From Dogs to Kings: Master Narratives and Plurality of Voices in *Treasure Island* and *Black Sails*

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The aim of this essay is to show how both *Treasure Island* and *Black Sails* depict master narratives that are mainly influenced by imperialist ideology. The essay analyzes elements present in both the novel and the television series that reflect imperialist practices such as “othering,” propaganda, and exploitation. The aim of this essay is also to underline the plurality of voices created by various narratives of marginalized people present in the two sources. By analyzing the perspective and social organization of minority groups such as children, gay men, and people with disabilities, this essay demonstrates how the narratives of marginalized people can be both subversive and complementary to the master narrative.

**Key words**
Treasure Island, Black Sails, new historical criticism, narrative, imperialism, othering, Flint, John Silver
“A story is true. A story is untrue. As time extends, it matters less and less. The stories we want to believe, those are the ones that survive, despite upheaval and transition and progress. Those are the stories that shape history” (“XXXVIII” 01:03:05-01:03:46). Thus speaks the pirate Jack Rackham in the series finale of Black Sails. His words reflect, although unintentionally, the view of many new historical literary critics who see history as a narrative comprised of stories that cultures tell themselves about themselves. True or untrue, these stories are influenced by the values and ideas of their time, and as they linger in the collective memory, they in turn shape the way a person or a group of people perceive themselves. Identity, social interaction, and power relations are all determined by the narratives that circulate within a culture.

The aim of this essay is to show how both Treasure Island (1883) and Black Sails (2014) depict master narratives that are mainly influenced by imperialist ideology. This will be highlighted through the analysis of elements present in both the novel and the television series that reflect imperialist practices such as “othering,” propaganda, and exploitation. These practices try to dictate how people should view and position themselves within society, creating hierarchies and enabling oppression.

In addition, this essay will also underline the narratives of marginalized people present in the two sources. By analyzing the perspective and social organization of minority groups, mainly represented by the pirates in both works, this essay demonstrates how the narratives of marginalized people can be both subversive and complementary to the master narrative. The novel and the television series will be analyzed using a comparative approach that relies on narrative and semiotic analysis.

New historical criticism views historical accounts and literary texts as narratives that are inevitably biased. This is because, like all humans, the people who write these accounts and texts “live in a particular time and place, and their views of both current and past events are influenced in innumerable conscious and unconscious ways by their own experience within their own culture” (Tyson 283). Therefore, their biases are reflected in their stories, as their views and their identities are shaped by the laws and customs of the culture they are part of.

Biases lead to the formation of a master narrative, or a narrative that is “told from a single cultural point of view that, nevertheless, presumes to offer the only accurate
version of history” (Tyson 287). This type of narrative is biased because it reinforces the beliefs and values of a single group or culture, and it oftentimes assumes the superiority of that given group or culture over others. This essay will show how the master narrative reflects imperialist values in both Treasure Island and Black Sails, especially by depicting how the pirates who resist these values are marginalized and turned into “others.”

Imperialist ideology usually inflates the importance of the Anglo-European culture as a civilizing force that brings enlightenment and progress to lands that are seen as primitive or inferior (Deane 690). Because of this view, the people living in these lands are turned into “others,” into heathens and savages, and are therefore oppressed and treated as less than fully human (Tyson 419-420). Their individual and national identities are erased or distorted through imperialist propaganda in order to fit a narrative that motivates the exploitation and subjugation of foreign lands. This propaganda often takes the form of stories that alter the perception colonizers and the colonized have about themselves and about each other.

In the 18th century, when the narratives of the novel and the television series take place, the established image of the imperialistic and righteous character placed emphasis on physical strength, religious devotion, and teamwork (Noimann 59). These traits were a requirement for representatives of imperial authority, while the pirates were depicted as bickering and lawless fools whose physical disabilities were demonized. Stories from the 18th century present the pirates’ behavior as a cautionary tale of “what happened to humans when they ‘go native’ and abandon their civilized ways” (Noimann 61). Implicitly, pirates became associated with the savagery that the righteous imperialistic character sought to civilize. As a result, a dichotomy between what is considered right or wrong was imposed by the imperialist ideology on both those who promote it and on those who are affected by it.

However, in both the novel and the television series, pirates are given their own stories as a means of subverting the master narrative. By presenting the point of view of marginalized groups, such as children, people with disabilities, and gay men, Treasure Island and Black Sails enable a plurality of voices that offers marginalized people the chance to present their own experiences and histories. In doing so, the master narrative is subverted and shown to endorse oppression in order to maintain its dominance (Tyson 287). Nevertheless, it is imperative to acknowledge that, like all human beings,
marginalized people are also influenced by the time, culture, and society they live in, and also have biases. As a result, some of their narratives are not so much subversive as complementary to the master narrative, serving as supporting evidence rather than counter-histories (Conway 27).

Even so, new historicism has been criticized for overlooking the allegorical dimension of historical writings, or what Alison Conway cites as their habit of “saying one thing and meaning another” (27). This is especially true in the case of narratives of marginalized people who are unable to directly challenge the master narrative due to various dangerous or incapacitating factors such as risk to personal safety, and instead choose to resort to allegories. The essay notes that such a case is encountered in *Treasure Island* in Jim Hawkins’ narrative. In *Black Sails*, it is Max who adopts a conflicting position as she both subverts and contributes to the master narrative.

As *Treasure Island* (1883) and *Black Sails* (2014) were written over a century apart, the master narratives follow a slightly different thread. While *Treasure Island* revolves around an act of exploitation and survival, *Black Sails* has a more modern approach, concentrating on how the identities of the characters are influenced by various narratives. Furthermore, since *Treasure Island* and *Black Sails* were created for two different mediums (print and, respectively, television), the medium specificity brings changes to the way in which the narratives are presented. For this reason, this essay employs a comparative approach as a method of analyzing the relations between the source text and the screen adaptation.

