

When is murder not murder? Homicide, the boy-hero, and *rites de passage* in *Treasure Island* and *Tarzan*.

## **Abstract**

This paper will explore the link between the cultural construct of Christian morality and heroic 'transgression' in R.L Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1881) and Edgar Rice Burroughs's *Tarzan* (1912). According to Joseph Kestner, the *fin-de-siècle* white male adventure hero is enabled through a four-stage process: departing; encountering; transgressing; and potential re-integrating (*Masculinities in British Adventure Fiction*, pp.10-11). The four stages constitute a *rite de passage* in which the hero, in particular, the boy-hero, can journey into manhood. His adventures often mean 'transgressing' Christian morality to surmount the hazardous challenges, and include activities such as spying, 'going native', and even murder. The transgression allows the boy-hero to embody a re-formed/transformed concept of masculine identity in a way that measures his masculine identity in relation to his contemporaries. Jim Hawkins, in *Treasure Island*, follows this trajectory and after he kills the pirate Israel Hands, his heroic position among his homosocial group is established. *Rite de passage* through the four-stage process presents an aspirational spectacle of masculinity, in which atavism becomes a symbol of might as opposed to weakness or criminality, and irrationality and impulse is described as 'passionate masculine authenticity' (Kestner, p.207). The paradox is apparent: a boy-hero must breach conformist masculine behaviour to realise the conformist masculine identity constructed by his culture. But what happens when murder is a way of life, even fun, as for the titular character of *Tarzan of the Apes*? Tarzan is brought up by apes outside the cultural construction of Christian moral codes, yet he possesses an 'inherent instinct' which prevents him from crossing certain boundaries: Rice Burroughs has his anthropoid-family eating meat but Tarzan will not partake in cannibalism. This paper discusses whether these authors represent recognisable codes of behaviour belonging to Christian morality which surround transgression as enabling the boy-protagonist to be viewed as heroic rather than as evil.

## **Bio**

Leo Hall is a Visiting Lecturer and PhD Researcher at the University of Chester. Her research explores how nineteenth-century perceptions of the gentleman and heroism, mobility, technology, and empire are represented in *fin-de-siècle* adventure stories and their illustrations between 1870 and 1914. The research focuses on the complexity of a relationship in which romanticised adventuring is dependent on industrialisation while the *fin-de-siècle* adventure story is also seen as an escape from that which created it. As well as understanding how nineteenth-century industrial modernity is imagined through the texts, the analysis of the illustrations is especially relevant for both understanding the visual representation of industrialisation in the adventure story and for studying the idea that the adventure hero is a nostalgic romanticisation of gentlemanliness. She currently lectures on the English Literature Undergraduate Degree on the Shakespeare and Victorian Literature modules, and on the MA in Victorian Literature and Culture. In February 2019, she had a joint article with Dr Simon Grennan published in *The Journal of Victorian Culture* called 'Literary and historic *flâneuses*: observation, commentary, enterprise and courage in late-nineteenth-century women's professional lives'.

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## **Paper**

A trend of white Anglophone adventure stories arose between 1880 and 1914. They include Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, first published in 1881, and regarded as one of the inaugural texts in the revitalization of quest romance stories, and Edgar Rice Burroughs' *Tarzan*, published in 1912, which is marked as one of the seminal texts of popular fiction because of the myths associated with its titular character. I would like to start this paper by reading two extracts. The first extract is from *Treasure Island*. At this point the boy-hero, Jim Hawkins, aged approximately thirteen, has cast adrift the *Hispaniola* and singlehandedly overhauled her. An injured pirate called Israel Hands is the only crewmember onboard the ship and has armed himself with a rusty dirk. Hawkins has two loaded pistols and has climbed the rigging, swiftly followed by Hands:

I was drinking in his words and smiling away, as conceited as a cock upon a wall, when, all in a breath, back went his right hand over his shoulder. Something sang like an arrow through the air; I felt a blow and then a sharp pang, and there I was pinned by the shoulder to the mast. In horrid pain and surprise of the moment—I scarce can say it was by my own volition, and I am sure it was without a conscious aim—both my pistols went off, and both escaped out of my hands. They did not fall alone; with a choked cry, the coxswain loosed his grasp upon the shrouds, and plunged head first into the water.<sup>1</sup>

This second extract is from *Tarzan of the Apes*. Tarzan has just turned eighteen. He has been stalking a man called Kulonga from a Congolese tribe who have recently moved into the area of jungle where Tarzan's anthropoid-family reside; one of the tribesmen has killed his adoptive ape-mother, Kala. Kulonga is the son of the tribe's king, Mbonga, he is armed with poison-tipped arrows:

So it was that as Kulonga emerged from the shadow of the jungle a slender coil of rope sped sinuously above him from the lowest branch of a mighty tree directly upon the edge of the fields of Mbonga, and ere the king's son had taken a half dozen steps into the clearing a quick noose tightened about his neck. So quickly did Tarzan of the Apes drag back his prey that Kulonga's cry of alarm was throttled in his windpipe. Hand over hand Tarzan drew the struggling black until he had him hanging by his neck in midair; then Tarzan climbed to a larger branch drawing the still threshing victim well up into the sheltering verdure of the tree. Here he

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<sup>1</sup> R.L. Stevenson, *Treasure Island* (Oxford: OUP, 2008), pp.138-9. All further references to be given in the main body of the text.

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fastened the rope securely to a stout branch, and then, descending, plunged his hunting knife into Kulonga's heart. Kala was avenged.<sup>2</sup>

These extracts pinpoint the rather incongruous climatic acts in which the two boy-heroes kill a man, and therefore are the focus of this paper. I will be questioning these two events and asking are these acts heroism or homicide when included in the adventure story: stories that were predominantly written for boys and men about men and boy-heroes; stories which championed action and 'a code of male honour in a man's world'.<sup>3</sup> Is Hawkins's supposed self-defence and accidental discharge of his pistols enough to place his actions outside the categorisation of murder? Does Tarzan's revenge-killing justify the graphically-portrayed, brutal cold-blooded murder of Kulonga?

According to Joseph Kestner, the making of the hero is enabled through adventure fiction's premise of a four-stage process: he lists them as departing; encountering; transgressing; and potentially re-integrating.<sup>4</sup> These four stages constitute a rite of passage during which the protagonist gains a re-formed/transformed concept of masculine identity, normally through transgressing Christian morality to surmount hazardous challenges.<sup>5</sup> For the boy-hero, his maturation is included in this test of extreme circumstances, and his transgression often constitutes the ultimate challenge in his *rite de passage*.<sup>6</sup> If the Ten Commandments are considered the very core of Christian moral code, in these two stories, the protagonists breach the sixth commandment, 'You shall not murder' (Exodus 20:1-17), to secure their heroic identities. In both Hawkins's and Tarzan's cases, the paradox is apparent: the boy-hero must breach conformist masculine behaviour to realise the very masculine identity constructed by his culture. So, is there a difference between transgression and evil? How do we define both terms? Indeed, who sets the boundaries? Why do responses to these texts ignore the dark side of heroism?

This dark side of heroic behaviour sits at odds with the persistent nineteenth-century belief that transgressive behaviour was 'un-English' and, in the case of murder, the act was 'alien to the true national character'.<sup>7</sup> Carolyn A. Conley suggests that murderers provided a

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<sup>2</sup> Edgar Rice Burroughs, *Tarzan of the Apes* (London: Penguin Classics, 1990), p.79. All further references to be given in the main body of the text.

<sup>3</sup> Ledger, *The New Woman*, p.178.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph A. Kestner, *Masculinities in British Adventure Fiction, 1880-1915* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2010), pp.10-11.

<sup>5</sup> Kestner, *Masculinities in British Adventure Fiction*, pp.10-11.

<sup>6</sup> Kestner, *Masculinities in British Adventure Fiction*, p.32.

<sup>7</sup> Carolyn A. Conley, *Certain Other Countries: Homicide, Gender and National Identity in Late Nineteenth-Century England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales* (Ohio: Ohio State University, 2007), p.41 and p.67.

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stake against which the English could identify themselves, ‘Englishmen who killed were not behaving like Englishmen – they were behaving like savages or Irishmen or Americans’: killing (except in war) was *not English*.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, in *Treasure Island* when Hawkins tells Livesey, Trelawney and Captain Smollett of the pirate’s mutinous plot to murder them, the squire exclaims ‘And to think that they’re all Englishmen!’ (p.69). Yet, neither Hawkins nor Tarzan, as children, shy away from the idea of killing a man. Just prior to Hawkins’s firing his guns, he narrates the following: ‘Then, with a pistol in either hand, I addressed him. “One more step, Mr Hands,” said I, “and I’ll blow your brains out!”’ (p.138). Hawkins’s narration of events unwittingly reveals his willingness to kill when he adds, ‘with a chuckle’, that ‘Dead men don’t bite, you know’ (p.138): the chuckling at his own joke, swiftly followed by ‘laughing aloud’ because his pistols provide a ‘new-found security’ (p.138) expose his state of mind and suggest that Hawkins is completely at ease with idea of shooting the pirate.

