

# Focus ON READING

*Vocabulary*

READING  
COMPREHENSION

## The Midwife's Apprentice

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**ACTIVATE PRIOR KNOWLEDGE**

**Reproducible Activities**

## *Focus Your Knowledge*

The **Middle Ages** spanned many centuries, lasting from about 500 to about 1450 C.E. This era in history arose from the chaos following the fall of the Roman Empire. It ended with the “rebirth” of Western European culture known as the Renaissance.

- Look at a map of the world. Find England. Observe the location of England in relation to continental Europe.
- Now consider the limitations of transportation and communication in the Middle Ages. There were poor roads, crude vehicles powered only by horse or oxen, ships powered only by sail or oars, and no established postal system. How do you think all of these factors might have affected life in medieval England? What impact might these factors have had on trade and communication with other parts of Europe?

The **Crusades** were a series of military expeditions conducted by European Christians to capture the Holy Land in the Middle East from its Muslim occupants. The Crusades took place between the eleventh and the thirteenth centuries, exposing the people of medieval Europe to distant regions and unfamiliar cultures.

- Look again at your world map. How might the Crusades have affected trade and communication routes in Western Europe? What differences could this have made to the lives of everyday people?

**Scientific knowledge** in the Middle Ages was still very limited. Medieval science was a combination of natural observation, folk wisdom, and superstition. It was still generally believed that all of the other planets revolved around the earth, and that the position of the stars and planets might predict the future. There was no accurate understanding of world geography and most people assumed that the earth was flat. The voyages of discovery made by Columbus, Magellan, and other European explorers had not yet occurred. The existence of the North American continent was still unsuspected. In terms of health, there was no knowledge of germs. People believed that illness was a punishment from God. Treatments for illness tended to consist of herbal remedies, superstitious rituals, and bleeding.

- How do you think the state of scientific knowledge during the Middle Ages would have influenced people of the ruling classes? The newly emerging middle class? The skilled and unskilled laborers? The peasants?

## Focus Your Reading

### Vocabulary Words to Know

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Study the following words and definitions. You will meet these words in your reading. Be sure to jot down in your word journal any other unknown words from the reading.

**heedless**—careless; not paying attention

**unnourished**—unfed; lacking the right foods for health and growth

**rank**—having a very strong, unpleasant odor

**wimple**—a cloth used to cover a woman’s head in the Middle Ages, leaving only the face exposed

**midwife**—a woman who specializes in helping women in childbirth

**apprentice**—someone who is learning a particular craft or skill from an experienced practitioner

**cockeyed**—crooked; tilted to one side

**lest**—in case; fearing that

**embers**—the still-hot remains of a fire; glowing pieces of coal or wood

**stanching**—stopping the flow of a liquid, often blood or tears

### Things to Know

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Here is some background information about this section of the book.

**Midwives** were important members of the medieval community. Especially in smaller towns and villages where other medical help was not available, the midwife was in great demand as the local childbirth “expert.” She provided mothers-to-be with advice and herbal treatments during their pregnancies. She gave comfort and professional help during labor and delivery.

**Apprentices** served an important function in the medieval economy. An apprentice was a trainee who served under a master craftsman or merchant. The training period could last two to seven years. The apprentice then became a journeyman until he or she was accepted into a guild.

**Hygiene** in the Middle Ages was limited. Many local water supplies were polluted by sewage from nearby towns and villages, making clean water scarce. Bathing was also rare, since many people believed that it could expose them to illness.

**Ale** (and beer) were commonly drunk by people of all ages in medieval times. Because of their chemical makeup, these beverages were actually safer to drink than untreated water. Ale tended to have a relatively low alcohol content, so it was consumed even by young children.

**Fleabane** was a powdery substance that came from a wildflower (*Erigeron*). People in the Middle Ages believed that it drove away fleas, which were a serious nuisance in most households.

## *Focus Your Reading*

### *Questions to Think About*

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The following questions will help you understand the meaning of what you read. You do not have to write out the answers to these questions. Instead, look at them before you begin reading, and think about them while you are reading.

