

Robert Louis Stevenson's *Kidnapped*

Teaching Notes for National 5 English
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A. TEACHING APPROACHES

Class Teaching: If it is intended that all members of a class should study *Kidnapped*, the novel may be introduced by a formal lecture: resources may include the presentation of a film or audio-recording and provision of a single large-scale map. A range of topics can be discussed in groups simultaneously, with conclusions presented to the rest of the class. Care will be needed to take account of the different speeds of reading within classes, and to avoid the risk that the lack of choice in the text does not prevent students from enjoying the book.

Group Work: *Kidnapped* may be offered as one choice among other books, with the students who choose the text grouped together. Tasks can then be shared e.g. there will be no need for every student to draw a map, web searches can be made by individuals, and the results pooled. Topics can be studied by pairs or by the group as a whole.

N.B. For economy of texts there may be a temptation to steer the students' choice of books; care will need to be taken to make sure that the choice is still a real one, and also that the work of groups is not limited by assumptions made about ability or levels of difficulty.

Personal Study: Although these notes are written for teachers, they can be edited and presented to students who have chosen to read *Kidnapped* as a text for personal study. Topics suggested here for group discussion can be presented for individuals to think about.

RANGE:

- National 5 English

KEY TEXTS:

- *Kidnapped*: Stevenson, Robert Louis, Official Edition of the Edinburgh World City of Literature, Get a City Reading Campaign (Canongate 2006)
- or *Kidnapped* in *Robert Louis Stevenson, The Scottish Novels*: introduced by Calder J and Watson R (Canongate Classics 1995)
- or other paperback editions e.g. Puffin

RECOMMENDED:

- *Scotnote: Robert Louis Stevenson's Treasure Island, Kidnapped and Catriona*: MacLachlan, C (ASLS 2006)
- 'Further Thoughts on Robert Louis Stevenson's *Kidnapped*', MacLachlan, C, 2006, online at www.asls.org.uk
- *Robert Louis Stevenson and his World*, Daiches, D (Thames and Hudson 1973)
- *Scotnote: Robert Louis Stevenson's The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, The Master of Ballantrae and The Ebb-Tide*: Carruthers, G (ASLS 2004)

B. INTRODUCTION

Robert Louis (pronounced “Lewis”) Stevenson came from a family of lighthouse builders but broke with his family’s traditions by reading law at university and then taking up writing as a profession. He offended his family by declaring himself an atheist, and challenged them further when he married a divorced woman ten years older than he was. Nevertheless, his father supported him financially during his early years, and the family reconciled themselves to his marriage. Because he always suffered from bad health, he spent most of his life in exile, but his affection for Scotland is evident throughout his work.

1. Students should be familiar with the main events in Stevenson’s life, and have acquaintance with some of his novels (see suggestions below).

Historical Background: The popularity of the “Waverley” and other novels by Sir Walter Scott, and Victorian middle-class enthusiasm for romantic Scotland, meant that Stevenson and his contemporary novelists could take for granted some knowledge of the ’45 and Scottish clan society even amongst juvenile readers. This is not necessarily the case today. Modern readers with their access to televised news, however, know far more about military occupation, “ethnic cleansing”, “terrorist” murders, and victors’ justice than Stevenson’s original public.

1. Make sure that the main outlines of the ’45 rebellion and its aftermath are well understood. Students could start with maps (with dates) of Prince Charles’s travels, from his arrival in Eriskay to his departure from Loch nan Uamh.
2. Web searches on e.g. clans, the Highlands, the ’45, will demonstrate that modern romantic nonsense is no better, and no more historical, than Victorian romantic nonsense.
3. The best-known fact about the Appin murder is that a man who was known to be innocent was hanged for it, not as a matter of immediate revenge but through a process of law overseen by one of the greatest noblemen in the United Kingdom. Students should examine the situation in Appin as Stevenson pictured it and be clear as to the actions and motivations of the main characters in the story.

The Plot: *Kidnapped* is a picaresque form of novel, with a plot that resembles a modern road movie; there is a single plot-line in which individuals go on a journey and have adventures on the way. As in a road movie, the plot enables an author to concentrate on the scenery through which the characters move and on the development of their relationship as they do so. Stevenson took minor liberties with detail, but the main facts and the route of the fugitives through Scotland are geographically and historically accurate.