The comparative approach primarily aims to explain the “equivalence in novel and film and to explain failures to attain equivalence” (Cardwell 52). Therefore, the method assesses the fidelity between the book and its adaptation, observing how the same narrative is retold in a medium different from the one in which it was originally created (Cardwell 54). Since *Black Sails* serves as a prequel to *Treasure Island*, this essay cannot focus on the fidelity of the adaptation because the two sources depict different plots and timelines. Instead, the essay will use a comparative approach to assess the equivalence and nonequivalence of the master narratives and the plurality of voices featured in both works.
The essay will use narrative analysis to analyze if parts of the written narrative, such as descriptions and tone, are recreated in the screen adaptation. The essay will also employ semiotic analysis to study the filmic elements that are non-linguistic, such as lighting and camera movement and angles (Cahir 63-65). This type of analysis deals with meaning and it is used to assess how narrative devices are transferred to screen through the use of filmic elements (Cardwell 56). Semiotic analysis will be applied as well to examine the meaning of symbolic elements in the novel.

*Black Sails* is a period drama created by Jonathan E. Steinberg and Robert Levine for *Starz*, an American cable television network. *Black Sails* serves as a prequel to *Treasure Island*, following the exploits of James ‘Flint’ McGraw and John Silver decades before the events of Stevenson’s novel, starting with the year 1715. The television series shows how Flint came to be a feared pirate captain, and follows Silver’s evolution from sea cook to the highly admired pirate portrayed in *Treasure Island*. The series also depicts the politics of New Providence Island (initially a British colony which at that time was under pirate rule), and portrays the subsequent war between pirates and the British Empire.

*Treasure Island* is a classic novel written by the Scottish author Robert Louis Stevenson. The novel is set in the 18th century, and it presents the accounts of an English boy named Jim Hawkins who, alongside Squire Trelawney, Doctor Livesey, and Captain Smollett, undertakes a search for a great treasure buried on an island in the West Indies. The treasure left behind by the feared pirate Captain Flint is also sought by several members of his former crew, including Long John Silver, who plots to retrieve the treasure by manipulating and double-crossing Jim Hawkins and the others.

Stevenson’s novel inscribes itself among the ranks of Victorian adventure stories that popularized desert island romance novels. These types of stories feature young English boys going on adventures in mysterious and dangerous locations, often at the periphery of the British Empire. They were usually devised to encourage young readers to commit themselves to the imperialist cause, and the stories incorporated propagandistic elements that promoted and “naturalize[d] a new spirit of imperial aggression and new policies of preserving power” (Deane 689).

A classic novel of the genre, *Treasure Island* is considered “one of the most satisfying adventure stories ever told” (Gubar 69). Therefore, the propagandistic tendencies
ascribed to the desert island romance genre are also generically attributed to Stevenson’s novel. Loraine Fletcher calls *Treasure Island* “perhaps the most successfully coercive children’s story in English” (45), as she argues that the novel encourages child readers to develop loyalties and prejudices similar to those of its boy-hero, Jim Hawkins. In the following pages, this essay will demonstrate that Jim Hawkins’ narrative and the narratives of other characters like him do contribute to the propagation of the imperialist agenda, however, they also subvert the master narrative by ensuring a plurality of voices, turning the novel into an anti-adventure story.

*Treasure Island* undoubtedly features a master narrative that is influenced by imperialist ideology. As mentioned before, master narratives are biased and dictate what or who is considered right or wrong, civilized or uncivilized, important or unimportant (Tyson 283). In the novel, this dichotomy initially lies between the cabin party (formed by Squire Trelawney, Doctor Livesey, and Captain Smollett) who are deemed as good, and the pirates (including Long John Silver, Captain Flint, and Billy Bones) who are deemed as bad. However, this distinction is soon blurred and the moral compass of the characters turns ambiguous as both parties commit violent acts and share the desire to gain treasure.

The treasure hunt denotes an act of exploitation. The master narrative portrays the cabin party as morally good in order to justify their claim on the treasure even as they have no legal right over it. The treasure initially belonged to Captain Flint who entrusted the map and, implicitly, the inheritance to Billy Bones (Stevenson 25). Therefore, Trelawney, Livesey, and Smollett “are trying to get their hands on riches that do not belong to them, while the pirates aspire to appropriate something that is an essential part of their own universe” (Nabaskues 1007). Consequently, the pirates’ narrative can be seen as a struggle to reclaim a part of their history. They are, however, faced with opposition and oppression from imperialist authority figures who try to enrich themselves at the expense of others.

The members of the cabin party can all be identified with institutions or bodies of authority that promote imperialist ideology and consequently contribute to the creation of a master narrative. David Sergeant calls Doctor Livesey and Captain Smollett “nineteenth-century professionals in everything but name” (908), and identifies Squire Trelawney with feudal aristocracy (908), while the pirates are named “lower class roisterers” (909). Similarly, Loraine Fletcher sees Captain Smollett as a representative of
the naval and military armed forces (36), and claims that “the gentry own the law and its interpretation” (35). This is especially true in the case of David Livesey who is a doctor and a local magistrate (Stevenson 14). His position as a civil servant grants him judicial powers, enabling him to dispense justice or punishment. Additionally, his position as a medical practitioner also grants him power over others, as he is the one to decide the course of treatment in the case of an illness or injury.

As observed throughout the novel, Livesey makes use of both positions to establish his authority. In his encounters with the pirate Billy Bones, Livesey first uses his function as magistrate to defend himself after being threatened with a knife and to chastise Bones: “I’m a magistrate; and if I catch a breath of complaint against you, if it’s only for a piece of incivility like tonight’s, I’ll take effectual means to have you hunted down and routed out of this” (Stevenson 14). Although warranted to defend himself, Livesey also shows the extent of his authority, since he can sentence the pirate based on words alone.

