

Treasure Island: historical background and literary analysis

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An amazing adventure, one that everyone dreams of since childhood, is the quest for a secret treasure in a distant island. A brave boy, among good and bad pirates, within the exotic setting of a mysterious island, is the protagonist of one of the most famous stories for the young: Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Treasure Island* (1881)

We shall start with a general outlook at the historical background of the Robert Louis Stevenson's adventure, which goes back to the 18th century, at the end of the Georgian era, leading the way to 19th century Victorian England. It was a time of piracy and big ships as well, felt by Stevenson and his contemporaries as a lost time, a lost way of living and above all a time where individual freedom was much more at hand, or at least seemed easier to attain than in those years under Victoria's rule.

Earlier in the 18th century, Queen Anne had left no direct heir to the English throne, who passed therefore to her nearest of kin, the Protestant George of Hanover, who became George I of England (1714 – 27). He spoke not a word of English, and showed no actual interest in ruling England, so that he proved to be rather unsuited to be the real sovereign his new kingdom. He tried to solve the problem by handing over all ruling responsibilities to his Prime Minister and his office, so that in the end the task of ruling the nation, all major authority, was actually in the hands of politicians and not of the king. In a rather different way from the former, George II (1727 – 60), continued the Hanoverian rule. The Seven Year's war took place against France (1755-63), while England was gaining territories and expanding its power all over the world (Canada, Florida, America east of the Mississippi, etc). Overseas, the East India Company had established trading posts at Calcutta and Madras, and England, after fighting against French and Indian troops became the owner of the East India Company monopoly. It was though during the third and last of the Hanoverian Georges, George III and the Regency (1760 – 1820), that England

suffered the loss of the American colonies and saw the end of its victories overseas and on land, in the war against Napoleon (1793-1815).

As far as piracy is concerned, a quick look at the word's etymology would help to clarify some ideas. The Latin term "pirata", from which the English "pirate" stems, derives from Greek "peira", that means "attack", "attempt". Piracy is an act of robbery committed at sea, and the one who commits piracy is obviously a pirate.

The earliest documented act of piracy dates back to the 13th century BC, referring to the exploits of the Sea Peoples who threatened the Aegean. The Sea Peoples is the term used for a mysterious confederacy of seafaring raiders who sailed into the eastern shores of the [Mediterranean](#), invaded several locations and attempted to enter [Egyptian](#) territory. As far as England is concerned, piracy began to be popular and fully acknowledged as an actual danger in seafaring, in the beginning of the 18th century, by 1713, when peace was signed at the Treaty of Utrecht, thus ending the war of the Spanish Succession (also called Queen Anne's War). With the end of this conflict, thousands of seamen, including Britain's paramilitary privateers, were relieved of military duty. The result was a large number of trained sailors at a time when the cross-Atlantic colonial shipping trade was beginning to boom. However, the great or classic era of piracy in the Caribbean extends from around 1560 until 1766. Traffic on shipping lines between Africa, Caribbean and Europe began to soar in the 18th century, a model that was known as a triangular trade, and was a rich target for piracy. Trade goods between these three places were sugar, rum and slaves. Blackbeard (1680-1713), the nickname of Edward Teach, is perhaps the most well known real pirate of that time, and lived in Bristol, the city where the treasure hunting campaign of the *Treasure Island* started. Blackbeard began his career as a seaman on English privateers, sailing out for Jamaica during the War of Spanish Succession (1701 – 1713) and his famous ship was the 'Queen Anne's Revenge', as a sort of response to the end of Queen Anne's war.

Later on in 19th century Victorian England, more precisely in 1876, Queen Victoria was declared Empress of India and the British Empire saw a further expansion and consolidation. The prevailing attitude in Britain was that expansion of British control around the globe was good for everyone. At home, the Industrial Revolution was also a demographic revolution with consequences in urbanization as it accelerated the emigration of the population from country to city and the result was the development of horrifying slums and cramped row housing in the overcrowded cities. It was in this century that literature saw its importance growing rapidly. A simple though important reason for this is that reading aloud to a small audience, mostly at home within the family and a limited circle of friends was definitely the most common entertainment at the time. The advent of a universal compulsory educational policy after 1870 meant that illiteracy was being fought and a new larger audience for literature was actually growing. The great social changes that happened in [Britain](#) during Victoria's reign as a result of the later part of the [Industrial Revolution](#) led also to important changes in the way literature was conceived and was supposed to act upon society, particularly in the case of the social or psychological novel or other narrative genres in general. Throughout its long history the very act of reading literature had been the preserve and privilege of the aristocratic or the learned classes in society, those who had the time and money to indulge in a

