

THE SINDBAD STORIES: THE PIT

THE STORY

Sindbad the sailor continued. He said:

'I made many more saddles and bridles for the most important people of the kingdom and made a great deal of wealth on that island selling more to the people of the island. They welcomed me into their community as an honoured guest and, as was the custom there, I was given a wife. Our wedding was a happy occasion and I stayed on the island for a good deal longer. But, sadly, one day my wife died from an unknown disease. After many days of grief, I was visited by friends, who offered their condolences. Also – though I thought it strange at the time – they said goodbye, as if I were about to leave the island. I could not make out the reason for this behaviour. Then I discovered, to my horror, the meaning of their farewells.

'It was the custom of the people of this island to also bury the living spouse with the dead partner. When I found out what my fate was, I did not meet it calmly. I pleaded with the king not to bury me alive, saying, "I am a foreigner, I do not have to put up with your customs!" But he and the others thought my reaction as odd as I thought their barbaric custom. There was nothing I could do. Two days later, after a ceremonial party – at which I was honoured! – I was lowered into a dark pit with my dead wife, and a heavy lid was placed over us, shutting out all light and the outside world.

'I could not see anything, but quickly realised that I was in an enormous underground tomb. From feeling around with my hands I managed to ascertain that I was surrounded by dead and decomposed bodies of all the husbands and wives that had been buried here before. The fact that I could not see the bodies, but knew they were there, was all the more chilling. To make things worse, I could hear what must have been rats that, from the sound they made, I guessed were large.'

Task Question: Was Sindbad right to object when he said 'I am a foreigner, I do not have to put up with your customs!'

Nested Questions:

- ✓ Should one always respect the laws and / or customs of another society?
- ✓ If one should respect the laws / customs of any society then should they respect the laws / customs of Sindbad's society and not impose the custom of spouse burial on him?
- ✓ Is it ever right to object to the laws and / or customs of another society?
- ✓ Is it ever right to try to change, or interfere, with the laws and / or customs of another society?
- ✓ Can you think of something that would be absolutely wrong for any society to adopt as a custom or law? (Classic examples are: torture and suppressing the education of women).
- ✓ What do you think of the custom on the island to give honoured guests a wife?
- ✓ Are values (morals, laws etc.) relative to different societies?
- ✓ Are there any values that are not relative to different societies but which hold for all societies?

(Suitability warning: the next section of the story may not be suitable for your class, so make sure that you read ahead to help you make a decision about whether to include Sindbad's killing of another to secure his own survival. If it is not appropriate for your class's age / maturity, then simply omit that part of the narrative; it will not harm the narrative to move directly to the section where he spies the larger animal. In your story (if you are telling it), he may have found a lighting device on the floor, maybe after having fished around among the rats! This sort of editing is easier to do if you are telling the stories rather than reading them. See 'Matching the register' on page 40.)

'After a few days in the complete darkness I began to feel very weak due to the lack of food and water. A warm tiredness came over me and I was just about to resign myself to being swept away by it, when the lid was moved and daylight streamed into the tomb. Another death had clearly happened and another man was being buried with his dead wife. I was moved into action. The other man had some food and water that I needed. Through great need, delirium and desperation I am ashamed to say that I killed the man to get hold of the sustenance he had on his person.

'When I had eaten, some strength returned to me and I discovered that he had a torch and tinderbox. I lit the torch to finally get a good look at my surroundings and see if there was anything that might help with my escape. I saw the rats that, until now, I had only heard. And they were indeed as big as I'd estimated. But then I caught the glint of an animal's eye, reflecting my light, and it was no rat, being far too large. I saw it vanish behind a rock at the far end of the cave.

'Perhaps, because of the food and water I had managed to get hold of – at great cost to myself! – my mind started to come into focus again. An idea came to me: an animal that size must have got inside the tomb from outside. I quickly ran to where it had vanished behind the rock and followed its only path just as the torch failed. I clambered over rocks for quite some time until eventually a dim light appeared to me in the distance, like a star.

'It kept vanishing behind unseen rocks as I moved towards it until, eventually, I got close enough to see that it was indeed the light from the sun permitted into this dark prison by some merciful aperture in the tomb's natural walls. I hoped and prayed that I would be able to fit through the hole and that I would not find myself arrested again and, perhaps, killed where I stood.'

'Though I was bigger than the animal I had seen, I was just able to squeeze through. I fell on to a tiny, stony beach that was hidden on the coast of the island and isolated from any route to it. I was trapped, but at least nobody would come looking for me here.'

'After a day of resting there and gathering my thoughts I saw, in the distance, a ship that looked to me that it was passing by the island, not visiting. Ignorant of who manned the ship, where it was going, or whether its crew would be friendly or hostile, I threw myself into the sea and swam, with what strength I could muster, towards it. I knew that the odds were against me, as I was weak and the currents strong. Desperation had already led me to one extreme course of action; now it led me to another.'

'I was lucky that someone on board the ship had seen me swimming towards them because, had they not sent some men in a small boat to meet me, I would surely have perished; my strength had deserted me long before I was able to reach my destination. I was dragged out of the water by a sailor and transported back to the ship.'

'Though I had survived, a part of me had died. I told my rescuers the story... though only in part.'

N.B. This section only pertains to classes for whom this would be suitable – see suitability warning on page 190.

Task Question: Was Sindbad justified in killing another in order to secure his own survival?

Nested Questions:

- ✓ If not 'justified' then can Sindbad be excused? What's the difference between 'justified' and 'excused'?
- ✓ Why did he say 'a part of me had died'? And why did he only tell part of his story to his rescuers?
- ✓ TX Cannibal: Imagine that you were thrown into a situation, like the real-life situation described in the film *Alive*, where the choice was between cannibalism and death. Would it be acceptable to resort to cannibalism? (The class could research the famous case 'Her Majesty The Queen versus Tom Dudley and Edwin Stephens 1884' for the purpose of stimulating a moral / legal discussion.)
- ✓ TX Killer: Slightly adjust the previous thought-experiment so the choice is between killing another and surviving yourself. Could it ever be justifiable to kill in order to survive?
- ✓ Are there any reasons why it might never be justifiable to kill in order to survive?