1. Stevenson asked his cousin David to draw a map marking the journeys of David Balfour, both on sea and on land. Students should draw their own map (a web search on “Undiscovered Scotland Kidnapped” will provide details and suggestions).
2. The overall plot mechanism – an orphaned boy reclaiming (some of) his inheritance – is slight and not entirely convincing. By the end of the book students must understand the law as regards “entail” or it will make no sense at all.
3. The Ebenezer plot may stretch credulity, but the kidnapping itself is only too realistic. In the mid-eighteenth century there was a busy trade in kidnapping Scottish children for sale as slaves in America. With his legal background, Stevenson would almost certainly have known about Peter Williamson, one among the many children taken from the north-east. After an adventurous life, Peter returned to Scotland and became an Edinburgh businessman. He sued several Aberdeen baillies who had profited from the trade, and was awarded £200 plus 100 guineas costs.

The Language: The language of *Kidnapped* is a *tour de force*. The Dedication to Charles Baxter gives an example of Stevenson’s use of Victorian dedicatory prose. The narrative is written in the language of popular novels of the period, but flavoured to suggest David Balfour’s lowland Scots background and to indicate that this is a novel set in the past. The dialogues are written in a Scots partly remembered from Stevenson’s Edinburgh youth, including the language used by his family servants, and partly a literary creation drawing on his scholarly interest in language and the conventional (and often patronising) ways in which writers of the time represented the inaccurate English used by Gaelic speakers.

1. Some students will find the book very easy reading, while others will find considerable language barriers to their enjoyment. Group discussion about the book’s general accessibility will help the latter to come to terms with their difficulties.

C. TOPICS WITHIN THE NARRATIVE

Chapters 1–6

1. *Kidnapped* begins in traditional tale-telling style, like Jack and the Beanstalk or Dick Whittington, with a young man setting out to seek his fortune. But the dialogue with the minister, Mr Campbell, does more than initiate the plot. Students should discuss how the affectionate and slightly comic portrait of Mr Campbell establishes a world of values and beliefs which will be challenged by David's subsequent adventures. (Students with a knowledge of Stevenson's relations with his conventional and godfearing parents will wish to widen the discussion.)
2. Students will note how the Shaws episode is prepared for by the account of David's journey, not least by the introduction of Jennet Clouston and her melodramatic curse. (Stevenson is using a traditional device of romantic novelists – see Meg Merrilies' curse at the end of Ch. 8 of Scott's *Guy Mannering* for an even more melodramatic example.)
3. David's experiences in the House of Shaws have been described as "gothic" and compared to "a good horror film". Students should notice the presence of traditional elements (e.g. darkness, lightning, fear of heights) and the mixture of black comedy, danger, and realistic detail.
4. Ch. 1 establishes both the geographical (Scotland) and the historical (18th century) setting of the book. What linguistic devices does Stevenson use to do this? Students should look for examples in the dialogue of words that are not used in standard southern English and look them up in the *Scottish National Dictionary*. They should also look for some words and constructions from David's narrative that indicate that this is a historical novel (a more difficult task).
5. The Dedication to Charles Baxter is written in a rhetorical style common to Victorian essayists, but it does not make easy reading today. Students should look at the language Stevenson uses, e.g. the order of words and clauses, the references made to education and leisure, and ask themselves why.

Chapters 6–14

1. Hoseason "was two men, and left the better one behind as soon as he set foot on board". What information about Hoseason does Stevenson provide to support this?
2. Stevenson was fascinated by this kind of duality and students can be directed to read more widely (e.g. *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*; the character of Sir Daniel Brackley in *The Black Arrow*).

3. The Round House episode has more than once been incorporated as a single episode in a book of short stories. Why?
4. Alan Breck ("pock-marked Alan") enters the story very dramatically and we learn much about him even before the shipwreck takes place. What?
5. Without spoiling the simplicity of his story-line, Stevenson provides quite a lot of information about the political, economic, and social situation in Appin during the years after the '45. What do we learn about it in these chapters? (Students should notice how much can be conveyed in a phrase, e.g. Alan's praise of clan loyalty is modified by "the tenants are true to their chief; and what with love and a bit of pressure, and maybe a threat or two...".)

Chapters 14–19

1. When he pictured Erraid, Stevenson drew on his youthful experiences as a member of a lighthouse-building family. What evidence is there that the islet is described from first hand knowledge?
2. What takes place in Mull and Morven to justify the "road movie" description of the book?
3. Blind aimless pursuers, as nightmare figures, feature in several ghost stories (e.g. by M. R. James). Readers could note that the menacing blind catechist Duncan Mackiegh can be paralleled elsewhere in Stevenson's books, e.g. the pirate Pew in *Treasure Island* and the blind leper in *The Black Arrow*.
4. Historically, Alan Breck is the chief suspect for the Appin murder. Stevenson makes a good case that he was not the culprit. How does he do so?
5. What light does *Kidnapped* throw on the complex linguistic situation in western Scotland in the 18th century?
6. The affectionate portrait of the Rev. Mr Campbell (Chs. 1 and 27), and the portraits of the two catechists (Chs. 15 and 16) will introduce readers to the role of religion and its political implications in 18th century Scotland (through its Victorian retelling). Note Maclean of Duart's (who was he?) patronage of the unsuitable Duncan Mackiegh, and the contrasting Henderland who was sent "by the Edinburgh Society for propagating Christian Knowledge to re-evangelise the more savage places of the Highlands". (Try web-searching "SPCK Scotland".)
7. Stevenson's James of the Glen, portrayed as an extorter of second rents from poor tenants ("a bit of pressure"), and in panic-stricken and incompetent reaction to the Red Fox's murder, is out of line with the traditional representation of James as a brave innocent, martyred by the Campbells. Why did Stevenson portray him as he did?

