

Treasure Island and The Chocolate War:

Fostering Morally Mature Young Adults through Amoral Fiction

Almost one century apart, Robert Louis Stevenson and Robert Cormier each incited literary revolutions with their first novels, *Treasure Island* (Stevenson, 1883/2012) and *The Chocolate War* (Cormier, 1974/2004). Stevenson broke the Victorian didactic model, and Cormier wrote through the lens of New Realism in the 1970s. These novels changed what was expected of young adult readers in their respective eras. Both authors nurtured in their contemporary young readers, and continue to nurture in their readers today, an ability to work through complex human experiences.

These novels can be classified as amoral fiction, which is fiction that presents characters or situations that cannot be classified as either good or bad. Amoral fiction provides opportunities for readers to navigate murky moral situations without the help or heavy-handedness of adult preaching. Furthermore, *Treasure Island* and *The Chocolate War* either highlight or manipulate the role of a moral agent—one who can discern what is right regardless of prior convictions. Discarding didacticism in favor of amoral scenarios in their novels indicates a trust that Stevenson and Cormier have in their readers—a trust that fosters the development of morally responsible adolescents. In essence, the receptive reader can live vicariously through and question the actions of the protagonists. Like Cormier, Stevenson pushes his readers to “think, to extrapolate beyond the end and connect what they have read with what they will do with their lives in the world” (Myers, 2000, p. 461). Although *Treasure Island* and *The Chocolate War* come from vastly different eras, their revolutionary styles are incredibly simi-

lar; each author trusts his readers to navigate morally ambiguous situations to develop their own autonomy.

Stevenson and Amoral Fiction

Stevenson set the groundwork for amoral fiction in his essay “A Gossip on Romance” (1882), originally published in *Longman’s Magazine*. In his essay, he underscores the difference between immoral and amoral fiction. He claims that romance fiction should mimic real life and that it should be:

a-moral; which either does not regard the human will at all, or deals with it in obvious and healthy relations; where the interest turns, not upon what a man shall choose to do, but on how he manages to do it; not on the passionate slips and hesitations of the conscience, but on the problems of the body and of the practical intelligence, in clean, open-air adventure, the shock of arms, or the diplomacy of life. (Stevenson, 1882, p. 70)

In essence, Stevenson proposes that by reading amoral fiction, readers will learn or vicariously experience how to deal practically with conflicts that will inevitably arise in their own lives. Stevenson (1882) writes, “There is a vast deal in life and letters both which is not immoral, but simply a-moral” (p. 70). Amoral fiction, then, introduces readers to the mechanics of dealing with “the human will” in an “obvious and healthy” manner. Stevenson’s fiction, like Cormier’s, fosters the idea that readers will develop “practical intelligence” as they work through morally complicated dilemmas. Furthermore, this type of literature portrays and gives “obvious and healthy” real-life lessons, whereas the lessons found in didactic pieces are not applicable to real life. It goes without saying that real

life is more complex than the lives presented in *Little Goody Two-Shoes* (Anonymous, 1765) or *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (Hughes, 1857)—stories written for young people to provide moral guidance rather than challenging content.

Stevenson redefined Victorian boys' adolescent literature by challenging the sententious children's literature so prevalent in his era. He let go of the accepted practice of didacticism in adolescent literature in favor of entrusting his readers with complex and morally ambiguous situations. *Treasure Island* was Stevenson's landmark amoral text, which changed the face of adolescent adventure literature (Darton, 1982, p. 300). The novel recounts Jim Hawkins's adventure aboard the schooner *Hispaniola* and the hunt for Captain Flint's treasure. Jim hides in apple barrels to learn of mutiny, pilots the *Hispaniola*, and kills a man for the first time. Jim fights against and alongside pirates while questioning the meaning of duty. *Treasure Island* highlights the duality that exists in everyone—notorious person of fortune and respectable country squire alike. The moral ambiguity found in *Treasure Island* is underscored by Jim's interactions with Long John Silver's complex and equivocal personality. Silver, the villain, plots the mutiny aboard the *Hispaniola*; however, he also saves Jim's life knowing that the pirates will retaliate with the "black spot." Long John Silver is at times the villain and the hero.

