

On the Moral Ambiguity in R. L. Stevenson's *Treasure Island*

JIA Yan-yan

Huazhong University of Science and Technology, Wuhan, China

Through the discussion of the moral ambiguity in R. L. Stevenson's characterization and plot-setting in *Treasure Island*, this paper argues that the author was not only occupied with romantic story-telling but also concerned with man's morality. Different from those critical realists who severely criticized the decadence of late Victorian morality, Stevenson tended to stress its dual nature.

Keywords: Stevenson, *Treasure Island*, moral ambiguity, dual nature

Introduction

Robert L. Stevenson (1850-1894) was born and educated in Edinburgh. Throughout his whole life, Stevenson suffered from serious tuberculosis, and of that disease he died. As is well known, Stevenson's life spanned a very tumultuous period of the British Empire. While many of late-Victorian writers, such as Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy, severely criticized the decadence of the capitalism, Stevenson was different from them. Dissatisfied with the drabness of his contemporary social life, he resorted to literary creation of exciting adventures and fascinating stories.

Though Stevenson only enjoyed a rather short life, he left for us tens of stories, of which *Treasure Island* is the masterpiece. It tells about a witty young boy's adventurous voyage together with many pirates to search for hidden treasure on a remote island. This book brought the author great reputation for its overwhelmingly attractive story. But perhaps just because the story was too interesting, the author failed to expose his real moral concerns to the readers' awareness. As a critic mentions, "He insisted upon the skill in handling material, rather than upon the values of ideas in literary creation" (Liu, 1993, p. 442).

In this paper, I will firstly discuss the moral ambiguity in Stevenson's characterization and plot-designing in *Treasure Island*. Then I will try to discover the reason for why the author preferred this indirect way of moral concerning. In the end, I will draw out my conclusion which may help to reevaluate this book.

Moral Ambiguity in Characterization

In *The Reader's Encyclopedia* edited by William Rose Benet, the genre of romance is defined as "a kind of prose fiction, in which the scenes and incidents are more or less removed from the common life and are surrounded by a halo of mystery and an atmosphere of strangeness and adventure" (Benet, 1965, p. 138). To judge by this criterion, it is at once apparent that Stevenson was thoroughly at home in it, and that *Treasure Island* confirms in all aspects to its principles. Stevenson once said in his *A Gossip on Romance* that:

The threads of a story came from time to time together and make a picture in the web; the characters fall from time to time into some attitudes to each other or to nature, which stamps the story home like an illustration...this is the plastic part

of literature: to embody characters' thought, or emotion in some act or attitude that shall be remarkably striking to the mind's eye.¹

The phrase "stamps the story home like an illustration" is interesting and illustrates the visual and dramatic qualities of his imagination. Stevenson was no stranger with the presentation of incidents and scenes which crystallize the moral ambiguities in dramatic moments.

While superficially only a romantic story with the traditional theme of pirates competing against honest men in the treasure-hunting journey, *Treasure Island* contains a greater depth of subtlety in characterization than one would normally associate with a common adventure story.

The Character of Long John Silver

The character of Long John Silver gives great strength to the whole story. He can be counted as one of Stevenson's most powerful characters. In a sense, this character eclipses the true hero of this novel, Jim Hogkins. When discussing the book many years later, Stevenson said:

I like the tale myself, for much the same reason as my father liked the beginning; it was my kind of picturesque. I was not a little proud of John Silver, also; and to this day rather admire that smooth and formidable adventurer. (Hammond, 1984, p. 105)

Silver's claim to the significance in this novel can be justified from the fact that Stevenson had once entitled the original draft as *The Sea Cook* which apparently refers to this figure. While following the convention of romance in describing such characters in the minimum of words, Stevenson was consummate in conveying the idiosyncrasies of every personality with admirable concision. In *Treasure Island*, Silver's first appearance was not presented with a large paragraph, but with considerable economy of words:

His left leg was cut off close by the hip, and under the left shoulder he carried a crutch, which he managed with wonderful dexterity, hopping about upon it like a bird. He was very tall and strong, with a face as big as a ham—plain and pale, but intelligent and smiling. Indeed, he seeped in the most cheerful spirits, whistling as he moved about among the tables, with a merry word or a slap on the shoulder for the move favored of his guests. (Stevenson, 2002, p. 20)

