



# The Sackville Street Caper

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## Teaching Guide

By Peter Heaney

### RATIONALE & THEMES

Adventure, fun and a crazy dash through Victorian Dublin provides a young Bram Stoker (author of *Dracula*) with material to feed his literary ambition. Bram absconds from his boarding school and joins pickpocket Molly Malone on a quest to prevent the theft of the Irish Crown Jewels.

Swapping a comfortable life in boarding school, Bram enjoys the uncertainty of life on the streets of Dublin, with every day an adventure.

The themes explored are:

- Determination
- Poverty
- Begging and stealing
- Victorian living conditions
- Social class divisions
- Friendship
- Fairness
- Taking responsibility
- Loyalty

### SUMMARY

Driven by his ambition to become a writer, young Bram believes that he is unable to acquire the necessary experience at his boarding school and runs away to find adventure on the streets of Dublin.

When he is robbed by a street gang, he pursues them into the maze of winding alleyways. He is knocked unconscious and awakens on Mud Island where he has been taken to meet Molly Malone, the leader of the Mud Island gang of thieves – the Sackville Street Spooks.

Molly accepts Bram into the gang when she realizes that his 'Quality' manner will be a useful addition to their enterprises. Bram agrees, hoping that being a gang member will provide him with the materials he needs to become a writer.

Tuesday being the gang's day of rest, Bram

accompanies them to the fair, a breath-taking spectacle of noise and excitement and learns that Molly is a very popular person.

However, other eyes are watching them and Count Vladimir's spies report back to him that they have located Molly, the best sneak thief in Ireland.

A visit to Madame Florence's tent reveals a distressing situation. Her husband, Wild Bert the Rodeo Rider, is in the Debtors' Prison and Molly offers to help him escape.

Meanwhile one of the Spooks, Billy the Pan, is being introduced to the King of the Beggarmen, in the hope that he can be initiated into the Brotherhood of Beggarmen. His initiation test is to bring a phoenix feather for the king.

Bubbling with excitement, Bram spots a poster announcing a reading by his hero Charles Dickens and Molly redeems a favour to secure exclusive access to the performance.

Count Vladimir is in straitened circumstances, and plans to kidnap Molly to assist him in plundering the Crown Jewels to restore his fortunes.

The Spooks' plan to free Wild Bert from the debtors' gaol is bold, relying on Bram using his 'Quality' manners to distract the gaolers to allow Molly to free Wild Bert. Their plan is successful and he is restored to Florence.

Billy the Pan (accompanied by his friend Shep) scales the fence into the Phoenix Park in search of the initiation feather. Securing a peacock feather, they are able to persuade the Beggar King to accept Billy.

Treating Bram to a trip to the top of Nelson's Column, Molly is kidnapped by Count Vladimir's spies. She manages to give an alarm whistle and Bram and the others set off in pursuit, only to watch in horror as Molly jumps from the cab, tumbles into the swollen River Liffey and disappears.

Bereft, they return to Mud Island, but are overjoyed when a bedraggled Molly appears and explains Vladimir's plan to steal the Crown Jewels that evening.

Bram reveals that his father is the custodian of the jewels and together they devise a plan that will thwart Vladimir.

Their plan works perfectly and as Vladimir is led off a final twist sees Molly secure a financial future for herself as they disappear into the night leaving Bram alone with his father.

### APPROACH

This is a very entertaining and fast-paced tale. It can be used in class to prompt imaginative discussion and writing.

This guide has divided the story into three sections and the activities offer suggestions on developing the themes.

## Section 1 Molly Pages 11 - 68

### SUMMARY

Bram confides to his diary about his decision to run away from school and seek adventure on the streets of Dublin to gain experience to equip him to become a writer.

Arriving in the city centre, Bram is distracted by a crying child (a clever trick performed by Molly Malone's gang) and finds that his satchel is stolen. He gives chase.

When he corners the Spooks in an alleyway, Bram is knocked unconscious by Billy, using a pan that he normally wears as a hat, and awakens on the floor of their Mud Island headquarters to meet the infamous Molly Malone. Molly promptly co-opts him into their gang and his adventure begins.

When his eyes adjust to the gloom, Bram

sees that it's a thief's den, full of the spoils their robbing (everything from soap and purses to toys and tools), including his diary, which he retrieves.

Realizing that Bram is "Quality" and an advantage to their operation, she explains their operation and then invites him to share their meal, which they have secured by trading their plunder.