However, in another instance, Livesey abuses his position of power. After Billy Bones has a stroke, the doctor is called to aid him. Livesey notes that “for my part, I must do my best to save this fellow’s trebly worthless life” (Stevenson 20), and then proceeds to draw blood from the man. At the end of the procedure, Livesey tells Bones that “I have just, very much against my own will, dragged you headforemost out of the grave” (Stevenson 21), declaring that he has saved the pirate’s life. However, as soon as he leaves the room, Livesey tells Jim Hawkins: “I have drawn blood enough to keep him quiet awhile; he should lie for a week where he is — that is the best thing for him and you” (Stevenson 22). Therefore, Livesey reveals that his treatment was not chosen to aid Billy Bones but to subdue him and prevent him from disturbing Hawkins.

Livesey’s actions and words reinforce the master narrative by establishing himself as a figure of authority over an individual he considers uncivilized and worthless. Consequently, Livesey is shown to be influenced by the time and culture he lives in, holding biases against a person like Billy Bones who rejects and opposes imperialist values. Moreover, Livesey actively oppresses Bones by misusing his position of power to physically incapacitate him.

*Black Sails* also features analogous characters who reinforce the imperialist master narrative. Admiral Hennessey and Alfred Hamilton (the Lord Proprietor of the Bahama
Islands) are government officials who use their position of authority to oppress and marginalize Captain Flint and Thomas Hamilton, who are both either gay or bisexual men. Upon discovering the relationship between the two men, Alfred Hamilton commits his own son, Thomas, to a mental institution, while Admiral Hennessey discharges Flint from his position as officer of the Royal Navy.

When dismissing Flint, Hennessey tells him: “I would like to defend you. I would like to remind myself that every man has his flaws, his weaknesses that torment him. I would like to help you recover from yours. But not this. It is too profane. It is too loathsome to be dismissed. This is your end” (“XIII” 29:03-29:23). In the 18th century, homosexuality was considered illegal and was punishable by hanging (Ertan 18). Although Hennessey decides not to bring charges against Flint, he nonetheless puts an end to Flint’s career and forces him to leave London and withdraw from public life. Therefore, Hennessey acts based on his biases which are influenced by a homophobic society and an imperialist ideology that enforces sexual oppression.

In turn, Alfred Hamilton’s biases influence the way in which society interprets the events between Thomas and Flint. Hamilton exiles Flint and Miranda, Thomas’ wife who supported the relationship between the two men. He then reports the story in a way that makes it seem more acceptable to the public. This version of the story still stands ten years after the event, as Richard Guthrie (Nassau’s first head of trade) relates it when talking to Miranda:

You see, I’ve had extensive dealings with the earl over the years, and so I’d long heard of the tragedy that befell his eldest son. Thomas’ wife, long rumored to be the cheating sort, had begun a torrid affair with her husband’s closest friend, a promising young officer in His Majesty’s Navy. And upon discovering the affair, Thomas went mad with grief. His despair so great, even the asylum couldn’t protect him from himself. As for Thomas’ wife, she’s said to have fled London along with her lover, partly out of shame, partly to escape retribution. Given the facts at hand, I am forced to assume that the lover is none other than our friend, Captain Flint. (“IV” 47:51-48:55)

By altering the story, Alfred Hamilton avoids stirring up a great scandal that would ruin his family’s reputation. He also uses the pretext of insanity to oppress his reform-minded son and render him unable to openly challenge his conservative political agenda. Observing the circulation of power within cultures, some new historical literary critics have claimed that “all definitions of ‘insanity,’ ‘crime,’ and sexual ‘perversion’ are social constructs by means of which ruling powers maintain their control” (Tyson 285). Therefore, Alfred Hamilton uses his position of authority to erase Flint’s and Thomas’
identity as gay men. By portraying the relationship between them as an act of insanity and perversion, Alfred Hamilton changes the narrative in order to fit his own purposes. Due to his biases, he also marginalizes the two men.

In *Treasure Island*, Livesey’s biases are also shown through the differences in narration between him and Jim Hawkins. Although Hawkins acts as narrator for the most part of the novel, the narrative perspective shifts to Livesey from chapters XVI to XVIII. Here, Livesey’s imperialist values and beliefs contribute to the master narrative by giving contrasting accounts to those previously offered by Jim Hawkins.

In chapter VII, Hawkins recounts the reaction of Squire Trelawney’s servant, Tom Redruth, after he is instructed to make preparations for the treasure hunt:

[...]. old Tom Redruth, who could do nothing but grumble and lament. Any of the under-gamekeepers would gladly have changed places with him; but such was not the squire’s pleasure, and the squire’s pleasure was like law among them all. Nobody but old Redruth would have dared so much as even to grumble. (Stevenson 61)

Hawkins clearly captures Redruth’s dissatisfaction with his master’s decision and his reluctance to embark on the voyage. In comparison, when Redruth dies in chapter XVIII, Livesey narrates that he “had not uttered one word of surprise, complaint, fear, or even acquiescence from the very beginning of our troubles till now, when we had laid him down in the log-house to die” (Stevenson 141). Livesey portrays Redruth as a loyal servant who died in the line of duty, serving his superiors, and who was laid to rest under the Union Jack, like a true Englishman (Stevenson 142-143). In the hierarchical society of the 18th century that endorsed conservative social values, duty and unquestioning loyalty were seen as virtues (Fletcher 34). As a result, Livesey would reward and expect this type of behavior from subalterns.

