

The Coral Island, a Children's Classic, as an Imperialist Text

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Abstract

One of the preoccupations of children's literature has always been to instruct children in the issues of right and wrong and to develop a sense of responsibility in them. In this article R. M. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island*, which, although written in the 1850s, still appeals to the boys, will be analyzed to address the questions of what meaning the reader takes from the book and how the issues of right and wrong are handled. The story which recounts the struggle of three boys, aged 14 to 17, with savagery and violence is not innocent of imperialist meanings because the author regarded English missionary work as beneficial and colonialism as helping the commercial, social and cultural transformation of the life of the native inhabitants; hence, his boy heroes act and speak in a manner that supports this ideology.

Key Words: Children's literature, missionary work, colonialism, right, wrong

Özet

Çocuk edebiyatının amaçlarından biri her zaman için çocukları doğru ve yanlış konularında eğitmek ve onlarda bir sorumluluk duygusu geliştirmek olmuştur. Bu makalede R. M. Ballantyne'in 1850lerde yazılmasına rağmen günümüzde bile çocukların beğenisine sahip *The Coral Island* adlı çocuk kitabında doğru ve yanlış sorunlarının nasıl irdelendiği ve okuyucunun kitaptan ne gibi anlamlar çıkarabileceği incelenecektir. Cennet kadar güzel bir ortamda 14-17 yaşlarındaki üç çocuğun tek başlarına vahşet ve kaba kuvvete karşı mücadelelerinin anlatıldığı öykü, emperyalist amaçlardan uzak değildir. Yazarın misyonerliğin ve sömürgeciliğin ilkel yerlileri uygarlaştırmadaki yararına inancı nedeniyle, çocuk kahramanların bu ideolojiyi destekler biçimde davrandıklarına ve konuştuklarına tanık oluruz.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Çocuk edebiyatı, misyonerlik, sömürgecilik, doğru, yanlış

Darton claims that "Children's books were always the scene of a battle between instruction and amusement, between restraint and freedom, between hesitant morality and spontaneous happiness" (1991, p. vii) and the boys' tale was meant to excite, amuse

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and instruct the youthful mind (1991, p. 247). Children's books in the modern sense grew up in the Victorian age. The boys' tale, or adventure fiction, became popular side by side with works of fantasy, folk-tales and fairy tales from the early 1850s onwards (p. vii; 246). The rise of boys' adventure fiction can be related to the British imperialist ideology in the 19th century, which encouraged the youth involvement in colonial life and work as part of the socialization of young people with the aim of preparing them to occupy colonial positions in the future. Although it cannot be said that the great numbers of adventure books were alike, they had some characteristics in common. These tales opened the door of contemporary romance, of life not drawn from the past, but accessible to the reader. The absence in the majority of them of any appeal to a dogmatic religious belief, or any open theory of conduct or education was the true novelty of these books (p. 247).

However, no story is mere entertainment. Texts contain a message of some kind (Hunt, 1991, p. 164). The more absorbing the content, the more potent its potential is for indoctrination (p. 152). The use to which children's books are put usually serves the dominant culture (Hunt, 1992, p. 6). According to Musgrave, "since children's literature is didactic, it must by definition be a repository ... of the values that parents and others hope to teach to the next generation" (1985, p. 22). Since children are deeply influenced by what they read, the middle classes see the book as a function of power in society (Hunt, 1991, p. 149). The "good" children's book is one which children will like and which will help their social growth. Historical periods differ in the forms of social growth they cherish. In an age which desires to spread imperialist sentiments, children will be instructed to act like colonizing pioneers. In an age which wishes to abolish differences between sexes, races and classes, the children will be willing to be anti-racist, anti-sexist and anti-classist (Hollindale, 1992, p. 26). During the second half of the nineteenth century ideological intrusion into children's reading was deliberately guided into the promotion of the cult of the Empire and its values (Stephens, 1990, p. 3; Lemke, 1995, pp. 141-3). The education of the young meant inculcating in the young strong moral and patriotic principles in order to create a generation of devoutly imperialist young Britons (Ashley, 1999, pp. 286-7). As a result, imperial adventure fiction became a dominant mode, and had a wide reading public as part of children's literature. Most children's stories contained political and ideological indoctrination through a set of literary, scientific, militaristic and Christian discourses for the glorification of the Empire. With the young male readers as its target audience, these adventure stories were so constructed that in them "the Empire and boyhood were mutually supportive" (Bristow, 1991, p. 41).

