

A Study Guide for

The Pirates of Penzance

by Gilbert and Sullivan

from the
**Opera Guild
of San Antonio**



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Background: The Pirates of Penzance

Gilbert and Sullivan

Gilbert and Sullivan collaborated on 14 comic operas from 1871-1896, a successful 25-year partnership. Both were knighted for their service to their country. *The Pirates of Penzance* or *The Slave to Duty* was presented simultaneously in England and America in 1879, to secure the copyright in both countries. The opera was immediately a big hit and played for over three months in New York and for 363 performances in London.

Librettist William Schwenck Gilbert (1836-1911) was trained as a military officer and served in the British militia for 20 years. He also held a government bureau job, which he disliked, and, after receiving an inheritance, became a lawyer. For many years he contributed dramatic criticism and humorous verse to the popular magazine, *FUN*. Many of Gilbert's libretti and arias are based on "Bab Ballads," comical poetry he wrote under the pen name "Bab." Even before working with Sullivan, Gilbert was a successful playwright who often directed his own plays and oversaw production and costumes.

Composer Arthur Sullivan (1842-1900) was once described by Gilbert as "incomparably the greatest English musician of the age." Born into a musical family, Sullivan composed his first work at the age of 8 and thereafter won numerous scholarships and competitions. Before collaborating with Gilbert, he was England's best-known composer and traveled in royal circles. For 10 years he also served as professor of music, teacher and organist. For 20 years he was conductor of the Leeds Festival. Besides his comic operas and contributions to other operas, his work included cantatas, oratorios, concert overtures, incidental music to plays, numerous songs and a grand opera.

Historical Context

Gilbert and Sullivan created during the reign of Queen Victoria—called the Victorian era (1837-1901). During this time Great Britain experienced great power, wealth, and culture. The British Empire extended around the world to India, South Africa, Canada, Australia, and other regions. Within the country, there was a vast industrial revolution and the growth of railways, which made rapid transit possible for the first time. Although today's thinkers often see Victorians as repressed and old-fashioned, they actually began many modern trends. Victorians explored remarkable social changes such as democracy, feminism, unionization of workers, and socialism.

Satire

Through satire, humor and wit are used to criticize government, other institutions and/or certain social practices or attitudes. Both the foolish and the immoral actions of people can be lampooned by satire. The subtitle for *Pirates of Penzance* is "Slave to Duty." During the Victorian period, conformity and following the "rules" of society were very important to many people of the middle class and other groups. In the opera, the main character, Frederic, ignores what makes sense or is the "right thing" to do and instead blindly follows the rules of proper social behavior. Good manners were more important to him than good sense.

The Story of The Pirates of Penzance

Cast of Characters

Major-General Stanley

The Pirate King

Samuel (his Lieutenant)

Frederic (the Pirate Apprentice)

Sergeant of Police

General Stanley's Daughters:

Mabel

Edith

Kate

Isabel

Ruth (a Pirate Maid of all work)

Chorus of Pirates, Police, and General Stanley's Daughters.

Synopsis and Songs

Act One: A rocky seashore on the coast of Cornwall

Frederic has been serving as an apprentice to pirates until his 21st birthday, which has just arrived. The pirates are celebrating, believing that Frederic will now join them as a full-fledged pirate. Frederic has many mixed feelings. He loves the pirates but their work disgusts him and he plans to leave and fight against them once he is free (since it is the "duty" of respectable people to destroy pirates—just as it is the "duty" of pirates to rob respectable people). And, as Frederic says, "When stern duty calls, I must obey."



Pirate chorus: "Pour, oh, pour the pirate sherry"

Frederic should not have been apprenticed to the pirates in the first place. His nursemaid, Ruth, being hard of hearing, was asked by Frederic's father to apprentice him to a PILOT, but she misunderstood. Frederic, however, is a "slave to duty" and choose to fulfill his apprenticeship rather than speak poorly about Ruth.

Song by Ruth: "When Frederic was a little lad"

The pirates, all orphans, are rather unusual, since they are tenderhearted—especially when it comes to other people who claim to be orphans. Frederic explains to the Pirate King that this is perhaps why they have been so unsuccessful in the past. He tries to convince him to turn respectable—but the Pirate King is happy to remain a pirate—finding it to be a more honest profession than most "respectable" endeavors. The Pirate King is sorry that he cannot convince Frederic to stay and requests, when they meet again, that Frederic will kill them quickly.

