

The Stevenson Trilogy

Robert Louis Stevenson

A Four-Level Literature
Parent Manual

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Royal Fireworks Press
Unionville, New York

Four-Level Literature: General Comments

The purpose of this literature program is to immerse children in great books so that they experience literature as literature and not as a drudgery of tedious school activities. I want children's minds on the books themselves and not on attendant assignments. It is by loving to read that children become literate.

The pedagogy of this program is grown-up and reflective; it is deliberately simple, focusing entirely on the reading of the book and avoiding all traditional worksheet activities in favor of rich discussion and thoughtful writing. Busywork has been eliminated. The activities that are included are flexible options, not a rigid system requiring every step every time. In the end if the child does not love reading, we have failed.

This manual is for the homeschool parent. The homeschool environment is different in many dimensions from the traditional school environment, and the recommendations take full advantage of the

unique flexibility and purity of concentration that occur in the homeschool setting. In writing a manual for homeschool use, however, I am mindful that the homeschool environment itself exists in many variations. Some children are homeschooled individually, others in small groups or classes. There will be homeschool children using this literature trilogy who are eight or nine years old and others who are of middle school age. There will be homeschool parents who want a grade-free, creative environment and others who want to establish a classical academic rigor that they may feel is lacking in the school system.

My strategy in this manual, therefore, is to provide paths for all of the above. I may refer to the *child*, or I may refer to the *class*, thinking of a small homeschool class. I may provide options for a fifth grader, and I may provide options for a seventh grader, who is by no means too old to read the books in this trilogy. Every activity in this manual can be conducted as an ungraded, creative activity, or it can be graded by a parent who wants the child to learn how to navigate a grading system. I do not provide any system for grading.

It is important that the approach to literature be

literary, focused on the texts, and simple. I do not want a noisy panorama of activities, worksheets, and other busywork to be the program. The program is the books. I want our approach to be deft and quiet, rather than loud. I want us to behave with literary grace. I want our activities to cuddle up to the books. We will do some creative and academic work in conjunction with the books, with our hearts turned at all times toward the books.

Accordingly, we can think about the program strategy in terms of four simple levels. The four levels are preparing, reading, creative thinking, and writing.

1. Preparing

Prior to reading the book, we might use an encyclopedia or the internet to look up the author and learn about the author's life and the place of the book in cultural history. This content, however, is secondary to the content of the book itself; it would not be important if the book were not important. An alternative is to do this research after reading the book, when the child may be even more curious about the details.

We might also prestudy the vocabulary by studying

*Robert Louis Stevenson:
I Remember Him as if It Were Yesterday*

In my own life of reading, I have relished reading book after book by the same author, sometimes until I had read the author's complete works, and then rereading them, as I have with Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*.

To prepare a trilogy of novels by Robert Louis Stevenson is an uncommon happiness, like finding an old childhood friend I did not know was alive. Except....

Except that, gentle reader, Stevenson is alive, and I knew it all along because I have—all my life—read his letters to me. One of his letters, *Treasure Island*, pushed aside the mundane detritus of my boyhood tedium and replaced it with a roaring world of high seas and crashing surf and salt wind and scarred pirates and the scratched caw of Captain Flint, Long John Silver's parrot: "Pieces of eight! Pieces of eight!"

Like Jim Hawkins, I remember the day that the old pirate, Billy Bones, stomped into the Admiral Benbow

inn, scaring the guests and banging on his table for bacon, eggs, and rum. Bones thought he would be safe there, high on the cliff, scanning the horizon with his spy-glass, but he wasn't. They came for him, Blind Pew and the pirate pack, and Bones became bones.

After I read *Treasure Island*, I knew Long John Silver, personally. I was “smart as paint,” he said, that liar. I gradually learned not to trust his mask of smiles and to see the glint of malice beneath his cheap courtesy. I learned not to believe anything he said. Not anything.

I liked Long John, though—paradoxically—and was always glad to see him when I entered a chapter, though I typically took a seat in the corner of a page and watched him like a parrot.