Children's literature cannot escape from ideology. The books for children express their authors' personal ideologies, whether consciously or unconsciously, openly or

indirectly, as well as the predominant ideology of the society they belong to, because there is much pressure on writers from all points of the “politico-moral spectrum” to conform to a predetermined ideology (Hollindale, 1992, pp. 18, 24-5). Because the text is intended for supposedly “innocent” children, it can scarcely be expected to be innocent of itself (Hunt, 1991, p. 14). Nineteenth-century children’s books were primarily designed to mould children intellectually or politically (p. 28), and so is R. M. Ballantyne’s *The Coral Island*: for instance, the encounters with the bloodthirsty cannibals are meant to make the boy reader see the beneficial effects of civilisation and Christianity – without any questioning of the merits or evils of colonialism and missionary work in the South Seas Islands, but the didacticism is balanced by the lighter tone of adventure and enjoyment. Moreover, since the story is narrated by one of the boys, the boy reader is largely unconscious of being preached to.

To Arthur Applebee, the stories children hear help them acquire expectations about what the world is like without the pressure of separating the real from the make-believe. Although they eventually learn that some of this world is only fiction, the recurrent patterns of values and expectations about the roles and relationships, which are part of their culture, will remain - “It is these underlying patterns which make stories an important agent of civilization, one of the many modes by which children are taught the values and standards of their elders (1978, p. 53).

A quality of the narrative style of nineteenth century children’s books was its formulaic structure and stereotyped characterization. The structure involved a number of obstacles to be overcome by the hero(es), young boys, with whom the reader identified. The hero was a political and cultural stereotype. *The Coral Island*, which has never been out of print since its first publication in 1858, contributes to the imperial adventure novel through the values privileged in the novel. Although, on the surface, the novel is not concerned with the Empire at all, its underlying ideology enhances imperialist values. Kutzer argues that the values constructed in the novel became the set values of the imperial adventure novel: “resourcefulness, leadership, pluck, moral virtue and chivalry are qualities that make Ballantyne’s boy heroes the rightful possessors of that island paradise” (2000, pp. 2, 10).

The Coral Island fits Miles McDowell’s definition of children’s books in most respects. To McDowell, children’s books tend to favour active rather than passive treatment with dialogue and incident instead of description and introspection; the story develops within a clear-cut moral schematism; plots are ordered; they tend to be optimistic; probability is often discarded; magic and fantasy, simplicity and adventure are its main features; language is child oriented (cited in Hunt, 1991, p. 63). *The Coral Island* differs in having many beautiful descriptions of scenery and in containing quite sophisticated language, which is one of the positive aspects of the book because

according to educationalists, the limitation of language is not only unnecessary but stultifying to the child (Hunt, 1991, pp. 104-5). Both developmental psychologists and educationalists generally believe that syntax acquisition comes much earlier than commonly supposed. Restricted language, if it leads to cliché and register-formation results in the expression of simple and simplistic ideas (pp. 105-6). Children's books are used to form the views of the child and thus to enable him/her to acquire both language and culture (pp. 51-2). In terms of education, books have considerable importance and influence because they bring the child into an encounter with language in its most various forms (p. 17). The language used in *The Coral Island* makes it challenging and contributes to the young reader's linguistic development.

The Coral Island is a powerful embodiment of certain aspects of British culture in the 1850s. It has the discursive aspects of the typical imperial adventure fiction, such as the depiction of the British as civilized, advanced, masculine and superior while the indigenous populations are described as backward, inferior and brutal. As a combination of these discursive elements, it is a propaganda tool for British imperialism like other stories of imperial adventure fiction. Since all through the nineteenth century the concepts of boyhood, adventure and Empire were always interconnected, the idea of masculinity was from the beginning an integral part of imperial adventure fiction (Loxley 1990, pp. 27-8).

