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Teaching Robert Louis Stevenson's

Treasure Island

from

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by

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General Introduction to the Work

Introduction to *Treasure Island*

Robert Louis Stevenson distinguished himself through his mastery of the genre of adventure stories. A gifted storyteller, Stevenson knew how to pace an exciting narrative. His verisimilitude, use of real-life models for his characters, and his understanding of youth inform his most famous work, *Treasure Island,* a story that contains both cultural myth and historical truth.

Treasure Island chronicles the adventures of Jim Hawkins, an adolescent from Bristol, England, as he journeys to a deserted island in search of buried pirate treasure. The party with which he travels can be roughly divided into two groups: upstanding, honest sailors and dastardly pirates. Soon after reaching Treasure Island, the pirates mutiny against their rightful captain, and the remainder of the book details the struggles between the loyal sailors and the pirates. Jim, the narrator and central character, plays an integral role in the story; it is he who first shows the treasure map to Doctor Livesey, he who discovers the pirates' plot against Captain Smollett, he who reclaims the *Hispaniola* from pirate control. Jim maintains a sense of wonder throughout the book commensurate with the exciting adventures he recounts.

However, *Treasure Island* is more than a mere adventure story; it also describes Jim's maturation and his transition from childhood to adulthood. In the beginning of the novel, Jim is timid and unassured, preferring to trust in and hide behind authority figures such as his mother and Doctor Livesey. As the plot progresses, Jim gradually becomes more confident and independent, making his own decisions and living with the consequences. *Treasure Island*'s emphasis on Jim's development from childhood to maturity makes it a *bildungsroman*, or, more broadly, a coming-of-age story.

Part of what makes *Treasure Island* so intriguing is the ambiguous manner in which the novel portrays moral issues. Long John Silver, the leader of the pirates, is vicious, dangerous, and opportunistic, but he is also brave, intelligent, and charismatic. Jim's relationship with Silver is difficult to define; Jim is clearly disgusted with the majority of the pirates, but he cannot help but admire Silver's better qualities. Unlike the rest of the honest sailors, who treat Silver with absolute derision, Jim seems to see Silver for what he really is: a man with major flaws, but also a man who is more vital, more alive than the law-abiding Doctor Livesey, Squire Trelawney, or Captain Smollett. Jim's clear respect for Silver indicates that, while he may not wish to live like the often brutish pirates, he cannot accept the moral absolutes that Livesey, Trelawney, and Smollett represent. The honest Englishmen and the pirates both influence Jim's development.

Mythological/Archetypal Approach Applied to *Treasure Island*

Notes on the Mythological/Archetypal Approach

MYTHOLOGICAL, ARCHETYPAL, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM are all closely related. This is because Freud formulated many theories around the idea of the social archetype, and his pupil, Carl Jung, expanded and refined Freud's theories into a more cross-cultural philosophy.

Critics who examine texts from a mythological/archetypal standpoint are looking for symbols. Jung said that an archetype is "a figure... that repeats itself in the course of history wherever creative fantasy is fully manifested." He believed that human beings were born with an innate knowledge of certain archetypes. The evidence of this, Jung claimed, lies in the fact that some myths are repeated throughout history in cultures and eras that could not possibly have had any contact with one another. Many stories in Greek and Roman mythology have counterparts in Chinese and Celtic mythology, long before the Greek and Roman Empires spread to Asia and northern Europe. Most of the myths and symbols represent ideas that human beings could not otherwise explain (the origins of life, what happens after death, etc.). Every culture has a creation story, a-life-after-death belief, and a reason for human failings, and these stories—when studied comparatively—are far more similar than different.

When looking for archetypes or myths, critics take note of general themes, characters, and situations that recur in literature and myth. In modern times, traditional literary and mythological archetypes are successfully translated to film. For example, Jane Austen's *Emma* was adapted into the popular Hollywood film *Clueless*. By drawing on those feelings, thoughts, concerns, and issues that have been a part of the human condition in every generation, modern authors allow readers to feel that they know the characters in a work with very little background information. Imagine how cluttered stories would be if the author had to give every detail about every single minor character that entered the work!

3. Archetypal Situations

- the QUEST: the hero's endeavor to establish his or her identity or fulfill his or her destiny.

Variations on the QUEST can include:

- the Faustian bargain: the selling of one's soul to the devil (metaphorically representing the notion that one would "give anything" in order to…) in exchange for unlimited power, knowledge, wealth, etc. Examples include King Midas.

- the pursuit of revenge for a real or perceived wrong, as exemplified by Captain Ahab's quest in *Moby Dick*.

- the descent into the underworld. (Note that this is usually one part of the quest rather than the entire quest itself.)

- the RENEWAL OF LIFE: death and rebirth, resurrection as seen in the cycle of the seasons, the phases of the day, sleeping and waking. Examples are "Sleeping Beauty," "The Secret Garden," etc.

- INITIATION: coming of age, rites of passage. Some examples include the first hunt, weddings, teenage angst films.

- THE FALL: any event that marks a loss of innocence, a devolution from a paradisial life or viewpoint to a tainted one.

- REDEMPTIVE SACRIFICE: any voluntary loss, especially a loss of life, that results in another's gaining or regaining a desired state.