It is important to note that both Hawkins and Redruth are part of marginalized groups: Hawkins is a vulnerable child, while Redruth is an elderly servant who has trouble reading (Stevenson 56), demonstrating either a deficient education, a visual impairment, or a reading disability. It is more likely that Redruth would oppose his master’s decision in the presence of Hawkins, who does not represent any form of authority, than in the presence of Livesey, who has been shown to hold a position of power and to endorse imperialist values. Therefore, the dissimilarities between Livesey’s and Hawkins’ narrations demonstrate how an individual’s views and biases can influence the way in
which events are interpreted. They also show how oppressive authority stifles the voice of marginalized groups. For this reason, a plurality of voices is needed in order to subvert or avoid the creation of a master narrative.

Like Livesey, Hawkins is also affected by the time and culture he lives in. As he prepares to embark on the treasure hunt, he criticizes Redruth for his reluctance to participate in it (Stevenson 61), and he imagines his future adventures akin to those presented in desert island romance novels. However, Hawkins manages to see past his own biases: “sometimes the isle was thick with savages, with whom we fought, sometimes full of dangerous animals that hunted us, but in all my fancies nothing occurred to me so strange and tragic as our actual adventures” (Stevenson 55). Hawkins comes to the realization that the glory of the treasure hunt is a fabrication and that the practice itself is in fact terrifying. While he encounters no dangers on the island, the real threat comes from the crew he has journeyed with.

As the fight between cabin party and pirates ensues, Hawkins becomes frightened rather than excited, and he separates from the cabin party several times, gaining experience as an individual who is no longer under the protection of authority figures. Being a vulnerable child, Hawkins sees the island as “a realm constituted not of abstract markers of profit and adventure, but of bloodshed, betrayal, and the systematic elimination of a condemned group” (Sergeant 915). Therefore, Hawkins’ perspective is imperative in subverting the master narrative because it disproves the image of the righteous imperialistic character, exposing the exploitative motive behind the treasure hunt.

Furthermore, by presenting Hawkins’ perspective and therefore ensuring a plurality of voices, Stevenson turns Treasure Island into an anti-adventure story because, “rather than encouraging youngsters to seek out wealth and glory overseas, Stevenson depicts the project of draining foreign lands of riches as terrifying, traumatizing, and ethically problematic” (Gubar 70). This anti-imperialist sentiment that denounces exploitation is also present is some of Stevenson’s later works, such as The Ebb-Tide (1894).

Treasure Island is structured as a retrospective account told by Hawkins and Livesey years after the treasure hunt is over. David Sergeant observes that Hawkins’ narration has “the curious air of an out of body experience, of Jim watching himself doing something
whose consequences are still vividly with him [...] but the enactment of which is distant and passive” (914). He associates this tone with the disassociation of a trauma victim or battle veteran (Sergeant 914). *Black Sails* transfers this narrative tone on screen through the sequences portraying the trauma Captain Flint experiences after having lost his lover, his career, and his home.

In the fifth episode of the series’ second season, the romantic relationship between Captain Flint and Thomas Hamilton is revealed through a series of flashbacks. The previous episodes anticipate this revelation by presenting the context in which Flint and Thomas meet, their debates about Nassau, their joint effort to restore it under British rule etc. However, the scenes portraying their romantic relationship are brief and feature no audible dialogue (“XIII” 51:21-52:28). They are intermittent and entwined with scenes showing Flint’s and Miranda’s departure after their forced exile from England. The sequence makes use of soft focus and lighting, slow camera movement, and a quiet soundtrack to depict the events in a muted manner, as seen through the distant memories of Captain Flint. Aras Ertan explains these choices thus: “the reveal montage in which we see their [Thomas Hamilton and James Flint] relationship is clearly a handful of James’ memories; how he remembers their time together. He is still mourning Thomas, and his memories all have an almost gentle feel to them” (19). The soft focus used in the scenes portraying their relationship also evokes a romantic effect (Cahir 293).

Nevertheless, these scenes also have a painful feel to them. As Miranda, Thomas’ wife, tells Flint right before the sequence: “you were told that it was shameful, and part of you believed it” (“XIII” 49:23-49:33). Affected by the homophobic society of the 18th century, Flint is still struggling with his identity as a gay man and with the tragic circumstances in which his relationship with Thomas ended. The first kiss between the two men (“XIII” 48:50-49:05) is shot at an eye-level angle, but their faces are partly obscured by shadows, as if to confer that this memory is too private to be presented in full view of the world.

Therefore, the novel’s passive tone of narration is recreated on screen, albeit for a different plot, through the use of filmic language that features semiotic qualities (Cardwell 57). In *Black Sails*, Flint recalls through muted scenes the tragic circumstances in which he has been marginalized based on his sexuality. Aras Ertan cites this technique as “a representation of gay trauma that doesn’t retraumatize gay people” (30). In a similar
manner, in *Treasure Island*, Hawkins presents a detached narration of his traumatic childhood adventures which include the violent marginalization of the pirates.

However, while in *Black Sails* Captain Flint actively challenges and works to undermine the imperialist master narrative that marginalized him, in *Treasure Island* Jim Hawkins presents a muted narrative of subversion. Hawkins, like Redruth, is unable to openly challenge the power of the cabin party because he ultimately returns under their authority. His narrative is also controlled by them, as in the beginning of the novel Hawkins recounts: “Squire Trelawney, Dr. Livesey, and the rest of these gentlemen having asked me to write down the whole particulars about Treasure Island, from the beginning to the end, keeping nothing back but the bearings of the island […]” (Stevenson 7). His account reflects that he is subjected to the cabin party’s decisions and that he is not the one who chooses what is included and what is left out of the story.