One of the obvious reasons for the book's success may be that it is a tale in which western civilization, stripped of what the author considers its defects, is recreated out of next to nothing by three boys isolated from the rest of the world by a natural catastrophe (Bratton, 1990, p. vii). The book shows vividly the version of moral and social relations which an average Briton of the world of the 1850s wished to pass on to the rising generations (p. viii). Since it is not only a survival story but also an adventure and a tale of youthful triumph, its fascination for the reader is not restricted to its times. To Hunt, a particular text written expressly for children, with a childhood recognizable today must be part of the definition of children's literature (1991, p. 62). This may be another reason for the book's appeal for so long. The importance of fantasy for children cannot be denied. The imaginative world of the story grips the boy reader and carries him through it in great delight and enjoyment. Half the book describes the paradisaical island and the boys' perfect life there. It is eventful but its mysteries and problems are easily resolved. The boys pick from the trees all the fruit they can eat, catch fish and hunt piglets for meat to cook on a camp fire. They get up when they like and wash themselves cheerfully in the sea. It is a fantasy of freedom, of health, of beauty. All this is framed by the lyrical evocation of the island – white sand, green surf, waving trees, bright coloured birds and the underwater beauty of corals and tropical fishes. The Diamond Cave, so-called because of its astonishing beauty and to which access is difficult, becomes the boys'

refuge when pirates threaten. It represents, in a sense, the innocence of their occupation of the island without any materialistic concerns.

An important aspect of the story is the absence of adult mentors, which contributes to the sense of holiday freedom. Jack, Ralph and Peterkin are wrecked all alone and they recreate their world by their own unaided and unguided efforts. As they seem to have already been conditioned to act responsively, they do not use their freedom for their personal advantage. When adults intrude, it is to bring evil or scatter the perfect community. Since there is no patriarchal structure, the problem of power relations hardly arises. The book's ideology is conveyed by what Hollindale calls "moral symmetry" in character delineation (1992, p. 39). Ballantyne distributes the necessary human attributes of his society between the three boys. Ralph, aged 15, is the narrator and recorder; he provides the reflection upon events previously assigned to the father figure. He is always emphasizing his intention to relate only the truth, and not to exaggerate. He is fond of books, but not very brave. Jack, aged 17 is the source of all kinds of information, the father figure in the sense of seniority and leadership, whose resourcefulness solves many problems; at the outset, when their ship is wrecked by a storm, it is Jack who enables the boys to reach the coral island safely. He bears responsibility for Ralph and Peterkin. They manage to make a rustic bower for shelter, learn how to quench their thirst, how to make a fire, tools, a boat, etc. by means of Jack's knowledge. The fourteen-year-old Peterkin acts as a baby and a joker. Since his mischievousness is harmless, the reader is allowed to enjoy it. The reader recognizes and appreciates not only their idealism, energy and courage, but also their facetiousness, emotional simplicity and anti-intellectualism. The boys' characters do not change. Jack is the skilled and educated one; Ralph is the reflexive boy with great faith in God; he is always invoking God's name and expressing his gratefulness to Him for creating such a wonderful world and for protecting them from both natural disasters and the evil deeds of the heathens. Peterkin is the jester who makes hasty decisions, but his sense of humour helps to alleviate their fears. They never lose their humane feelings, never hunt and kill for the sake of it; are not interested in materialistic things. They are observant and inquisitive, ever-intent on learning new things. What Ballantyne emphasizes is their bravery, resourcefulness and moral virtues, which he was hoping to inculcate into the minds of all English boys. They are characterized by patriotism, strength, honesty, courage, and enterprise, which were the stereotypical features of boy heroes in the popular adventure fiction of the time (Reynolds, 1990, p. 51). The manner in which the boys recreate the conditions for a civilized life out of next to nothing conveys the idea of the superiority of white people.

Ballantyne seems to identify himself with the boy and to wish to please and to appeal to him rather than aligning himself with parents and teachers. This must have been a great attraction to his first readers, because till then the mainstream of writing for

children was largely prescriptive and pedagogic in intention. The narrative voice is that of the adult Ralph, looking back at the adventures of his boyhood. He rarely points the moral of the incidents.