Generally, as Shep explains the fare is plain, however, this evening, it is a banquet of roast chicken, as Mrs. Halpert had surplus and she had taken a liking to a delicate lace collar that Molly offered in exchange.

That evening, Bram confesses to his diary, his delight at his new circumstances.

Next morning, Billy apologises for his enthusiasm in hitting Bram with his pan, while Molly admits to being the best sneak thief in Dublin, before they all set off to enjoy the fair.

His senses are assailed and Bram is entranced by all the delights of the fairground. Everyone seems to know Molly and owe her a favour. They are welcomed wherever they go.

Billy is spirited away by his father, with Shep joining him. They all fail to notice that they are being watched by two of Count Vladimir's spies, who have been tasked with finding Molly and who now report back to the waiting Count.

## DISCUSSION POINTS

- (**Read p37**): Molly mentions 'the snatchers'. In Victorian times, body snatchers stole dead bodies and sold them to hospitals for research. Today people will sometimes donate their organs to help others. Is this something we should all do? Is it right to use our organs this way? Which organs would you give to someone else?
- (**Read pp46-48**): Molly and her gang are thieves. However, she explains that they only steal to eat. Is stealing acceptable in these circumstances? Do you have a right to steal if you are starving? Would you complain if a starving person stole from you? Do starving people across the world have the right to share what we have in Ireland?  
[youtube.com/watch?v=Zr1rzSSMsac](https://youtube.com/watch?v=Zr1rzSSMsac)  
[trocaire.org/our-work/educate/brighterfutures/primary/](http://trocaire.org/our-work/educate/brighterfutures/primary/)
- (**Read p50**): Mrs. Halpert isn't hungry. She has food to spare, yet she swaps it for something she knows is stolen. How could she defend what she has done?
- (**Read p52**): Molly teases Bram as 'Quality', those who believe that they are

better either through wealth or position. Who are the 'Quality' today? Is it right to divide people in this way? How would you recognize a fair society? What are the top three signs that a society was fair for everyone living in it?

[scoilnet.ie/search/?q=a%20fair%20society&fq=school\\_level%3A1](http://scoilnet.ie/search/?q=a%20fair%20society&fq=school_level%3A1)

## ACTIVITIES

### 1. The Adventure (**Read p13**)

Bram is looking for an adventure to give him ideas for writing stories. Can you help him by giving him an idea for an adventure that he can use to write an exciting story?

In small groups, create an exciting topic and storyline, including plot and characters for him.

Separately, each write a version of the story and then compare them. You can illustrate them if you wish.

You can also use iMovie to create your story as a film clip.

[scoilnet.ie/uploads/resources/14201/13839.pdf](http://scoilnet.ie/uploads/resources/14201/13839.pdf)

[bbc.co.uk/bitesize/topics/zx339j6/articles/zrwmwnb](http://bbc.co.uk/bitesize/topics/zx339j6/articles/zrwmwnb)

### 2. Pickpockets (**Read p24**)

Molly and her gang prepare to go pickpocketing. This was and is a daily danger for people living in Dublin as the gang use clever tricks to distract people while they steal from them.

Create a poster to warn people of the pickpockets and their tricks.

Think about the words and images you use, remembering that this is Victorian Dublin. Could you do a similar poster for today?

### 3. Dublin Experience (**Read p26**)

Bram has arrived in the centre of Dublin with no idea of where to go or what to do.

If he arrived in Dublin today, how could you make sure that he enjoyed his visit?

In small groups, prepare your own unique guide to Dublin, highlighting what he should see, where he might go and what dangers he should be aware of.

[visitdublin.com/things-to-do](http://visitdublin.com/things-to-do)

### 4. Robbed (**Read pp29-31**)

When Bram raised the alarm, the gang quickly disappeared.

Everyone who had been robbed will make a statement about what was stolen and its

personal value to them.

Make a copy of three of these to show the impact and distress that a theft can cause to someone.

[victimsupport.org.uk/help-and-support/coping-crime/how-can-crime-affect-you](http://victimsupport.org.uk/help-and-support/coping-crime/how-can-crime-affect-you)

## 5. Charmless Chowder (**Read p35**)

The author uses alliteration to add colour to his descriptions. It is a fun way to use rhyming sounds.

Look carefully at your mum's shopping list and rewrite it using illustration and as many alliterations as you can find to add **fun and flavour** to it.

