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Pirates, Pieces of Eight, and Pacific Nights

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by Anthony F. Franco

> I have seen wicked men and fools, a great many of both; and I believe they both get paid in the end; but the fools first.
>
> — *Kidnapped*

The above statement closes David Balfour's ordeal on the islet of Earraid and offers the reader a choice dose of the wisdom and philosophy of *Kidnapped* 's author, Robert Louis Stevenson. The statement also conveys the underlying theme of a unit that attempts to examine the work of master storyteller Stevenson. Central to this survey is the concept of that rogue bandit, the pirate, who Stevenson immortalized through his characterization of Long John Silver. Equally important is the notion of treasure, both material and philosophical.

The impetus for this effort is derived from an increasingly narrowed middle school English curriculum which advocates the reading of literature, and novels in particular, as a secondary line of study. This back seat relegation serves two major purposes in the English classroom: the compilation of cumulative book report records and a source for multicolored checklists that are hung in just about every middle school English classroom except my own. Clearly, the appreciation of novels and the exploration of critical themes inherent within such works by students prior to entering high school can only serve to enhance the impact of curricular reading at the more advanced levels of education.

The choice of an author and a sampling of his work over several authors and their work was not a particularly difficult decision to make. First, there would necessarily be more continuity for a class of young readers, thereby providing more fuel for classroom discussions with less chance of confusion. A strategy incorporating a variety of authors might have more comparative value and would expose students to several different approaches in the treatment of a theme. Such strategies do not provide for a very close look at one author, and that clearly should be a goal for the novice reader of literature.

It has become increasingly difficult to motivate students to read literature at all levels in education. The most structured strategies employed by English teachers can never provide total assurance that every student will read every book assigned. A strategy that incorporates the works of several authors may serve to program that student for failure should one or two authors be ignored. When the work of one author is the focus of a

teaching unit, the neglectful student remains capable of contributing to class discussions even though only a segment of the work assigned is read. All of the Stevenson works intended for use in this unit are essential to the development of the various themes therein; they are not indispensable to the extent of excluding a student who has not read them.

Secondly, when we speak of Stevenson, we refer to him as a master storyteller. We know he is writing adventure stories. Stevenson's work is of the highest interest level that authors down through the years have struggled to attain. He remains descriptive, suspenseful, and readable. His gift for characterization is an ideal starting point for the inexperienced reader of literature.

Lastly, several of Stevenson's works are on recommended reading lists for seventh and eighth graders. As classics of literature these time-honored works have appealed to millions of readers over the years and millions yet to come. It would be an injustice to give my students anything less than *Treasure Island* , *Kidnapped* , *The Strange Case of Dr . Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* , and the gentle *A Child's Garden of Verses* .

The first key theme to explore with students after they have read *Treasure Island* , and have at least started *Kidnapped* , is the theme of piracy. There has never been a group of social rebels, save for Robin Hood and his Merry Men, who have been romanticized, fictionalized, and held in awe so much as pirates. The Golden Age of piracy, which encompasses the last decade of the seventeenth century and the first quarter of the eighteenth century, gives evidence to the above. During this period numerous groups of pirates roamed the world's oceans in search of booty. This era was nearly matched only once, when some one hundred years later unemployed privateers sought instant riches following the end of the War of 1812. I do not intend to chronicle the exploits of such ravaging hordes led by the likes of Thomas Tew, Henry Every, William Kidd, Edward Teach (Blackbeard), or Bartholomew Roberts (Black Bart). Those legends and others from the Golden Age are chronicled most interestingly and competently by a contemporary named Daniel Defoe in *A General History of the Pyrates* . A few pertinent details will be mentioned here in order to give the reader some background and to help substantiate our underlying theme.

First, a distinction must be made between pirates and privateers. The world feared the former and lauded the latter. Pirates pillaged the flags of all nations. They performed brutal rituals at sea, drank a lot, ravished women both at sea and ashore, impressed seamen of all tongues, disrupted shipping routes and trade between nations, and generally had very short-lived careers halted either by death at an early age or retirement to the green pastures of the Western world. Though privateers conducted themselves in a like manner they had the official sanction of a king or territorial governor who gave them both the authority and license to behave in such a way.