In the first half of the book the boys experience perfect happiness and their life is compared with the life of Adam and Eve in paradise (Ballantyne, 1990, p. 187). The Golden age comes to an end with three incidents: the first is natural – a storm maroons the boys temporarily on a tiny bare rock, where for one night they experience terror and abandonment. They return in the morning to find their homestead devastated, their boat lost. Next, their paradise is invaded by “ferocious savages” leaving “the white sands stained with blood” (p. 187). At first they watch concealed as the war canoes run aground on their beach. A fight takes place between the savages, culminating in cannibalism. The sight of a lighter-skinned woman led out to be killed awakens Jack’s chivalric instinct. He flings himself on the savage chief and brings the huge chief down on top of himself. Ralph and Peterkin rush to rescue him and then they set free the prisoners of the defeated party, prepare a feast for them, and help them repair their canoe. The encounter is pervaded by the central justifying symbols of colonialism (Bratton, 1990, p. xvii). The lighter-skinned woman is not European, but Samoan; however, her skin colour marks her out as being a step higher up the racial ladder in terms of Victorian ethnology. The chief with his yellow hair and colourfully painted body is like a monster and gives an impression of cultural miscegenation. To Bratton, Jack’s behaviour, “the abandonment of self-preservation and rational restraint and the release of instinctive and ... irresistible force derived from his white ancestors, is inevitable because of his racial dominance. It is justified by invoking the chivalric code, which is the basis of European civilization – the victim he defends is a weak woman” (p. xvii).

The savages go away, but the innocent stage of the colonial encounter has come to an end and the boys’ lives have been changed. Ralph recalls that Peterkin seemed to have “grown two years older within a few days’ experiences” (Ballantyne, 1990, p. 188). Then the third blow falls as pirates invade the island. The boys take shelter in the Diamond Cave, where luckily they have stocked provisions from a feeling that they might one day hide there from the savages. But ironically the pirates are white men. When Ralph gets out of the cave next day, thinking they have gone to their schooner, he is caught and carried off. The following adventures on the whole have the aim of justifying the British Empire, as it was beginning to be argued in the 1850s (Bratton, 1990, p. xviii). The discourse of imperial adventure fiction emphasized the need for the colonization of Asia and Africa on moral, religious and scientific grounds. Non-westerners were depicted as childlike, lazy and cowardly without any initiative or sense of responsibility, which called for European domination. The white race being superior

could civilize them, make them neat and clean and cure them of their savagery. As Kutzer points out, “savage natives are completely ‘Other’, closer to animal than to human; they are monsters; they are evil incarnate” (2000, p. 7). Having been brought up on such views, Peterkin, upon reaching the island, utters the following words: “We’ll take possession in the name of the king; we’ll go and enter the service of its black inhabitants. Of course we’ll rise, naturally, to the top of affairs. White men always do in savage countries. You shall be king, Jack; Ralph, prime minister” (Ballantyne, 1990, p. 16).

In the 1850s Ballantyne’s contemporaries were inclined to define virtue in terms of muscular Christianity, asserting the value of simple faith in the face of encroaching scientific and religious doubt (Bratton, 1990, p. xi). Michael Russell states this very explicitly. “To Britain has been entrusted by Divine Providence a greater extent of power than ever belonged to any other nation, whether in ancient or modern times, with the view that she may carry to the remotest parts of the earth the pure form of Christianity which she professes” (cited in Bratton, 1990, p. xvii). Ballantyne too seems to have had great faith in the beneficial effects of British missionary work on the commercial, social and cultural transformation of the life of the South Sea Islands. *The Coral Island* is an extreme example of this state of mind. At the opening of the story Ralph says he has heard that “in the Coral Islands men were wild, bloodthirsty savages, excepting in those favoured isles to which the Gospel of Our Saviour had been conveyed” (1990, p. 4); when they reach the Coral Island safely, Ralph remembers his mother’s words that at the moment of danger he should look to Jesus Christ.

