

Name:

Date:.....

Read the following retelling of an Ancient Maya Story and answer the accompanying questions.

Deep in the forests of Central America, lived the Maya. Like everyone everywhere, these people loved to recount stories, and one of their favourites was called 'The Legend of the Hero Twins'.

Part one:

Once, a long time ago, two brothers (who were also twins) lived in a house with a vast, barren garden. The brothers tried very hard to be good gardeners, however, even the rabbit who pilfered their carrots every day could tell you that they were useless at it!

One thing they excelled at though was playing ball games. In the land of the Maya, people who were excellent at ball games were held in the very highest regard. For this reason, the twins commanded a great deal of attention whenever they played. Onlookers would shout so loudly whenever the boys played, that their noise attracted the worst possible attention. The Lords of Death – wicked, powerful dwellers of the Underworld – noticed, and saw that this was a perfect opportunity to play one of their monstrous death tricks. It would be a fine jest to trick the annoying twins into dying!

One day, the brothers received an invitation from the Lords of Death to play a ball game in the Underworld. Immediately, the boys realised this was a trick and were mighty fearful. But as everyone knew, one cannot ignore a summons from the Lords of Death – that would mean instant death itself!



Realising this, the terrified twins practised, trained and prepared

themselves as best they could for the moment when they would play in front of the mortifying Lords of Death. Finally, facing the inevitable, they set out for the journey to the Underworld.

The brothers crossed a deadly river of spikes. They successfully traversed a river of blood. Finally, facing the most disgusting scene of all, the twins waded across a river of gore and pus. Exhausted from their trials, the pair arrived, feeling quite petrified, at a dark and deathly fortress. This was the house of the Lords of Death.

Tasks:

1. Underline words you are unsure of. Choose one word, read around the sentence and write a good guess about what it might mean. Now use a dictionary to see how close you were.

My word:

What I think it means:

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What it actually means:

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2. Highlight words or phrases in the text that you think are effective. Copy one into your book and say why you chose it.

My word or phrase:

Why I chose it:

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3. Predict what will happen next. Give a reason for your prediction by looking back at the text.

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Part two:

1. As we read this part of the story, highlight any words you are unsure of and we will think about their meanings.
2. Pay careful attention when the Lords of Death are mentioned in the story. Pick out some of the things they do and say what motivates them to act as they do towards the Hero Twins.

The door to the Underworld gaped before them: a great black maw, ready to swallow them whole. In the distance, a glimmer of light shone like hope and the two petrified brothers felt drawn to it. Reluctantly, the pair made their way into the tunnel-mouth. The darkness crowded around them, black as tar, and seemed to stick to their skin and soak in. Their hope was being leeches out of them.

“We must remember why we are here, brother. We must remember that football brought us here. And there is nothing more holy than football!”

The other nodded in agreement. Steeling themselves, they began a sturdy march towards the light and bravely went through to the other side.

Think! What does the speech from one of the brothers tell us about his character?

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A tall, wooden statue awaited them. It towered rigidly over the twin boys and cast a deathly shadow, for this was an effigy of one of the Lords of Death. The pair stared up, wondering what to do. Was this a trick? Was it a test? If they ignored the statue and went past, would they meet their doom?

Not wanting to appear rude, the brothers bowed and one of them said a polite, “Hello. We are here to see the Lords of Death.”

A cold blast of wind froze them to the spot. The statue shrunk to life-size and was joined by a crowd of the Lords of Death. They surrounded the twins and leered at them, most satisfied with their trick.

“Do you think the Lords of Death are wooden-heads? You have insulted us and you must pay the price!” the former statue said. His grin was that of a hungry shark.

The brothers knew they had failed the first test.

Think! Why does the author describe the grin on the Lords of Deaths’ faces as being like a hungry shark?

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“Do not be hasty my lord,” suggested another of the vile Death Lords. “Remember, these two brave fellows crossed every obstacle in their path to reach our Underworld. Few have ever achieved such a feat. We should take this into account.”

The Lords of Death nodded slowly. One of them offered a seat to the twins, which they took up quickly after such a torrid journey. They were simply exhausted from their trials.

“Perhaps we will not be killed!” one brother whispered to the other. “These Lords are quite generous after all!” They eagerly took a place on the bench.

But upon contact with the seat, a burning fire overtook their bodies and shot them into the air. Screaming and wailing in pain, they knew they had failed a second of the infernal tests. Their faces were red with shame.

The Lords laughed heartily at their misfortune. They seemed to consider that the Twins were nothing but their playthings – something to be humiliated and toyed with. Unfortunately for the Twins, the teasing was to continue.

Think! Why are the Lords of Death being so cruel to the Twins? What is their motive? What do they get out of being so nasty?

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“Go forth,” the Lords commanded. “You shall face yet more tests. This is rare entertainment for us here in the Underworld.”