A circumstance which makes the thin line between piracy and privateering even thinner and which clearly befuddles the situation is that the same band of pirates was able to change its status almost at will several times during its career. Thus, it was quite often the case that captured pirates would be spared the gallows by pleading that they were impressed seamen or by loading the pockets of a government official with some of the spoils of a recent rampage, thereby proving to all concerned that they were privateers in service to a flag.

This latter practice of buying life and retirement brings us to a second facet of pirating that needs examination. Pirates were businessmen and greedy ones at that. Territorial leaders, especially in the Americas, were businessmen, and greed was not altogether unknown by them. The riches of an increasingly smaller world appealed to many, and the pirates projected an image as purveyors of these riches to the various local consulates. A pirate ship could conceivably embark on a three-year rampage throughout the world's oceans, return laden to an understanding, sympathetic, and greedy port, pile some riches on shore,

and receive a general pardon for its wrongs.

Many ports generally welcomed a rowdy bunch of pirates in much the same way that host cities welcome conventioneers and even college students on spring vacation. The economy of the area received an immediate jolt and upgrading from these thirsty individuals intent upon satisfying all their needs and wants after a long journey. Each of these wayward souls had at least a pocketful of doubloons to insure they received their satisfaction.

A third trait of pirate life not to be overlooked was their position as vanguards of democracy while at sea. Most pirates voted on everything. Whenever a decision had to be made, pirates called for a vote, and the majority ruled. Pirates decided the course they would sail, the measures of discipline to be inflicted upon their own, and even who was to be captain. Oftentimes a decision made one day might be overturned the next if a vote so directed.

Democracy on board was carried even further by the pirates when it came time to split the booty. The entire crew, with the exception of the captain and the quarter-master, received equal shares of any riches to be divided. Pirates also advocated their own forms of social security and vocational training. Handicapped sailors could sign on to be cooks or galley mates, or an injured pirate early into the cruise could be placed in the galley at jobs paying a half share. Any youngster who had run off to sea for the first time would have a task and would be compensated for it. Of course, the “sponsor” would receive a healthy endowment if the occasion arose.

Pirates were indeed a wicked lot and some were fools. Many of the wicked pirates were able to ease into a retirement to the good life without any financial worries. The fools never quite made it that far. The fools through their greediness or temperament perished by the hands of their own crewmates or by the whim of their captains. Even the captains were not impervious to foolhardiness, and their greed or stubbornness generally made them legends before their time was due.

The chief motivational force that drove pirates to the sea was, of course, the same motivational force that still causes most of mankind to get up in the morning: gold, spoils, riches, booty, treasure—in short—money. As suggested, pirates with their purchasing power could become highly respected gentry when they finally laid to rest their pistol and cutlass. Many a haggard seaman or destitute land-lubber simply could not resist the lure of fortune and decided to forego the obvious risks involved by casting their lots with the pirates. A fortune could be made and with that fortune an exceptional standard of living could be attained.

The pirates of the Golden Age brandished their pistols and cutlasses and pillaged their way toward the promise of financial success using their speedy ships with great skill to surprise unsuspecting victims and escape from vaunted royal navies. Their sails are still now and their pistols and cutlasses are rusted relics of a bygone era. Still, their spirit remains in this age of modern technology and forms of piracy abound. The pirates of today employ an arsenal which includes automatic weapons, explosives and incendiary devices, #2 pencils, and computer technology. The pirates of today utilize fast cars and jet aircraft to similarly surprise modern man and escape from crime task forces. Just as their predecessors, the pirates of today hope to accumulate instant wealth through antisocietal means.