Song by the Pirate King: "Oh, better far to live and die"

The middle-aged Ruth wants to go with Frederic when he leaves but Frederic has never seen another woman and wants the opportunity to do so. Ruth tries to convince him that all women look much the same. Frederic realizes he has been deceived when a group of lovely young women comes onto the beach.

Duet by Frederic and Ruth: "Oh, false one, you have deceived me!"

Frederic hides himself so as not to frighten the young women with his pirate costume.

Ensemble by the girls: "Climbing over rocky mountain"

When the girls decide to go wading, Frederic realizes he must reveal himself so that he will not embarrass them. They find him attractive but are frightened, so he tells them his tale and implores any one of them to marry him.

Song by Frederic: "Oh, Is There Not One Maiden Breast"



The sisters refuse Frederic but suggest their sister Mabel might marry him. Sure enough, Mabel takes pity on Frederic and offers him her heart.

Song by Mabel: "Poor wandering one"

The sisters pretend to talk of other things but listen in to the conversation between Mabel and Frederic.

Mabel sings an ensemble with the sisters and Frederic: "Did ever maiden wake," "How beautifully blue the sky," "Did ever pirate roll."

Frederic warns the sisters to leave before the pirates return. It is too late, however, and each pirate grabs a girl.

The pirates and girls sing in ensemble about getting married: "Here's a first-rate opportunity"

The girls' father, a Major-General arrives.

Song by the Major-General: "I am the very model of a modern major-general"

Learning the intentions of the pirates, the Major-General informs them that he is an orphan. Dismayed but still tender-hearted, the pirates let go of the girls.

Song by the Major-General, which becomes an ensemble with the girls and the pirates: "Oh, men of dark and dismal fate"



Act Two: A ruined chapel by moonlight

The Major-General feels very guilty because he told a lie about being an orphan and his daughters cannot console him.

Chorus: "Oh, dry the glistening tear"

Song by Mabel: "Dear Father, why leave your bed"

Frederic returns with the local police force that he has asked to help him wipe out the pirates.

Song by Sergeant and police: "When the foeman bears his steel (Tarantara, tarantara!)"

The girls excitedly encourage the men to go off and do their duty. The police reveal their reluctance to do any real fighting but march off anyway.

Song by Sergeant and police, which becomes an ensemble with the girls: "When the foeman bears his steel (Tarantara, tarantara!)"

Ruth and the Pirate King find Frederic alone and beg him to reconsider his war against them. Then a "bombshell" is dropped! Frederic has not really completed his 21st birthday. Since he was born on February 29, a day that comes only once every 4 years (leap year), he has only completed his fifth birthday.



Trio: "When you had left our pirate fold"

Frederic, always a "slave to duty," realizes that, technically speaking, he is still apprenticed to be a pirate. He is despondent over this, but will do his duty. Now that he is a pirate again, he reluctantly reveals that the Major-General lied about being an orphan.

Trio: "Away, away! My heart's on fire" (Ruth and Pirate King); "Away, away! Ere I expire" (Frederic)

Frederic tells Mabel the sad truth and she begs him to stay. They promise to join together in 64 years or so when he has passed his 21st birthday.

Duet: "Stay, Frederic, stay!" (Mabel) "Nay, Mabel, nay!" (Frederic)

When the police re-enter, Mabel tells them that Frederic has rejoined the pirates. Hearing the pirates approach, the police hide.

Song by Sergeant and police: "When a felon's not engaged in his employment"

Pirates' chorus: "A rollicking band of pirates we"

Pirates' chorus: "With catlike tread"

Police chorus: "Tarantara, tarantara!"

The pirates hide as the Major-General, still feeling guilty, appears. When he finds everything peaceful outside, he sings a ballad and all the other men quietly join in.

Solo by the Major-General: "Tormented with the anguish dread"

Ballad: "Sighing softly to the river"

The girls come searching for their father. The Pirate King and Frederic prepare to grab the Major-General. Seeing Frederic, Mabel begs him to help her father. Frederic reminds Mabel of his "duty." The police struggle with the pirates but are defeated.

Chorus of pirates and police: "We/You triumph now, for well we trow"

Finally, the Sergeant of Police thinks to ask the pirates to give up in the name of Queen Victoria. Because—with all their faults—the pirates still love their queen, they yield immediately.

Ruth then reveals that the pirates are not pirates at all—just noblemen who have gone bad. The Major-General, moved by the pirates' love of their queen, grants them permission to marry his daughters.

