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Research Paper

## **Characterization of the Adventure Novel: Race, Gender Relations, and Setting**

The 19<sup>th</sup> Century was known for several styles of writing, almost exclusively found in this era, of these the adventure novel stood and advanced the idea of a hero as a conqueror. The word “conquer” was synonymous with power, rightful propriety, and an “innocent” pursuit of something that could, and ought to be owned, whether it was people, wealth, or land. Robert Stevenson’s novel, Kidnapped, is an interesting adventure tale, worthy of scrutiny, because of the book’s duality of the self, portrayed by two distinct characters, namely Alan Breck and David Balfour. Together, these two men represent the pairing of adventurers that complete one another, yet set off by irreconcilable differences, most notably heritage. Not only is this a novel of identity, a struggle to find one’s self through adventure and action, but also one of political and social strife, gender relations, and even hints of racial relations.

The adventure novel stems, or at least can attribute its progress to that of British Empiricism in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and has heightened delusions of grandeur in which a hero is seen as a victor or conqueror of an ‘uninhabited’ land. This is apparent in many works of this time even those of Joseph Conrad who saw the adventurer as a liberator and courageous in his quest for justice. In Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, the main character Charlie Marlow experiences British empiricism first hand when he witnesses the slave

trade in central Africa and the treatment of the Africans laboring for ivory. “Strings of dusty niggers with splay feet arrived and departed; a stream of manufactured goods, rubbishy cottons, beads, and brass-wire set into the depths of darkness, and in return came a precious trickle of ivory” (Conrad 119). This passage is an excellent example of the idea of conquest, which during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, underwent several shifts in order to advocate and justify its usefulness and morality. Even the language usage of the time is telling of how the British Empire viewed “savages”; as an unconquered people in need of civilization and culture. Yet, despite Marlowe’s remorse and sorrow, and even air of a melancholy soul, he, like all other adventures of this time, says or does nothing. He is a passive, though perhaps a disagreeing voice, whose inefficacious actions are indicative of a silence in this time period. The irony of this is that it is not in a heroes nature to stay still and remain silent, they are the thrill seekers of their time, and rightfully so, are the first to step out, yet they do not. They are men of action only when it serves their purpose. This relational attitude seen in most heroes of the 19<sup>th</sup> century novel is also prevalent in the Robert Louis Stevenson’s character David Balfour. When he is in harbor he sees slaves being loaded on a ship headed for the Americas, he shudders at the thought and moves on; again an active voice is only internal, affecting no change on the character, reader, or even outcome of the story. However, Stevenson does not extrapolate to the extent Conrad does on race relations and slavery in his novels, but rather pays more close attention to the interactions of his main characters.

A more prevalent and always apparent tone in adventure novels is that of an overseer or ruling force and a subservient one. Whether it is the British Empire and that of a native people group in some far off land, or even the disagreeing peoples of the

Highlands and Lowlands, there is an ever apparent strife among two peoples. In Kidnapped, this dichotomy is played out on an even more specific and finite level in the interactions of David and Alan, each representative of a different side of the spectrum. In one of Stevenson's personal memoirs, he relates his relations of clans to that of his youth and was recorded as writing:

It was perhaps yet more important that I had enjoyed in my youth some knowledge of our Scots folk of the Highlands and the Islands. Not much beyond a century has passed since these were in the same conclusive and transitioning state as the Marquesans of to-day. In both cases an alien authority enforced, the clans disarmed, the chiefs deposed, new customs introduced...The grumbling, the secret ferment, the fears and resentments, the alarms and sudden councils of Marquesan chiefs, reminded me continually of the days of Lovat and Struan. (Tulloch 68)

The Marquesas Islands he speaks of, are those that were colonized by France in the 1700's and were altered and made subservient under the rule of a distant empire. It is then clear that even in childhood; Stevenson had a clear understanding of social and political strife, more specifically between England and Scotland. This may have been the cause of much of his writing, as perhaps means of an escape or social tool, by which change could one day emerge.

In most adventure novels, as in Stevenson's own life, experience plays a key role and much of this experience is had by a younger man, not yet an adult having the experience attributed to adulthood. The adventure novel is therefore one of growth, as far as experience is concerned, where characters undergo stages of growth, sometimes moving forward sometimes back, nevertheless, in the end they usually emerge the victor of their own self-conscious. Furthermore, the most notable aspect of the adventure novel is that of the male relationship. It is here that the actions of both males are set off by one another, determined by one another, and even contrasted by one another. Growth is