[scoilnet.ie/search/?q=alliteration&fq=school\\_level%3A1](http://scoilnet.ie/search/?q=alliteration&fq=school_level%3A1)

[bbc.co.uk/bitesize/topics/zfkk7ty/articles/zc3v6g8](http://bbc.co.uk/bitesize/topics/zfkk7ty/articles/zc3v6g8)

## 6. Begging (**Read p63**)

Billy and his father are both beggars.

Begging might look easy to do. Just stand in the street, with a hand outstretched. However, it is difficult and requires skill to be successful.

Where and how to stand? What to wear? How to look? These must all be carefully considered.

His father has given him a copy of the Beggar's Almanac. It's only a single page, but it contains all a beggar must know.

Make a copy.

## Section 2 The Gaol-Break Pages 69 - 124

## SUMMARY

Bubbling with excitement, Molly steps off the big wheel with Bram and announces that they will visit Madame Florence the fortune teller, where they hear the sorry tale of Florence's husband, Wild Bert, who is incarcerated in the Debtors' Prison. Florence asks Molly to help him escape and Molly agrees.

Billy stands with his father in the gloom of a dark, damp cellar, listening to the chanting of the Brotherhood of Beggarmen as he awaits the arrival of the King, who when he appears, is wearing a huge multi-coloured cloak and informs Billy that he must bring a phoenix feather before he can be admitted to their Brotherhood.

Returning to their Mud Island headquarters after the fair in a glow of enjoyment, Bram spots a poster advertising a reading by his favourite author Charles Dickens, that very evening. He is immediately in a rapture of delight. Molly promises that she can get him in to see Dickens' performance if he will agree to help her free Wild Bert from gaol and the deal is enthusiastically agreed.

Count Vladimir's spies, report their sighting of Molly and they make preparations to kidnap her the following day to use her sneak thief skills to help them steal the Crown Jewels.

Molly escorts Bram to the theatre and on the way, he shares his story with her. When they arrive at the theatre, she redeems a favour to secure seats on the stage wings for the performance and an opportunity to meet Dickens afterwards. Bram is so overwhelmed by the experience that he cannot find the words to record it in his diary that evening.

Next day, Molly puts her plan to gaol-break Wild Bert into operation. Bram's role is to distract the guards by acting like 'Quality' and using their deference to mask what Molly is really doing.

The plan works perfectly and Wild Bert is restored to Florence in time for their wedding anniversary celebrations.

### DISCUSSION POINTS

- (Read pp105-106): Dickens remarks that for some books, the best parts are the covers and advises Bram and Molly to continue reading. What does he mean by this? What makes a book worth reading? How would **YOU** decide if a book wasn't worth reading? What benefits do you get from reading?  
[youngreadersfoundation.org/importance-of-reading/](http://youngreadersfoundation.org/importance-of-reading/)
- (Read pp108-109): Bram notices the housing squalor and poverty for the people living beside Mud Island and thanks his own good fortune for living where his own 'pretty house' is. However, is poverty simply bad luck? What are the causes of poverty? Is it bad luck or unequal treatment and opportunity?  
[goalglobal.org/changemakers](http://goalglobal.org/changemakers)  
[scoilnet.ie/search/?q=poverty&fq=school\\_level%3A1](http://scoilnet.ie/search/?q=poverty&fq=school_level%3A1)  
[concernusa.org/story/causes-of-poverty/](http://concernusa.org/story/causes-of-poverty/)
- (Read pp111-113 & 115): Molly knows that the police always defer to 'Quality' and rarely question them. She uses this to distract the guards. Do you think that some people are treated differently because they are 'Quality'? Why do we

defer to people we think are better than us? Are some people really better than us? Which groups are treated differently in our society? What does it mean to be treated equally? How can we make sure that everyone is treated equally?

- (Read pp112-115): It was common in Victorian Times to be sent to gaol if you couldn't pay your debt. The debtor was kept in gaol until the debt was paid. Is this a fair punishment? Should people be sent to gaol for debt? Is it fair for rich countries to continue to demand poor countries repay their debts when their own people go hungry?  
[scoilnet.ie/search/?q=debt&fq=school\\_level%3A1](http://scoilnet.ie/search/?q=debt&fq=school_level%3A1)  
[bbc.co.uk/programmes/p03gj1qs](http://bbc.co.uk/programmes/p03gj1qs)  
[bbc.co.uk/programmes/p03gj1qs](http://bbc.co.uk/programmes/p03gj1qs)

### ACTIVITIES

#### 1. The Fair (Read pp70-71)

The fair is an amazing experience for Bram. The noise, smells and sights are breathtaking. That evening, he tries to capture the excitement of the day for his diary.

