

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Mutiny on the Bounty

by
Charles Nordhoff

Book Information

Charles Nordhoff, Mutiny on the Bounty
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Captain Bligh is an unrelenting tyrant aboard his ship. His crew attempts mutiny and tries to set him adrift in a small lifeboat. The coauthor is James Norman Hall.

Topics: Adventure, Survival; Classics, Classics (All); Community Life, Justice/Legal Issues; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Series, Bounty Trilogy; Transportation/Vehicles, Ships/Boats

Main Characters

Captain Edwards Captain of the "Pandora," who takes Byam and several other "Bounty" crew members prisoner and keeps them in deplorable conditions throughout their journey back to England

Dr. Hamilton ship's surgeon aboard the "Pandora," who attempts to help Byam and the others receive better treatment at the hands of Captain Edwards

Fletcher Christian second officer on the "Bounty," whose abuse at the hands of an intractable Bligh causes him to take over command of the ship

George Stewart Byam's fellow midshipman and friend, who marries a Tahitian girl and has a daughter with her

Hitihiti a Tahitian "Indian" of high standing in the community, who becomes Byam's taio, or special friend and benefactor, during his time in Tahiti

James Morrison Boatswain's mate on the "Bounty," who eventually stands trial with Byam and is pardoned by the King

Roger Byam the narrator of the story, who lives through the mutiny and suffers months of false imprisonment on Bligh's assertion that he was a willing participant

Sir Joseph Banks a family friend of Byam's who encourages him to join the crew of the "Bounty" and works on behalf of his acquittal five years later

Tehani Byam's Tahitian wife

Thomas Ellison a cheerful and popular young seaman who is condemned to death for his participation in the mutiny

William Bligh captain of the "Bounty," an exceptional mariner flawed by an almost irrational insistence on total subordination of his men

Vocabulary

cable a nautical unit of measure equal to 720 feet or 120 fathoms

cat-o'-nine-tails a whip made of nine knotted cords, used for flogging

fathom a nautical unit of measure used for depth soundings and equal to six feet

larboard the left-hand side of the ship when facing the front (has now largely been replaced by the term "port")

league a nautical unit of distance equivalent to three miles

sheets a nautical term for ropes

starboard the right side of a ship when facing the front

victualing supplying a ship with food for a journey

Synopsis

As the story opens, the narrator, now a retired sea captain, thinks back on the events of his career, chief among them, the mutiny that took place years before aboard H.M.S. "Bounty." The remainder of the book recounts the saga of the "Bounty's" voyage to Tahiti, the mutiny on board, the dreadful aftermath, and terrible consequences for almost every man aboard.

At the age of seventeen, Roger Byam is thrilled to accept the position of midshipman aboard the "Bounty" offered by Lieutenant William Bligh himself. He is to apply his gift for languages to the making of a dictionary of the Tahitian language. After several months at sea, conditions aboard the ship become intolerable due to the lack of provisions and the

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general atmosphere of tyranny created by the iron rule of Lieutenant Bligh. The men have reason to believe that Bligh has shortchanged the provisioning of the ship to line his own pockets, but any grumbling is met only with further heavy-handedness by the incensed captain. Fletcher Christian, Bligh's second in command, makes some attempt to soften Bligh's treatment of the men, but his suggestions are ignored and ridiculed. Bligh's treatment of Christian extends to berating him in front of the men and accusing him of stealing some stockpiled coconuts. Christian later confides to Byam he had intended to abandon the ship, but before this escape could be accomplished, the mutiny occurred as a spontaneous opportunity. Several of the men take up arms with relish against the hated Bligh, but others remember their duty and choose not to join in. Christian orders Bligh and those loyal to him into the ship's launch and sets them adrift, presuming certain death for them in an open boat in savage Indian territory. Several men, including Byam and Morrison, took no part in the mutiny, but could not go with Bligh. To these, Bligh declares, "I'll do you justice, lads." Christian returns the ship to Tahiti, and it is there that Byam remains, choosing to stay and await a British ship to take him home. During this time he meets and marries Tehani, and she soon gives birth to a daughter. Eighteen months pass like an idyllic dream for Byam, but finally a British ship is seen entering the harbor at Matavai Bay. When he paddles out to present himself to the captain, he is horrified to be arrested and placed in irons for the crime of mutiny. Even more surprising is the fact that Bligh has miraculously survived, returned to England, and implicated Byam as one of the mutineers.

The other "Bounty" crew members are rounded up, and the ship prepares to return them to England to be court-martialed. The prisoners are kept under deplorable conditions, endure the wreck of their ship, and remain alive to face the day of their court martial. Though the testimony of available witnesses is overwhelmingly in Byam's favor, he is condemned to death on the strength of Bligh's affidavit. Byam is only too glad that his mother is not alive to suffer through this blight on the family name. It is after the

verdict that Sir Joseph Banks discovers the availability of a witness whose testimony can reverse Byam's death sentence. The witness is called, and Byam is a free man.