Stevenson’s novel then shows how the master narrative controls the way in which events are interpreted, and how some narratives of marginalized people are complementary rather than subversive. Hawkins “recognises and endorses an authority which comfortably owns not just the law but the history and culture of his country” (Fletcher 35). Having no position of power, Hawkins has no other choice than to submit to the master narrative that shapes his culture by handpicking the stories that get written down in history. Furthermore, the eradication of the pirates and the cabin party’s victory is seen as showing the “futility of resisting that late Victorian concentration of power” (Sergeant 914) in which Stevenson lived.

However, in its allegorical dimension, Hawkins’ narrative is subversive because it draws attention to the oppression and propaganda enforced by imperialist ideology. Hawkins “ultimately functions as a helpless parrot, whose pained passivity incites child readers to […] see through the seductive propaganda of books that urge them to take part in the project of imperialist expansion” (Gubar 71). Hawkins is not the typical hero of adventure stories who is the master of his own fate and free to roam the world. Instead, Hawkins returns under the control of oppressive authorities. Nevertheless, by presenting his own traumatic experiences, Hawkins contributes to the plurality of voices which offer a new perspective on the events of the treasure hunt, portraying them as harmful and exploitative rather than glorifying them.

Hawkins’ narrative can be compared to that of Max, who in *Black Sails* operates as Nassau’s new head of trade. Max is responsible for selling the goods stolen by the pirates
to the markets of other colonies. However, in order to do so and keep her position, Max has to have a legal front and she needs to respect British trade and customs laws. Max is a lesbian and a woman of color, and in her past she has been a slave and a prostitute. Because of these factors, the marginalization she has experienced is perhaps greater than that of any other character in the series. Yet when Woodes Rogers reinstates British rule in Nassau, Max willingly offers her partnership to the governor. Her narrative, therefore, seems complementary to the imperialist ideology.

When Max is informed of Jack Rackham’s and the other pirates’ plan to continue the war against Rogers and the British Empire, Max states:

Civilization has been winning that war for 10,000 years against men richer, braver, stronger, and smarter than you. [...] You mustered a force stronger than you had any right to hope for. You hit the governor when he was at his weakest. And at what result? Eleanor is dead, Anne is nearly dead, and the governor is sitting in Nassau in my fucking chair victorious! You cannot fight civilization from the outside in. (“XXXIV” 52:20-52:55)

This statement reflects Max’s perspective on the power relations present in the time and culture she lives in, underlying the struggles and inequalities faced by marginalized groups. She seems to consider that direct opposition is futile because Rogers’ position of power is consolidated and rooted in thousands of years of oppression.

Nevertheless, Max’s statement also hints towards a form of muted subversion. By recognizing British authority, Max is allowed to maintain her position of power, a position which in turn allows her to retain control over her own narrative. Max navigates through the Empire’s laws, culture, and history and, by the end of the series, she becomes the hidden power which controls the new governor of Nassau. Discriminatory imperialist values and biases prevent her from holding a visible role of leadership, but she nonetheless assumes the higher position of power she can attain while also ensuring her survival and her inclusion in society. In her perspective, imperialism is not something she can fight against, but it is something she can work around. Therefore, like in the case of Jim Hawkins, Max does not fight imperialism from the outside in, but from the inside. However, this position limits her ability to openly express opposition towards colonial rule.

In contrast, the reason why Flint and the other pirates are able to directly challenge authority is because they live outside of it. The pirates have been “othered” by the master narrative, marginalized, and portrayed as less than human. In Black Sails, this practice of
“othering” stands at the center of the conflict between pirates and the British Empire. In the first episode of the series, Captain Flint states:

> When the king brands us pirates, he doesn't mean to make us adversaries. He doesn't mean to make us criminals. He means to make us monsters. For that's the only way his God-fearing, taxpaying subjects can make sense of men who keep what is theirs and fear no one. When I say there’s a war coming, I don’t mean with the Scarborough. I don’t mean with King George or England. Civilization is coming, and it means to exterminate us. ("I" 52:27-53:03)

By influencing the way pirates are seen and by reducing them to monsters, the imperialist ideology paints the rejection of its values as something abnormal. Bradley Deane argues that “every empire produces its own pirates, redefining the criminals of the sea in order to assert, by contrast, the legitimacy of its own overseas adventures” (694). For this reason, the practice of “othering” has a propagandistic nature since it justifies the Empire’s violent policy against these people by depicting it as a civilizing mission. This type of propaganda also consolidates the sense of self of the colonizers, dictating the values they should accept and follow. These values become so ingrained in their culture that a pirate who rejects the rule of law and does not abide by a Christian moral code becomes a monstrous image against whom violence, exploitation, and oppression appear justified.

Similarly, in *Treasure Island*, the pirates are referred to as unruly, uncivilized “dogs”. The novel contrasts the existence of two antagonistic worlds, one of civilization and one of savagery (Nabaskues 1006, 1010). The pirates are described in antithesis with the cabin party: “I remember observing the contrast the neat, bright doctor, with his powder as white as snow and his bright, black eyes and pleasant manners, made [...] with that filthy, heavy, bleared scarecrow of a pirate of ours, sitting, far gone in rum, with his arms on the table” (Stevenson 12). Doctor Livesey is portrayed as upholding the established image of the imperialistic and righteous character: orderly and well-mannered. Billy Bones, on the other hand, is depicted as a filthy, drunken ruffian who later offends and threatens Livesey. Nevertheless, Bones is immediately put in his place by the doctor and backs down “like a beaten dog” (Stevenson 14).

