

Memory Writing and National Identity in *Treasure Island*

Chenrui Yuwen, Yanhua Lyu*

Inner Mongolia University, Hohhot 010000, Inner Mongolia, China

Abstract: *Treasure Island* stands as a landmark work in British maritime literature, representing a new direction of the genre during the mid-to-late 19th century. Through its narrative of collective memory, the novel articulates Victorian era national identity by constructing three interconnected memories that coalesce into Britain's dominant ideology. First, Jim Hawkins' personal growth narration links adventure, courage, and masculinity cultivation to establish an ideal model for future imperial citizens. Second, selective recollections of pirate history which portrays Silver as chaotic, greedy character, thereby shaping Britain's cultural identity through contrast with these negative examples. Finally, the material memory carrier of searching for the treasure map symbolizes the retrieval and reinterpretation of buried colonial history. This thesis reveals that *Treasure Island* is not merely an adventure novel, but a literary work that purifies the chaotic colonial history into a story about British national identity through analyzing these memories.

Keywords: *Treasure Island*; memory writing; national identity

1. Introduction

Since its publication in 1883, *Treasure Island* has firmly secured its canonical place in world adventure literature, distinguished by its tight plot, vivid character, and sheer narrative allure. Robert Louis Stevenson's novel *Treasure Island* stands as a seminal work of British imperial adventure fiction. Told primarily from the first-person perspective of Jim, the son of an innkeeper, and supplemented by Dr. Lively's narrative, the story weaves together a growing tale with a nuanced exploration of moral ambiguity and the mythology surrounding pirate culture. They are the rule followers of the society and undertake every duty they are made to. In that age, a masculine man played the role of "dutiful husbands and attentive fathers, devotees of hearth and family".

The story begins at the remote Admiral Benbow Hotel on a British coast. The death ultimatum delivered by the pirates via a black ticket causes him to die of terror; as a result, Jim accidentally obtains the treasure map belonging to the notorious Captain Flint. The local gentry, Dr. Livsey fund the purchase of a ship named the Hispaniola to journey to the island in search of the lost treasure. Among the recruited crew is the highly charismatic, tall cook John Silver who secretly commands a group of rebellious pirates operating within the fleet.

Jim returns to England framing adventure as a harsh catalyst for romantic escapism. Stevenson's novel subverts romantic adventure tropes through complex moral ambiguity and Jim's growing, probing greed, loyalty, and the contradictions of imperial ideology. The novel probes moral ambiguity and growth in the imperial adventure canon and uses binary moral contrasts to shape pirate history, build British national identity and serve the mood needs of Victorian imperial expansion in a vivid and widely accepted way. However, to dismiss it as merely growing story for young entertainment is to overlook the complexity and historical depth that define it as a cultural text.

As the central vehicle for cultural memory, the novel holds a pivotal position in the dialogue exploring the grand question of who we are. The paper argues that the novel difficult approach to memory writing. Catana notes that memory redefines the past and history[1]. The concept of memory discussed here is not an objective reconstruction of history; rather, as theorized by scholars such as Jan Assmann, it constitutes a selective, constructive, and even innovative cultural practice aimed at providing contemporary society with a shared framework of meaning and a collective identity. The novel's key merit is its successful remaking of bloody plunder in British sea expansion into a tale of courage, loyalty, and civilization's victory over chaos. The process of ideological cleansing works through three mutually supporting memory stories: first, Jim Hawkins's personal growth memory, which joins individual adventure to the character-building of empire citizens; second, the selective memory of pirate history, which makes pirates the total opposite to act as a contrast and so shape core British values; third, the search for physical memory objects, shown by the treasure map, an act that naturally stands for the recovery and moral telling of early colonial accumulation history.

Together, the three layers of memory form a web of meaning that turns the empire's real problems into a clear, workable national allegory full of heroism. A critical study of the process not only allows reevaluation of the novel's place in literary history, but also offers a typical example for understanding the tight link between 19th British literature and imperial politics.

2. Memory of Personal Growth: Forging Qualified Citizens of the Empire

Jim as the first-person narrator, shapes readers' emotional engagement and value judgment via his retrospective reconstruction of his adolescent adventures from an adult perspective. The narrative strategy, anchored in personal reminiscence, renders the novel both aligned with the classic paradigm of the 19th British growing novel and transcendent of ordinary juvenile adventure texts, evolving into an implicit training program for the future subjects of the empire. Jim's memory presents itself as highly private individual experience, yet its narrative function bears distinct public exemplary significance. Through a replicable logic of growth, it provides a well template of identity construction for middle-class adolescent readers in the Victorian era, internalizing the ideological demands of the empire into individuals' self-awareness of growth.