Heroic masculinity confirms and reinforces the boy-hero’s burgeoning manliness as he progresses through Kestner’s four stages, and overcomes the restrictions of boyhood, and relishes in individualistic adventure which allows space for violence. The consistent portrayal of *fin-de-siècle* adventure heroes as both virtuous and transgressive figures offers a powerful reconceptualization of masculinity, one which rejects early-Victorian bourgeois concepts of English masculinity and accepts ‘barbaric’ qualities of manliness: of ‘raw strength, courage, instinctive violence, bodily size, and homosocial commitment to other men’:<sup>9</sup> values which still manage to be aligned with Christian moral qualities such as valour, courage, patience, and honour. As a result, the boy-hero must learn to play the ennobling game of risk and reward in order to become a man: it is a game with rules whose foundations are laid in the long-nineteenth century’s developing ideology of manliness in harmony with Christianity, in particular, with Charles Kingsley’s (1819-1875) ideas on muscular Christianity.

The path to Kingsley’s muscular Christianity lies through Thomas Carlyle (1779-1881) and Samuel Smiles (1812-1904) who idealised a normative masculinity which emphasised self-denial, self-discipline, and the proclamation that ‘man was created to work’. However, Kingsley, as a liberal Anglican, felt the Christian man belonged to a world of action.<sup>10</sup> The impact of Kingsley’s philosophising on muscular Christianity and Christian responsibility had a far-reaching impact from the 1850s onwards in which the boy-hero was

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<sup>8</sup> Conley, *Certain Other Countries*, p.67.

<sup>9</sup> Deane, ‘Imperial Barbarians’, p.206.

<sup>10</sup> C.J.W.-L. Wee, ‘Christian manliness and national identity: the problematic construction of a racially “pure” nation’ in Donald E. Hall (ed.), *Muscular Christianity: Embodying the Victorian Age*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p.68.

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often placed as a respectable school boy. Thomas Hughes' novel *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857) was at the forefront of the evolving boy-hero, with Tom Brown being both physically strong and morally incorruptible.<sup>11</sup> His was a boyhood shaped by a combination of more liberally political values, evangelical moral strictness, and money that was a result of hard work rather than inheritance.

The label 'muscular Christianity' originated in a review by T.C. Sandars in the *Saturday Review* of Kingsley's *Two Years Ago* (21 February 1857), in which he described Kingsley's 'muscular Christian' man as someone:

... who fears God and can walk a thousand miles in a thousand hours – who, in the language which Mr. Kingsley has made popular, breathes God's free air on God's rich earth, and at the same time can hit a woodcock, doctor a horse, and twist a poker around his fingers.<sup>12</sup>

Kingsley was recognised as the advocate of a new movement in which the defining characteristics of muscular Christianity were the union between religious certainty and physical strength:<sup>13</sup> the male body became a metaphor in which manly acts were inextricably linked with 'a physical armour-plating to withstand various potential threats to religious belief, bodily health, and social stability'.<sup>14</sup>

Kingsley's ideas brought together traditional elements of English literature connected to religion, and the idea of the romantic adventurer tramping his way through foreign lands.<sup>15</sup> The combination makes for an extremely commanding and dangerously attractive ideal of interlinked masculine and national identity. These writings were informing dominant types of Western masculinity, a hegemonic masculinity sanctioned by an enduring lineage of violence, as Edward Said recognises:

Behind the White Man's mask of amiable leadership there is always a willingness to use force, to kill and be killed. What dignifies his mission is some sense of intellectual dedication; he is a White Man, but not for mere profit, since his 'chosen star' presumably sits far above earthly gain.<sup>16</sup>

Stevenson argued that his 'characters need to be presented with but one class of qualities – the war-like and formidable' because his novels dealt with danger and the fear that danger

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<sup>11</sup> Joseph Bristow, *Empire Boys: Adventures in a Man's World* (London: Harper Collins Academic, 1991), p.55.

<sup>12</sup> Sandars in Hall (ed.), *Muscular Christianity: Embodying the Victorian Age*, p.7.

<sup>13</sup> Hall (ed.), *Muscular Christianity: Embodying the Victorian Age*, p.7.

<sup>14</sup> Hall (ed.), *Muscular Christianity: Embodying the Victorian Age*, p.8.

<sup>15</sup> Wee, 'Christian manliness and national identity', p.69.

<sup>16</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), p.226.

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'idly' provokes.<sup>17</sup> Thus the boy-hero, in proving his maturation in manhood, must display implicit inner qualities, such as tenacity, resolution and courage and the White Man's willingness to use force and to kill. In fact, Stevenson was derided for the violence he portrayed in *Treasure Island*, arguably this is because his protagonist is not a superman but an ordinary boy, the 'everyman', demonstrating brutality as part of everyday life amongst his peers, overseas, in the name of the empire. That is, the everyman embodying new ideals of a muscular manliness driven by a personal authority which is sanctioned by both God *and* state.

