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Blood or Chance: An Examination of Wealth and Character in *Treasure Island*

In *Treasure Island*, author Robert Louis Stevenson subverts the expectations of his readers through simple writing and subtle narrative techniques. On its surface *Treasure Island*, is about a boy who never changes or learns from his own mistakes, that reaffirms the Victorian idea that wealth belongs to those born into it. Inspecting the text closer, reveals that the novel's protagonist, Jim Hawkins, does change through external matters such as class. *Treasure Island* subverts readers' expectations by having Jim Hawkins change through the choices of characters that act as his father, allowing him to move upward in the class system, disputing Victorian views of class and wealth by having Jim gain it by chance.

Treasure Island subverts expectations by first making readers think it is supporting Victorian ideas of wealth through the moralities of characters with it. In the novel there are two kinds of men with wealth, the pirates and the aristocrats, and these two types of people represent two classes of Victorian gentlemen, gentlemen born and gentlemen of fortune. Children's literature critic, Naomi J. Wood, explains that *Treasure Island* focuses on two kinds of upper class Victorian men, gentlemen of birth, and gentlemen of fortune. Gentlemen born, are those born into wealth, while gentlemen of fortune are those that come into wealth later in life due to a combination of luck and hard work. In Victorian England, gentlemen of fortune were looked down upon as the aristocracy, and a large part of the rest of their society, believed that only those born into wealth deserved it, (Wood 66-69). *Treasure Island* upholds the notion that only

gentlemen born deserve their wealth by making the prominent villains, the pirates, gentlemen of fortune, while most of the protagonists, or heroes, are aristocratic gentlemen born.

Treasure Island asserts that only gentlemen born are deserving of wealth by associating moral quality with social status. Two key traits of gentlemen of fortune Wood points out are, they were of lower social standing than gentlemen born, and that their social status is subject to consistent changes throughout their lives, (Wood 66). When doing our own reading of *Treasure Island* these ideas are applicable to the pirates. The pirates are immediately associated with change when the first one is introduced. In the book's opening narration, the protagonist, Jim Hawkins, is telling us how he was instructed to write down the events of his adventure from start to finish. Jim marks the start of his adventure as, "...the time when [his] father kept the 'Admiral Benbow' inn, and the brown old seaman, with the sabre cut, first took up his lodging under [their] roof," (Stevenson 9). Despite the adventure not actually starting until the blind pirate Pew attacks the Admiral Benbow. Jim starts his story by describing the pirate called the captain and gives a detailed recount of his stay at the inn, which is something he could have skipped to the end of. Jim starts his story with the captain and describing his entire stay signifies that when Jim's life changed and events started to fall to place, a major change is linked to a pirate. Throughout the story the pirates cause most of the major changes in the plot, from Pew and his crew attacking and burning down the Admiral Benbow to give Jim a reason to leave home, to Long John Silver leading a mutiny on the ship and giving the story its antagonist and flow in its second half. The pirates are linked to change and the major characters among them usually have access to or know how to access wealth making them gentlemen of fortune. The aristocrats in the book, like Doctor Livesey, are associated with static events and are poised above the pirates, making them gentlemen born. When Doctor Livesey is introduced he is

described as, "...the neat, bright doctor, with his powder as bright as snow, and his bright, black eyes and pleasant manners," (Stevenson 12), and is never described in full again, implying a stagnation in his appearance. The pirates are also the villains of the books, being associated with morally dubious acts, like Long John Silver's mutiny. At the same time, the aristocrats are associated with strong morals, like when Doctor Livesey threatens the captain by giving him medical advice, "...if you keep on drinking rum, the world will soon be quit of a very dirty scoundrel!" (Stevenson 13). This line happening in the middle of an argument between Livesey and the captain, shows that the doctor feels a need to do his job even when disagreeing with someone he dislikes, showing his strong morals. By associating the class of gentlemen born with characters like Doctor Livesey, and gentlemen of fortune with the pirates, *Treasure Island* seems to agree with Victorian ideas of wealth. The character Jim Hawkins being the protagonist blurs that line.

In Stevenson's novel, Jim Hawkins is portrayed as a static character, when in actuality he changes through the choices of his two potential father figures, Doctor Livesey and Long John Silver. *Treasure Island* presents Jim as static through not allowing him internal, personal growth. Jim never has to learn from his actions, for he is rewarded even when he makes mistakes. When Jim follows Silver and company to the shore of the island, the narration proclaims, "then it was there came into my head the first of the mad notions that contributed so much to save our lives," (Stevenson 74). Calling the idea to follow Silver to shore, so Jim can keep an eye on him and find a way to stop him, "the first of the mad notions," makes the idea, and many of those that come after it, seem like a bad one. Going ashore was a bad idea because Long John Silver had nineteen men on his side while our heroes only had seven, (Stevenson 70), but Jim went anyway and got rewarded for it by meeting Ben Gunn, who was part of Flint's crew and knew Silver,

giving the heroes a leg up. On page 82, it is revealed that Ben Gunn had been stranded for three years, and he survives to the end of the book. Jim's bad idea not only grants the heroes a new ally but gets a stranded man back to a familiar civilization. Jim is given no chance to learn or grow, internally, however he does change by way of the external choices made by his potential father figures.