The technological advances of modern society have produced a new breed of pirate that kidnaps, robs, bribes, and swindles with no less fervor than Blackbeard or Bartholomew Roberts. At times the exploits of these modern-day pirates dominate our communications network and media to such a great extent that mankind is forced to wonder about the consequences and often becomes dismayed. Unfortunately, increased technology

has the effect of providing us with instantaneous words and pictures which magnify the enormity of the problem. Had these communication advances been present when Blackbeard sailed in his viciousness, I doubt whether our ancestors would have cared to live out the eighteenth century.

Just who are the modern pirates? Suffice it to say they are any radical or white collar individual or group that uses means contrary to society in order to gain riches. Kidnappers are by far the leaders of this lot as their assault on their fellow man is very much akin to the atrocities committed by their forebearers.

Kidnappers seek treasure troves of anywhere from thousands to millions of dollars depending upon the stature of the person abducted, much the same as a pirate of yesteryear knew the difference between the spoils of a merchant ship and the cargo of one owned by the king.

In addition to the kidnapper, who is probably the most savage of the modern pirates, there is an impressive group of other pirates who merely rob, bribe, swindle, and embezzle with the promise of financial success. Their weaponry and *modus operandi* may vary; their intent remains the same. This unit does not plan to pass judgment upon nor admonish these pirates. No attempt will be made to identify them by name nor chronicle their exploits. Their names and deeds are in our minds all too often. Let any teacher using this unit use the media of that day to show students how the sails are still billowing in the wind, that the pistol and cutlasses have not, in fact, been laid to rest.

There are countless tales surrounding treasures left behind by the pirates of the Golden Age. Blackbeard and Captain Kidd, two of the most renowned pirates of this era, reputedly left caches of treasure in hundreds of places, including many on our own continent. To this day oral and written histories emphasize the riches that have lain untouched for nearly three hundred years. Expeditions endlessly search for the fame and fortune awaiting them which may never be uncovered.

Modern day students will easily get immersed in treasure hunting—it is natural for the race to be curious. The treasures of our society are not where Blackbeard and Kidd deposited them. These treasures are the ones that our grandfathers and great-grandfathers passed on to us. These are the treasures of heritage, and they exist in two distinct forms: artifacts and values. Searching for these riches can be as rewarding as digging for and finding Blackbeard's doubloons on Ocracoke Island.

Artifacts are all around us. They serve as a clear reminder of our past—the era before the Age of Plastic. They are in attics and dresser drawers, on fireplace mantles, and in cellars. They are also our most overlooked treasures because they are so constant; they virtually go unnoticed. In an earlier unit of this type (*VIEW: Visual Inquiry/Experience in Writing* , 1980, Vol. II) this author and a colleague delved into the world of artifacts. We exposed our students to the world of the past, and, with much success, endeavored to have them read objects and come to know them. I refer both myself and others attempting to incorporate this present effort into their lessons to that unit as a resource.

Values are the unseen artifacts of life. They also are treasures which can be lost or momentarily misplaced as a result of group pressures. No one time in a student's career needs more reinforcement of values than at the middle school level. The constant pressures that arise daily from the peer group at this level continually tend to bury these treasures. It is our duty to strengthen students against this barrage in as many ways as possible lest they remain fruitless treasure hunters in the years to come.

Much of Stevenson's work is value-oriented. His two teenage protagonists in *Treasure Island* and *Kidnapped* , Jim Hawkins and David Balfour, are prime examples of his mastery at creating moral examples for the young

reading populace. A composite of both characters clearly suggests a parallel to most of the secondary students in our classrooms in terms of socio-economic backgrounds. Hawkins, the son of a widowed innkeeper, remains at the lower level of the economic spectrum while Balfour, the somewhat misplaced gentry and also an orphan, never appears to be more than just economically comfortable until the end of the book.

A treasure hunt of sorts for family and personal treasures and a study of values-clarification need not be the central core of this unit. They are included here as viable examples of what can be done in our classrooms and as points of embarkation for other travel routes such as map reading, descriptive and expository writing, and goals setting. We, as teachers, may be wicked if we mention these treasures to our students and do not develop them;, surely we are fools if we choose to completely disregard them.