In Bram's style. (p33) create the entry he might have written.

#### 2. Dear Count (Read pp88-89)

Vladimir's fortune has disappeared and he has been forced to sell all of his treasures.

He is very short of money and his bank manager has written a stern letter to him complaining of his spending and his poor financial habits.

Make a copy of the letter his bank might have sent to him.

#### 3. You can READ! (Read pp105-106)

Bram is surprised to discover that Molly can read. There are many people today in Ireland and globally who cannot read.

There are many reasons for this.

In groups, prepare a letter to your TD urging the Dáil to take action to support these people. Include statistics and your own suggestions about how they might be supported as well as descriptions of how living with illiteracy denies them many opportunities.

[worldliteracyfoundation.org/early-intervention-reduces-illiteracy/](http://worldliteracyfoundation.org/early-intervention-reduces-illiteracy/)  
[nala.ie/literacy-and-numeracy-in-ireland/](http://nala.ie/literacy-and-numeracy-in-ireland/)

#### 4. The Malaprop (Read p109)

Calico Tom uses a malapropism (*The elephant of surprise*) to explain why their plan will succeed.

Like Mrs. Malaprop, he uses them a lot and Rose finds them very funny. She keeps a list of her favourites.

In groups make a copy of the best three from her list, describing what he said and what he meant to say.

You can add illustrations to heighten the comic effect.

[almanac.com/funny-malapropisms](http://almanac.com/funny-malapropisms)

#### 5. Who's O'Donovan? (Read pp 118-119)

For a few seconds, the guards start at each other and then realise that if Molly is involved, they have been tricked.

The author thought that he might include a short paragraph describing their confusion and dialogue as they dash about trying to discover what she was up to and who the 'Quality' really was.

Make a copy of the paragraph he might have included, up to the point where they discover the empty cell and the opened rear door.

#### 6. Quality (Read pp114-115)

After Bram's 'Quality' performance, Calico Tom is really impressed and declares that he would like to be able to behave like 'Quality' as well.

Bram agrees to coach him and produces a **YOU TOO CAN ACT LIKE Quality** illustrated single sheet guide for him.

It includes advice on what to say and how to say it; how to walk and where to stand in a room; how to dress and hold your head and how to look at people.

Make a copy of the leaflet he gave him.

## Section 3 Bram the Spook Pages 125 - 221

### SUMMARY

Billy the Pan, accompanied by Shep set off for the Phoenix Park to find the Phoenix feather that will allow him to complete his initiation into the Brotherhood of Beggars.

Barred entry to the Zoo, they scale the fence and explore the enclosures until they secure a peacock feather. They present it to the Beggar King and he accepts their logic that

since the feather is from the Phoenix Park, then it must be a Phoenix feather and Billy is inducted into the Brotherhood.

Molly decides that since it is a wet day, they will climb the stairs inside Nelson's Column and admire the view instead of picking pockets. Bram notices that Molly is missing and when her alarm whistle pierces the air, they rush to the parapet to see her being bundled into a cab and driven off.

They give chase and watch in horror as she leaps from the cab as it crosses bridge and tumbles into the Liffey.

They can see no sign of her in the swollen river and are convinced she has drowned.

Back at Mud Island, their gloom suddenly disappears when a wet and muddy Molly reappears.

She explains that she was rescued by a sailor and that she had been kidnapped to help Count Vladimir steal the Crown Jewels that evening.

Bram is upset, explaining that his father is the keeper of the jewels and will lose his job if they are stolen.

Determined to teach the Count a lesson and frustrate the theft, Molly puts a plan into action to switch the jewels and fool the Count into stealing a bag of worthless costume jewellery.

Entering the Dublin Castle stronghold through the culverted Poddle stream, they switch the real jewels and watch as the Count steals the fakes and escapes.

Unfortunately, he spots the fakes and chases Molly and her gang who have the real ones.

A wild pursuit through the alleyways, leads them to the crypts below St Michan's, where confronted by the ranks of the Brotherhood of Beggarmen and the Castle guards led by Bram's father, the Count and his spies surrender and hand over the jewels.