The pirates then reject authoritative discipline but seem incapable of governing themselves. After the pirates organize a mutiny against the cabin party and take over the ship, they destroy its cabin by ransacking it, seemingly unable to see the ship’s strategic value in the long run. Furthermore, the pirates do not seem concerned about their
precarious position, and instead spend most of their time drinking and fighting among themselves. Therefore, the pirates are distinguished by their brutality and carelessness (Sergeant 908). These portrayals are meant to distance the pirates from the image of the imperialistic character, however, their traits can also be interpreted as a consequence of the dangerous lifestyle they lead. Living outside of societal norms and imperial authority, the pirate’s existence, like that of most marginalized groups, is uncertain. Without a stable income or home, the pirates do not think about the future and are instead concerned about their immediate survival which they have to secure through brutal acts.

In the novel, this instability is also reflected by the space inhabited by the pirates, compared to those inhabited by the cabin party. “The cabin party – including Jim – inhabit a succession of spaces which are clearly defined, enclosed, and, to varying degrees, defensible” (Sergeant 916). Smollett, Trelawney, and Livesey take up the ship’s cabin and, after the mutiny, they immediately withdraw to the stockade on the island. In contrast, the pirates inhabit open spaces: the deck of the ship and the beach. Hawkins appears somewhere in-between, being a “cabin-boy” (Stevenson 51) but also roaming most of the island. Through a semiotic analysis, these spaces could be interpreted as signifying contrasting levels of stability and social structure. The open spaces reflect the vulnerability of marginalized people, as opposed to the closed spaces where those who endorse imperialism consolidate their positions of power.

An equivalent closed space is also encountered in Black Sails in the form of the fort. In the first episode of the series, the first shot of Nassau depicts the fort in the center of the background, capturing it from a low angle as looming over the island (“I” 20:14). The camera angle signifies the importance of the structure (Cahir 65), since the fort controls the bay and, consequently, whoever controls the fort controls the island. As Flint’s plans to consolidate Nassau become clearer, the fort begins to play a more important role in the story. Almost half of the series’ second season is focused on the conflict of who should control the fort. In the novel, Flint builds the stockade (Stevenson 145); in the television series, the fort is essential to Flint’s plans of turning Nassau into a stable and safe place (“II” 31:40-32:11).

In Black Sails, Flint is aware of the British Empire’s imminent attempt to reclaim Nassau and reestablish colonial rule. As a result, he wishes to turn Nassau into a place that can self-govern and can repel any attacks. However, Flint is inevitably influenced by the culture he comes from and by his past. The solutions he proposes are not so different from
imperial rule. While talking to Billy Bones, Flint warns him that “civilization is coming, and it means to exterminate us. If we are to survive, we must unite behind our own king” (“I” 53:00-53:16). As Bones protests, saying that there are no kings in Nassau, Flint declares: “I am your king” (“I” 53:21). Flint is reluctant to trust his fellow pirates and instead tries to enforce his own views about order. He wishes to replicate a system he is familiar with and which is based on social structure and concentration of power.

Nevertheless, the pirates are seen to have their own form of social organization. As Bradley Deane notes, “the pirates themselves, while thoroughly lawless from the perspective of British authority, are in fact obsessed with their own set of rules” (698). Hierarchy, rules, and customs are all present within their community.

In both Treasure Island and Black Sails, Flint’s crew is organized with him as captain, John Silver as quartermaster, and Billy Bones as First Mate. Their positions show the hierarchy of pirate crews. The captain is elected by the crew as their leader, while the quartermaster is elected as a representative of the crew and serves as a counterweight to the captain’s authority (Stevenson 86n1). The crew members also have the power to depose their captain or quartermaster through a council. In the television series, Flint’s and Silver’s positions are changed multiple times through a council. In the novel, the deposition happens by presenting Long John Silver with the black spot:

“It was around about the size of a crown piece. One side was blank, for it had been the last leaf; the other contained a verse or two of Revelation — these words among the rest, which struck sharply home upon my mind: “Without are dogs and murderers.” The printed side had been blackened with wood ash, which already began to come off and soil my fingers; on the blank side had been written with the same material the one word “Deposed.” (Stevenson 230)

This symbol is used according to the “rules” (Stevenson 225) and serves as a notice of termination of contract. In the case of Billy Bones, the black spot initially functions as an execution warrant. The symbol has such a strong emotional impact that Bones dies of a stroke the moment he receives it (Stevenson 30). In Black Sails, Billy Bones is also the one who introduces the black spot to the narrative. He relates that “it was Mr. Gates who first told me about the spot. It kept him awake for three nights” (“XXVIII” 29:42-29:51). However, instead of receiving it himself, Bones uses the black spot as a way of reinforcing pirate rule over Nassau.

Bones sends the black spot to the captains who side with British authority and refuse to lend their support to the pirate resistance. When using it for the first time, Bones
states that “I have no doubt that Captain Throckmorton is currently unconcerned with our threat. We have only just begun to tell our story” (“XXVIII” 30:03-30:12). Bones brings back a piece of pirate history that, although deemed inconsequential by imperialists, still holds a universal meaning. He uses it to construct and consolidate the narrative of the marginalized group he belongs to. From the point of view of new historical criticism, this could be seen as an act of reclaiming a part of history that was erased by the master narrative.

For the pirates, the black spot functions as law and moral code. In Stevenson’s novel, the usage of the Bible page to create a black spot leads to the subversion of the master narrative. Religion has often been used as a tool to spread imperialist ideology (Gubar 77). By inscribing their moral code over the Bible, the pirates subvert the authority of Christianity and assert the legitimacy of their own practices. However, the pirates are also inevitably influenced by the imperialist ideology that proclaims the superiority of Christian beliefs. Many of the pirates believe in the sanctity of the Bible and think that defiling it will attract a curse (Stevenson 230). Consequently, these enforced beliefs implicitly oppress them by making them reluctant to act based on their own code and to break away from the moral authority of Christianity.