Finale by all: "Poor wandering ones"

Lesson Plan: The Pirates of Penzance

Try some or all of the following activities to enhance the educational experience of your students.

Before Going to the Opera

Connect and motivate.

TEKS. MUSIC. 3.5, 4.5, 5.5, 6.5, 7.5, 8.5. High School, I, II, 5. THEATER. 3.4, 4.4, 5.4, 6.4, 7.4, 8.4, High School, I, II, 4. LANGUAGE ARTS. 3.2, 4.4, 5.4, 6.4, 7.4, 8.4.

Discuss:

- What is special about turning 21 years old?
- What are "social" rules that everyone should obey?
- What are the reasons behind the rules?

Read the background information.

TEKS. MUSIC. 3.1, 4.1, 5.1, 6.1, 7.1, 8.1. High School, I, II, 1. THEATER. 3.4, 3.5, 4.4, 4.5, 5.4, 5.5, 6.4, 6.5, 7.4, 7.5, 8.4, 8.5. High School, I, II, 4, 5. LANGUAGE ARTS. 3.8, 3.12, 3.13, 4.9, 4.13, 4.14, 5.9, 5.13, 5.14, 6.9, 6.13, 6.14, 7.9, 7.13, 7.14, 8.9, 8.13, 8.14, High School English. 6, 9, 13. SOCIAL STUDIES. 3.14, 4.20, 5.22, 6.18, 7.19, 8.27. High School. American History. 20. World History. 20.

Discuss:

- How did Victorian times differ from the times in which we live now?
- What do you think the opera will be like?

Read the story.

TEKS. LANGUAGE ARTS. 3.9, 4.10, 5.10, 6.10, 7.10, 8.10, High School English. 7.

Read the synopsis of the opera. (For now, you can ignore the songs that are written in bold.) As you read, try to guess what will happen next and how the characters are feeling.

Identify important vocabulary.

TEKS. LANGUAGE ARTS. 3.8, 4.9, 5.9, 6.9, 7.9, 8.9, High School English. 6.

What do the following words and phrases mean? Do they help you better understand the opera?

- | | | |
|--------------|---------------------------------|----------------|
| • apprentice | • matrimony (and matrimonified) | • paradox |
| • pilot | • doctor of divinity | • constabulary |
| • pirate | • foeman | |

Listen and discuss.

TEKS: MUSIC. 3.1, 4.1, 5.1, 6.1, 7.1, 8.1, High school I.1. LANGUAGE ARTS: 3.1, 3.2, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.4, 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 5.4, 6.1, 6.2, 6.3, 6.4, 7.1, 7.2, 7.3, 7.4, 8.1, 8.2, 8.3, 8.4, High School English, 15.

Listen to one or more of the songs from the opera, which are listed in bold in the synopsis. Follow along in the libretto. Ask yourself:

- How many voices are singing?
- Are they expressing different viewpoints? What are they?
- What is the mood of the song?
- What does the music express about the opera or characters?
- How does the music make you feel?

Example: Ensemble from Act One:

| | | |
|---|--|---|
| Mabel: Did ever maiden wake, From dream of homely duty, To find her daylight break With such exceeding beauty! Did ever maiden close Her eyes on waking sadness, To dream of such exceeding gladness? | Frederic: Did ever pirate roll His soul in guilty dreaming, And wake to find that soul With peace and virtue beaming? Did ever pirate loathed, Forsake his hideous mission To find himself betrothed To lady of position! | Girls: How beautifully blue the sky, The glass is rising very high, Continue fine I hope it may, And yet it rained but yesterday. Tomorrow it may pour again (I hear the country wants some rain), Yet people say, I know not why, That we shall have a warm July. |
|---|--|---|

During the Performance of the Opera

Listen to the overture.

TEKS. MUSIC. 3.1, 4.1, 5.1, 6.1, 7.1, 8.1, High School, I, II, 1.

Think about the following:

- Where is the orchestra?
- What overall mood does the overture convey?
- What repeated themes do you hear?
- How is the overture preparing the audience for the opera?

Design and spectacle.

TEKS. ART. 3.1, 4.1, 5.1, 6.1, 7.1, 8.1, High School, I, II, 1. LANGUAGE ARTS. 4.23, 5.23, 6.23, 7.23, 8.23, High School English, 19, 20.

Think about the following:

- What is your impression of the setting when the curtain comes up?
- How is the pirate ship and ocean simulated?
- How does Act II differ from Act I?