The beggars and Molly slip away unseen and Bram is left to a warm embrace and reunion with his father who restores the jewels to the castle strongroom.

Bram can't bring himself to tell his father that the jewels in the castle strongroom are the fakes and a letter from Molly, written as she departs for a new life in America confirms his suspicion that she has used the real jewels to spread good fortune to the rest of the Mud Island Spooks.

### DISCUSSION POINTS

- (Read pp134): The tenement where Billy and his family live is a slum. It is squalid and very overcrowded. Is it fair that

people have to live in these conditions? Should everyone have a right to proper housing irrespective of whether they can afford them? Is it the Government role to make sure that everyone has proper housing to live in?

[scoilnet.ie/search/?q=slums&fq=school\\_level%3A1](http://scoilnet.ie/search/?q=slums&fq=school_level%3A1)

[liverpoolecho.co.uk/news/liverpool-news/gallery/18-striking-images-capture-poverty-19120149](http://liverpoolecho.co.uk/news/liverpool-news/gallery/18-striking-images-capture-poverty-19120149)

[habitatireland.ie/where-we-work/](http://habitatireland.ie/where-we-work/)

- (Read p162): Molly reminds the Spooks that they are a family. It is human nature to prefer to belong to groups or gangs or teams. We are more comfortable when we do things as a group. Why do we have this instinct? Why is it more attractive to be part of a team? Are there dangers in allowing a group to decide what we do rather than making your own decisions? How would you spot the danger signs?
- (Read pp189-190): The jewels are found to be fake. However, does it really matter? They are simply shiny ornaments. Most people prefer to wear costume jewellery. Why do people wear expensive jewellery? What are they trying to say about themselves? Why do we all need to be noticed in this way?
- (Read pp211-213): Bram knows that Molly has taken the real jewels and that those in the safe are fakes. Should he have made sure that the real jewels were returned? Does it matter if the jewels in the safe are fake if no-one knows? Is it really a crime if no-one ever knows about it?

### ACTIVITIES

#### 1. The Feather (Read p133)

When the author was describing the phoenix and its feather, he thought that it might be a good idea to have an illustration of them both.

Unfortunately, he couldn't find a suitable artist.

Create a coloured illustration for his description.

#### 2. Appreciation (Read p139)

Bram thinks about how his life has changed and how fortunate he was to have a comfortable bed and regular meals.

He determines to appreciate them when he eventually returns home.

In small groups make a list of the five things in your life which are worth appreciating.

Individually, write an illustrated note to your

parents / carers to show your appreciation.

### 3. Help (Read p147)

Molly has fallen into the Liffey and the gang are unable to rescue her from the swollen river.

In you saw someone fall into the water or in difficulty would you know what to do?

In groups create a simple instruction manual for Molly to help her stay safe in the river and one for the gang to help them to be able to safely rescue her.

Remember, some of them can't read so you will have to use diagrams and matchstick characters to tell them what they can safely do.

[scoilnet.ie/search/?q=water%20safety&fq=school\\_level%3A1](http://scoilnet.ie/search/?q=water%20safety&fq=school_level%3A1)

[rospa.com/leisure-water-safety/water/advice/water-safety-code](http://rospa.com/leisure-water-safety/water/advice/water-safety-code)

### 4. Dubh Linn (Read p168)

Molly explains that the name 'Dublin' comes from the description in Irish of a deep pool beside the castle – 'Dubh Linn', 'The Black Pool'.

Irish origins for the names of the places we live are very common.

Find at least two names from your local places that have Irish origins.

Create an illustrated explanation that your local council might like to use on their media to encourage tourists to visit.

### 5. Passwords (Read p181)

Bram is able to easily guess his father's password / combination for the safe.

It is really important to keep your information safe and you should choose / create your passwords with great care so that they can't be guessed and that you can remember them easily.

In groups create a password maker guide that Bram's father might use to help him create secure passwords..

[wikihow.com/Create-a-Password-You-Can-Remember](http://wikihow.com/Create-a-Password-You-Can-Remember)

### 5. Dear Bram (Read pp213-214)

Many years after his adventure, Bram publishes his book *Dracula*.

It is very popular. Molly reads a copy and remembers Bram and their adventure.

She decides to write to congratulate him, share their memories and tell him what she is doing now.

Make a copy of the letter she wrote.