In the days that follow, Byam decides that he will return to his paradise in Tahiti, but is strongly encouraged by Sir Joseph to "do his duty" to his good name by returning to sea in honorable service. After a month of deliberation, Byam decides Sir Joseph is right, and he takes up what will be a long and distinguished career in His Majesty's navy. At one point, Byam returns to Tahiti as captain of his own frigate. There, he sees a Tahiti horribly transformed by war and pestilence. As he sadly envisions the ghosts of his Tahitian friends, Byam mourns the passing of an idyllic time and place.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Near the end of the book, as Byam, Morrison, and Muspratt prepare to go their separate ways, the following exchange occurs between Morrison and Muspratt: "See here, Muspratt, how are you off for rhino?" "Oh, I'll manage, Mr. Morrison. I've ridden shanks' mare to Yarmouth before now." In the context of the scene, what is the meaning of this dialogue?

In the paragraph preceding this exchange, Byam is discussing the fact that Muspratt lives with his mother in Yarmouth and has little money. In this context, "rhino" can be inferred to be a slang term for money, or cash. Considering the reference to the shank, or leg, it is possible to infer that "riding shanks' mare" means "walking."

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Literary Analysis

In your own words, explain how the Tahitians' view of the future was different from that of the typical white man of the period. Give an example from the book to support your answer.

Hitihiti found Byam's careful deliberation over whether to marry Tehani quite ridiculous. In advising his friend to follow his heart and marry his sweetheart, Hitihiti demonstrates the typical attitude of the Tahitians regarding such worry, telling him, "...tomorrow may never come." In the narration, Byam explains that the Tahitian language lacks a word or phrase to express the idea of worry about the future. He goes on to take the advice of his taio, and thereafter enters one of the happiest periods of his life.

Inferential Comprehension

What was the essential difference of opinion between Bligh and Christian on the issue of how to maintain discipline and obedience at sea?

Bligh's ruthless and dogmatic attitude toward ship-board discipline is shown repeatedly throughout the first half of the book. A young midshipman is tied to the masthead for a harmless prank, the carpenter is placed in irons for trying to use the best wood, and seamen's rations are cut in retaliation for some perceived grumbling. At one point, Christian attempts to point out that, at least in some cases, men could be "tamed" more effectively with kindness than with fear. Bligh treats this comment with utter contempt, stating, "Our seamen understand kindness as well as they understand Greek. Fear is what they do understand." As shown later in the book, this basic difference in philosophy plays no small part in the mutiny that ends Bligh's command of the "Bounty."

Constructing Meaning

As Byam prepares to leave Tahiti for the last time, he ruminates about the Tahiti he knew as a young man and writes, "...suddenly the place was full of ghosts ... my own among them." What did he mean?

When Byam returned to Tahiti as a sea captain in his forties, the idyllic island of his youth had been horribly transfigured. The breadfruit trees were nearly gone, war and pestilence had wreaked havoc, and the people, once so open and numerous, were sullen and demoralized. Byam's beloved Tehani was dead, and no one seemed to know his dear friend, Hitihiti. The ghosts to whom Byam refers in this passage are likely the remembered spirits of his friends, his native family, and the Byam of long ago who spent the best days of his youth in a place that is now gone forever.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting A story often becomes more meaningful when the setting is better understood. To promote an understanding of the realities of maritime travel during the late eighteenth century, ask students to trace the route of the "Bounty" from Spithead, England around Cape Horn and westward to Tahiti. Using a globe or world atlas, estimate the length of the voyage in miles, using the appropriate map scale.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors While reading *Mutiny on the Bounty*, the reader comes to an understanding of the long maritime tradition of Britain. Nautical and sailing terms are used throughout the book, and students may have experienced some confusion with the heavy use of this specialized lexicon. To increase the students' understanding of the book's dialogue and narration, assign students to complete a "nautical dictionary" to include the terms used throughout the book, including: starboard, cable (distance), aft, clew, forecastle, mizzenmast, sheets, topgallant, mess, blocks, keel-hauling, hove-to, larboard, stove in, league (distance).

Understanding the Author's Craft Several film versions of *Mutiny on the Bounty* are available on

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video, including a 1935 version starring Marlon Brando, and 1984's *The Bounty*, a Mel Gibson vehicle scripted by Robert Bolt, the author of *A Man for All Seasons*. Have your class view one of these versions, asking them to pay particular attention to the following questions. In what way(s) was the plot different from that presented in the book? Are the characters of Bligh and Christian more or less developed than they were in the book? Which version of the story provides the more meaningful representation of theme of the story?

Comparing and Contrasting The theme of discipline versus chaos is central in *Mutiny on the Bounty*, and naval discipline is a topic discussed by many characters in the book, including Sir Joseph Banks, Fletcher Christian, William Bligh, Master Fryer, and the narrator. As a class, take up the question of discipline as it was presented in the book by holding a classroom debate on the subject. Half the class will advocate for the position of Bligh and the naval officers of his time, who held to the idea that discipline must be maintained to prevent anarchy at sea. The other half should advocate for the ideas expressed by Christian for fair-minded leadership. Re-read sections of the book for supporting arguments for each side, but also encourage students to examine their own feelings on the subject.