

Island of the Blue Dolphins
The Devilfish

Grade Level

Middle School: Sixth through Eighth Grade

Subject

Literacy and Language Arts

Common Core Standards

RL.6.1, RL.6.4, RL.6.9, RL.7.1, RL.7.4, RL.7.9, RL.8.1, RL.8.4, RL.8.9

Background Information

The goal of this lesson is to hone students' skills in close reading by having them compare two texts of different genres written in different periods but on the same subject. Students will gain a better understanding of how different perspectives, authorial purposes, and narrative expectations can influence texts.

In Scott O'Dell's *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, one of Karana's central tasks is ensuring that she and Rontu have enough to eat in all seasons. While food is plentiful and Karana knows how to obtain it, she also craves the delicacies that were available to her when her whole community lived on the island. For that reason, she hunts the "devilfish," or giant octopus, despite the difficulty of the task.

Karana hunts devilfish on several occasions. But when she, Rontu, and a giant devilfish have a prolonged struggle, she realizes that the danger she has put herself and Rontu in is too great. She never hunts the devilfish again.

Like Karana, the Nicoleños who lived on San Nicolas Island hunted the octopuses that lived in the waters around the island. The species found around the Channel Islands today include the California two-spot octopus (*Octopus bimaculoides*), the East Pacific red octopus (*Octopus rubescens*), the North Pacific bigeye octopus (*Octopus californicus*), the California Lilliput octopus (*Octopus micropyrsus*), and the giant Pacific octopus (*Enteroctopus dofleini*).

Where did Scott O'Dell get the idea to have Karana and Rontu wrestle with a giant octopus? We can't be certain, as he didn't leave evidence. But we do know that the term "devilfish" was used by others writing about San Nicolas Island. In 1892, Ninetta Eames published an article titled "Three Weeks on a Weird Island" in *Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly*. This general interest magazine circulated between 1876–1956 and featured poetry, book reviews, and articles about science. Eames' "Three Weeks on a Weird Island" describes a frightening encounter between two men and a devilfish on San Nicolas Island.

Materials:

- Copies of the reading chart and the selected reading from “Three Weeks on a Weird Island” for each student
- Class set of *Island of the Blue Dolphins*
- Internet access for each student

Procedure

1. Prepare materials and familiarize yourself with the text.
2. Distribute handouts containing the reading chart and selected reading.
3. Ask students to read the selected readings from chapter 19 of *Island of the Blue Dolphins* and “Three Weeks on a Weird Island,” or read them aloud as a class.
 - The selected reading from *Island of the Blue Dolphins* is in Chapter 19, beginning with the paragraph “Rontu, who was trotting along in front of me, suddenly dropped his fish and stood looking down over the edge of the reef,” and ending with the paragraph “Rontu had a gash on his nose from the giant’s beak, and I had many cuts and bruises. I saw two more giant devilfish along the reef that summer, but I did not try to spear them.”
4. Instruct students to refer back to the readings as they fill out their reading charts, separately or in groups.
5. Have students answer the questions provided at the end of “Three Weeks on a Weird Island.”
6. Lead a discussion in which students share the differences they noticed between the two texts.
7. Ask students to research *Frank Leslie’s Popular Monthly*: What kind of publication was it? Who was its audience? (Students can be directed to the Lone Woman and Last Indians Digital Archive, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/islandofthebluedolphins/research.htm>.)
8. First in pairs and then as a class, discuss how the genres of a general interest magazine article and a children’s novel differ, and how those differences may have influenced narration in the two texts.

Suggested Readings

- “Giant Pacific Octopus,” Channel Islands National Park subject site on *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/islandofthebluedolphins/pacific-octopus.htm>.
- Ninetta Eames, “Three Weeks on a Weird Island,” *Frank Leslie’s Popular Monthly* 34, no. 6 (December 1892): 657–71. Lone Woman and Last Indians Digital Archive, University of South Carolina, <http://calliope.cse.sc.edu/lonewoman/home/Eames1892>.

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Island of the Blue Dolphins
The Devilfish

Chapter 19 of *Island of the Blue Dolphins* and Ninetta Eames' story, "Three Weeks on a Weird Island," both describe frightening encounters with "devilfish." Karana and Rontu risk their lives while trying to hunt the devilfish, while in "Three Weeks on a Weird Island," Charlie is afraid a devilfish will attack Leroy after he has accidentally fallen into the water. Both stories describe the devilfish as dangerous, but the authors present characters who have different attitudes towards the sea animal.

Directions: Reread the part of chapter 19 that describes Karana and Rontu's struggle with the devilfish and read "Three Weeks on a Weird Island." While you are reading, pay special attention to any descriptions of the devilfish, including what words Karana and Charlie use to describe the animal. Then, complete the chart below. Choose at least two quotes from each passage that contain descriptions of the devilfish; identify vocabulary (or diction) that each character uses to describe the devilfish; and explain how Karana or Charlie feels about the devilfish, based on the words each author uses.