First, Jim's personal adventure, which evolves from passivity to agency, serves as his own initiation ritual. At the outset of the novel, Jim is an ordinary teenage boy assisting his widowed mother at the Admiral Benbow Inn, occupying a marginal position in the established social order. The appearance of a treasure map, however, plunges him into a perilous adult world. His development is structured as a sequence of critical decision-making moments. The most iconic episode occurs when he overhears Silver's mutiny plot while concealed inside an apple barrel. The act of eavesdropping symbolizes a cognitive leap from ignorance to awareness, as well as an awakening of subjectivity, which shifts from passive resignation to fate to active pursuit of truth. No longer a mere spectator of events, he emerges as a pivotal agent capable of turning the tide. His subsequent acts, such as seizing the *Hispaniola* and exploring the island on his own, continually reinforce the proactive and resolute form of masculinity. The narrative mode redefines adventure itself as a valuable, even indispensable form of civic train.

Second, Jim's memory of growth is inextricably linked to the exaltation of masculinity in the Victorian era. Masculinity is constructed by culture and also changed by it. Piratical masculinity is most quintessentially shown in pirates in *Treasure Island*. Commenting on the Victorian masculinity, the unauthorized forms of masculinity represented by pirates need to be taken into account. The ethos is not mere personal bravery military conquest, administrative management and frontier exploration, including courage, resilience, self-discipline and composure under pressure. The code of conduct, academically termed imperial masculinity. It demands that person can both survive and adapt in the wild frontier environment and abide by imperial order principles at the moral level, acting as balancers between violence and civilization. When facing crises, such as the critical duel with Israel Hands on the sailing ship, Jim does not only physical courage, but also the ability to make a decision in morally ambiguous situations. Unlike pure piratical bravery, Jim's decisions always imply a latent confirmation of legitimacy: he confronts mutinous pirates and upholds the lawful order represented by the squire and the doctor, thus endowing his actions with moral justice. He also acts against orders and leaves the camp without permission, but the narrative ultimately frames his behavior as a heroic act driven by a higher loyalty, the safeguarding of collective interests. In the narrative, Jim's brief self-reproach for his unauthorized departure leave from the camp constitute a subtle calibration of memory: once an individual's autonomous action transgresses the established authoritative order, it is marked as a fault in memory; yet when the action ultimately serves the collective interest, memory revises itself and reconstructs the act as an embodiment of courage and resolve.

Third, the purification of wealth and the return of imperial order. The last of story, Jim returns to England successfully with part of the treasure, fulfilling his dream of class progress. This ending bears profound ideological implications. The treasure originates from the bloody plunder of Captain Flint, yet this origin is deliberately downplayed in the narrative. This is the ideological function of memory writing: Jim's recollection actively implements selective amnesia, pushing the colonial violence behind the treasure and the bloody prehistory of piracy to the margins of the narrative, treating them merely as a backdrop to the adventure rather than an object of critical reflection. Readers' attention is directed to how Jim and his companions win the treasure through courage and wisdom, rather than where the wealth comes from. As a result, the wealth originally stained with colonial blood is quietly whitewashed through the heroic deeds of Jim and his fellows. Flint's piratical plunder is essentially the barbaric prototype of imperial primitive accumulation: early colonial expansion itself had blurred boundaries with piracy, and figures such as Drake were even granted letters of marque by the Crown, serving as informal instruments of imperial expansion. Jim's lawful acquisition of the treasure transforms the barbaric primitive accumulation into personal wealth acceptable to civilized society. The violent origin is erased from memory, leaving only an inspirational narrative of reward through courage and wisdom. Jim's memory of personal success is ultimately tied to the preservation and restoration of domestic order, perfectly bridging the rift between individual desire and social norms. Meanwhile, Jim returning to his homeland with wealth and achieving class advancement also confirms the promise of mobility within the imperial system.