Instead, the master narrative urges pirates to repent and return to the fold. In the novel, Hawkins oscillates between pirates and the cabin party but ultimately joins the latter. Furthermore, with the exception of Silver, the only pirates who survive the treasure hunt are the ones who side with the cabin party: Ben Gunn begs to return to civilization and becomes the member of a church choir (Stevenson 119), while Abraham Gray is rewarded for his loyalty and rises in rank (Stevenson 264).

In *Black Sails*, the pirates are similarly encouraged to return under imperial rule through the form of pardons promising absolution of all crimes in exchange for their allegiance and labor. However, Captain Flint warns against this practice: “they took everything from us, and then they called me a monster. The moment I sign that pardon, the moment I ask for one, I proclaim to the world that they were right. This ends when I grant them my forgiveness, not the other way around” (“VII” 37:36-37:59). Return under imperial rule implicitly represents a return under the influence of the master narrative that “othered” the pirates in the first place. Therefore, the acceptance of a pardon would represent the acceptance of the image assigned to them and an end to their resistance.
Yet, through the master narrative, imperialism appears desirable. In *Treasure Island*, Abraham Gray’s case shows that “the rare working man of good character can rise out of squalor and join the gentry, so no social structures need changing” (Fletcher 40). Consequently, the inability of marginalized people to succeed in society is ascribed to their own failure rather than to an inequality of chances determined by bias.

However, this inequality is clearly captured in *Black Sails* by Jack Rackham. Rackham is a pirate who, through the four seasons of the series, evolves from quartermaster to captain to directly threatening Woodes Rogers’ position as governor of Nassau. In the third season of the series, Rackham is faced with Rogers and taken prisoner. On the way to Rackham’s execution, Rogers shows his disapproval of the pirates’ continuous attempt to oppose British authority even at impossible odds. In turn, Rackham tells Rogers about how he was left destitute at the age of thirteen after his father’s death, and then replies to Rogers’ criticism, adding:

“You people, incapable of accepting the world as it is,” says the man to whom the world handed everything. If no Anne, if no rescue, if this is defeat for me, then know this: you and I were neck and neck in this race right till the end. But, Jesus, did I make up a lot of ground to catch you. ("XXVI" 29:52-30:19)

Rackham opposes Rogers as a figure of authority who demands his submission and who moralizes the pirates’ rejection of established rules and values. Rackham also refuses to accept his social position, which was determined by unjust policies. His statement reflects that advancement through the current social structures is indeed possible, but a marginalized person will always encounter more difficulties than a person from a dominant group. Rackham had to deal with humiliation, debt, and forced labor to rise to his position, while Rogers was handed the role of governor based on his fame and wealthy background.

In response, Rogers argues that he too has endured loss and experienced hardships in his life ("XXVI" 30:19-30:42). However, while it is hard to ethically measure whose need and whose suffering is greater, the series does not reflect that Rogers has encountered discrimination or inequality. In fact, the marginalization he might have experienced was caused by him straying from the established rules and values he himself now seeks to enforce upon others in order to consolidate his social position.

Moreover, inequality of chances is not encountered only due to social standing. In the novel, as Loraine Fletcher remarks, “unlike the cabin party, who all start out physically
fit, [the pirates] have a predictably high incidence of disability and mutilation” (38). This reflects a clear gap between the prospects of one group over the other, as people with disabilities are often marginalized by society. In the television series, pirates such as John Silver, Randall, and Ned Low are also presented as having physical disabilities.

Nevertheless, John Silver proves himself to be the most resourceful of the pirates, in spite of his amputated leg. In both Treasure Island and Black Sails, Silver demonstrates an incredible agility and refuses to show his physical discomfort for fear of appearing weak. His final success in both the novel and the television series subverts the master narrative by demonstrating that marginalized people are in no way inferior to the dominant group. Silver “becomes an inspiration because of the way he overcomes physical deformity and hardships to achieve a position of power and influence” (Noimann 69). He gains the respect and admiration of both his crew and his enemies, and his missing leg becomes his defining feature.

Moreover, John Silver uses his disability to empower himself. In Treasure Island, he uses his crutch to attack a man who refuses to join his mutiny (Stevenson 115). Similarly, in Black Sails, he uses his metal pegleg to brutally kill one of his rivals (“XXV” 37:18-37:34). In doing so, Silver turns the master narrative around. He uses his position of “other” to create a narrative that instills fear into those seeking to undermine him.

In Black Sails, shortly after Silver commits the murder, stories about him begin to circulate, some of which embellish the truth: “they call him John the Giant, they say that he’s seven foot tall. They say that he moves better on that leg than most do with the ones that God gave them” (“XXVIII” 45:10-45:18). Yet this image helps Silver acquire and consolidate a position of unprecedented power among the pirates; he becomes Long John Silver, the pirate king. In this regard, the narrative of the screen adaptation is equivalent to the one of the source text, as in Treasure Island Silver is described in the same manner: “he would hand himself from one place to another, now using the crutch, now trailing it alongside by the lanyard, as quickly as another man could walk. [...] ‘He’s no common man, Barbecue,’ said the coxswain to me. ‘[...] a lion’s nothing alongside of Long John!’” (Stevenson 80). Therefore, in both works, Silver is a figure of power that is on par with representatives of imperialist authority.

His image reaches almost mythical proportions as similar descriptions of him arise throughout both the novel and the television series. His situation is mirrored by that of
Captain Flint. In *Treasure Island*, Squire Trelawney relates about Flint as follows: “I've seen his top-sails with these eyes, off Trinidad, and the cowardly son of a rum-puncheon that I sailed with put back — put back, sir, into Port of Spain” (Stevenson 48). The man’s reaction reflects Flint’s reputation as a pirate so feared that his name or flag alone are enough to make people flee or surrender.

