Narrative
Benedict Arnold and Dishonor

☐ I can define the vice of dishonor by examining the story of Benedict Arnold

Essential Vocabulary (See Glossary for Definitions)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>dishonor</td>
<td>Failing to demonstrate good character and integrity and acting deceptively.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>integrity</td>
<td>To tell the truth, expose untruths, and keep your promises.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>self-deception</td>
<td>Acting on a belief that a false idea or situation is true. Being deluded or deceived by ideas that endanger the humanity of others and movements that are unjust.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>treason</td>
<td>The crime of betraying one's country, especially by attempting to kill the sovereign citizens or overthrow the government.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>conspiracy</td>
<td>A secret plan by a group to do something unlawful or harmful.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sunshine Patriot
A soldier who only supports a cause when it is winning and not through challenging times. This phrase comes from an influential pamphlet by Thomas Paine, *The American Crisis No. 1, written in 1776.*

infamous
Being famous for doing something bad or treacherous.

turncoat
A traitor.
courier
A person who carries messages.

Narrative

During the first six years of the American Revolution, few fought with greater honor and sacrificed more for the cause than Benedict Arnold of Connecticut. In 1775, he led a failed American invasion of Canada, in which the participants nearly died from starvation and exposure traversing the wilderness of Maine. The following year, Arnold helped turn back a British invasion of the United States from Canada at Valcour Island on Lake Champlain. Most importantly, in the fall of 1777, General Arnold played a critical role in forcing the British to surrender at Saratoga, New York. This victory convinced France to enter into an alliance with the colonies that helped lead to American Independence. In securing that key success, Arnold suffered grievous wounds that cost him a couple of inches of bone in one of his legs and left him disabled. He was trusted for his character and self-sacrifice.

In the opening months of the Revolution, Americans shared Arnold’s patriotism. But as the war wore on, many lost their enthusiasm and dropped out of the cause, leaving Arnold increasingly disgusted by the apathy of his fellow countrymen. Not only did Arnold’s fellow citizens leave...
the tough job of fighting the British up to a tiny minority; they also neglected to support the army financially, and instead concerned themselves with their civilian pursuits. Arnold grew more and more frustrated with these “sunshine patriots.”

Many Continental Army officers and enlisted men shared Arnold’s bitterness toward the American public. Others expressed their frustration either by simply resigning and going home, or by organizing themselves to lobby Congress for a redress of grievances. Officers pressured Congress to recognize their services by voting them a military pension and to provide for the widows and orphans of those killed in action.

But Arnold lacked the patience for collective action. Instead, he preferred to take lonely and dramatic stands on his own. Denied the major general’s commission he believed he deserved (Connecticut, it seemed, already had its quota of major generals), he battled Congress on his own for justice. Thanks to the loyal support of his commanding officer, General George Washington, Congress grudgingly awarded Arnold the position, but refused him the promotion he merited. Arnold saw this as Congress being petty.

A “perfect storm” of factors — his crippling injuries, his intolerable mistreatment, and even his recent marriage to a lady half his age with strong British connections and a lifestyle he could not afford — all drove Arnold to reckless and dishonorable measures.

He concluded that the new United States had become even more corrupt than Great Britain. And if that was the case, then the colonies might as well reconcile with the mother country. And who better to bring about that reconciliation than Arnold himself — the one and only virtuous revolutionary remaining? Self-pitying and increasingly delusional, Arnold contemplated the unthinkable: He would defect to the British! He even convinced himself that his treason would inspire other officers to defect, crushing the Revolution once and for all. The honorable and courageous revolutionary officer gave in to deception and dishonor.

Arnold used his influence with his loyal mentor, General Washington, to obtain command of the critical U.S. fort at West Point on the Hudson River. He then closed his infamous secret deal with the British: He would commit treason against his country and turn over West Point to the enemy without a fight.

Even worse, he would betray the commander who had always stood up for him. Arnold carefully arranged the surrender to take place while General Washington was present at West Point, so that the British would not only acquire the strategic stronghold but would also obtain Washington as a prisoner. In return, Arnold would receive a general’s commission in the British army and a whopping cash reward of 10,000 pounds sterling.
In the end, Arnold’s treasonous plot against both his country and his commander failed — only because some local militia forces by chance captured a spy, Major John André, carrying details of the conspiracy. Washington, who now knew of Arnold’s treachery, secured West Point. The turncoat fled to the British for protection. Washington demanded Arnold’s return, so that he could be hanged for treason. When the British refused to hand over Arnold, Washington instead hanged John André, the captured British courier. André, a handsome, charming, well-liked young British officer, died at the gallows in place of Arnold.

Although appointed a British general as he had been promised, Arnold never obtained the fame and recognition he craved. Having proven himself a traitor, the British could never trust him with significant responsibilities. Arnold’s claim to fame during the remainder of the war was to burn to the ground the city of New London, Connecticut (just a few miles from his birthplace in Norwich), in a British raid. After the war, Arnold went to England, where he lived until he died at the age of 60. He has been reviled in American history ever since as a traitor to his country and remained a model of dishonor.

The ultimate irony of Arnold’s treason is that it sent such shock waves across the U.S. that instead of inspiring mass defections and a reconciliation with Great Britain, it instead inspired the very patriotic sacrifices for the cause that Arnold had once sought — the very sacrifices needed finally to secure American Independence.

**Analysis Questions**

1. How did Benedict Arnold serve his country in the Revolutionary War?
2. Why did Arnold grow frustrated with his fellow Patriots?
3. Should Arnold have joined with his fellow officers in lobbying Congress to better support their services? Should he have fought alone for the pension of one man killed in action? When that failed, should he have used his own money to help that man’s family? Explain.
4. Make a list of all the betrayals you note in the story. Were any merely imagined?
5. In your judgment, what is the very worst thing Arnold did? Why? Which of his actions are understandable, but still flawed? Why?
4. Can we come closer to understanding a virtue by examining its opposite? How did Arnold’s actions evidence dishonor, dishonesty, and cowardice? What virtue(s) does his story help you understand?
5. Do you think Benedict Arnold believed he was acting with integrity?
6. What is to keep people who believe they are doing right from hurting the people they believe they are protecting?
8. What is the importance of integrity in a constitutional republic such as in the United States?
9. Describe a situation in which you may be susceptible to self-deception about your own integrity.