3. Selective Historical Memory: Pirates as the Other of Civilization

The second key part of memory writing in the novel is the very selective shaping of pirate history. Piracy has a long past; pirates appeared with the first seagoing ships. Goethe once said piracy is an inseparable part of sea shipping trade. So piracy arose with the growth of ancient sea navigation. In history, piracy was complex, closely tied to state-issued letters of

marque and messy early global trade. Yet in *Treasure Island*, pirates become a functional “other” group, whose core story role is to highlight and strengthen the civility, order and loyalty of English identity through binary contrast. This remaking of pirate history is not just a writing technique; it is a key part of building shared British memory in the Victorian age. The novel draws moral and civilizational lines for the core meaning of Englishness, making pirates a necessary negative reference in building national identity. The first figure, Long John Silver embodies the dialectic between complexity and otherness. Undoubtedly one of the most compelling pirate figures in world literature, Silver’s multifaceted character, blending cruelty with tenderness, cunning with magnanimity, precisely reflects the subtlety of the novel’s ideological operation. Though Jim engages in a relentless battle of wits and wills with him, he expresses admiration and even identification with Silver, and adopts elements of the pirate’s impulsive style in his own actions. Then, the novel ultimately allows Silver to evade justice and go unpunished. Owing to this moral ambiguity, the contemporary periodical *The Dial* expressed concern that this adventure romance beloved by boys would exert a detrimental effect on their moral development[4]. The sharp binary contrast covers up the messy truth of real history. By painting pirates as the root of all sea disorder, it lets Victorian readers accept Britain’s moral superiority. Speaking of the connection between violence and masculinity, Dawson says “Virtues such as aggression, strength, courage and endurance have repeatedly been defined as the natural and inherent qualities of manhood”.

Then the uncivilized representation of the pirate collective. The rest of the pirate group in the novel are endowed with purer traits of barbarism and chaos. They are a disorderly mob driven by alcohol, greed rife with suspicion and violence within their ranks. Incapable of establishing a stable social structure, they fall into disarray after their mutiny succeeds, quickly descending into internal strife and self-destruction. In contrast to Silver’s individual complexity, the rank-and-file pirates are flattened and symbolized by memory, becoming the embodied carriers of barbarism and disorder. The novel reinforces the anti-civilization attributes of this group through abundant details: they speak vulgarly and lack rational self-restraint; even when holding the upper hand, they sink into internal strife over petty profits and personal grudges, incapable of building a stable order. This portrayal echoes precisely the Hobbesian proposition of the state of nature as a war of all against all, and also aligns with the Victorian perception of social hierarchy: the lower class, if detached from elite control and enlightenment, would degenerate into a chaotic mob. This portrayal stands in sharp contrast to the hierarchical, organized civilized team represented by Trelawney. The pirate ship and their camp on the island serve as a microcosm of disorder, highlighting the inherent rationality and necessity. The spatial structure of the novel further intensifies this opposition: the swamp encampment occupied by pirates, savage symbolizes the undisciplined state of nature; the stockade held by Jim’s side, by contrast, is well and orderly, embodying civilized order on the savage frontier. Through this depiction of pirate life as a state of nature, Stevenson literary renders the Hobbesian philosophical proposition: without authority and loyalty, human society will regress into a war of all against all; and the style hierarchy and order are the only reliable path for humanity to escape barbarism. As Chesterton aptly noted, Stevenson employed the pirate persona solely to challenge the Victorian era’s dull and manly-deficient civilization[2].

Finally, there is the movement and sanitization of historical responsibility. This constitutes the most critical ideological function of selective memory. The British’s global colonial expansion that were scarcely distinguishable in nature from piracy. By projecting these bad traits onto the outlaw group of pirates, the novel achieves a subtle discursive displacement. The legitimate colonists, symbolized by the squire and the doctor, are thus able to distance themselves from these ignominious acts, as they stand for law, science, and civilization. In this way, the iniquities of colonial history are borne by the pirate Other. As readers condemn the greed and cruelty of Silver and his ilk, they unconsciously identify with the civilizing enterprise embodied by figures like Trelawney. This selective memory of pirates performs a sanitizing function: it allows the British public to disavow the violent foundations of their own prosperity while still celebrating the spirit of adventure.

4. Material Carriers of Memory

4.1 The Treasure Map and the Recovery of Colonial History

Memory does not reside in language and narratives; it is also inscribed upon material objects. In Europe’s long discourse, maps have always played a pivotal role. Maps have served both an informational function, and also acted as a pointer to the desires of the mapper for what might lie within those territories delineated. Maps are a kind of language, or social product which act as mediators between an inner mental world and an outer physical world[3]. The political potential of mapping is obvious: new territories can be delineated by drawing lines on paper, important resources can be emphasised. As cultural memory theory posits, material carriers are the core medium through which collective memory is anchored, transmitted and reconstructed. They preserve specific historical experiences in tangible form, while simultaneously providing a manipulable object for later revisions of memory. The composition of the novel bears a profound link to cartography. The novel bears from a rough sketch of an island drawn by Stevenson. In the novel, the treasure map left behind by Billy Bones is precisely such a core material carrier of memory, bearing the weight of history and driving the entire narrative forward. The

whole story unfolds around a map, a treasure, a mutiny and an expedition, with the map sustaining powerful narrative tension throughout the text. The pursuit and understand of map constitute the third dimension of the novel's politics of memory.