usually apparent in each case and is due to their counterpart, as they play out their adventure together. In most cases of adventure, one male is determined the guardian or mentor of the other, however, both usually take certain characteristics from the other, that they may unfortunately lack. It can therefore be said, that together they create an ideal of a perfect male hero, and are then championed as one into the limelight. Out of this a “doppelganger” effect takes hold in which one male could very well be interpreted as the “id” or ghost-self of the other, not really of a spatial nature, but residing only in the mind. Conrad’s, Marlowe is a melancholy, thoughtful persona of intelligence and progressive thought, while his counterpart, the man he admires and in a way envies, Mr. Kurtz is a powerful, rugged man of nature and domination. Together, these two men create an edifice of manliness, Conrad himself wanted to create and even become. In addition, Stevenson also created an ideal male persona rooted in the characteristics of not one but two males. David was representative of intelligence, logic, genteel behavior and manners, much like those synonymous with Lowland Scots, while Alan had those characteristics of a man of action, brash, skilled at battle and brave and easily goaded almost to a fault; stereotypical characteristics of Highland Scots. It is apparent that Stevenson thought of these two men as a duality of characteristics most suitable to one another, and though they had their differences along the way, they were easily cast aside by the overpowering presence of the male bond.

Upon further scrutiny, we find these relationships as a homosocial dynamic most apparent in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, when normal men were championed to the level of heroes upon returning from conquest or adventure. According to Andrew Michael Roberts in Conrad and Masculinity, “Eve Sedgwick’s work on the structure and

history of the nineteenth-century homosociality provides the crucial framework for the understanding here. In her examination of ‘the structure of men’s relations with other men,’ she postulates ‘the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual,’ without any implications that ‘genital homosexual desire is “at the root of” other forms of male homosociality” (BM, 1-2) (Roberts 49). It is then clear that there is a thin line, by definition, between the strong homosocial bonds of heroic males, and that of homosexual partnership, though this does not insinuate a sexual natured relationship, but simply a fundamental similarity between the two interactions.

The idea of swordplay also supports this notion of homosocial bonding as men capable of wielding a sword are seen as valiant and have the ability to woo women based on their swordplay capabilities. The insinuation is of a phallic nature; that is men in possession of such abilities are seen as more virile and even romanticized, much like that of the Red Cross Knight in the Spencer’s Faery Queen. There is also an element of safety apparent to the reader when a man, capable of wielding a sword is present. Notice in Kidnapped the reassurance the reader receives of David’s safety when Alan is close by. Alan is seen as a guardian of David, who is incapable of wielding a sword to the extent of Alan, but still able to some extent because he is male, i.e., he possesses these phallic qualities, but not to the extent Alan does. When Alan attempts to teach David how to use a sword he becomes frustrated at David’s inability to use it effectively. After all, David is not a man of action but of reason and logic, having little need for the “impressive” nature of swordplay. This aspect of male characteristics is also apparent in several other adventure novels, including Conrad’s Karain, as Roberts suggests, “This idea of a horrible void,” i.e. that of not having a sword, “combined with Karain’s fear of a space

behind him, would suggest castration anxiety. This anxiety is partially relieved by the presence of his sword bearer, and also when he enters the privileged world of homosocial exchange on the schooner” (53). It is therefore apparent that simply the male presence itself, gives others even other males, a sense of safety and inexplicable comfort.

From this phallic categorization, it is also clear that women could never take on an effectual role in the adventure novel and due to this bias, were many times overlooked as being replaceable by a strong male presence. If by chance there is a women character in the adventure novel, their role is usually one of a domestic nature, affecting nothing more than a marginal character would. There is therefore a shared understanding or knowledge only men are privy to, excluding women from attaining said knowledge and keeping them both at a distance and at a disadvantage. “Another way of putting this would be to say that the exclusion of women from the space within which men’s knowledge circulates encourages the identification of the truth ‘beyond’, ultimate or unnatural unattainable truth, with the feminine” (137). Therefore the woman is seen as an unnatural addition to the adventure novel. More specifically, when looking at Heart of Darkness or Kidnapped, the two differ only slightly in their addition of women into the story:

Then—would you believe it?—I tried the women. I Charlie Marlowe, set the women to work—to get a job. Heavens! Well, you see, the notion drove me. I had an aunt, a dear enthusiastic soul. She wrote: ‘It will be delightful. I am ready to do anything, anything for you. It is a glorious idea. I know the wife of a very high personage in the Administration, and also a man who has lots of influence with,’ &c., &c.....” (Conrad 109).