1. The *setting* is the time and place of a book. What clues in the text help you form an idea about the setting?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. What are living conditions like for the main characters?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. As the story unfolds, how does the author show that Brat/Beetle is quite intelligent?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. What role does the cat play in Beetle's first weeks in the village?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. What role does the midwife play both in Beetle's life and in the life of the village as a whole?

## Build Your Vocabulary

Read the sentences below. On the line, write your definition of the word in bold type. Then, on another sheet of paper, use that word in a new sentence of your own.

1. “But the girl noticed and, on that frosty night, burrowed deep into the warm, rotting muck, **heedless** of the smell.”  
heedless: \_\_\_\_\_
2. “In any event, the dung heap probably smelled little worse than everything else in her life—the food scraps scavenged from kitchen yards, the stables and sties she slept in when she could, and her own unwashed, **unnourished**, unloved, and unlovely body.”  
unnourished: \_\_\_\_\_
3. “. . .dearly would she have loved to eat a turnip without the mud of the field still on it or sleep in a barn fragrant with new hay and not the **rank** smell of pigs who fart when they eat too much.”  
rank: \_\_\_\_\_
4. “An important-looking woman, with a sharp nose . . . and a **wimple** starched into sharp pleats.”  
wimple: \_\_\_\_\_
5. “And there was more work, . . . washing her linen in the stream and carrying her bundles to those cottages where a new baby was expected, for the sharp lady was a **midwife**.”  
midwife: \_\_\_\_\_
6. “Beetle soon acquired a new name, the midwife’s **apprentice**, and a place to sleep that smelled much better than the dung heap, though it was much less warm.”  
apprentice: \_\_\_\_\_
7. “. . .his whiskers were **cockeyed**, going up on one side and down on the other, giving him a frisky, cheerful look.”  
cockeyed: \_\_\_\_\_
8. “She . . . suffered their pinching and poking and spitting in silence, **lest** her resistance inspire them to greater torments.”  
lest: \_\_\_\_\_
9. “Each morning Beetle started the fire, blowing on the night’s **embers** to encourage them to light the new day’s scraps.”  
embers: \_\_\_\_\_
10. “Beetle carried the basket with the clean linen, ragwort and columbine seeds to speed the birth, cobwebs for **stanching** blood, . . . and mistletoe and elder leaves against witches.”  
stanching: \_\_\_\_\_

## Check Your Understanding

### Multiple Choice

Circle the letter of the best answer to each question.

- In the beginning of this story, approximately how old is Brat?
  - ten or eleven
  - eleven or twelve
  - twelve or thirteen
- What memories does Brat have of her early childhood?
  - She has no memories at all.
  - She remembers her mother's singing.
  - She remembers a warm cottage but no mother.
- What does Beetle do when she goes with the midwife to a birth?
  - She waits outside the house.
  - She helps the midwife give herbs and medicines to the laboring woman.
  - She discusses the midwife's price.
- How does Brat think the woman in the starched wimple looks when she first meets her?
  - cruel
  - important
  - kind
- Why does the midwife change Brat's name to Beetle?
  - because Brat reminds her of a burrowing dung beetle
  - because Brat scurries across the barn just like a beetle
  - because she is as tough as a dung beetle's shell
- Why doesn't Beetle leave bread and cheese for the cat more often?
  - because the cat is not in the neighborhood very often
  - because the cat's owner doesn't want other people feeding him
  - because Beetle rarely has enough food even for herself
- What do the village boys do to the cat?
  - They make him race across the river with an eel to see who can swim faster.
  - They put him into a sack with an eel and throw them into the river.
  - They put him into a sack with Beetle and throw them into the river.
- What does Beetle do on Lady Day?
  - She must work as she does every day.
  - She is allowed to rest, and she gets extra bread and cheese.
  - She goes to the fair with the midwife.
- What are two reasons for Jane's having chosen to become a midwife?
  - She was an apprentice in her youth, and she has given birth to six children.
  - She goes to Mass every Sunday, and the village is willing to pay for her training.
  - She has strong hands, and she has clean fingernails.
- What two things "curse her life" and keep Brat moving on?
  - hunger and cold
  - hunger and the teasing boys
  - the need for a job and a good bath