The second half of the book, which tells of pirates and savages, must have been inspired by the numerous accounts of missionary work in the South Seas at mid-century and the two topics – imperialism and missionary work - are closely linked. Ralph’s voyage with the piratical sandalwood trader gives him the opportunity to observe the horror of an encounter between unprincipled Europeans and unconverted heathens, resulting in their mutual destruction. “It establishes in the reader’s mind both the absolute otherness of the natives, the raw material of the imperialist mission, and the wickedness of those born in Christian countries who have yet neglected or rejected their chance of salvation” (Bratton, 1990, p. xix). Ralph, the epitome of young British manhood, himself is finally brought to feel that he is the greatest sinner of all because he cannot remember enough of the Bible to convert the dying pirate, Bloody Bill, shot by the white captain for trying to warn the natives against the captain’s plan to leave without paying for the sandalwood they have bought.

One of the widespread ideas about children’s books is that the motives of writers and parents are ideologically neutral. In reality, there is much ideology in and around children’s books that is hidden (Hunt, 1991, p. 142). According to Tambling, a society

produces the narratives its ideological presuppositions support (1991, p. 8), and imperialism has inspired a considerable literature (Giddings, 1991, p. 1), which has formed an extensive ideological infrastructure to legitimize and morally to justify colonialism in the name of progress, of spreading the word of God, of bringing law, order and good government to less fortunate parts of the world (p. 3). Hence, narrative fiction has had an important position in the history and world of the Empire. Colonial romances helped to reinforce the dominant ideologies of their time by teaching their readers to see the world outside Europe as primitive, mysterious places peopled by inferior savages, centuries behind Europeans in moral and social evolution (Jaffe, 1992, p. 77).

In other words, the fictions of the Empire did not merely reflect what was going on in “reality”, but helped to authorize it and to motivate its continuance. As Bill Ashcroft and Pal Ahluwalia point out, the discourse of colonialism obscures the underlying political and economic aims of colonisation and shows it as a civilizing endeavour aiming at the moral improvement of the natives (2001, p. 9-10). Moreover, the evolutionary theory was used to support the ideology of colonial expansion. The idea of a lower race that requires elevation and improvement left no consideration for the self-government of the colonised, and the dominance of the white race was regarded as the result of inherited superiority. Such arguments depicted expansion and control as not only moral but somehow natural.

The 1850s and 1860s saw the birth of scientific racism and a change in English racial attitudes. To Lorimer, this was a product of the needs of imperial rule. In order to justify British control over various indigenous peoples the Victorians developed the ideology of the civilising mission and the white man’s burden. The ideology of the new scientific racism declared that moral and intellectual as well as physical traits were biologically determined. Individual diversity was not taken into account and it was assumed all blacks were inferior to all whites (1978, pp. 13-5). One of the major concerns of *The Coral Island* seems to be to reinforce the idea that imperialism is a sacred duty of English people to carry the torch of civilization to primitive, brutal savages, and missionaries are seen as saviours, bringing education, knowledge and moral improvement to the savages. It can be seen clearly that Ballantyne’s view of society is hierarchical and implicitly racist (Parker, 1991, p. 46). There is an easy assumption of European superiority. The stereotype of brutal, bloodthirsty cannibalistic natives occupies an important place in the book. This has to do with the unexamined belief that black men showed a sensual and animal nature much closer to brute creation than the civilized white races. James Hunt, a medical doctor, claimed the black man is intellectually inferior to the European and that the black race can only be humanized and civilized by Europeans (Lorimer, 1978, pp. 138-9). Defenders of the Bible against