Stevenson's father, who was heavily involved in the development of *Treasure Island*, was unsettled by Stevenson's almost heroic treatment of Silver, especially at the end of the novel where Silver gets away with some of the treasure. In response to his father's disapproval of Silver's outcome, Stevenson wrote, "I own I do not agree with you about the later chapters of *Treasure Island*. I think John Silver in his later developments about as good as anything in it. I should say about the best of it. So there is a hitch" (as cited in Booth & Mehew, 1994, vol. 3, p. 294). It is apparent that Stevenson's strict, Calvinist father was uncomfortable with the "bad guy" getting off scot-free. Furthermore, it is intriguing that Stevenson claims that Long John Silver, the villain, is the "best" of the novel. Even in the *Saturday Review* in 1883, Walter H. Pollock claims that the real hero of the novel is Long John Silver. Pollock wrote, "[A]nd you feel, when the story is done, that the right name of it is not *Treasure Island*, but *John Silver, Pirate*" (as cited in Booth & Mehew, 1994, vol. 4, p. 217). While Stevenson be-

lieves that Silver's role in the novel is one of the best parts of the story, he also expects the reader to decide if Long John Silver and Jim each follow a moral path, since neither of their actions can be classified as all good or all bad.

The amoral content of Stevenson's *Treasure Island* was of such caliber that it appealed to both

pleasure readers and more discerning readers. It found a ready audience among young readers and older readers alike, and even Prime Minister William Gladstone was known to have stayed awake until all hours enthralled with *Treasure Island* (Sutherland, 2012, p. 225). However, the novel was not without critics. Along with his father's disapproval of the text, Stevenson's wife, Fanny, was less than happy about having her husband's name attached to such a novel (Sutherland, 2012, p. 230). As Stevenson unfettered the adventure story from its didactic chains,

such authors as Rider Haggard (*King Solomon's Mines*, 1885), Anthony Hope (*The Prisoner of Zenda*, 1894), and John Buchan (*Prester John*, 1910) followed suit, and the genre was never the same. These novels made the genre "grow up into greater maturity, but in doing so gave it also the chance of growing clean out of boyhood" (Darton, 1982, p. 300).

Cormier and the Morally Ambiguous

Almost one century later, ripples from Stevenson's literary revolution were being found in Robert Cormier's work. Like Stevenson, Cormier trusts his readers and expects the same potential for them to gain moral maturity. The years leading up to Cormier's radical text *The Chocolate War* were ones of change. According to Townsend (1996), adolescent literature of the 1960s reflected the general discontent and disillusionment with authority (pp. 272–273). Authors were

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considered “pioneers” if they mentioned, let alone discussed, issues such as “unwed motherhood, school dropouts, mental illness and the problems confronting children of divorced or alcoholic parents” in their literature (Townsend, 1996, p. 276). Although Cormier did not intend for *The Chocolate War* to be labeled

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a young adult novel, it was received as one and should be critiqued as one. Keeping the public’s reception of his work as a young adult novel in mind, it should be noted that regardless of Cormier’s original intended audience, Cormier’s purpose was the same—to portray life as it really is. Cormier “den[ies] his readership a romantic view of society and . . . subvert[s] a unitary view of childhood through the content and form of his work” (Head, 1996, p. 28). Cormier’s work blew past

all of the previous attempts to break with traditional cultural standards. His violence was grittier; his outcomes were bleaker.

In writing amoral realism, Cormier expunges any bit of didacticism from his texts. Like Stevenson, Cormier trusts his reader to digest his rough content without the heavy-handed guidance of an author. *The Chocolate War* tells the story of Jerry Renault’s interaction with his prep school’s secret society, the Vigils, and their ring leader, Archie Costello. As an “assignment,” Archie makes Jerry decline participation in the school’s chocolate fundraiser for two weeks. At the end of the assignment, Jerry continues to refuse to sell the chocolates and temporarily becomes a hero for standing against the system.