First, the map as a product of colonial violence. This yellowed sheet of paper is by no means a navigational tool. In essence, it is a microcosm of modern colonial spatial power. Since Age of Navigation, England has accomplished naming, partitioning and appropriation of global oceans and lands through cartographic technology; the map is a product of colonial power. The treasure map, as a barbaric variant of this logic of power, constitutes tangible physical evidence of past colonial plunder, making the bloody history of first accumulation from the era of Captain Flint. The markings on the map such as Skeleton Island, the relics Flint left on the island, including the skeleton pointing toward the treasure and the horrific legends surrounding him all point to a buried, dishonorable past. The skeleton symbol is not a mere intimidation marker, but a symbol of violent spatial appropriation: it marks not only the location of the treasure, but also Flint's sovereign claim to the island achieved through slaughter. This chaotic, unofficial history stands in stark contrast to the imperial image of a civilizing mission that the Victorian era sought to construct. The map thus presents as an urgent problem of memory in need of resolution.

Second, the quest as a ritual of historical recovery. This voyage can be interpreted as a reclamation ritual for this repressed colonial memory. Yet this recovery undergoes a thorough displacement in both its agents and its rules: it is led by the squire, the doctor and the captain who are representatives of the British social elite and the professional middle class with the participation of Jim, the embodiment of the new generation. The composition of the team is itself a microcosmic replica of the imperial power structure: Squire Trelawney provides capital and resources, corresponding to the economic foundation of colonial expansion; Captain Smollett presides over military force and order, corresponding to the violent guarantee of imperial expansion; and Jim, as the future successor to the imperial cause, undertakes the function of generational memory transmission. Although they also resort to violence, the narrative strictly confines their use of force to the frameworks of self-defense and mutiny suppression, thereby endowing it with legitimacy. British became tied to national identity through the heroic images of "old sea dogs" such as Drake. This draws a clear moral line between the treasure-hunting process itself and Flint's voyages, which were motivated purely by plunder. The hunting voyage in the novel is precisely the literary reenactment of this historical logic: it completes the legitimate recovery of historical memory.

Third, the transfer of wealth and the completion of the narrative. When the treasure is discovered and transported back to England, it undergoes a symbolic transfer of ownership. Its proprietorship shifts from Flint, the barbaric and illegitimate pirate, to the civilized, legitimate English gentlemen. Alongside the shift in ownership, the function of the map as a material memory carrier also undergoes a complete transformation: it was originally Flint's private testament of crime, bearing the memory of bloody plunder; once the treasure is legally acquired, the map sheds the stain of original sin and is transformed into a memento of heroic adventure, serving as material testimony to the triumph of courage, wisdom and order. The nature of the wealth is transformed: it is no longer ill-gotten gains, but a reward for courage, wisdom and adherence to order. The bloody history to which the map alludes is rewritten through this heroic act of recovery. The negative connotations borne by the material memory carrier are stripped away and replaced with entirely new, positive values. Through the narrative, the empire not only appropriates the material wealth of the colonies; more importantly, it reconstructs the historical memory of the origins of this wealth, rendering it readily acceptable and praiseworthy by domestic society with a clear conscience. This process also forms a perfect echo of the Other of pirates discussed earlier: the original sin of violence is entirely attributed to the pirate group.

4.2 The Complicity of Memory and the Completion of the National Allegory

The three layers of memory including personal, historical and material do not operate in isolation. Instead, they form a network of complicity that mutually verifies and reinforces itself, collectively weaving a complete picture of national identity. Together they constitute a tight narrative closed loop: the memory of self growth builds an emotional channel, selective historical memory delineates boundaries of identity, and the construction of material memory provides a form of legitimacy. Interconnected and mutually supportive, they enable the infiltration of ideology to occur imperceptibly.