Robert Louis Stevenson has long been revered as a master storyteller of adventure. In order to write good adventure stories, there must be conflict. R.L.S. incorporates all major types of conflict in his novel. Man vs. man is, on the surface, his chief conflict. Stevenson pits a young, innocent, orphaned, and often socially pure protagonist (Jim Hawkins, David Baflour) against an old, salty, and deformed antagonist (Silver, Uncle Ebenezer). Into this stew of contrast, R.L.S. sprinkles a liberal dose of supporting characters who remain noble companions to the unfortunate youngster (the rather complacent Dr. Livesey, the brash Alan Breck Stewart). Indeed, Silver remains noble and a man of dreams; Uncle Ebenezer suffers no physical repentance while receiving a major jolt of indignity.

The conflict between Stevenson’s young heroes and their environments is apparent: young Mr. Hawkins battles the sea and David Balfour combats the harsh heath of Stevenson’s native Scotland and the phenomenon of political boundaries. The conflict between man and himself remains Stevenson’s forte. Wayward travellers, Hawkins and Balfour, are constantly beset by moral decisions which have even greater impact upon them because of their backgrounds; Jekyll/Hyde represents the ultimate level of such conflict and a pattern for future authors.

It is fitting that Stevenson or “Tusitala”, as the native Samoans referred to him, be a master of relating man,s inner conflicts since his life was one very long conflict plagued by ill health and terminated only by death at a very early age of forty-four. The story of Robert Louis Stevenson’s life is not a very pleasant tale, and the grief does not subside until his last years on his mountainside estate, Vailima, in Samoa. Stevenson found inner peace and physical rejuvenation in the Pacific. The level of maturity within himself and his writing gained strength while he lived on the island. Unfortunately, this peaceful respite was short-lived as pressures heretofore unnoticed by the ailing author eventually combined to destroy him. I urge anyone using this unit to read a biography of Stevenson. I promise a remarkable story about a fascinating man; I apologize for putting you through his pain and grief.

Robert Louis Stevenson belongs in New Haven for New Haven students. His work is already here, his themes are relevant for New Haven’s youth: he was a man of suffering, he was a man of emotion, he was a man of experience, and, best of all, he tells a really great story.

Sequence of Lessons

A primary consideration in the implementation of any unit that deals with literature is the availability of texts. There is much of Stevenson in local and school libraries; there may not be the required amount of copies necessary to satisfy an entire class that reads each selection together. A remedy to this situation does exist, and I have used this technique with much success in the past. I draw the names of my students by chance

until I have four study groups. Each group is then assigned one of the selections and is given a certain amount of time in which to complete each reading. At the end of this reading period the groups will switch selections. This procedure continues until all groups have read all selections.

Two advantages are inherent in the strategy mentioned above. First, a teacher need not be overly concerned with the availability of books for students since most classes will only require five to seven copies of each selection. Different editions of a selection offers no great problem since Stevenson generally wrote short chapters for periodical serialization. Secondly, a study group of five to seven students creates an ideal setting for discussion. This small group will less inhibit a timid student from participating in a discussion, and the delinquent reader feels obligated to make some contribution to the group. As a byproduct of this process, segmented discussion groups tend to turn each other on to future readings. There is usually much cross group discussion even before all groups have read all selections.

The selections of Stevenson intended for this unit include *Treasure Island* , *Kidnapped* , *A Child's Garden of Verses* , and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* . The first two are generally considered "boys' books". I do not foresee a problem for any of my students in the enjoyment of either of these two classics; each has an adolescent hero beset by external problems and internal moral conflict within the setting of a classic adventure story. The latter two selections are included as examples of the scope with which Stevenson wrote. The gentle *Garden* and the psychologically savage *Jekyll/Hyde* should be contrasted in order to show students the range of Stevenson,s accomplishment.

The four titles above are literary classics. Their inclusion in this unit is my personal preference. Some of my students may have already read one or two of them. What is remarkable about Stevenson is that he can be reread at ease. My main objective is to make sure my middle school students do not miss Stevenson at this stage in their lives. I would suggest that this same unit could be used at the freshman level of high school. Modifications of the reading list could possibly make the unit pertinent for sophomores, juniors, and even some senior classes. It remains that it is essential for Stevenson to be read in one's youth for when he is reread in adulthood he is that much more enjoyable.