Such phrases as "wonderful dexterity", "a face as big as a ham", "whistling as he moved about among the tables" add solidity and depth to the portrait, making it vivid and verisimilitude. As the characterization of John Silver proceeds in the story, the reader may become conscious of those juxtaposed contradictory essences in his personality—"plain and pale" but "intelligent and smiling"; "crippled" but "capable of managing his crutch with wonderful dexterity". He is treacherous, deceitful, appetizing violence and killing, but he is also capable of loyalty and of displaying qualities of leadership, good humor and companionship. It seems clear that the combination of a dominating personality and a crippled body held for him an even more powerful appeal. Just like Henley mentions, "Long John, called Barbecue, is incomparably the best of all. He, and not Jim Hawkins, nor Flint's treasure, is Mr. Stevenson's real hero" (Hammond, 1984, p. 105). He is in fact a case-study in that duality of human nature. Despite of all his moral defects, his treachery, violence, and sloppiness, we do not seem to be very abhorrent of this figure. Throughout the whole story, Silver claims for much of our attention, and plays an indispensable role in the development of the story. We must not ignore the fact that at the end of the narrative, Silver is not punished for his crimes but succeeds in making good his escape with some treasure.

¹ See Robert Louis Stevenson, *Memories and Portraits* from https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/s/stevenson/robert_louis/s848mp/chapter15.html.

So equivocal an end did Stevenson give to Silver that it exempted him from having to make a right-or-wrong judgment on Silver's deeds. Stevenson was clearly reluctant to have Silver executed, and his sudden disappearance with a small portion of the treasure artistically solved the technical problem of removing him from the narrative while letting the reader surmise his future fortune.

The Character of Jim Hawkins

Jim Hawkins, the chief narrator of the story, is the real hero of the novel, or at least it seems so ostensible. Out of the whole 34 chapters, 32 are narrated by him. Jim is an archetypal juvenile character of the seventeenth century, an age of capital accumulation and colonial expansion. Jim is of the same ilk of Robinson Crusoe, the well-known character of Daniel Defoe, another famous writer of this "deserted island" theme. Both are courageous, witty, adventurous, and covetous to risk their lives in the pursuit of fortune. At the beginning of the novel, Hawkins is childish, naive, and somewhat timid, afraid of the monstrous appearance and horrible stories of the old pirate Billy Bones. But he is also kind, showing sympathy with Bones whom everybody else hates and dreads. Gradually during the travel of the series of sea adventures, he becomes more and more clever and brilliant. Even his rashness turns out to be of good account. The hallmark of his maturity is in the scene in Chapter 30 when Hawkins, having promised Silver that he would not attempt to escape, is persuaded to do so by doctor Liversey, but he replies, "No, you know right well you wouldn't do the thing yourself; neither you nor Squire, nor Captain, and nor more will I. Silver trusted me; I passed my words, and back I go" (Stevenson, 2002, p. 138). Hawkins, then, despite his mistrust of Silver, feels that having given his words, he is bound to honour it.

Even this positive description of Jim Hawkins also contains some reflections of moral ambiguity. Many incidents draw our attention to the plane of morality. In Chapter 22, from the point of view of morality, Jim is wrong or treacherous to deliberately run away from the stockade where his wounded friends are deserted almost with not the least ability to protect themselves. Yet his slapdash plan proves to be decisive in defeating the pirates. While wrong morally, he is justifiable tactically.

About Other Characters

These ambiguities in human nature and morality are also reflected in other characters, such as Billy Bones and Isreal Hands, both of which are good and evil combined. Billy Bones, for example, for all his drunkenness, hot temper, and monstrousness, retains a good deal of Jim's pity and sympathy, and on his death Jim even bursts into "a flood of tears". Hands is a character morally much more ambiguous. Until he has a duel with Jim (in Chapter 26), Stevenson did not write much about his wickedness. Even when he has decided to kill Jim, he still carries a smile "that had in it something both of pain and weakness—a haggard, old man's smile; but there was, besides that, a grain of derision, a shadow of treachery, in his expression as he craftily watched, and watched me at my work" (Stevenson, 2002, p. 117). While such words as "pain, weakness, and haggard" claim for our sympathy with Hands, others, such as "treachery, derision" seem to have deluded the sympathy. Are Hands and Bones morally wrong or right?

Stevenson refused to give a direct judgment. The dividing line between moral rightness and error is further blurred at the end of the story, when Jim Hawkins, Doctor Liversey, and the Squire make a decision to leave behind on the island three of the mutineers, though who desperately implore them not to do so and take them back to the civilised society. This seems to Jim a painful but unavoidable decision. "It went to all our hearts, I think, to leave them in that wretched state; but we could not risk another mutiny; and to take them back home

for the gibbet would have been a cruel sort of kindness" (Hammond, 1984, p. 108). Here the impossibility of getting ultimate moral rightness is further felt by the reader.