- the CATALOG OF DIFFICULT TASKS: (labors of Hercules, Cinderella's treatment by her stepmother and stepsisters, etc.).

- the END OF THE WORLD: usually apocalyptic, involving warfare, a huge battle, a metaphoric final battle between good and evil.

Variations on the end of the world include

- Armageddon: the final battle between good and evil according to the Christian New Testament (book of Revelation), in which evil is finally vanquished, evildoers receive their eternal punishment, and God reigns over a newly-created Heaven and Earth;

Psychoanalytic Theory Applied to *Treasure Island*

Notes on the Psychoanalytic Theory

THE TERM "PSYCHOLOGICAL" (also "psychoanalytical" or "Freudian Theory") seems to encompass two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses on the text itself, with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining conflicts, characters, dream sequences, and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is similar to the Formalist approach. One will further understand that a character's outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son's desire for his mother, the father's envy of the son and rivalry for the mother's attention, the daughter's desire for her father, the mother's envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father's attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level to avoid breaking a serious social more.

- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory asserts that it is in dreams that a person's subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and accomplished in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.

Activity One

A Case Study in Adolescence: Analyzing Jim's Decisions

1. Copy and distribute the handout: *Treasure Island*: Psychoanalytic Activity One: Jim's Decision.

2. Divide the class into four groups or a number of groups divisible by four.

3. Assign each group one of the following decisions Jim makes in *Treasure Island*:

   - Jim's decision to go to sea
   - Jim's decision to disclose what he heard in the apple barrel
   - Jim's decision to go ashore with the mutineers
   - Jim's decision to leave the stockade, take the coracle, and cut the *Hispaniola* adrift

4. Instruct students to complete the handout within their groups.

5. Reconvene the class and discuss the following as a closing exercise:

   - Consider Jim's decision to go to sea with Squire Trelawney, Captain Smollett, and his crew. What does this choice reveal about Jim's character and the phase of life he is going through? Based on this decision, what can readers infer about Jim's self-image and his expectations for life? Are his expectations realistic?

   - Consider Jim's decision to disclose what he heard in the apple barrel to the Captain so Smollett can plan a defense against Silver's mutiny. Based on this decision, what can readers infer about Jim's attitudes towards the other characters? How do his attitudes change throughout the novel?

   - Consider Jim's decision to go ashore with the mutineers. What is he expecting to accomplish or discover by doing this? Is his expectation fulfilled by reality, or is he surprised by the outcome? How does the decision itself signal a change in his character?

   - Consider Jim's decision to leave the stockade, take the coracle, and use it to get close enough to cut the *Hispaniola* adrift. What can readers infer that he is thinking? Compare the outcome with his expectations. Does he surprise himself with his own strength? What kind of character development is revealed through the decision itself and the ensuing action?

New Historicism Applied to *Treasure Island*

Notes on New Historicism

A COMMON TENDENCY IN THE STUDY of literature written in, and/or set in, a past or foreign culture is to assume a direct comparison between the culture as presented in the text and as it really was/is. New Historicism asserts that such a comparison is impossible for two basic reasons.

First, the "truth" of a foreign or past culture can never be known as established and unchangeable. At best, any understanding of the "truth" is a matter of interpretation on the parts of both the writer and the reader. This is most blatantly evident in the fact that the "losers" of history hardly ever get heard. The culture that is dominated by another is often lost to history because it is the powerful who have the resources to record that history. Even in recent past events, who really knows both sides of the story? Who really knows the whole of the Arab-Israeli story? Or the Iraqi story? New Historicists argue that these unknown histories are just as significant as the histories of the dominant culture of power and should be included in any worldview. Since they often contradict "traditional" (i.e., the winner's) history, there is no way to really know the absolute truth.

Second, while the text under consideration does indeed reflect the culture in which it was written (and to some degree in which it is set), it also *participates* in the culture in which it is written. In other words, its very existence changes the culture it "reflects." To New Historicists, literature and culture are born of one another. For example, although Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* certainly reflected the culture of the South during the mid-20th century, it also became a tool to raise awareness of, and change certain elements of, that culture.

Activity One

Analyzing the Influence of Stevenson's Life on *Treasure Island*

1. Copy and distribute the handouts: *Treasure Island*: New Historicist Activity One: The Life of Robert Louis Stevenson (1850 – 1894) and *Treasure Island*: New Historicist Activity One: Robert Louis Stevenson: His Life and Philosophy.

2. Divide the class into small groups.

3. Instruct students to read the handout: *The Life of Robert Louis Stevenson (1850–1894)*.

4. Instruct students to complete the handout: *Robert Louis Stevenson: His Life and Philosophy*.

5. Reconvene the class and allow students to present their findings.

6. As a closing activity, discuss the following questions:

   - What, if anything, can *Treasure Island* tell the reader about the culture of Scotland at the time the novel was published?

   - Why should the reader be wary of accepting Stevenson's view of Scottish culture as absolute truth?

   - What do you, as a modern reader, bring to *Treasure Island* that might change its meaning? Think about how your culture differs from the culture or cultures portrayed in the novel.

   - Do Stevenson's descriptions of pirates and their lifestyles, activities, and rituals seem clichéd to you? If so, why? What other books, films, or television shows portray pirates in a similar manner?