Darwin's theory of natural selection took an even darker view of savage life and saw the black man's conversion to Christian ways as the only hope for their salvation (pp. 146-7). The boys' belief in white men's superiority is such that they are amazed to see symptoms of a kindly nature among some of the savages. Ironically, the ferocious looking pirates are not savages but white men. Ignoring the association of missionary work and imperialism, Ballantyne shows the spiritual improvements wrought by conversion to Christianity (pp. 137-8, 231-4, 242-9). The boys are so confident that they are superior to the savages and know what is right and what is wrong that they try to teach the natives their own moral values, such as burying the dead instead of eating them (p. 183) and are relieved to see that the converted natives are wearing decent clothes. Ralph is so horrified when he sees the white captain of the pirate schooner brutally kill the natives that he decides to run away as soon as they reach an island. He is, however, dissuaded by Bloody Bill, a white cut-throat, who tells him that most of the islanders are cannibals and eat even their friends for pleasure, kill their own infants or feed them to snakes. Fortunately, Bill says, when the missionaries arrive, all the evil deeds come to an end (pp. 230-1). Ralph is miserable at being surrounded by people to whom the shedding of blood is mere pastime. Furthermore, he notices that the chief's word is law and there is no other law on these islands. He prays for the missionaries to be there soon (p. 235). Among the worst atrocities Ralph sees we could mention the launching of a war canoe over the living bodies of the victims (p. 247). Generally it is the native people who exhibit childish characteristics. This association of ideas was widespread at the time. The idea of the savage as a child allowed Ballantyne to ascribe this to racial characteristics, while holding out hope for the future. The agent of change would be the missionary work (Parker, 1991, pp. 54, 58).

The boys' behaviour on the island reflects some of the main ideologies of the eighteenth and mid-nineteenth century. Jean Jacques Rousseau in his study of perfect childhood, *Emile*, (1762), stated that children were to turn to nature rather than to books for knowledge both about life and themselves. Wordsworth gave a similar message in *The Prelude* (1850) (Tucker, 1992, p. 158). To John Stuart Mill all knowledge must be grounded in and tested by experience (cited in Aiken, 1956, p. 140). Although Jack is a well-educated boy and his knowledge contributes greatly to the boys' survival, what the three boys learn through their experiences in direct contact with nature is equally important, if not more so. Peterkin is ignorant as far as book learning goes, but he knows many things learned from experience which Jack and Ralph do not know. The boys develop in a continuous process of "assimilating" new experience by interpreting it in terms which are currently meaningful to them and "accommodating" to new experience by reorganizing their own system of meanings. This natural process of development is extremely important to Piaget as well (Graham, 1972, p. 19). Even Peterkin, who has an

unobservant and frivolous nature at the beginning, matures gradually through their experiences on the island. According to Mill, the primary social factor which blocks the way of individual and collective well-being is the interference of institutions with individual self-development (cited in Aiken, 1956, p. 147). The absence of such institutions or any high authority on the Coral Island is an important factor in the boys' great happiness.

Havighurst and Taba define four character types: the defiant, the submissive, the adaptive and the self-directive (Graham, 1972, p. 173). In the three boys we see aspects of the last three types. They are submissive in that they conscientiously perform what they are required or expected to do by the values of the class they belong to. Besides, they have strong moral standards and a well-developed sense of duty and obligation. They also fit the adaptive type because they are friendly, outgoing and sociable. Jack and Ralph, being strong-willed and self-sufficient, are characterized by self-criticism and self-doubt, and so, can be said to possess the features of the self-directive type (p. 174). Ralph says that Jack overcomes all obstacles when he thinks he is acting rightly; but when he is doubtful about the rightness of his behaviour, he becomes timid (p. 130). His motto is, "When there's a will, there's a way" (p. 130). His building the boat despite all that shortage of materials is an example of his strong will power, his endless energy and resourcefulness.

One of the main preoccupations of children's literature has always been to instruct children in the issues of right and wrong, and to develop a sense of responsibility in them; in other words, to teach them to behave morally and to make moral judgements, which entails taking full account of the rights of others and applying to one's own behaviour the rules of right and wrong which one holds to be applicable to others' behaviour (Graham, 1972, p. 11). Children have to learn what things are "right" and what things are "wrong". The term "socialization" refers to the child's learning of the ways of his society and his adjustment to the social requirements imposed on him; and moral development refers to the process by which the child becomes capable of making moral choices (p. 18). H. J. Eysenck argues that "socialized behaviour rests essentially on a basis of conditioning which is applied during a person's childhood by his parents, teachers and peers" (cited in Graham, 1972, p. 103). Middle class parents are likely to accept the values of society more readily and to condition their children more firmly in accordance with these values (p. 105). Many incidents in the book illustrate that the boys in the story have already been properly conditioned as to what is right and what is wrong. Kohlberg proposes three levels of development, the third being the level of self-accepted moral principles. At the sixth stage of the third level, there is the belief in the sacredness of human life as representing a universal human value of respect for the individual (Graham, 1972, p. 231). The boys' risking their lives to save the defeated natives from

being eaten and the Samoan woman from being killed are examples of their high level of moral development. For them living is a universal human right whatever the skin colour of the people concerned.