kind of non-profitable, [hobby](#)-like activity as reading. Many factors contributed to make reading both more accessible and desirable, all these including, for example, the development of a highly ambitious and revolutionary educational policy by which all children were compelled to attend school, a new sense of well being and comfort in everyday life among wider sectors of Victorian society, mainly within the bourgeoisie, which meant the building and decorating of more appealing houses, served with [gas light](#) and pleasantly heated. The Victorians are therefore often credited with the invention of childhood, as they took a real effort to stop child labour in as much as they cared for their education and sought to look at them as different from adults. The child had its own identity and had to be respected as such and no longer as an “adult in miniature”. Literature for young people became a growing industry with, not only, adult novelists producing works for children but also authors that only worked for them.

In the 19th century there were two popular types of novels: on the one hand, those novels dealing with the theme of the navy yarn, which places a capable officer in an adventurous situation within a realistic setting and historical events; on the other hand, there are those that deal thematically with the desert island romance. This last type of ‘romantic’ novel was the one that had more influence in Stevenson’s work, since it features shipwrecked or marooned characters, confronted by all sorts of perils in their treasure-seeking adventure, such as pirates and angry natives,. The desert island romance was very important in Great Britain, around 1815, perhaps because of the philosophical interest in Rousseau and Chateaubriand’s “noble savagery”. In *The Treasure Island* we see clear influences from these authors as well as from some of Stevenson’s contemporaries, like Edgar Allen Poe, in his fantastic tales like *The Gold- Bug*, where he took the idea of the captain Flint’s skeleton. From Washington Irving, Stevenson constructed Billy Bones’ history, and, in reality, he based himself in people to model the *Treasure Island* pirates: Long John Silver was inspired by the pirate Henry, Ben Gunn was inspired by Benjamin Gunn of Rio Pun Go, etc.

The novel presents two different narrators: Jim, who narrates in first person almost all the story, and Dr. Livesey, who assumes it from chapter XI to XVII. Jim is therefore an autodiegetic narrator because he is the protagonist and his narrative technique allows the reader to gain much more insight into what the character feels as a young teenager, what his emotions are and the way he sees everything else around him. The other narrator, Dr. Livesey, is a homodiegetic narrator, because he is not the protagonist even though he plays a part in the story, and not a lesser one as a matter of fact. His account is very factual and contains plenty of details, and unlike Jim, he keeps a more detached attitude towards expressing his own feelings and emotions, thus not allowing the reader to get into what he thinks or feels. The reason why the author changes the narrator in chapter XI is, firstly, because Jim does not know what is happening to his friends while he decides to escape from the ship and have his adventure inland; secondly, as the story is all narrated in the first person, narrators, either Jim or Livesey, can only tell what they witness in the exact places where they happen to be, each one at a time, as narrative time, unlike the story time, cannot be overlapped.

Through the whole book the author uses different narrative techniques. One of them is the use of perspective in a continuous shifting of focus in