From this rather lengthy passage, we see that a women’s influence is sought as a last resort, and what a shock it is to seek the help of a woman! Marlowe suggests he was

“driven”, to seek the help of his dear aunt, and she was more than compliant, willing to do anything. At only one other point in the story is a woman woven into the fabric of the story, having any affect on the novel. This is of course is the “Intended” or Kurtz’s fiancée. However, she is not even given a name, but merely a title, linking her to a male in a fundamental way, having no identity of her own. In Kidnapped, the reader can see a slightly more active female role played out, yet it is still stifled by the strong male bonds, and is only a secondary or passive voice on the whole. One such example is that of Mrs. Stewart, the wife of James Stewart, who takes on the role of a domicile housewife. “His wife sat by the fire and wept, her face in her hands....” (Stevenson 131). As one can see, from this and several other passages, she possesses the characteristics of an emotionally distraught, dependent woman, solely relying on the actions of her husband to guide her own. This idea of reliance is also in keeping with female characters of this style, allowing little freedom for a woman herself to direct her own destiny, to play her own hand of cards so to speak. Stevenson differs ever so slightly in his placement of one female character in particular, that of the “bonny lass” who owned the inn. Though Alan and David use their cunning to trick her, and play upon her sympathies, it is still evident that they are utterly dependent upon her to bring them out of danger and into safety. The female character, at least at one point in Kidnapped, plays an active role and is a hero, in a marginal sense or possibly even more as her help furthers their progress in the story. Nevertheless, it still remains the case that in the homosocial realm of adventure, male dominance allows little room for female interaction and involvement.

A final aspect apparent in most adventure novels is the ideas of place or setting as a central and defining theme, governing the actions of the novel’s characters. In the work

of Conrad and Stevenson, there are four apparent settings through which the characters experience very different outcomes. Character interaction with the sea, land, city, and islands, are key dichotomies, which involve the characters in very different ways. Interaction with character and sea is by far the most closely knit and homosocial as characters have no escape from the influence of other male characters. They rely on others and in doing so; create dependent friendships that are not easily separated into their individual parts. We see this on the “Covenant” between Alan and David who form an alliance based on a mutual goal and this flourishes into a much deeper bond and friendship. The sea represents an isolated state of being; however, the character is not alone, but with others. He is still able to experience camaraderie and is still able to determine his destiny. When a man is then cast into the sea, he is separated from his closely knit group, thereby rendering him dependent upon nature and his own will to survive. Should he be lucky enough to find an island, the isolation is furthered as he must forage for food, water, and shelter, three fundamental needs met by the ship and other shipmates. When alone on an island, the characters true nature is apparent, and their mental and physical fortitude are severely tested. Many characters crack under the pressure of these circumstances, much like David, who begins to weep for his own situation. If the character is able to get to a mainland, this is then a shift from self-reliance to that of partial dependency on others, but also independency. Being reunited with the land signifies a contrast of these two states, as the character must still exhibit some manner of self-reliance against nature, whose presence can still be a factor upon land. However, the character also receives the most help on land, whether it is from family, like the Stewarts, or from a village or town. On land, the character has a constant

glimmer of hope of being reunited with his male friend follow him once again. Finally, the city signifies a complete stop or final resting place of both the adventure and the male bond. The city is representative of complete Modernism, and reliance on technology, rather than man. As Roberts suggests, "For Conrad, then the relationship between imperial setting and metropolitan centre is shadowed by a pairing of the manliness of physical and productive labour in the service of imperial trade with a more problematic and passive intellectual and artistic masculinity, as he writes about the former role while beginning to occupy the latter" (47). It is clear from this passage that Conrad, and not only him but other male authors, realize the contrasting nature of colonial imperialism with that of city life, one requiring a more active role the other passive. Most writers of this age took on the more passive, city life, and only wrote about the active life. Their writing then became their dichotomy, their dual nature, much like Alan and David or Marlowe and Kurtz, but in a more theoretical, transparent sense. It would then be considered a manner of escapism by which they could reside in the body of the adventurer but from the safety and comfort of their writing desk. Therefore, in city life a strong male bond is not longer needed and an adventure is impossible as there is no more unmarked land to either travel or discover. In British adventure tales, London itself, acts like a final solution, much like Edinburgh does in both Scottish and British stories. The size of these two cities can be attributed to this as well, this size generating any number of possibilities the character can take, thus propagating further the distancing of strong male bonds.

The adventure tale, though rooted in imperialism, is a map of socio-cultural norms and desires, using the sense of thrill and camaraderie to capture the reader in a way he

can relate to. These stories usually remove love and even women from the scene as unneeded amidst a strong male presence, and at times give the weaker or more dependent characters feminine qualities, compensating for the obvious lack of depth and variation from removing any female influence. A sense of nationalism is at times instilled in the nature of the adventure tale, creating a sense of duty and relatedness to one's country, therefore, justifying the means by which imperialism is carried out. The adventure tale relies heavily on the male ego as a means by which to carry out its story and active voice, and therefore, was mostly read by white males of the nineteenth century. The adventure tale is therefore set off from the rest of literature as an entity all its own, unable to survive outside the imagination and senses.

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