

2011 Suggestions for Teaching *The Pirates of Penzance* by W. S. Gilbert & Arthur S. Sullivan

Before seeing/reading the play

1. Research the lives of William S. Gilbert, Arthur Sullivan and Richard D'Oyly Carte. What were the major ambitions of each individual? What did they have in common? What were the significant differences between them? What is each noted for? What did each contribute to their successful collaboration? These and other web sites provide information:

http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/W._S._Gilbert

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arthur_Sullivan

<http://math.boisestate.edu/gas/carte/index.html>

2. What are W. S. Gilbert's contributions to modern staging practices? How did they come about? These and other web sites provide information:

<http://math.boisestate.edu/gas/whowaswho/G/GilbertWS.htm>

http://www.answers.com/topic/w-s-gilbert#As_a_director

3. What was the Savoy Theatre? How is it associated with Gilbert and Sullivan? This and other web sites provide information:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Savoy_opera

4. Define topsy-turvy. Read Gilbert's "My Dream" in his *Bab Ballads* for his examples. Gilbert's operas are known for turning some everyday conditions upside down and following it to its logical conclusion. Find modern instances of this comic style (suggestions: Monty Python, *South Park*, *Saturday Night Live*, *The Daily Show*) and, for each instance, explain the condition that is turned topsy-turvy and how it plays out. These and other web sites provide information:

<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/topsy-turvy>

http://math.boisestate.edu/gas/bab_ballads/ballads2.txt

5. Research the life of Queen Victoria, paying special attention to the 1870s and 1880s. How was she regarded by her subjects? These and other web sites provide information:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Queen_Victoria
<http://www.royal.gov.uk/HistoryoftheMonarchy/KingsandQueensoftheUnitedKingdom/TheHanoverians/Victoria.aspx>

6. Describe the status of women in England in the 1880s. What was expected of middle-class women? Of women of the lower classes? Contrast the expectations of a young, beautiful, affluent woman with those of an older, poorer woman. Contrast the treatment of married and unmarried women. These and other websites provide information:
http://www.fashion-era.com/a_womans_place.htm
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women_in_the_Victorian_era
<http://www.victoriaspast.com/LifeofVictorianWoman/LifeofVictorianWoman.html>

7. The play is subtitled *The Slave of Duty*. Define duty. What does it mean to be a slave of duty? Who determines the duty to which an individual is bound?

8. What is indenture? What is an apprentice? How do the conditions differ? These and other web sites provide information:
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indenture>
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apprenticeship>

9. Find Penzance on a map. What is the town particularly known for? What features would make it a resort? Why was it popular in 1879, when *The Pirates of Penzance* was written? These and other websites provide information:
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Penzance>
<http://www.cornwalls.co.uk/Penzance/>

10. Define literary piracy. Research the pirating of Gilbert and Sullivan's *H.M.S. Pinafore*. What steps did they take to prevent similar theft of *The Pirates of Penzance*? This and other web sites provide information:
<http://www.musicals101.com/gilbert2.htm>

11. Define the theatrical convention known as deus ex machina. Name instances in modern fiction, film and television. These and other web sites provide information:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deus_ex_machina
<http://www.answers.com/topic/deus-ex-machina>
12. *The Pirates of Penzance* contains many words that may be unfamiliar. This web site offers a comprehensive glossary:
http://math.boisestate.edu/gas/pirates/html/pirates_glos.html
13. Define paradox. How does a paradox work? How can the contradictions be resolved? Find examples in novels, movies, plays, television shows, games, graphic novels and on-line publications. This and other web sites provide information:
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paradox>
14. What is leap year? Why was it instituted? This and other web sites provide information:
<http://www.timeanddate.com/date/leapyear.html>
15. What is satire? What are its purposes? Find examples in novels, movies, plays, television shows, games, graphic novels and on-line publications. How do you respond to satire?
16. What is a patter song? Describe the relationship of the words and the notes in a patter song. Suggested activity: Many patter songs can be tongue-twisters. Learn all or part of one and practice it till you can say it perfectly at top speed. The obvious example in *The Pirates of Penzance* is “I am the very model of a modern major-general,” also the chorus beginning “Here’s a first-rate opportunity.” Other Gilbert and Sullivan pieces include “The Nightmare Song” from *Iolanthe* and “When I, good friends, was called to the bar” from *Trial by Jury*. Some other patter song composers are Stephen Sondheim, Noel Coward, Tom Lehrer, Bob Dylan and Billy Joel. YouTube offers many examples. These and other web sites provide information and song lyrics:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patter_song
<http://www.worlddreambank.org/L/LORDCHAN.HTM>