Stories such as *Treasure Island* and *Tarzan* demonstrate how the empire's alliance with adventure trips into an alliance with personal authority and violence; these activities become 'markers of manhood' for the boy-hero, where homosocial pursuits are intended to forge an identity and earn respect in each other's eyes. So how do we forgive these moments of personal authority and violence and categorise them as part of the boy-hero's *rite de passage*? Does it become a case of not how they play the game but, rather, how do they feel about playing the game? Hawkins detaches himself from the reality of killing another man by placing it as a moment outside normality, offering an excuse for his behaviour when he says he has gained control over his emotions and quietened his 'pulses' so that he 'was once more in possession of myself ... I was my own master again' (p.140). For *Tarzan*, forgiveness lies in contrasting murder with a far greater sin:

[A]nd then he prepared to get down business, for *Tarzan* of the Apes was hungry, and here was meat; meat of the kill, which jungle ethics permitted him to eat. How may we judge him, by what standards, this ape-man with the heart and head and body of an Englishman, and the training of a wild beast?

[...]

Of a sudden, a strange doubt stayed his hand. Had not his books taught him that he was a man? And was not [Kulonga] a man also? Did men eat men? Alas, he did not know. Why, then, this hesitancy! Once more he essayed the effort, but of a sudden a qualm of nausea overwhelmed him. He did not understand. All he knew was that he could not eat the flesh of this black man, and thus hereditary instinct, ages old, usurped the functions of his untaught mind and saved him from transgressing a world-wide law of whose very existence he was ignorant (p.80).

Murder pales into insignificance in comparison to such a potentially heinous act as cannibalism. Both boys must play the game but for *Tarzan*, he must also learn the unspoken

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<sup>17</sup> Stevenson, 'A Humble Remonstrance', p.98.

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rules of the game, rules with foundations laid in Christianity. Rice Burroughs places considerable emphasis on Tarzan's white British (and upper-class) 'heart and head and body' providing an 'hereditary instinctual' knowledge of what is right and wrong, and what is definitely a step too far when it comes to transgressing boundaries.

*Tarzan* is, without a doubt, a horrifically racist text: Rice Burroughs not only applauds Tarzan's inherent white genetics, but his black characters are grotesque caricatures and the Congolese tribe are portrayed as atavistic animals. A consideration of these issues is, however, another paper. The focus here is on Tarzan's reactions to his transgressions, not only through his own thoughts and the narrator's questioning, but his actions and behaviour are placed in direct comparison to the actions of the black tribe as a way for him to learn individual identity and, later, earn the respect of his French benefactor, Lieutenant Paul D'Arnot.

D'Arnot is captured by the tribe and is beaten with sticks and stones and torn at with claw-like hands; every vestige of clothing is ripped from his body as 'the merciless blows fell upon his bare and quivering flesh' (p.198). But he is not to be delivered quickly from his torture as he is 'bound securely to a great post from which no live man had ever been released' (p.198). As pots of water are being boiled, D'Arnot is repeatedly stabbed with spears. The sadistic scene is described as a 'dance of death' where the tribe daub their 'bestial faces' with colour and commence a celebratory 'orgy' of torture that is *always* enacted before that grim stake until death would be an act of charity. The comparison is overt, Tarzan may kill, but his are mercifully quick killings not a prolonged game that tortures the half-conscious victim who watches beneath half closed lids in what seems to be a 'vagary of delirium, or some horrid night-mare from which he must soon awake' (p.198). Although Tarzan is described as a killer of men and of beasts, he kills 'as the hunter kills, dispassionately' (p.182). There is no pleasure in his acts, even in the revenge-killing of Kulonga.

To conclude, texts like *Treasure Island* and *Tarzan* contributed to a nineteenth-century social construction of masculinity in which men were 'made' rather than born masculine. Masculinity becomes, as Judith Butler argues, a doing activity: the boy-hero must perform actions to create his masculine identity. In learning how to control individualistic desires to partake in what are presented as grimly necessary situations, the boy-hero 'emerges to the fore as the fiction's perfected dream-hero, the initiator, manipulator and controller of

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the action',<sup>18</sup> thus fulfilling a *rite de passage* in which he finds his identity. The burgeoning manliness of the boy-hero embraced the dual aspects of heroism, that is, the moral or cultural aspects as well as the physical facets. Therefore, in boy-heroes such as Hawkins and Tarzan, transgressive behaviour is seen as necessary, if not attractive, and is certainly presented as forgivable.

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<sup>18</sup> Loxley, 'Slaves to Adventure', p.62.