

Ship's Super Superstitions & Shakespeare

Target Grade Level: 7th - 12th

Time for Lesson: 60 - 90 minutes

Overview & Major Themes

Students explore the definition and theme of superstitions, traditions and taboos through the vehicle of sailors aboard *Constitution* and Shakespearean poetry.

Objectives	Outcomes	Materials & Resources
<p>Students will learn the definition of superstition.</p> <p>Students will read Shakespearean poetry and practice literary analysis.</p> <p>Students will creatively write one superstition, and use deductive reasoning to support their superstition.</p> <p>Students will participate in a group activity and group discussion.</p>	<p>Through the vehicle of sailors aboard <i>Constitution</i> and Shakespearean poetry, students will be exposed to religious or social customs within different subcultures.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore <i>Burial at Sea</i> scene on <i>A Sailor's Life for Me</i> • Copy of <i>Pericles, Prince of Tyre</i> (selections of Act III) • Sea-Worthy Superstitions

Time	Instructional Activity
5 min.	Explore the <i>Burial at Sea</i> scene in "A Sailor's Life for Me", and discuss "The Stitch Through The Nose." While on the surface it seems a childlike superstition, it's important to highlight its practical nature (a final dead check). Sailors had many superstitions (see the attached sheet).
10 min.	Hand out and read with students <i>Pericles, Prince of Tyre</i> (selections of Act III). Dissect the lines with them so they understand the play. Emphasize with students the sailor's superstition that a dead body on board the ship is causing the storm. [Note- this is a peculiarly English superstition- the French and Spanish regularly carried their dead on board until they reached land so they could be buried ashore in consecrated ground.]

Time	Instructional Activity
15 min.	Discuss with students: Why would the sailors believe this? Are there any superstitions about our dead that we carry now? Can you think of any superstitions in your own life? Why do we carry these superstitions and what might the reasons for the beliefs be? Read through the other Sailor's Superstitions with your students.
30 min.	Students begin creative activity: write a straightforward, simple superstition. Tell them they must do this quietly! The idea is to create a superstition that is believable, and all the reasons for it could be believable. They will be posting and "designing" their superstition anonymously with the class, and individually marking their votes for what they think is the REAL reason that the superstition might exist.
15 min.	<p>Sample:</p> <p>My Superstition is (in 20 words or less):</p> <p>Keeping a secret:</p> <p>My Real Practical Reason for its existence is (15 words or less, 3 nouns max, one verb only)</p> <p>My Fake Practical Reasons are (each 15 words, 3 nouns max, one verb only).</p>
10 min.	After students complete their Superstition, they each anonymously post their Superstition. Students take turns or log their vote for each other's "real practical reason" for their classmates' posted superstitions.

The “death” of Thaisa in Act III of William Shakespeare’s *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*, is a very tragic and puzzling scene. When she dies in childbirth during a sea voyage, the ship’s sailors wish to immediately have her body removed from the ship, believing the storm battering them will not cease until “the ship be cleared of the dead” (III.I, 50).

- From David Stewart, in his article, “Burial at Sea: Separating and Placing the Dead in the Age of Sail.”

Pericles, Prince of Tyre

by William Shakespeare

Act III

PERICLES:

Now, mild may be thy life!
For a more blustrous birth had never babe:
Quiet and gentle thy conditions! for
Thou art the rudeliest welcome to this world
That ever was prince’s child. Happy what follows!
Thou hast as chiding a nativity
As fire, air, water, earth, and heaven can make,
To herald thee from the womb: even at the first
Thy loss is more than can thy portage quit,
With all thou canst find here. Now, the good gods
Throw their best eyes upon’t!

Enter Two Sailors

First Sailor:

What courage, sir? God save you!

PERICLES:

Courage enough: I do not fear the flaw;
It hath done to me the worst. Yet, for the love
Of this poor infant, this fresh-new sea-farer,
I would it would be quiet.

First Sailor:

Slack the bolins there! Thou wilt not, wilt thou?
Blow, and split thyself.

Second Sailor:

But sea-room, an the brine and cloudy billow kiss
the moon, I care not.

First Sailor:

Sir, your queen must overboard: the sea works high,
the wind is loud, and will not lie till the ship be
cleared of the dead.

PERICLES:

That’s your superstition.

First Sailor:

Pardon us, sir; with us at sea it hath been still
observed: and we are strong in custom. Therefore
briefly yield her; for she must overboard straight.

PERICLES:

As you think meet. Most wretched queen!

LYCHORIDA:

Here she lies, sir.

PERICLES:

A terrible childbed hast thou had, my dear;
No light, no fire: the unfriendly elements
Forgot thee utterly: nor have I time
To give thee hallow'd to thy grave, but straight
Must cast thee, scarcely coffin'd, in the ooze;
Where, for a monument upon thy bones,
And e'er-remaining lamps, the belching whale
And humming water must o'erwhelm thy corpse,
Lying with simple shells. O Lychorida,
Bid Nestor bring me spices, ink and paper,
My casket and my jewels; and bid Nicander
Bring me the satin coffer: lay the babe
Upon the pillow: hie thee, whiles I say
A priestly farewell to her: suddenly, woman.

Exit LYCHORIDA

Sailor's Superstitions

Whistling for a Wind

Does the wind have ears? Ships like *Constitution* were powered by the wind. If there was no wind, the ship did not make progress. If you're a sailor whistling for a wind, the noise carries out across the ocean. Sailors would whistle trying to attract the wind to the Ship. The expression "whistling for a wind" has come to mean to attempt a futile endeavor.

Scratching a Backstay

Scratching a backstay, a thick rope that held up the masts, was said to give you a favorable wind in the direction needed.

Coins under the Masts

Sailors believed placing a coin under the mast brought good luck or a profitable voyage. The coins were placed under the masts of a ship as it was being built. The tradition began with the ancient Romans, who placed a coin in the mouths of the dead enabling them to pay a mythological ferryman to transport them across the River Styx to embark on their afterlife. Many cultures believe in a voyage to the afterlife after death. As the superstition goes, if a ship and her sailors were lost at sea, then the coins under the masts ensured that the dead's fares across the River Styx were paid.

Hex marks and amulets

Geometric scratches called hex marks and amulets (pendants made from spoons) warded off evil spirits.

Unlucky to set sail on a Friday

Friday was named after the Norse goddess Frigg, or Frigga. The goddess of love and fertility, she was the wife of the god Woden, after whom Wednesday is named. In early times, Friday was regarded as a lucky day, and an especially good one on which to get married. But in early Christianity, Frigga was regarded as a witch; her day unlucky because it was the day of the week Jesus was crucified. Becoming a deeply-rooted superstition among sailors, it became bad luck to set sail on a Friday.

A sick man won't die until high tide

Fletcher S. Bassett writes in his "*Legends and Superstitions of the sea and sailors in all lands in all times*" that, "On Cape Cod, and in many other districts along the New England coast, it is firmly believed that a sick man cannot die until the ebbside begins to run. Watchers by beds of sickness anxiously note the change of the tides, and if the patient lives until the flood begins to set in again he will live until the next ebb."