This enrages Brother Leon, who is in charge of the fundraiser, and he enlists Archie’s help to turn the tide against Jerry. The Vigils conspire to change Jerry from a hero to pariah and then, ultimately, to victim. At the close of the novel, Archie orchestrates a boxing match and manipulates Jerry and the school bully, Emile Janza, into participating. Brother Leon looks on as Jerry is violently and brutally beaten by Emile. Archie is a complex character, at once commendable

and repulsive. Townsend (1996), speaking of the villain in *The Chocolate War*, says, “It is hard to avoid seeing the gang boss—cool, subtle, unscrupulous Archie Costello—as the hero” (p. 279). This sentiment reminds readers of what Walter Pollock said of Long John Silver. Both Long John Silver and Archie might be considered “heroes” of their respective novels, but this is problematic since both of them act good *and* bad, depending on which serves their own self-interests.

Throughout *The Chocolate War*, we see instances of Jerry’s resilience as he is beaten only to struggle back to his feet. He is strong and tough, and the reader is imbued with hope that Jerry will come out the hero. However, Jerry is physically and mentally crushed at the end of the novel; he is unable and unwilling to stand in rebellion against the bad guys, which strips him of his earlier heroic title. This demonstrates Cormier’s insistence on representing life as it really is—that sometimes bad people win, and sometimes bad people seem to be good.

Because of its amoral characters and morally ambiguous content, Cormier’s work has been regularly banned and contested. Even as recently as 2004, *The Chocolate War* topped the ALA’s Most Challenged Book List (American Library Association, 2005, para. 1). However, regardless of the criticism, Cormier’s success created license for other authors to follow suit. According to Townsend (1996), authors such as Chris Lynch (*Iceman*, 1994), Michael Cadnum (*Calling Home*, 1991), and Erika Tamar (*Fair Game*, 1993) followed Cormier’s example and pushed the “frontiers of permissibility” (p. 280). Today, the “frontiers of permissibility” are still being tested with books such as *And Tango Makes Three* by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell (2005) and *Saga* by Brian Vaughan and Fiona Staples (2012), which also use amoral situations to get to a higher truth. Through using amoral situations, Cormier gets to his higher truth by fostering the growing autonomy of his readers. According to Frank Myszor, Cormier “achieves this moral goal by structuring the novel so as to require an ‘interrogative’ style of reading” (as cited in Tarr, 2002, p. 96). Cormier expects his readers to be “active and involved critic[s]” and, in doing so, he creates a more knowledgeable and mature young adult (Head, 1996, p. 31). By writing fiction that acknowledges moral ambiguity, Cormier, like Stevenson, anticipates that readers will question morally complex situations so as to learn

from them and determine how they might respond to similar experiences in their own lives.

Moral Agency across Authors

Stevenson and Cormier use amoral literature to underscore the role and value of a moral agent. A “moral agent,” as defined by Rachels (1986) in *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, is:

someone who is concerned impartially with the interests of everyone affected by what he or she does; who carefully sifts facts and examines their implications; who accepts principles of conduct only after scrutinizing them to make sure they are sound; who is willing to “listen to reason” even when it means that his or her earlier convictions may have to be revised; and who finally is willing to act on the results of deliberation. (p. 11)

By looking closely at the innovative novels *Treasure Island* and *The Chocolate War*, one begins to understand the ramifications of such groundbreaking amoral texts. The consequence of these original works is that they push their readers to encounter real-life ambiguities through fiction. In *Treasure Island*, Stevenson showcases the development of Jim becoming a moral agent. *Treasure Island* is rife with instances where Jim needs to put aside his prior convictions and prejudices about pirates and the “best men of society” for the good of the expedition and, frankly, for survival. It is significant that Jim finds his autonomy without relying on the set strictures of his culture. He becomes his own man.