Jim's memory of personal growth provides readers with a channel for emotional engagement and a template for rendering ideological intimate and compelling. Readers enter the narrative through the perspective of the young Jim, and as they empathize with his fear, courage and growth, they naturally accept the value order presupposed by the narrative: they regard Trelawney's side as Us and the pirate group as the Other, and see the success of the treasure hunt as the inevitable outcome of justice. Personal growth experience is deeply bound up with collective value judgments, so that imperial norms cease to be external preaching and become the internal requirement of individual realization. The selective historical memory of pirates draws clear moral boundaries, defines the distinction between us and them, and transforms internal contradictions into solidarity. By projecting all traits of violence, greed and disorder onto the pirate group, class differences and conflicts of interest within British society are temporarily set aside, and a shared civilized identity becomes the core bond for forging consensus.

Meanwhile, the recovery and narration of the material memory embodied in the treasure map resolves the original sin of colonial history at its root, providing legal for the wealth and power of the empire. It confirms the narrative logic of civilization conquering chaos through a material closed loop, lending tangible material support to abstract moral judgments. Working in tandem, the three transform a history of maritime expansion into an inspirational national fable of personal growth, the triumph of justice over evil, and the conquest of chaos by civilization, capable of being passed down.

Written at the apex of the British Empire, through its distinctive memory writing, this novel effectively responds to the identity anxieties of an era of imperial prosperity. Though Britain held global hegemony in the late 19th century, it also faced dual challenges at home and abroad: growing class contradictions domestically, simmering resistance in the colonies, and rising questioning of the moral legitimacy of imperial expansion. The memory reconstruction in the novel precisely provides a cultural solution to this dilemma of the era. It offers a stable, coherent and positive national self-image, alleviating the internal tensions and moral guilt that might arise from the brutality of colonial practice. More importantly, it entered the public reading sphere through the popular genre of adventure fiction, and became a core text of adolescent reading in particular, realizing the generational transmission of imperial ideology. The novel is therefore far more than an adventure novel; The memory paradigm has gradually merged into Britain's collective cultural memory alongside the canonization of the work, becoming an unitary part of maritime adventure within the connotation of Englishness, and continuously shaping later people's perception and imagination of British.

5. Conclusion

Treasure Island, though regarded more often as a work of children's literature, is more thoughtful than it appears. Through an deep analysis of the mechanism of memory writing in *Treasure Island*, we can uncover the cultural codes under the surface plot of the novel. Through memory operations on three levels, personal growth, the historical Other and material symbols. Stevenson finishes a difficult ideological project: he purifies the chaos and violence of British global expansion that are difficult to confront into a clear, well and highly appealing national myth. The three parts of memory support and verify one another, jointly forming a tight ideological narrative network: Jim's first-person original memory builds a channel of emotional empathy for readers, internalizing imperial value norms into self awareness of growth; the selective memory of the pirate group draws a clear boundary between civilization and chaos, building a negative reference point for national identity; and the building of the meaning of the treasure map as a material memory completes the moral clean of colonial wealth at its root, providing a legitimizing narrative for the empire's capital accumulation.

The novel secures its complex position in the history of 19th British literature: it is both a milestone in the development of maritime fiction and a paradigmatic sample of imperial cultural build, while also offering profound insights into how to examine the relationship between novel and politics, and between narrative and power. How a story is told and how memory is shaped are directly related to how nation understands past, defines present, and imagines future. The enduring appeal of novel stems precisely from its present of the purity of adventure, the justice of civilization, and the wealth and glory that an empire is entitled to under the sun. The task of literary criticism is to listen to the overtones of grand narratives and use it to analyze novel.

References

- [1] Catana, Elisabeta Simona. Memories and Stories Redefining the Past and History in Julian Barnes' s the Sense of an Ending[J]. Romanian Journal of English Studies, 2020, 17(1) :8-15.
- [2] Chesterton, G. K. The Victorian Age in Literature. Butterworth, 1913.
- [3] Lindy Stiebel, "A Map to Treasure: The Literary Significance of Thomas Baines's 'Map of the Gold Fields of South Eastern Africa'(1873)", South African Historical Journal, Vol.39, No.1 (1998), p.64.
- [4] Maxiner, Paul, editor. Robert Louis Stevenson: The Critical Heritage. Routledge, 1981.

Author Bio

Chenrui Yuwen (2001.02); Female; Han Chinese; Hohhot, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region; Master's degree candidate; Research Interests: English Language and Literature.

Yanhua Lyu (1972.07); Female; Mongol ethnic group; Chifeng City, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region; Master's degree candidate; Associate Professor; Research Interests: English Language and Literature.