Jim Hawkins changes by the end of *Treasure Island*, but not through his own choices, instead he changes through the choices made by those the story positions as a possible father figure. According to literary critic John D. Moore, the narration in *Treasure Island* seems to portray Jim as a static protagonist because he is narrating the events after they have already happened. While he may not be much older when creating his narration, Jim Hawkins narrates the events from an adult perspective as the events of the story changed him. The story gives hints to these changes through the changing descriptions of the island, (Moore 436-440). The island is first described by Long John Silver to Jim, painting a picture of the ideal place for a young boy to have an adventure. When the island is mentioned on the final page of the book is it described as, "...that accursed island...", the narration goes further, with Jim revealing, "...the worst dreams that [he] ever [had] [were] when [he] [heard] the surf booming about its coasts...", (Stevenson 183). Throughout the book Jim refers to the island as Treasure Island, or "the Isle of Treasure" but at then end refers to it as accursed and describes it as a nightmare, which is what it became for him, signifying a change. Most of the changes expressed in the narration are changes in perspective about the island, almost like Jim is just realizing the severity of the situation he was in, however, like Moore claims, there are subtle changes that Jim only goes through because of the actions of his could-be father figures, (Moore 438-442). One change that happens to Jim is the loss of the Admiral Benbow, forcing him to leave home. That change only happens because

the captain chose to stay there, and pew followed him. Another choice that causes a change in Jim, is when his mother decides to go back to the inn for the captains chest, so she can collect his tab. She decides to only take what she is owed and counts out every coin. Jim describes his mother doing this by saying, “but my mother frightened as she was, would not consent to take a fraction more than was due to her, and was obstinately unwilling to be content with less,” (Stevenson 28). Before this scene, Jim barely describes his mother, usually only describing her working. When he finally does, he uses the word “obstinately,” which is used to described a stubbornly determined person, which is a bad thing to be when pirates are after them. Using that word in this scene questions the mother’s intelligence, but Jim also describes her bravery by starting the sentence with “frightened as she was” before describing her actions. This implies a change in how Jim views his mother, seeing her as a person as all kids do when they grow up. However, the biggest change Jim goes through is one of social class.

By the end of the book Jim rises in social class because of the actions of Long John Silver and Doctor Livesey, making him a gentleman of fortune. Jim is able to get to Treasure Island and get his, “...ample share of treasure...,” (Stevenson 182), because circumstances outside of his control and choices not his own led him to meeting Doctor Livesey and Long John Silver. Jim and his family only know Doctor Livesey because his dad is ill at the start of the book. Doctor Livesey only knows of the pirates and the treasure because Jim’s dad was sick at the same time the captain stayed at the Admiral Benbow. Through a series of chances and choices outside of Jim’s control, he is left in the care of Doctor Livesey and taken on an adventure to find treasure, after all the Benbow only burned down and the island was only discovered because the captain came into the inn. Livesey does take a liking to Jim when he takes him in becoming a potential father figure. When Jim reveals the map to Doctor Livesey, he treats him like a father would his

son immediately praise him while offering him supper and letting him stay with him, (Stevenson 36). This aristocrat taking a liking to Jim, and taking him in, allows Jim a slight upward movement in social ranks. Another character, who acts as a father figure to Jim, whose actions affects Jim's change in status Long John Silver. Silver takes an immediate liking to Jim when they meet, praising him like a father would when he spots Black dog, saying, "...you're a lad you are, but you're as smart as paint," (Stevenson 48). This praise comes after Jim points out Black dog, even though he gets away, but long John praises Jim letting him know he did his best, like a father to his son. It was Livesey's actions that led to Jim meeting Silver, as he put the Squire in charge of finding a ship crew, and Silver was the choice of cook. Silver also causes the mutiny that leads to the rest of the events of the plot. It is the conflict with Silver that leads to the treasure being found, as the mutiny leads Jim to going ashore and meeting Ben Gunn who was, "on flint's ship when he buried the treasure," (Stevenson 84). In the end Jim was only able to make off with his share of the treasure, and therefore in a higher social class because of the stroke of luck that led him to meet all these people whose choices and situations pointed him in the direction of the treasure. Based on the parameters set by Wood, this makes Jim a gentleman of fortune, meaning Stevenson's book subverts expectations by hiding what it is doing in plain sight. Despite coming across as the opposite, *Treasure Island* goes against the Victorian views of social class and allows Jim to be a gentleman of fortune and the main protagonist.

By allowing Jim to gain his share of treasure through luck, *Treasure Island* subverts expectations and makes Jim a gentleman of fortune allowing him to rise in social class without being evil. *Treasure Island* is an example of a book that seems simple on the surface but is packed with so many different ideas hidden just in the subtext. By parsing through the subtext,

readers find a book that challenges the social ideals of its time without revealing itself to be doing so.

Note To Reader

I decided my topic by complete chance, when writing the project proposal, I was on campus, and *Treasure Island* was the only book from this class on me. Then I did preliminary research and found three articles about the ideals that Stevenson packed into the book. Originally my topic was going to be about how Jim loses his innocence, but then Professor Michals suggested that I use the article by Naomi J. Wood, and I decided to write about the deceptively complex representations of social class in the book. Advice I got from a classmate was to focus more on the economic and social class aspect of my topic, as during the first draft I was still trying to write about innocence, and Professor Michals told me to be clear about what was my interpretation of the book and what was an article's, advice I tried to follow completely and hopefully did. My final version of the paper is vastly different from my first version of the topic. Originally, I wanted to write about how Stevenson infused his own struggles into Jim to create a story about the loss of innocence. This topic was too vague and so I focused on an economic reading based on ideas in Wood's article. My original draft had about four sources and the book, but my final draft only has two and the book because I realized that was all I needed for this paper. It is not the best it could be, but it is the end of the semester I revised it twice, so unfortunately, I have done all the work I can do it without interfering with my other final projects. I hope this turned out all right.

Works Cited

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- Wood, Naomi J. "Gold Standards and Silver Subversions: Treasure Island and the Romance of Money." *Children's Literature*, vol. 26, 1998, pp. 61-85.