The two brothers traversed a bridge and entered a rickety house beside a river of blood. The door creaked open of its own accord. The Twins entered the house, but instead of a floor, they were

faced with a thousand foot-long blade edges as sharp as a barber’s razor. Each and every blade was scarred with sickening streams of dried blood. The Twins knew now why the river outside flowed red. The only way out was on the other side of this room.

The Twins whispered to each other. They had failed two tests and could not afford to fail a third – for that would summon certain death. Tentatively, the brothers climbed down and cleverly found there was a pathway under the blades where the blood dripped into the river. Crawling steadily, never rushing, they made it to the other side unscathed. Not a drop of their blood was fed to the river that day.

For the first time, they had passed a test. However, another house, filled with ferocious, ravenous jaguars stood before them. But for this eventuality, the two had come prepared. They reached into their backpacks and pulled out dried bones – which they usually used as weapons. They flung them at the fearsome felines and such was the success of their distraction that they made it out of the house of jaguars without a scratch.

Think! How do you think the Twins are feeling at this point in the story? How do you think the Lords of Death are feeling? Explain your answer.

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The next test involved the Lords lighting gigantic, fiery ovens. They ordered the boys to jump over the furnaces, their eyes hungry for injury, pain and suffering unto death.

“These tests will never end!” said one of the twins. “We can never rest until we are dead! Even if we pass every test, we are sure to die of exhaustion! The Lords of Death will take our lives one way or another.” With that, they looked at each other, nodded, and threw themselves into the nearest fiery oven.

The Hero Twins died instantly, painlessly in fact. All that remained were ashes, which the Lords of Death threw angrily into a river. No-one had ever given them a life willingly. Now, it was they who had been tricked.

Think! Now how do the Lords of Death feel? What word or words help you work this out? Explain.

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But this tale does not end here. The Hero Twins returned – not in human form – but as a pair of catfish swimming in a cool, flowing river. They were still alive! And their brush with death with the wicked Lords had imbued them with magical powers.

At the flick of a thought, they returned to human form once more. The Hero Twins had returned. The clever brothers travelled the country, showing off their amazing new magical powers. They could cut themselves into pieces and instantly restore themselves to one whole. They horrified people by burning down their houses, only to restore the ruins a moment later.

So famous were the Twins, people would pay to see their tricks and so they took themselves to every town and made a hearty living.

Think! Was your prediction correct, wrong or close? What is the biggest shock for you in this story so far? Give an example

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Part three

Time passed. The Lords of Death quite forgot about the two brothers, who had somehow survived their wicked tests. They got wind of a pair of magical twins performing tricks – magical tricks – which baffled everyone. Intrigued, the Lords of Death sent the Twins an invitation to the Underworld.

Knowing that one can never refuse such a request, the Twins (who were worried at receiving a second invite) began the tiresome, unpleasant journey to the Death Lords. The rivers, which still flowed with blood and pus, now seemed to them to be easier to cross. In fact, the Twins arrived in no time at all. Strangely, the Twins' confidence grew as they approached the realm of the Lords of Death.

Think! Why are the Twins confident now?

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“We hear that you can chop up a person, and then put them back together again unscathed!” cried one of the Lords. “I demand that you show us this dark magic!”

Hardly believing their luck, the Twins sliced and diced two of the Lords of Death. The other Lords, who took a step back, gasped. No-one had ever destroyed such a powerful being as they so easily. Their astonishment became fear when one of the brothers made an announcement:

“We could easily piece these Lords of Death back together, but we choose not to!” They nodded in unison.

All the fire and brimstone in the world could not harm them. No blade could damage them. The Twins had inherited the power to survive the Lords of Death, which came from their noble sacrifice in the infernal ovens.

Think! Look at the speech of the brothers. What is different about it from when they arrived the first time in the Underworld?

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Try as they might, the Lords of Death could not cut or burn the two brothers. The fires flared away from them and any charring was instantly repaired. Knives, which were the sharpest ever made, could slice them of course - but in no time at all, the brothers returned back in one piece.

The Lords of Death knew they had been defeated and sent the brothers back to Earth. They could not risk losing anymore of their kin to these two magicians, who were the deadliest they had ever encountered.

Think! In what ways have the Lords of Death changed?

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The gods in the heavens, who had been watching over the Hero Twins all along, smiled at the magic they had bestowed. The brothers had used it wisely. Their courage would deter the Lords of Death from demanding visitors, who they would then murder!

With beneficent smiles, the gods brought the two heroes to join them in heaven. One twin was transformed into the sun, while the other became the moon. The family of the Hero Twins inherited the Earth and became its rulers, pushing aside the Lords of Death.

The children of the Earth build ball courts in honour of the Hero Twins, which are their way of remembering their wisdom and sacrifice.

Think back over the whole story. Who do you think changed the most? The Lords of Death or the Hero Twins? Explain your answer with an example.

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