Chapters 19–26

1. A web search for “Glencoe massacre” will provide background information for Ch. 20. It will also provide information about relationships between the Campbells and other clans (some of it very dubious).
2. Identify in the episode with the bouman (Ch. 21) some of the qualities which mark Alan out as an experienced leader in Highland society.
3. Examine the episode in Cluny’s Cage for evidence of differences between Alan’s qualities of character and his life experience and David’s. Students should recall what they know about David’s family background and compare it with Alan’s reminiscences about his father in Ch. 12.
4. Students with a knowledge of Stevenson’s state of health and of his relations with his wife will perhaps be able to comment on his picture of David’s weakness and illness and his subsequent quarrel with Alan.
5. In describing the quarrel between Alan and David, Stevenson undertakes the difficult task of presenting a quarrel fairly, but through the eyes of only one of the participants. How far does he succeed?
6. Stevenson’s portrait of Cluny Macpherson, as a proud Highland leader protected and served by his clansmen, follows historical tradition. His suggestion that the noble fugitive spent his time playing cards and fussing over the right way to cook is his own addition. Compare the treatment of James of the Glen, and comment on Stevenson’s craft as a novelist.
7. When writing the episode in Ch. 25, when Alan competes with Robin Oig Macgregor, Stevenson was able to assume that his Victorian readers, unlike their successors, had some acquaintance with a romantic version of the Rob Roy story. A web search for “Clan Macgregor” will provide some information – and will also give students practice in discarding the rubbish which clutters up web searches.

Chapters 26–30

1. Critics have complained that “a major drawback for general readers is that there is only one female in the book and she is half-witted”. Is this a fair comment?
2. *Kidnapped* is one of those books which, like Jane Austen’s novels, are written for readers of one sex but are enjoyed equally by both male and female readers. Can you explain why this has happened?
3. It has been suggested that there are clear breaks in the story of Alan’s travels, where changes in the tone and content of the novel are marked by crossing water: e.g. David’s voyage in the brig *Covenant*, his progress onto Erraid and Mull, his adventures in Appin, his crossing of the River Forth. Comment.

4. The portrait of Rankeillor accurately demonstrates the social standing and qualities associated with lawyers in 18th-century Edinburgh. Is the portrait entirely a sympathetic one?
5. Students should discuss Rankeillor’s account of the two brothers and their choices. They will see that the brother who made the ruthless, practical choice and took the estate ended up as a half-mad miser, while the romantic one who chose love and gave away his inheritance had a happy and successful, though impoverished, life as a country schoolmaster. Is this complex view of human motivation and human experience matched in other parts of *Kidnapped*?
6. How far are Rankeillor’s opinions on what took place to be read as those of Stevenson himself?
7. Although David’s story began in a fairytale way, when he finally achieves his fortune he accepts two thirds of his entitlement. Students should ask themselves whether they felt surprised, or disappointed, by this solution to the plot. Why did David, through Rankeillor, accept less than his legal due? Would Alan in similar circumstances have acted as David did?
8. Critics have said that Alan and David illustrate Victorian racist assumptions, with a warlike, romantic, artistic Highland Gael contrasted with an inhibited, financially cautious, conventionally-minded Saxon Lowlander. Given that “Balfour” is a name of Gaelic origin, and that it is David who has romantic ideas about the law of Scotland while Alan is the cynical realist, is there any basis for what these critics have said?
9. Some critics have argued that the trick by which Ebenezer is led to betray himself belongs to an entirely different level of realism from Rankeillor’s practical and compromised solution, and that this is a flaw in the narrative. Is this a fair comment?
10. Comment on the final sentence of the story (“The hand of Providence” etc.) in the light of what has been learnt about David during the preceding chapters.
11. Whereas *Kidnapped* was consciously written as a boys’ adventure story, Stevenson’s sequel *Catriona*, written for adult readers of both sexes, has never been as widely read or as popular. Read *Catriona* and discuss why this is the case.