



# **THE RANSOM OF RED CHIEF**

*Based on the short story by O. Henry*

*Adapted for the stage by Brian Kral*

*A California Theatre Center Study Guide for Teachers and Students*

## **SYNOPSIS**

“It *looked* like a good thing...” So begins this uproarious tale of a brilliant scheme gone awry, which captures all the charm and exaggerated comedy of O. Henry’s classic story. Two bungling con men, Bill Driscoll and Sam Porter, in an attempt to quickly garner funds to pull off a land fraud scheme, decide to kidnap a child from a rural town and demand a large ransom for the child’s return. Their choice of victim, the feisty offspring of a prominent citizen, gives them more than they bargained for! Their “victim”, who assumes the title of “Red Chief”, believes that Bill and Sam’s scheme is actually a camping adventure, and the little captive takes control! Red Chief christens Bill “Old Hank the Trapper” and renames Sam “Snake-Eye the Spy”. Ready to go into battle at the slightest provocation, Red Chief inflicts terror onto the captors, while they try to communicate their terms to the Dorset family and threaten to send their captive home for acting up! With Red Chief, life goes from bad to worse as the ransom plans undergo unexpected twists and turns! Finally, in response to Bill and Sam’s demands, Red Chief’s family declares that only if the captors pay them \$200 will they take the child back! Bill and Sam count out their dollars as they wearily accept defeat at the hands of a nine-year-old, but welcome the opportunity to finally be rid of Red Chief!

### **GENERAL DISCUSSION**

1. Discuss the character of Red Chief. Why do you think Red Chief is such a wild kid? If the kidnapping is fun, why does Red Chief behave so disrespectfully to Sam and Bill?
2. In order to get Red Chief to follow instructions, Sam uses a technique commonly known as “reverse psychology”. What is reverse psychology? Did it work on Red Chief? Is it an effective way to take control of a situation?
3. Why does Sam always make Bill look after Red Chief? Do you think Sam is fair in his delegation of duties?
4. One of Red Chief’s better qualities is a vivid imagination. How can using your imagination be helpful in challenging circumstances? Write about a time when your imagination helped you get through a tough situation.

### **LITERATURE/WRITING**

1. Research O. Henry, the writer of the short story on which the play is based. O. Henry was one of America’s greatest humorists. When and where was he born, and what was his real name? What did he do before he became a writer? What other stories did he write? He is known for his ingenious use of the ironic “twist ending”—what does this term mean? What is the twist ending in *The Ransom of Red Chief*?
  - a. Write your own humor story, and give it a twist ending like O. Henry.
2. Read the original story as a class, and compare and contrast it with the play. The playwright makes several changes, such as Ebenezer being Red Chief’s uncle, not father; and changing the setting from rural Alabama to the American Southwest. What other changes did you notice? Why do you think the playwright made these changes?
3. One of the things that makes *The Ransom of Red Chief* such a good story is its strongly developed characters. Sam and Bill’s personalities, for example, are very distinct from one another. How does this make their relationship interesting? If they were very similar, how might the story be different?
4. The American West is the setting for a considerable volume of literature. John Steinbeck, Mark Twain, and Larry McMurtry are just a few writers who are famous for works set in different parts of the West. What types of characters are often seen in these stories? What kinds of things happen to them? Why do you think the West has inspired so many writers?

### **DRAMATIC ARTS**

1. *The Ransom of Red Chief* contains many scenes of stage combat, which are meticulously crafted scenes in which performers engage in a physical combat

sequence, sometimes using stage weapons. Acts such as lifting someone off the ground, throwing an object across the stage to another performer, or falling down can also count as stage combat. When performing stage combat, it is of the utmost importance to be aware not only of what you are doing, but what the other actors are doing as well. Before every performance, the actors practice all of their combat sequences.

- a. Why is it important to review stage combat sequences before every performance? Why is it important to be super-aware of the other performers?
  - b. Not every combat sequence has to be a fight. Where in *The Ransom of Red Chief* did you see combat scenes that involved an activity other than fighting?
2. Discuss the scenery and lighting for *The Ransom of Red Chief*. How did the colors represent not only the landscape, but the mood of the play as well? Compare and contrast the lighting for daytime scenes with the nighttime scenes. How does stage lighting work with the scenery to establish setting and mood?
  3. Discuss the props in *The Ransom of Red Chief*. Props (short for properties) are objects that are handled or used by actors during a performance. What challenges does a prop designer face in creating props for a play that is set about one hundred years ago, and also has a scene in which an item must be broken? Did the props look historically accurate and convincing?

### **SOCIAL STUDIES**

1. What is a gramophone? It is also known as a phonograph. What is its modern equivalent? Use the Internet to find old photographs and advertisements for gramophones/phonographs. Compare and contrast them with record players and CD players.
2. Research early twentieth-century cameras with the class. How did these cameras work? Look up old photographs and advertisements for cameras on the Internet. Compare and contrast them with modern cameras.
3. What modes of transportation were used at the beginning of the twentieth century? Automobiles had been invented, but they were not yet mainstream. What were the most common ways for people to get from place to place?
4. Red Chief loves to make-believe being part of an Indian tribe. What are some of the actual Native American tribes that inhabited the American Southwest at the time the story takes place? How were they structured? In what type of dwellings did they live?

5. Divide the class into groups, and have each group research a different tribe. Have them construct a poster depicting where their tribes lived, the food they ate, the types of clothing they wore, and any other interesting facts they can gather.
6. Near the end of the play, Sam challenges Red Chief to a showdown, in the style of Billy the Kid and Pat Garrett. Who were these two men? What happened during their confrontation? Research them on the Internet or in the library.
7. Identify the following figures associated with the Old West, and explain why they are famous: Buffalo Bill, Calamity Jane, Wild Bill Hickock, Annie Oakley.
8. Sam and Bill want to get money in order to invest it, which in turn will generate more funds. They begin with a “joint capital” of \$600. Define the term “joint capital”, as well as the following investment terms: interest, appreciation, stock, share, bond.

### **SCIENCE**

1. Outdoor life is a major theme in *The Ransom of Red Chief*. Because they are drifters, Sam and Bill spent most of their time outdoors, sleeping in whatever cave or hollow they can find. And Red Chief thinks being kidnapped is a camping trip!
  - a. What are some valuable outdoor survival techniques that Sam, Bill, and Red Chief would need to use on their adventures? For example, how would they make fire? How much water and food would they need? How would they protect themselves from the sun during the day, and stay warm at night?
  - b. Imagine that you are Red Chief, and you have decided to plan your camping adventure with Sam and Bill. How long will you be gone? How much food will you need? Will you hunt for game? What kinds of supplies will be required? What duties will you assign to Sam and Bill?
2. When Bill burns his hand on the beans, Red Chief says that butter will soothe the burn. Is this true? Use the Internet or a book of remedies to discover if butter will heal burns. What is the proper first aid procedure for burns?
3. Research weather patterns and landscape in the American Southwest.
  - a. What are the average daily high/low temperatures for each month of the year? What is the average rainfall for each month of the year?
  - b. What types of land formations are found there? What kinds of plants and animals are native to the region?

**WRITE TO CTC!**

After watching the play, write us a letter about it. Tell what you liked or disliked about the story, the characters, costumes, set, or anything else you observed. Support your thoughts with examples and reasons. (*Teachers' comments are also appreciated!*)

Mail to:  
CTC  
**P.O. Box 2007**  
**Sunnyvale, CA 94087**