17. Research the British army during the reign of Queen Victoria and the means of obtaining commissions and promotions. These and other web sites provide information:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_Army_during_the_Victorian_Era
<http://www.colonialwargaming.co.uk/Miscellany/Army/Commissions.htm>
18. Research the British peerage during the reign of Queen Victoria. By what means did an individual achieve peerage? What were the privileges and responsibilities of peers? How were they regarded by members of the middle and lower classes? These and other web sites provide information:
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peerage>
<http://www.baronage.co.uk/bphtm-02/moa-04.html>

Other Resources: Film

- *The Pirates of Penzance* (1983), based on Joseph Papp's production, directed by Wilfred Leach, with Kevin Kline and Angela Lansbury.
- *The Story of Gilbert and Sullivan* (1953), directed by Sidney Gilliat, with Robert Morley and Maurice Evans, a biography of their collaboration.
- *Topsy-Turvy* (2000), directed by Mike Leigh, presents the relationship of Gilbert and Sullivan as well as staging practices and company dynamics for the first production of *The Mikado*.

After seeing/reading the play

1. Refer to your research on "topsy-turvy". What social and emotional conditions are turned upside down for the purpose of the play? Include the action prior to the play, the current situation and the ethical and emotional responses of the characters.
2. Construct a timeline of the events in *The Pirates of Penzance*.
3. Draw a diagram showing the connections of the principal characters: the Pirate King, Frederick, Ruth, Samuel, Major-General Stanley, Mabel, the Police Sergeant.

4. Chart and explain the status of the same characters. Describe how their status changes at pivotal moments. In each case, explain why and how the change comes about.
5. How did it happen that Frederick became a pirate? What has legally compelled him to remain a pirate?
6. What does Frederick perceive as his duty as the play begins? How does his perception change as the action progresses, and what causes the changes? What sometimes contradictory actions does duty compel Frederick to perform?
7. Refer to the lyrics to “I am the very model of a modern major-general.” What are the qualifications of which Major-General Stanley is proudest? Which show his aptitude for his rank? What individuals and practices might Gilbert be satirizing here?
8. Refer to the lyrics of the Pirate King’s song. Describe his philosophy of life. Why does he prefer his life, despite its obvious drawbacks?
9. Refer to the Sergeant’s lyrics beginning “When a felon’s not engaged in his employment” and “When the foeman bares his steel.” What character traits does he demonstrate in these two songs? Describe his philosophy of law enforcement. How suited is he to his chosen career?
10. Refer to Mabel’s song “Poor wandering one.” What reasons does she give for falling in love with Frederick? How does she respond to his devotion to duty?
11. Refer to your research on the status of women at the time of *The Pirates of Penzance*. What are some differences in the play’s treatment of Ruth and Mabel, that is, an older, unmarried woman versus a younger, unmarried woman? What factors in Victorian society might account for the differences?
12. What is the weakness of the pirates? How is it exploited?
13. What is the weakness of the policemen? How do they overcome it?

14. Refer to your research on the British peerage. Which characters are peers? How are they regarded by the other characters? How are they treated dramatically?
15. What seems to be the standard of good manners guiding the characters? Find instances when they describe what courtesy requires and/or act upon their notion of politeness. How appropriate do you find these behaviors in the circumstances?
16. Explain the word play that results from the confusion of the words “orphan” and “often.”
17. Explain the paradox that prevents Frederick’s leaving the pirate band.
18. Refer to your research about deus ex machina. What is the complicated situation that requires the intervention of a deus ex machina? What is the deus ex machina and why does it work? What if anything prepared you for this?
19. Compare the complicated situation in *Pirates* with the one at the end of *Measure for Measure*. What is the deus ex machina in *Measure* and how does it work? Imagine some other means of resolving the muddles in both plays. What is gained and what is lost by resolving the situation by the deus ex machina?

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