Some years later, I heard from Stevenson again, but this time it was not the West Indies or the Antilles that his letter brought forth in my mind; it was the tale of *Kidnapped*, and of soggy Scotland, and cold green mountains, and gray fog, and stern British patrols that hunted for me, tracking me down on the great misty slopes. At the beginning I'd been sold by my weasel uncle Ebenezer and kidnapped aboard the stout brig *Covenant*, commanded by Captain Hoseason, who planned to

The Stevenson Trilogy
Vocabulary Prestudy

Here are ten words common to all three novels. Let us examine them before beginning the trilogy.

accoutrement: n. items of clothing or equipment

apprehension: n. anxiety, fear

countenance: n. facial expression

derision: n. mockery, ridicule; **deride:** v. to ridicule

forfeit: adj. or v. lost or surrendered as a penalty

hitherto: adv. up to this point, until now

latter: n. the second or last one mentioned

melancholy: adj. deeply sad, depressed

perplexity: n. confusion

whither: adv. where

accoutrement: n. items of clothing or equipment

“About his waist he wore an old brass-buckled leather belt, which was the one thing solid in his whole accoutrement.”

Treasure Island

“I did so, sir, for my sins...for it was by his means and the procurement of my uncle, that I was kidnapped within sight of this town, carried to sea, suffered shipwreck and a hundred other hardships, and stand before you to-day in this poor accoutrement.”

Kidnapped

“...his clothes...were enormously too large for him... the trousers hanging on his legs and rolled up to keep them from the ground, the waist of the coat below his haunches, and the collar sprawling wide upon his shoulders. Strange to relate, this ludicrous accoutrement was far from moving me to laughter.”

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde

Treasure Island

A Comment

If you think about the matter objectively, you might not conclude that Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* actually is what many books only claim to be: unforgettable. After all, its good-guy-bad-guy plot is predictable. From the first paragraph of the novel, you know that it will have a happy ending. You never worry that narrator Jim Hawkins will be killed, or that Long John will win in the end, or that the book will spiral into ghastly tragedy. Furthermore, many of Stevenson's characters are even likeable; how shallow.

In *Treasure Island* the good guys are good, though sometimes obtuse (think Squire Trelawney), and the bad guys, though they may dissemble their malevolence or moral indifference, are bad. No one is redeemed, no one changes, no important character switches sides. There are no moral dilemmas. It is flat good versus flat bad—like *Star Wars* on a boat.

There is also not the inconvenient complexity of character that you find in Jane Austen or Charles Dickens. There are not troubling dimensions to the personalities. The characters are a bit like J.M. Barrie's Tinker Bell, who was so little that she could have only one emotion at a time; they never seem to be in conflict with themselves. Even the slightly conflicted, ambivalent relationship between Jim and Long John does not seem deeply troubled.

On cursory inspection, *Treasure Island* seems conceptually elementary. You do not feel threatened by deep meanings or subtle observations about reality. The narrative exposes no discouraging disclosures, no philosophical disappointments, no perplexities, no criticisms of conventional mores. When you finish reading *Treasure Island*, you do not even feel worse about yourself.

How *unmodern*.

Joseph Campbell taught us the structure of the mythical hero's quest: to leave the safety of what you know and to journey out to an unknown place where you encounter a danger for which you are not prepared. By trusting your inner truth, you overcome the challenge

and return home with new enlightenment.

Jim Hawkins does not do that.

Jim Hawkins does go to a dangerous and mysterious world, but he more experiences it than reflects upon it. He survives it, not because he changes but because he does not. His struggles with the perils of Treasure Island—and with the peril of Long John Silver in particular—seem merely to confirm his inner character, not build it or clarify it. In the end Jim simply does what the doctor and the squire ask him to do—he writes down the particulars of their adventure, which, even years later, he does not seem to have reevaluated.

Yes, Long John is a magnetic character, a diabolical charmer. Long John reminds us of Shakespeare's frightening Iago in *Othello*, an evil genius—the sort that today we would call a sociopath, a predatory manipulator who is utterly convincing to his doomed victim. Yet can we imagine Long John carrying through the plot that Iago completes, of deceiving good Othello into murdering his good wife Desdemona? I think not. For all of his deceit, Long John is no Iago. Iago would deceive even Long John. The serene Iago might be the most terrifying character in all of literature, but Long John, for all of

Treasure Island

Language Illustration Questions

The following questions concern the language illustrations that appear in this edition of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. These questions will promote a thoughtful involvement with what the illustrations reveal about Stevenson's writing.