Notice the following visual elements:

- sets
- costumes
- make-up
- lighting
- props
- number of people onstage

Notice the movement:

- fighting/swordplay
- jumps
- chases
- falls
- dancing
- marching

Arias, duets and ensembles.

TEKS: MUSIC. 3.1, 4.1, 5.1, 6.1, 7.1, 8.1, High school I.1. LANGUAGE ARTS: 3.1, 3.2, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.4, 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 5.4, 6.1, 6.2, 6.3, 6.4, 7.1, 7.2, 7.3, 7.4, 8.1, 8.2, 8.3, 8.4, High School English, 15.

Listen carefully and consider the following:

- How difficult do you think it is to sing the songs?
- What is the difference in hearing the music live vs. on a recording?
- What gestures and other movements do the singers use?
- When does the singing get "flashy?"
- What parts are done as recitative?

After Going to the Opera

React to the experience.

TEKS. MUSIC. 3.6, 4.6, 4.6, 5.6, 6.6, 7.6, 8.6, High School, 6. THEATER. 3.5, 4.5, 5.5, 6.5, 7.5, 8.5, High school I. LANGUAGE ARTS: 3.9, 3.10, 4.10, 4.11, 5.10, 5.11, 6.10, 6.11, 7.10, 7.11, 8.10, 8.11, High School English. 7, 10.

Write or talk about the following:

- Did you like the opera or not? Why or why not?
- What did you like best or least?

Retell the story.

TEKS. LANGUAGE ARTS. 3.9, 4.10, 5.10, 6.10, 7.10, 8.10, High School English. 7.

Answer the following questions:

- What was the main idea of the opera?
- Who were the main characters?
- What was the sequence of the plot?
- What problems occurred and how were they solved?
- What comic elements were used?

Act out parts of the opera.

TEKS. THEATRE: 3.2, 4.2, 5.2, 6.2, 7.2, 8.2, High school I.2.

Divide students into small groups to make "frozen pictures" of a part of the opera. (The group poses without moving as if a part of the opera had just been photographed.) The other groups will guess which part is being portrayed.

Draw the characters.

TEKS. ART: 3.2, 4.2, 5.2, 6.2, 7.2, 8.2, High school I.2

Draw your own caricatures of the characters. Look in the library or on the Internet for more ideas of how Victorians (and pirates) might have dressed.

Explore the satire:

TEKS. ART: Creative expression/performance 6.2, 7.2, 8.2, High school I.2

- How many things do Frederic and the other characters do out of a sense of "duty?" Do their actions always make sense? Why or why not?
- How did Frederic's sense of duty change as a pirate or "respectable" person?
- Why did the Pirate King think he was more honest than "respectable" people?
- Why did the Major-General feel so bad about pretending to be an orphan?

Explore the social rules.

TEKS. ART: Creative expression/performance 6.2, 7.2, 8.2, High school I. 2

Look at the following social rules. Can you think of times when these are good rules and other times when the rules do not make sense.

- Never make someone else feel bad.
- Never break a promise.
- Always tell the truth.

Malapropisms, homophones and puns.

TEKS. LANGUAGE ARTS. 3.8, 4.9, 5.9, 6.9, 7.9, 8.9, High School English. 6.

In the opera, the nursemaid mistook the word "pirate" for the word "pilot" and the Major-General thought the pirate were saying "orphan" instead of "often." Make a list of other words that might become confused or use the list below. Create your own puns or stories using some of these.

- wait—weight
- lawyer—liar
- edge—etch
- sports—sprouts
- bride—bribe
- horse—house
- singer—sinker
- mail—male
- stake—steak
- week—weak
- pane—pain
- bare—bear

Vocabulary across the curriculum.

TEKS. LANGUAGE ARTS. 3.8, 4.9, 5.9, 6.9, 7.9, 8.9, High School English. 6.

What is the Major-General talking about in this song?

Can you relate it to other areas of the curriculum, such as mathematics and social studies?

I am the very model of a modern Major-General,
I've information vegetable, animal, and mineral,
I know the kings of England, and I quote the fights historical
From Marathon to Waterloo, in order categorical;
I'm very well acquainted, too, with matters mathematical,
I understand equations, both the simple and quadratical,
About binomial theorem I'm teeming with a lot o' news
With many cheerful facts about the square of the hypotenuse.

I'm very good at integral and differential calculus;
I know the scientific names of beings animalculous:
In short, in matters vegetable, animal, and mineral,
I am the very model of a modern Major-General.