Alternatively, Cormier manipulates the expected role of Jerry, the protagonist, who readers might assume will develop into a self-governing youth. Tarr claims that Jerry “actually has no idea whom he is fighting or what he is fighting for” and should not be considered a moral agent, as he is “clueless as to how his actions will affect others; he does not seem to deliberate on his actions; he does not listen to others’ warnings” (2002, pp. 96–97). By playing with expectations, Cormier highlights what can happen if one does not open oneself up to such things as “listening to reason,” because Jerry, who refuses to do so, is broken and defeated at the conclusion of the novel. Readers learn that to be a moral agent, one must think of how one’s actions might affect others and be “willing to act on the results of deliberation,” even if it is in direct opposition to one’s prior beliefs.

Jerry, according to Tarr (2002), cannot be consid-

ered a rebel hero, either, as he is not actively engaged in any cause, nor does he identify with any cause (p. 96). Jerry’s inaction and lack of deliberation affect his peers and teachers because the entire school becomes embroiled in the eponymous Chocolate War. Furthermore, the entire school is implicated in Jerry’s destruction by viewing and paying for the brutal Gladiator-like boxing match between Jerry and Emile. By providing a bleak outcome for his hero, Cormier expects readers to question what they might do differently than Jerry. Even though the novel does not show the development of a moral agent, it aids readers in becoming their own moral agents as they respond to Jerry’s actions.

Ultimately, the act of reading these amoral novels, though different in their approaches, introduces the reader to what it means to become a moral agent. In turn, the reader learns to examine morally ambiguous situations without leaning on adults’ or society’s strictures.

Lasting Effects

The ripples first created by Stevenson’s amoral text and furthered by Cormier’s are still being felt. Many scholars and critics are still asking the same questions about the benefits or disadvantages of amoral messages in the literature read by our youth today. Ratzan (2013) claims that amoral novels, particularly ones like Cormier’s and Stevenson’s, challenge readers to “be *better* than [Cormier’s or Stevenson’s] characters, and to make the real world a more hopeful place than [their] imagined one” (2013, para. 10). By creating a situation where the author entrusts his or her readers with the charge of bringing their own hope, the author is “respect[ing] the intelligence of [his or her] readers . . . and this degree of respect may be the most hopeful quality of all” (Ratzan, 2013, para. 11).

According to critic A. S. MacLeod, Cormier, like Stevenson, “departed from standard models and [broke] some of the most fundamental taboos” of adolescent fiction (as cited in Head, 1996, p. 28). Both *Treasure Island* and *The Chocolate War* challenged the tradition that adolescent literature was a “sort of cultural touchstone that could, or should, comfort its readers or reinforce certain cultural codes” (Head, 1996, p. 29). Many novels by Stevenson’s and Cormier’s contemporaries, which reinforced their society’s cultural standards, do not reflect reality. Furthermore,

these contemporary novels do not allow young adults to grapple with the reality that good and bad are not always clearly delineated; sometimes the protagonist might not be a good person or might not make morally responsible choices. Alternatively, both Steven-

son's and Cormier's novels use morally ambiguous protagonists and, in doing so, are "interested in the relation between childhood experience and the emergence of a moral grownup and how writing can foster that" (Myers, 2000, p. 451).

Treasure Island and *The Chocolate War* each changed the face of adolescent literature. Stevenson, through *Treasure Island*, eschews didacticism in favor of giving autonomy to his readers in the hopes that they will in turn become morally responsible individuals. Cormier, through *The Chocolate War*, followed suit, placing trust in his readers by breaking standard cultural

assumptions of what should be written about in young adult literature. *The Chocolate War* is a gritty, realistic book that allows readers to question how they would respond if they were faced with similar insurmountable odds. No longer did adolescent readers always have the answers to moral dilemmas delineated for them. As both novels made the genre grow up, so too did they change what is expected of the adolescent reader—to grapple with and confront realistic, morally ambiguous situations.

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