1. What are your two favorite language illustrations in Chapters 1 and 2? Explain why you chose those two.
2. Please explain, in your own words, the point of the first language illustration in Chapter 3, involving the words "where he lay for a while silent."
3. Discuss either of the two final language illustrations in Chapter 3. What did you learn from it?

Treasure Island

Character Quotations for Quote Quizzes

Here are quotations that may be used for quote quizzes. I will not provide any certain number per chapter; you may select from them as seems appropriate. I have adjusted capitalization and other details slightly for formatting purposes, but I have not changed any words. Each quotation begins with the number of the chapter in which it is found. I encourage you to use these as models and to enjoy finding more. In practice I did not give quote quizzes every day; when I did give one, I used three to five quotes, reading each one carefully two times. All the students had to do was to write the name of the character whose words they were.

Notice that the quotations are always the words of a character, never the words of the narrator. If you want to choose some of your own quotations, here are some tips: find quotations that are famous, that have clues in them such as grammar or ways of speaking unique to a

character, that are memorable or repeated, that mention plot details that give them away, or that reveal important aspects of a character's personality. Try to find quotations that should be obvious to any child who really has read the story, not quotations that are subtle, tricky, or overly challenging. We do not want the quote quizzes to be dreaded. Here are some *Treasure Island* quotes that you might like to use:

1. I remember him as if it were yesterday, as he came plodding to the inn door, his sea-chest following behind him in a hand-barrow. - Jim
 1. I'm a plain man; rum and bacon and eggs is what I want, and that head up there for to watch ships off. What you mought call me? You mought call me captain. - Billy Bones
 1. Were you addressing me, sir? I have only one thing to say to you, sir, that if you keep on drinking rum, the world will soon be quit of a very dirty scoundrel!
- Dr. Livesey
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Treasure Island

Creative Questions and Activities

These options are designed to expand the child's creative and imaginative interaction with the literature. I do not expect every option to be undertaken, and I would like for the child to play a part in choosing the creative activities that he or she will do. If you assign these as written essays, first person is acceptable.

1. Study Long John Silver's pirate words and phrases, and write a poem as Long John, using his quirky language. It can be a funny poem if you like.
 2. Jim makes several major decisions on his own, without consulting his friends. Pick one of these solo decisions, imagine that he made a different decision, and explain how that would have changed the plot of the novel.
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Treasure Island

Academic Writing Practice

Treasure Island provides an excellent basis for academic essay writing. It is filled with advanced language and powerful characters. Robert Louis Stevenson was a serious student of human nature, and his story provides a kind of fictional laboratory where characters are placed in difficult situations, allowing us to watch how they perform. Well-educated children at the middle school and high school levels should find the novel and the following essay questions challenging and appropriate.

In my own courses I use open-book essay questions exclusively as the assessment for literature. I insist that essays be written in standard academic English. They must be true essays, with introductions, bodies, and conclusions centered on single ideas. Students must use the standard conventions of formal style: no contractions, no first person. *Essay Voyage* and my *Advanced Academic Writing* books provide the guidelines for the essays. I like

to provide four or five study questions in advance, and I give students several days to prepare for the essays. The actual essay test presents students with three of the study questions, with one being mandatory. Each student chooses one of the remaining two to answer. Making one question mandatory causes students to prepare for all of the study questions, requiring substantial thought and rereading. I do not spring surprise questions on the students. I do believe that some student choice is important.

I provide more than five questions here, and you can select those that you wish to give to the child. You also may replace any of these questions with questions of your own.

These are Socratic questions that do not favor one answer over another; the evaluation of the essays is based on the English, the essay structure, and the force of the case that the child makes with quotations. This means that the child may use his or her book during the essay session in order to quote from it.

1. Dr. Livesey and Squire Trelawney make an interesting pair of characters. They have much in common, but they are also very different. Explain how they are different, and then explain why they are friends.
 2. Does Jim Hawkins survive the dangers of the story by sheer luck, or does he have qualities and strengths that allow him to survive? Explain.
 3. In spite of Long John Silver's obvious reprehensible and repugnant qualities, there is something about him that appeals to us. Even Jim cannot help liking him, and Robert Louis Stevenson is careful to allow Long John to escape unharmed at the end of the story. What is it about Long John that is appealing?
 4. Long John Silver's language is very different from Jim Hawkins's language. Is Silver's language distinctive only in vocabulary and phrasing, or is his grammar also different? Explain in detail.
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