I propose to use this unit over a two month period. Individual modifications to this unit by myself, or anyone else using it, will either decrease or increase this time allotment. My present inclination is to use the unit no more than two days a week while students are pursuing their readings. Lessons of general interest which support the various themes will be presented in these classes. After all reading groups have completed the selections each student will contract to complete a prescribed number of activities suggested by the instructor. An additional period of time will be afforded to the students for this purpose. Students will have the option of completing some of these activities with a partner rather than individually.

***Sample Activity* #1. Piracy**

Objectives:

1. To illustrate for students a broad notion of piracy.
2. To show students that piracy still exists.

Explain to students that piracy is an ancient vocation that still exists in various forms today. The general notion of pirates, the one we see in Stevenson, is a group of individuals who support themselves by plundering others by force while at sea. Today that conception still exists and has been extended to include robbery while in the air and also on land. Generally, piracy is accomplished by a group of individuals using force to gain the possessions of another group or individual. Piracy is also the unauthorized use of another's production or invention. This latter conception often occurs without any overt use of force and is often detected only after a considerable amount of time has passed. Explore with students the following categories of pirates giving examples of each. A general listing on a chalkboard is suggested.

Pirates of the sea

- Blackbeard
- Captain Kidd

Pirates of the air

- Hijackers

Pirates of the road

- Truck hijackers
- Armored car robberies
- Gold chain snatchers
- Muggers
- Bank bandits
- Store robberies

Pirates of industry

- Industrial espionage

Pirates of finance

- Embezzlers
- Extortionists

Extension Have students start a file on pirates with pictures and articles from magazines and newspapers. More artistic students should be encouraged to develop collages which might show a history of piracy through the ages.

***Sample Activit* y #2**

Objectives:

1. To illustrate for students the notion of treasure.
2. To teach students an appreciation for the family heritage.
3. To have students become more aware of their values.

Explain to students that there may be tons of buried treasure throughout the world left behind by such renowned pirates as Blackbeard and Captain Kidd. It is virtually impossible for us to locate these caches of riches as thousands of treasure hunters have failed to do so in the past. Each of us is able to locate a treasure trove that may be hidden within our homes. These treasures might be in the form of an object or a photograph which has a special value for ourselves and our families. They may be hidden in an attic, a bureau drawer. They may even be in full view on a table or mantle. Wherever these treasures are they do have a special value for those who own them. Lead a class discussion as to what some of these "pieces of eight" might be.

Examples:

—an old photograph of a departed loved one
—a book which has been in the family for several generations
—a tool used by a grandfather or greatgrandfather
—a candlestick holder
—a coin, stamp, or baseball card collection
—war mementoes
—an old doll or toy
—a piece of jewelry
—an old letter or card

Extension:

1. Suggest, if possible, that several students bring to class their treasure and share their feelings about it with the group.
2. Write a comprehensive paper which describes the object treasured, explains its value, and even tells a story about it.
3. As a follow-up activity, read Stevenson's poem "My Treasures" from *A Child's Garden of Verses*

to the class.

***Sample Activity* #3 The Only Child**

Objectives:

1. To better acquaint students with Robert Louis Stevenson.
2. To have students consider the value of friendship.

Explain to students that Robert Louis Stevenson was born an only child and was handicapped throughout his short life by lung disorders which necessitated lengthy recuperative trips to different areas of Europe and the rest of the world. Explore with children some of the consequences of being an only child (loneliness, inventing playmates).

Extension:

1. Read and discuss from Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verses* the following poems:.
   "A Good Play"
   "My Shadow"
   "My Kingdom"
   "The Unseen Playmate"
2. Encourage any "only children" in the class to share their feelings on being an only child with the group.
3. Each student in the class should write a paragraph or two on being an only child even if they have brothers and sisters.
4. Read and discuss "The Land of Counterpane" from *A Child's Garden of Verses* . Have students explain what they do when they are bedridden and remind them that Stevenson spent much of his life in such a position.