Moral Ambiguity in the Plot

Moral ambiguity can be observed not only in Stevenson's characterization, but also in the plot of the whole story. Evidently, the plot is the searching for hidden treasure. But we must be aware that the buried treasure belongs to neither Jim's group, nor Silver's den, still nor Flint. As a matter of fact, it is the booty of Flint's robbery and plunder. So we can say that no one of them—Jim, Liversey, Trelawney, Silver, and so-and-so—is more justifiable than any others to stake his claim of the treasure. So why can Jim, Liversey and Trelawney feel at ease and justified to carve up the treasure when they get it? We must notice that the background of the story is the mid-eighteenth century when the capital accumulation was drawing near its fulfillment. In the capital society at that time, it is a "lawful" means to plunder capital and resources from other backward areas, as can be testified in the novel by the fact that Squire, while cursing the cruelty of Flint, feels proud of his being an Englishman. Even Billy Bones proclaims that he had "lost the precious sight of his eyes in the gracious defense of his native country" (Stevenson, 2002, p. 14).

At that time, robbers and capitalists were not easy to distinguish. They almost came from the same way: plundering, home and abroad. The only difference between them was their way of disposing their booty. Robbers and pirates would carve up and spend it right away like waters, and soon became penniless again, and began another turn of plunder. But those capitalists were much wiser. They would change their money into capital and make it a goose that lay golden eggs. In *Treasure Island*, such gentlemen-like pirates are represented by Doctor Liversey and Squire Trelawney. They never give any hesitation to the justification of their deeds. But Stevenson successfully shunned from having to judge it right or wrong by means of his ambiguous plot-setting.

Moral Ambiguity and Stevenson's Neo-Romantic Principle

Over the years, Stevenson has been regarded as a writer of stirring adventure stories. But we should keep in mind that Stevenson created his novels during the second half of the nineteenth century, a time when critical realism was in its height, so that it might not be easier to write pure entertainment works than didactic critiques. However, Stevenson was always aware of the aesthetic function of his fictions, especially in his exciting situations intended to arouse the interest of the readers. Stevenson was often grouped as a representative of the neo-romanticism. He revised some of the romantic literary principles. He would agree that,

...facts that are formed to touch the mind must be done a great way off, and by somebody never heard of ... in order to move the readers, and the writer of the fiction must invent stories that are exotic and exciting as well as new and intriguing characters.²

Treasure Island tends to be about leaving home, making a break with the familiar world of childhood, to seek fortune as well as moral identity. In this novel, he also dealt with the theme of "deserted island", as did Daniel Defoe. He deliberately made the most of this story take place in a remote island in the sea. This intentional distancing from the climate of the late nineteenth century permitted Stevenson to examine the

² See Robert Louis Stevenson, *Memories and Portraits* from https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/s/stevenson/robert_louis/s848mp/chapter15.html.

problems of morality, evil, and the duality of human nature without any of the extraneous consideration a novel set in his contemporary England would have involved. In so doing, Stevenson skillfully set a background for the novel, where the people are not confined to the social moral codes. Their behaviors are also freed from the judgment of the moral and judicial yardsticks. They are at once the litigants and judges of the issue. This is in aid of the author to deal with the problems of moral ambiguity. It seems to the reader that the impossibility to give a right-or-wrong judgment to all those activities as well as those actors is reasonable, as no fixed law but gangster principle is available there.

The narration of the story in the first person's point of view is also helpful in carrying out the motif. Basically the novel is proceeding through the recalling of Jim's. With his consummate skills, Stevenson had presented us a clear portrait of the adult man's world mirrored in a juvenile's eyes. Thus the author made it more plausible to the reader that, as the narrator is only an immature boy without mature logic, how he could clearly judge those adult's behaviors.

Conclusion

In a perceptive essay on *Treasure Island*, W. W. Robson observes: "On its own plane, it fulfills the primary purpose of all fiction: to provide the reader with imaginative understanding of human nature, in ideal conditions for the existence of that understanding" (Robson, 1984, p. 211). While it was conceived primarily as a boy's adventure story, its status as a children's classic has diverted the reader's attention from its deeper qualities and its importance to Stevenson's own superficial approach to his art. In this novel, Stevenson explored his lifelong concerns with the problems of man's moral duality and ambiguity. He focused on the theme of the ambiguity of human behavior, of the coexistence in one person of selfish and disgusting and attractive motives, of the thin dividing line separating rational and irrational conducts. This is achieved through the sympathetic presentation of individual behavior over long periods, and the highlighting of moments of crisis. Through the story of these particular individuals—Silver, Hawkins, Liversey, etc.—he is able to demonstrate the inconsistencies inherent in human activities and the ambivalence which lies at the heart of clear-cut situations. Continually the reader is compelled to examine his own responses and to evaluate the alternative courses of behaviors. Is this character good or bad? Is that action right or wrong? Is this man wholly evil? Is this issue really as simple as it appears? Stevenson seemed to tell us that man is neither wholly good nor wholly wrong; that in an age when religious belief has been eroded and the grey area of moral ambivalence greatly widened, there can be no simplistic solution to these problems.

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