	wild plants that grow on mountains, cliffs etc
haven	place of safety
haybaler	machine for working the hay
haystack	large arrangement of hay (cut grass)
hop-scotching	children's game
hunched	head and shoulders down, protectively
kestrel	small bird of prey
limping	favouring one leg while walking
pinched and sallow	thin and white
riding the punches	dealing with the problems
romped and gamboled	running and jumping
rugged	imposing, rocky scenery
shrivelled	taken everything out
sole prop	only support
stoop	curve
tanker	large sea ship carrying (for example) oil
treacherous	extremely dangerous
veneer	very thin cover
wreckers and smugglers	bandits who trick ships onto rocks and then steal and sell the goods they carry

# Gone to Sea

## Wordwork

### Language at Work

1. When William first goes down to the pool, he remembers the time when his brothers were learning to swim. Clearly this was an earlier time than the moment he was doing the remembering. Look carefully at the way the verbs are used to talk about these earlier times.

He went first to the place his brothers had learnt to swim, a great green bowl of sea water left behind in the rocks by the tide. As he clambered laboriously over the limpet-covered rocks towards the pool, he remembered how he had sat alone high on the cliff top above and watched his brothers and his father diving and splashing in the pool below, and how his heart had filled with envy and longing. 'You sit there, with your Mother,' his father had said. 'It's too dangerous for you out there on those rocks. Too dangerous.'

2. In the first phrase, the time is the time of the narrative, the **past** ('He *went*') and the earlier time is represented by the **past perfect** ('his brothers *had learnt* to swim'). How many other examples of the earlier time can you find in this extract from the story?

3. Now look at the time before William went down to the beach, when Sam was encouraging him to try.

'A fine run, Billy,' said Sam; his drooping eyes smiled gently. There was no sarcasm in his voice but rather a kind sincerity that William warmed to instantly.

'Better'n yesterday anyway,' William said.

'You should swim, dear lad,' Sam sat up and shook the hay out of his hair. He clambered down the haystack towards William, talking as he came. 'If I had a foot like that, dear lad, I'd swim. You'd be fine in the water, swim like the seals I shouldn't wonder.' He smiled awkwardly and ruffled William's hair.

If William had been remembering this conversation when he first went to the beach (and he might well have done) then the first part might have been written about like this:

Sam had said he had run well, and there had been no sarcasm in his voice, rather a kind sincerity that William had warmed to instantly. William had replied that it had, at least, been better than yesterday.

Notice that not all the words or descriptions from the first piece have been included. It is enough to select one or two ideas to give the general impression. Now it's your turn. Write the rest of the extract in the same way, starting>

Sam had sat up and told him that he should swim.

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