Supplemental Activities

1. Research and report on a pirate from history such as Blackbeard and Captain Kidd.
2. Do a character sketch on one of the following:
   Long John Silver
   Jim Hawkins
   David Balfour
   Alan Breck Stewart
   Dr. Jekyll
   Mr. Hyde
3. Research pirate ships and ships of the early eighteenth century and report to the class.
4. Pirates sailed under their own flags. Either using research or your imagination make a pirate flag at least 16” X 24” from cloth.
5. Construct a diorama of any scene from *Treasure Island, Kidnapped* , or *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* .
6. Research and report on the gold and silver coins which pirates coveted including: doubloons, ducats, crowns, pieces of eight, and guineas.
7. Draw a map showing buried treasure with a key to all symbols.
8. Write a fictional newspaper account detailing the exploits of a pirate.
9. Read a biography of Robert Louis Stevenson and report on his life.
10. Read and report on one work by Stevenson not read in this unit.
11. Write an interview with any one of the characters you have met in Stevenson’s work.
    or
    Conduct an interview with another member of the class in which at least one of you is a character that we have met in our reading.
12. In essay form discuss the treasures that mean the most to you.

Teacher Bibliography

Calder, Jenni. *Robert Louis Stevenson: A Life Study* . New York: Oxford University Press, 1980.

The most recent in a tradition of excellent biographies on Stevenson, this highly readable and

critical view of his life details all the facets in Stevenson's background that contributed to his development as a writer.

Chesteron, G.K. *Robert Louis Stevenson* . New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1928.

The first of the Stevenson biographies. Endless background information.

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Along with Furnas the standard biography of Stevenson.

DeFoe, Daniel. *A General History of the Pyrates* . Edited by Manuel Schonhorn, Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1972.

A classic written during the Golden Age of piracy by a master chronicler. Essential background information.

Franco, Anthony F. and Gorman, Benjamin A. " *VIEW: Visual Inquiry/Experience in Writing* ", Vol. II, New Haven, Ct.: Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, 1980.

A teaching unit detailing how one comes to "know" an object. An essential tool complete with lesson plans that encourage students to find the more accessible treasures of their heritage.

Furnas, J.C. *Voyage to Windward* . *The Life of Robert Louis Stevenson* . New York: William Sloan Associates, 1951.

The classic biography of Stevenson. Essential reading for all.

Glaus, Marlene. *Good and Right and Beautiful* . Rockford, Ill.: Giant Photos, Inc., 1971.

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Hobsbawm Eric. *Bandits* (Revised Edition). New York: Pantheon Books, 1981.

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Rankin, Hugh F. *The Golden Age of Piracy* . New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1969.

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Wallachinsky, David and Wallace, Irving. *The People's Almanac #2* . New York: Bantam, 1978.

Interesting and varied information concerning both Stevenson and buried treasure.

Student Bibliography

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A highly readable and interesting capsule view of pirates. Can be shared by both students and teachers.

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A basic biography of Stevenson written for students. Very readable.

Stevenson, Robert Louis. *A Child's Garden of Verses* . Illustrated by Jessie Wilcox Smith. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905. Reset 1955.

Stevenson's poetic craft details loneliness, values, and the world of make believe.

Stevenson, Robert Louis. *Kidnapped* . New York: Signet Classic—The New American Library, Inc., 1959.

The action-packed and adventuresome story of David Balfour and his journey across Scotland. Generally acknowledged as one of Stevenson's best books.

Stevenson, Robert Louis. *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* . New York: Pocket Books, i972.

The classic tale of horror detailing one man's struggle within himself.

Stevenson, Robert Louis. *Treasure Island* . New York: Signet Classic-The New American Library, Inc., 1965.

The best known of Stevenson's work from a story-telling standpoint, this classic tale of pirates and treasure has thrilled millions of readers, both young and old.