Descriptive passage from Chapter 19, <i>Island of the Blue Dolphins</i>	Key vocabulary in the passage	Description of Karana's emotions at that point in the chapter

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Descriptive passage from "Three Weeks on a Weird Island"	Key vocabulary in the passage	Description of Charlie's emotions at that point in the story

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Selected Reading from “Three Weeks on a Weird Island”

Note: This passage is excerpted from a magazine article written by Ninetta Eames in 1892. The “weird island” is San Nicolas Island, the place Scott O’Dell calls the Island of the Blue Dolphins in his novel by the same name.

Having fixed things to our satisfaction, we made our way cautiously along a backbone of sandstone running far out beyond the frothing breakers. Being now ravenously hungry, we chose the smoothest surface at hand and stretched ourselves to dry, and munch our apples and biscuit. The direct rays of the sun set us to steaming at a great rate, and provoked an imperative [urgent] drowsiness. I fell asleep, and Leroy must have done likewise, for I was vaguely conscious of his deep breathing beside me.

An hour or so later my eyelids slowly unclosed in a delicious half-awakening, and the next instant I was straining my sight at what I took to be the tails of two enormous spotted snakes floating aimlessly out from a submerged boulder [boulder]. While absorbed in watching them a third undulatory shape was thrust like a tongue from the crevice, and was followed by a fourth and a fifth slimy, elongated tentacle, all of which broadened toward the same focus. When my curiosity was at its height a disgusting, jellylike mass detached itself from the rock and moved slowly forward by the aid of its eight feelers, three of which I had not perceived before.

I now realized that the bundle of “snakes” was in reality the antennae of one round, glutinous creature possessed of two large, watery eyes which glared voraciously. Though I had never before seen this hideous and formidable monster, I was convinced it was the octopus, commonly called the “devilfish,” and known to legendary lore as the “Kraken.”

Seeing the creature about to shamle off, I called sharply to Leroy. There was a loud splash and a choking cry in response. To my dismay I saw him struggling and sputtering in the water. In his violent awakening he had rolled off into the pool inhabited by the devilfish. I had read frightful accounts of its deadly embrace, and my presence of mind forsook [left] me. I shrieked wildly:

“Don’t climb up here! Go farther down. For mercy’s sake, hurry! He’s right under you!”

“I’m glad something is under me, for it seems a deucedly long way to the bottom! Lend a hand, can’t you, and don’t be so infernally scared!”

He extended one hand, while the other clutched the notched wall, his toes barely touching the shell-like boulder underneath. My eyes fell upon his shoes and socks drying beside me in the sun. Even now the blistering thongs of the octopus might be

reaching for his bare flesh! Fortunately he was ignorant of its malevolent [malicious, evil] presence. I remembered also that he could not swim a stroke. We both strained every muscle; but not until he had felt his way some yards down the submarine ledge was it possible for our united efforts to get him up the slippery stones.

When Leroy scrambled to his feet I submitted to a briny [salty] but dramatic embrace. Then breaking away, I ran to look for the devilfish. He was nowhere in sight, but there was a slight movement of the water where the monster had buried itself in a cleft of the rock.

When I explained to Leroy he stopped wringing his clothes and stared open-mouthed, then laughed extravagantly.

“The governor will never forgive me for not allowing myself to be thoroughly wound up and sucked dry for the benefit of science. Think what a beautiful exemplification of the polyp’s wonderful apparatus for exhausting air! Really, Charlie”—with whimsical gravity—“you did wrong to help me escape. The best we can do now is keep mum on the subject.”

And odd as it may appear, we carried out the suggestion, saying nothing about the adventure, even when the Chinamen a few days after hauled in their net only to find an octopus writhing among a score of other fish. Under the professor’s tutelage we had a chance to come to a pretty good understanding of the creature’s remarkable anatomy. Every snakelike feeler had on its under surface rows of suckers which act like cupping glasses to draw the blood of its victim. These tentacles are hollow, and supplied with sharp points on the ends. In fact, the whole shapeless, scabrous heap is quite revolting enough to give rise to the superstitious horror with which the “sea vampire” has ever been regarded.

Source: Ninetta Eames, "Three Weeks on a Weird Island," *Frank Leslie’s Popular Monthly* 34, no. 6 (1892): 657-71. Lone Woman and Last Indians Digital Archive, University of South Carolina, <http://calliope.cse.sc.edu/lonewoman/home/Eames1892>.

Using the readings and your reading chart, answer the following questions:

1. What type of animal is the devilfish? What other nicknames does Charlie give for the creature?