I know our mythic history, King Arthur's and Sir Caradoc's;
I answer hard acrostics, I've a pretty taste for paradox,
I quote in elegiacs all the crimes of Heliogabalus,
In conics I can floor peculiarities parabolous;
I can tell undoubted Raphaels from Gerard Dows and Zoffanies,
I know the croaking chorus from the Frogs of Aristophanes!
Then I can hum a fugue of which I've heard the music's din afore,
And whistle all the airs from that infernal nonsense Pinafore.

Then I can write a washing bill in Babylonian cuneiform,
And tell you every detail of Caractacus's uniform:
In short, in matters vegetable, animal, and mineral,
I am the very model of a modern Major-General.

In fact, when I know what is meant by "mamelon" and "ravelin",
When I can tell at sight a Mauser rifle from a javelin,
When such affairs as sorties and surprises I'm more wary at,
And when I know precisely what is meant by "commissariat",
When I have learnt what progress has been made in modern
gunnery,

When I know more of tactics than a novice in a nunnery;
In short, when I've a smattering of elemental strategy,
You'll say a better Major-General has never sat a gee.

For my military knowledge, though I'm plucky and adventury,
Has only been brought down to the beginning of the century;
But still, in matters vegetable, animal, and mineral,
I am the very model of a modern Major-General.

Contradictions.

TEKS. ART: Creative expression/performance 6.2, 7.2, 8.2, High school 1.2

Many of the characters in the story did not behave in predictable ways. Fill in the blanks below and then create your own unexpected characters:

- Most young men are _____ but Frederic was _____.**
Most police officers are _____ but those in the opera were _____.
Most pirates are _____ but those in the opera were _____.
Most generals know about _____ but the Major-General knew more about _____.
Most people sneak by _____ but the pirates sneaked by _____.

Oral language practice.

TEKS. ART: Creative expression/performance 6.2, 7.2, 8.2, High school I.2

Read and/or declaim one of the Bab Ballads by W. S. Gilbert (or use the song by the Major-General). Practice reading quickly, expressively, and with perfect pronunciation. For other selections, look at http://math.boisestate.edu/gas/bab_ballads/html/ballads.html

Language images.

TEKS. ART: 3.2, 4.2, 5.2, 6.2, 7.2, 8.2, High school I.2 LANGUAGE ARTS. 3.8, 4.9, 5.9, 6.9, 7.9, 8.9, High School English. 6.

Create art to illustrate the following phrases from the opera:

- with cat-like tread
- slave to duty
- blushing buds of ever-blooming beauty
- my heart's on fire
- the poplars...wave their arms above

Write something original.

TEKS. LANGUAGE ARTS: Writing/purposes 6.15, 7.15, 8.15, High school I.1—MUSIC: Creative expression/performance 6.4, 7.4, 8.4, High school I.4.

Re-write the opera as if it took place in your community. To imitate Gilbert and Sullivan, try including the following elements:

- Lots of rhymes, even within the same line
- So much alliteration the words sound like tongue-twisters
- Words with multi-syllables
- Figures of speech
- Rapid tempos
- Humor
- Contrasts between what a character says and what he/she really feels/believes

Research.

TEKS. MUSIC. 3.1, 4.1, 5.1, 6.1, 7.1, 8.1. High School, I, II, 1. THEATER. 3.4, 3.5, 4.4, 4.5, 5.4, 5.5, 6.4, 6.5, 7.4, 7.5, 8.4, 8.5. High School, I, II, 4, 5. LANGUAGE ARTS. 3.12, 3.13, 4.13, 4.14, 5.13, 5.14, 6.13, 6.14, 7.13, 7.14, 8.13, 8.14, High School English. 9, 13. SOCIAL STUDIES. 3.14, 4.20, 5.22, 6.18, 7.19, 8.27. High School. American History. 20. World History. 20.

Find out more about one of the following:

- Opera
- Careers in opera
- Victorian era
- Other Gilbert and Sullivan operas

Recordings and resources

Recordings: One of the best recordings is the 1968 D'Oyly Carte production with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, directed by Isidore Godfrey.

Websites:

For a libretto: http://math.boisestate.edu/gas/pirates/pirates_lib.txt

Opera Guild of San Antonio: <http://www.operaguildda.org/>

Movie: "The Pirates of Penzance," 1983, directed by William Leach and starring Linda Ronstadt, Kevin Kline, Angela Lansbury, Rex Smith and George Rose; rated G, 112 minutes long.

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