A similar scene is depicted in *Black Sails* when Flint’s crew tries to attack a ship after having deposed Flint from captaincy. When they raise Flint’s flag, the enemy ship quickly surrenders; however, once the enemy captain realizes that the man leading the pirates is not Flint himself, he decides to fight. Outnumbered, the pirates are forced to flee, but Flint intervenes, assuming command of his crew once more: “you cannot just escape, you have to sink that ship. For if a single one of those men lives to tell the tale, no one will ever surrender before that flag again” (“X” 47:13-47:22). The pirates’ livelihood is, therefore, depicted as dependent upon the fear they can instill in others. The master narrative that turns these men into monsters and dogs actually propagates their legacy, creating a vicious circle. The Empire formulates a master narrative that makes it appear morally superior, while the pirates use the brutal image ascribed to them in order to remain feared and retain the power they have struggled to obtain.

*Black Sails* best portrays the relationship between pirates and imperialist authority through the eyes of Abigail Ashe. Raised and schooled in London, she is the daughter of Peter Ashe, the governor of the Carolina Colony, notorious for his violent policy towards pirates. As a teenage girl, Abigail is kidnapped, held for ransom, and then rescued by three different pirate captains. During this time, she observes the pirates’ customs and social organization, and concludes thus:

All I knew were the stories I was told of monsters and valiant men sworn to slay them. But now that I've nearly traversed the ocean that separates New World from old, I fear that the stories I've heard may have clouded the truth more than clarified it. It would seem these monsters are men – sons, brothers, fathers. And it would seem these men fear their own monsters – an empire, a navy, a king, my father. ("XVI" 34:17-35:10)

Like Jim Hawkins, Abigail Ashe experiences the life of both groups and comes to the realization that what she had been led to believe her entire life was merely a fabrication born out of bias. “Jim works alone, following his own instinct, his own heart, and not an inculcated patriotic duty to his country dependent on collective actions and motives” (Noimann 57). Likewise, Abigail is able to think for herself and see past her biases, observing that the pirates are just a group of people who have been “othered” by the
imperialist ideology. This proves how master narratives have been repeatedly used by Anglo-European cultures to justify their violent and exploitative practices. They have been used to bring legitimacy to their own actions by dehumanizing and marginalizing the groups who opposed or rejected their values.

To conclude, works like *Black Sails* and *Treasure Island* blur the lines between what is considered rightful or wrong. Their intentional ambiguity reflects that a story is two-sided, inherently subjective, and that its truth is secondary. A story is shaped by the person who tells it, and as long as the story resonates with the values of its teller and others like them, it will be believed and remembered.

The master narratives present in both *Treasure Island* and *Black Sails* influence the way marginalized groups and dominant groups view themselves and each other. The imperialist ideology hails the superiority of its followers over those who reject its authority. Therefore, in Anglo-European cultures, white heterosexual adults who are physically fit occupy the top of the hierarchy, while children, gay persons, and people with disabilities are oppressed or marginalized and excluded from positions of power.

The histories and identities of marginalized groups are erased or distorted to fit master narratives. For this reason, works like *Treasure Island* and *Black Sails* are important because they bring forward the experiences of these marginalized groups and ensure a plurality of voices. The master narrative is therefore denied absolute authority and proven insufficient in shaping history and culture.

A plurality of voices subverts the master narrative by exposing its oppressive nature. In *Black Sails*, Captain Flint is depicted as the product of a homophobic society that has taken everything from him, while Max and Jack Rackham are shown to confront impossible odds in order to attain positions of power. Similarly, in *Treasure Island*, Jim Hawkins’ narration depicts the oppressive control of the cabin party and the imperialist propaganda behind the treasure hunt.

However, all humans are inevitably influenced by the times and culture they live in and develop biases which influence the way they interpret certain events. In both sources, John Silver uses the negative image ascribed to him by the master narrative to further his power. It shows then that, even if part of a marginalized group, a person can still consciously or unconsciously reinforce the master narrative that marginalized them in the first place. Alternatively, like in Hawkins’ and Max’s case, they might also be unable to
directly challenge the narrative due to risk factors, and must resort instead to an allegorical narrative.

Even so, this allegorical dimension is often overlooked, especially in *Treasure Island*, a text which rarely benefits from political readings (Fletcher 34). The lack of such interpretations limits the research area of this essay. Academic sources regarding *Black Sails* are also extremely rare, a factor which limits the prospects of discussion within the field. Nevertheless, this essay represents a contribution to the study of both sources and invites further investigation and research.

A particular point of interest could be found in analyzing the narration of the two works. Both focus heavily on the act of storytelling and on the stories that circulate between the characters, especially those relating to Captain Flint. This point has not been extensively discussed in the present essay due to time constraints, as well as because of its inapplicability to the thematic focus.

It is also important to note the limitations that have arisen from dissimilarities between the plot and timeline of the two sources. As previously mentioned in this paper, *Treasure Island* and *Black Sails* explore different conflicts through two different points in time, factors that restrict the extent of the comparative approach. Although a recent work, *Black Sails* serves as a prequel to Stevenson’s Victorian novel and reflects the struggle against an established oppressive authority in a more direct manner than Stevenson could during his time.

*Treasure Island* innocently depicts, through the form of a children’s adventure story, an act of survival and adaptation that gets recorded in history under the scrutiny of higher authority. On the other hand, *Black Sails* dislodges this lens, offering a glimpse into an alternate unrecorded history where the war is nearly won by the weak, the outcasts, and the shunned. However, in both cases the master narrative dictates the ending, and whatever resistance is left is downplayed or hidden from plain sight. Nevertheless, the relentless pursuit of finding one’s place, either within or without society’s rules and customs, presides over both works and makes for an empowering message that requires people to reconsider the stories they have been told by their histories and cultures.
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