presenting the most relevant characters (e.g., Jim or Silver), so as to produce in the reader a certain blurring of identity, which often comes along with one's acknowledgement of the complex duality of human nature: no one is ever altogether good or evil. Ethics as well as social morals are put at stake and largely though subtly questioned. Also, the shift of narrators is a good example of this technique, because it enables the reader to observe the same sequence of events from two different perspectives. Another technique is the use of retrospective: when the author begins and ends the novel with a retrospective into a presumably distant past, that is, the story begins and ends as a recollection of past events taken from the comfort of the present life, bearing the wide opposition between a past youthful experience amidst adventures and dangers and a present experience where more mature years brought about material as well as psychological ease and comfort. Once back again from his quest trip to the Treasure Island, Jim promises to himself that he won't venture into such an adventure anymore in his lifetime. This technique makes *Treasure Island* a good model of story telling, because from the outset it creates interest and suspense, so that the story never flags while it always succeeds in bringing the meaning of adventure into a new light. The use of suspense as a technical narrative device characterizes thus the whole novel, being particularly conspicuous at the end of each chapter so that the reader is inevitably forced to turn the page to know what will happen next. This technique of ending suspense may be related to the fact that *Treasure Island* was originally published as a series in a periodical – (1881) – so it was important to end each episode in a way that would make readers eager to look for the next one in new issue. For example, Chapter XIX is a very clear instance of this, when Jim resumes the narration again, leaving us intensely curious about what is happening back in the pirates' ship. Even to increase suspense, quite often the author uses the technique of foreshadowing, by which he makes his narrator(s) predict what will happen. This device can be seen, for instance, at the end of chapter XI, when Dr. Livesey predicts what will be the downfall of the trio setting out, and also in chapter XXVII, when as soon as Jim sets foot on the island he is struck with two signs that his comrades are not to well. Finally, there's the coincidence technique. It is another narrative device that makes the character appear in "the right place at the right time". Some good examples of the coincidence technique are in chapter II, when the doctor arrives after the fight, before though the captain comes to consciousness, and in chapter VI, when Livesey is conveniently having dinner with the squire at the precise moment Jim is arriving, so there is no need for any of them to waste time trying to locate each other. Many critics point out that the use of coincidence is the weakest element of Stevenson's novel, as it can be rather unrealistic notwithstanding with the general tone of the story. After all, as a story addressed to teenagers and youths *Treasure Island* bears throughout all its pages a fantastic and imaginative dimension that can very well afford to include unrealistic details or facts that help to project ourselves into far away dreamlike realms.

The use of language in *Treasure Island* is always appropriated to each speaker. For instance, Long John Silver speaks his own language, has a 'pirate' popular style of his own (he uses idiosyncratic phrases such as "you may lay to that") and the language becomes his identity (Stevenson, *Treasure Island*: Chapter XXIX). Ben Gunn uses incorrect spelling to illustrate perhaps his illiteracy (idem: Chapter XV). Stevenson's use of figurative language, on the

other hand, makes the reader see and feel with greater intensity what he/she is reading. A good example of figurative language is on chapter XXIII when we can almost see and feel the forces that control Jim, namely the ocean, and also see the pirates that he can watch on the shore and in the ship. Together with these particular aspects of language comes the use of symbols as they broaden immensely the meaning of the novel. Here are some of the most important symbols of *Treasure Island*: knives, that represent danger and killing, especially for Jim, for example, in Chapter XXVI, when Israel Hands threatens the boy with a knife; money, that is a symbol of corruption and death and also of power, in such an extent that it makes people run for it. In Chapter XXIV, we can see money as a symbol when Jim packs the money into the bags while he reflects not only upon the wealth it will bring him but also upon the costs that this money has had: seventeen men have died for it. Last but not the least, the ship, the *Hispaniola*, is a crucial symbol in the novel, not only as the actual vessel that enables the quest trip to the Treasure Island, with all associated meanings of adventure, self-knowledge and self-formation (as a real life education), but also as the ship that lies behind all possible connections and complex mechanisms between savagery and civilization within the Western world of the time, namely, the 19th century Victorian age. To go back a hundred years as in the story, to the seventeen hundreds, may be considered symbolic as well.

The *Treasure Island* presents to us, finally, a number of themes to which we would now draw your attention, though in a brief selection of topics as the following:

- It represents the classical adventure, whereby its protagonist becomes totally involved in the action, playing the traditional role of the hero.
- Good vs Evil, is presented here as a theme of moral ambiguity which does not impose a definite choice to the reader to choose. However, didactically enough, as a narrative for younger ones, the good triumphs over the evil, and everyone gets he deserves. The pirates meet a bad end, and the good ones are rewarded with the treasure. The only exception is Silver because of the ambiguity of character and behaviour associated to him: although he is a pirate he likes Jim and plays to the growing orphaned boy as a male model role. In Chapter XI, there is a good example of the conflict opposing good and evil in the dialogue accompanying the mutiny of the pirates.
- Death in this novel is quick, clean and efficient following the rapid advancement of the plot, while it eventually serves to cast potential obstacles to the adventure still ahead. There are lots of good examples of this theme throughout the novel but it is on chapter XXVII that we can see death as utterly representative. Quite ruthlessly, though in self-defense, Jim kills Israel Hands and shows no regret but relief about it, because the only thing he wants is to save his own life and to continue his treasure hunt in the island.
- Hero's growing up from boyhood to manhood. At the beginning of the novel Jim is a young boy living with his parents at a quite country inn, knowing very little about the outside world. But at the end he has matured to be a young though experienced man who has faced death, sailed across the high seas, met with all sorts of

dangers, killed a man in self-defense and finally has been rewarded with his due share of a treasure that anyone of his time and place would envy. So Jim develops from a purely passive character into an experienced and resourceful campaigner. This development is particularly evident in Chapter V (when he is a young boy but exhibits several typical features of the hero in an adventure book), as well as in Chapters XIV, XXII, XXVIII and XXX (Jim achieves his full moral stature as a proper man within the core of the action).

- Jim interpreting the hero. This young boy who turns into a wiser young man is presented as a kind of wish-to-be model for Stevenson's youthful audiences. In his dreams and aspirations, Jim appeals to all young boys from all times who, like him, feel they have to impose themselves in a hostile world, breaking up some rules while respecting others, giving up parental protection for the sake of finding out who they really are and what they are supposed to do in the world they live in. Like all these boys, Jim is but an ordinary one who manages to surpass himself in a surprising way. A good example of this, with symbolic resonances, is presented in chapter XXIII, when Jim cuts the ship away, as the only possible solution because he isn't able to steer the small ship himself.
- The 'father' as a male-model theme. After his father's death, Jim meets a number of older men who may represent to him possible male-model roles. One of these men is Israel Hands (Stevenson, *Treasure Island*: Chapter XXVI), who teaches Jim to sail and land the Hispaniola; another one, the most important, is Long John Silver (idem: Chapter XXXI), who, in his rough, unconventional manner, cares for and protects Jim almost like a father, because he sees himself as that young boy when he himself was his age; lastly, Dr. Livesey can also be considered a father figure to Jim because Jim respects him for his professional qualifications and his moral uprightness.
- Quest theme, which in Stevenson's novel appears in the shape of a treasure hunt. Critics often refer to its close association to the 19th century romantic endless quest for perfection, no matter what difficulties and perils lie ahead.
- Ignorance vs Knowledge theme. A subsidiary though prevailing theme in the novel, as it does not stand immediately forward as all other themes seem to do. Stevenson uses it to enhance the possibilities of suspense, and it becomes evident as the crew get to know of the pirates' planned mutiny (Stevenson, *Treasure Island*: Chapter XII).
- Savagery vs Civilized world theme. We are made to realize the bitter truth that nature, and not men, is a ruthless, dominant power ruling the world of all creatures and things, an idea that becomes quite clear in chapter XXII, where we are well aware, Jim included, that we cannot control our own destiny. Jim must rely on nature's whims, or on a wiser destiny, to carry them all wherever it may.

CONCLUSION:

The themes presented in the novel call the attention of the kids, not only because of the main character (Jim) is a young boy, like them, but also because of the marvellous, fantastic and enigmatic novel background, that appeals to their imagination and adventurous side of life.

The origins of the fairy tale come from the eighteenth century, in salons, where mainly aristocratic women could get together to *demonstrate their intelligence and education through different types of conversational games* (Jack Zipes, *The Origins of the Fairy Tale for Children or, How Script Was Used to Tame the Best in Us*: p.121). The tales that soon men and women started to write served to introduce moral values, the honour codes and instruct children in an amusing way, and Stevenson's *Treasure Island* is a good example of this kind of writing.

The main message of the novel is: the ethics and morality, the values of good and evil are intrinsically ambiguous, so that in the end all choices are to be taken individually as personal acts of assuming one's responsibility in life, towards all others who surround us.

So, this novel has everything to be successful between the young and teenagers for the next generations, as it is an up to date novel, that will always serve as an escape from these children's reality.

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