

Class and Social Status in *Treasure Island*

The novel *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson is a fascinating tale of pirates, ambition, and the quest for buried gold. It was first published in 1883. This is important, as the context of the novel is necessary to understand the social commentary that the author was making. It is not usually noted, but when studying this book, it is important to remember that before anything else, this was a book about money, or the pursuit of treasure. Given that it was set in the eighteenth century, it provides readers with a literary escape from the perils of their everyday capitalist life in the offices and factories of the time. It sought to transcend the value system that was in place that placed a high value on hard work and personal sacrifice. It was a story about stealing a fortune, and it somewhat glorified this act. It is a romance novel, but there are no women in the book (with Jim's mom being the only exception), it is a romance about money and class. The social commentary that this book projects is one that aligns a person's worth in monetary terms and one that serves to give a broad commentary on the means of capitalist gain (Wood 61). This essay will discuss how class differences are defined and represented, and hierarchies questioned or reinforced in this book. From this, it will be clear that this novel does a lot to highlight the class differences of the time and strengthen the prevailing notions about social class.

As mentioned, this book is one that revolves around money, and focuses on a story that betrays the ideas of capitalism. It makes themes out of the value of monetary

representation, and the notion of how society is constructed not through divine intervention, like many people believed at the time, but through capitalist decision-making and greed. This deconstructs the popular notions of God, and serves to reinforce the how class differences and hierarchies are actually constructed in society - through the greed of money, the same greed that motivates Jim and the others to set sail south in pursuit of the bullion (Wood 62).

The book contains many debates about economics and money, specifically the different values that gold and silver can fetch. These were reflections of the cultural assumptions about value. It highlights the superiority of gold over silver, drawing a parallel between the middle-class and the rich. What he is doing is showing how value is socially constructed, much like class structures. The silver standard was associated with a more populist mentality; in contrast, the gold standard represented the upper class, established sect of society. This commentary reinforced the class structures of the time, placing additional worth in that of the aristocratic classes (Wood 62).

This book uncovers the distinction between those who are born into wealth and those who came into vast fortunes. It sheds light on the religious and political misapprehensions that were commonplace by showing that Long John Silver and the gentry had the same wealth attaining strategies. It shows how, despite what was commonly thought in society, the pursuit of wealth was a shameful and brutal one, a

comment that has links in Marxist thought. It shows that there was no inherent morality that surrounds the pursuit of money (Wood 64).

The significance of the gold-silver relationship in this book cannot be overestimated as it is very important for the argument of this paper. Gold and silver were more than just precious metals, they said a lot about the political situation at the time, a time when economies were being shaped around the values of these metals. The gold-standard emerged as something that represented only the best, and this was the class that those who searched the island were seeking to become a part of (Wood 65).

In England there was a noticeable divide between the aristocratic classes and the manufacturing class, but toward the middle of the nineteenth century, England began to assert itself as a worldwide power in industry and export, and this created a social framework where the different classes to work together toward the common goal of economic stability (in their own class-appropriate ways). This is exactly what the situation was like with those on the ship and island. They came from different social classes and backgrounds, and even though the voyage was full of mutiny and mutinous thoughts, they were all brought together through the common goal of economic abundance (Wood 65).

Gold and silver connoted different political systems, with gold being associated with the tyranny of the aristocracy, and silver was a more democratic metal, one that was possessed by the masses, those who did not have ready access to gold. Gold and silver

represent a divide between old money and new money and the characters from this tale can be said to be associated with these different social groups. Stevenson aptly makes reference to the politics of representation of currency in the way he developed Long John Silver's persona, and even name. He analyzed the way social profit is divided through money. It became clear that gold benefited those who were already established, and silver was for those who were of the working class, and who sought to be aligned with the gold-standard, but were not – just like Long John Silver, and his crew (Wood 66).

One of the main themes of this book is the ongoing struggle between those of hierarchical wealth and those of new fortune, and this was exemplified throughout the book in the gold-silver debate. Someone who is born of money is thought of as having an inherent worth that is not present in others. This is what the gold-standard is about. It is a standard that few people can claim association with. We see an example of this when Ben Gunn, the pirate who had been living on the island for many years, put his confidence in a gentleman who is born of wealth: “He puts a precious sight more confidence . . . in a gentleman born than in these gentlemen of fortune, having been one himself” (Letley 98).

Long John Silver and his crew are not of the gold standard; in fact they are of the silver-standard, which is what his name suggests. They are of the class that is desperately seeking to attain their fortune and status, not from their inheritance and family, but from the coming together of greed and luck. People like Silver do not have an inherent social

value as it is one that forever fluctuates based on how much he has at the time. The social status that Long John Silver and his crew (representing the social underclass) are trying to attain is not secure like that of the gentry who has inherited wealth, and who live comfortably and confidently of dividends and investments (Wood 66). This is highlighted by Long John Silver when he says: “Here it is about gentlemen of fortune. They lives rough, and they risk swinging, but they eat and drink like fighting-cocks, and when a cruise is done, why, it’s hundreds of pounds instead of hundreds of farthings in their pockets. Now, the most goes for rum and a good fling, and to sea again in their shirts” (Letley 67). For the pirates on this adventure, the treasure is a way to achieve their desired end, and a way to give temporary gratification to their wants. However, it is this desire for long-term gain that caused them to fail in their goal of getting the treasure. They do not act like cunning Protestants. This book highlights the ideological struggle that was so prominent at the time, by making drama of the standards associated with gold and silver and then breaking apart this struggle by letting Long John Silver have the last word (Wood 66).

This novel uncovers the underlying value and the discontinuities among classes, moral fibre, and mostly survival. At the beginning of the story line, Jim places values with those who adhere to the ideals of gentleman who are born with wealth, and this notion is continually shown in the way that the pirates are compared with this gold-standard (Wood 67).

The author writes the book in a way that is meant to strengthen ideas of class and representations of values. The reader is intended to root for the poor and those of the silver-standard, in hopes that they will acquire the wealth they have set out to do and transcend the social classes. This is shown in the way that the protagonist Jim, is transformed throughout the course of the novel. He begins by being poor and thus dirty, child-like, immature, etcetera, and then he becomes transformed, with his newly acquired wealth, into a rich, clean, law-abiding member of society (Wood 68). This essay has discussed how class differences are defined and represented, and hierarchies questioned or reinforced in this book. From this it is clear that this novel does a lot to highlight the class differences of the time and strengthen the prevailing notions about social class.

References

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