On the surface level, a text encodes meaning through the language and the author's attitude (Hunt, 1991, p. 69). What truly communicates is the hidden attitude, the underlying philosophy and stance. It is not the act of violence that corrupts but the acceptance of violence as a norm (p. 143). The fact that the boys in the book never accept violence as a norm, whether performed by white men or savages, shows the implicit attitude of the author, so does their belief that only through Christianity can the savages be reformed and civilized. Authorial control is one of the markers of children's literature (p. 85). In *The Coral Island* it is covert, but present all the same. The assumption that children's books should be "readerly" rather than "writerly" determines the quality of the books. The author attempts to do all the work for the reader to limit the possibility of interpretation and to guide understanding (p. 81). This applies to *The Coral Island*.

Although morality has commonly been associated with religion, in reality there seem to be no grounds for supposing that religious belief is related to the level of personal morality. To Schoben, religion is important as the carrier of great traditions of moral conduct and great models of responsible manhood (cited in Graham, 1972, p. 257). The boys, having being conditioned by the Victorian notions of the beneficial effects of missionary work, associate religious belief with morality, and greatly appreciate the missionary work on these islands. Ralph from the very beginning is always articulating his faith and trust in God. When the boys undertake a difficult task, which is to go to the island where the Samoan woman is kept captive by Tararo in a boat with insufficient crew, Ralph says, "men do not know how much they are capable of doing till they try and ... we should never give way to despair... always supposing, however, that our cause is a good one and that we can ask the Divine blessing on it" (Ballantyne, 1990, p. 282). Besides, he hears from the sailors on the schooner that the only safe places on these islands are where the Gospel has been sent. After witnessing the brutalities practised by the cannibals, Jack also becomes a staunch Christian.

Upon their arrival on Mango, they are faced with the danger of being captured and roasted alive and eaten by the cannibals. Luckily, they reach the Christianized village safely and are welcomed by the native missionary. They see that the huts are well-kept and clean and the inhabitants are not naked, which makes Ralph infer that all this is the result of their conversion (p. 287). The missionary teacher tells the boys about some more savage customs, such as the strangling of the wives of a chief when he dies; or the right of the son of a chief to depose his father when he grows infirm and to bury him alive (p. 294-5). Ralph prays to God to prosper those missionary societies that send such inestimable blessings to these islands of dark and bloody idolatry" (p. 296). The boys

themselves witness another fight at the end of which the tribe that wins brains the defeated ones and puts their brains on leaves to offer to their gods. Still another outrage takes place within the temple of the savages where the priest dissects human bodies to be baked afterwards (p. 307). The boys feel that as true knights they should not leave a work unfinished and save the imprisoned Samoan woman from Tararo (p. 279). They are rescued from Tararo's vengeance by a thunderstorm. To Ralph it seems the awful storm is calculated "to impress the mind of beholders with the might and majesty of God" (p. 327). Next day while searching for food they are caught once more. They are finally released "through the great goodness of God" (p. 332), says the teacher. What has happened is that a newly-sent English missionary has managed to convert Tararo and all the villagers in a very short time. The Christianized villagers and Tararo now treat the boys so kindly that the boys feel sad at leaving the island to go home.

At the end of their adventures the boys are ready to return home, more than ever convinced of the superiority of white men and of their duty to improve and reform the savages' ways of living and of the providential effects of missionary work. However, they have also displayed compassion for the defeated natives, helped and fed them, and risked their lives to save the Samoan woman, which indicates that they are morally developed enough to recognize everyone's right to live whatever their skin colour. The novel ends with a closure, that is, a sense of ending, with normality restored and security emphasized, which satisfies child readers (Hunt, 1991, pp. 118, 127).

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