



GÖTEBORGS UNIVERSITET
INST FÖR SPRÅK OCH LITTERATURER

ENGLISH

Colonising *The Coral Island*:

A Postcolonial Reading of R.M. Ballantyne's Children's 'Classic'

Johanna Bengtsson

C-Essay
Spring 2012

Supervisor: Fereshteh Zangenehpour
Examinator: Chloé Avril

Abstract

Being written during the rise of the British Empire in the 1850s, R.M. Ballantyne's boys' adventure story *The Coral Island* is in many ways a product of its time, conveying imperial ideas and Victorian values to the young reader. Through his portrayal of the native inhabitants in relation to his descriptions of the three British protagonists, the author creates a stereotyped image of the natives as primitive savages. Due to the further use of a first person narrator and realist pretensions, the dated racist ideas become influential upon the reader. In spite of the fact that the novel has been considered as an entertaining children's classic by generations since its first publication, *The Coral Island* should not be classified as good children's literature today but should rather be historicised as a result of its controversial contents. By adopting a postcolonial approach and applying postcolonial theory in my analysis of R.M. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island*, I have in this essay endeavoured to demonstrate in what ways the novel would prove problematic as a children's book today. In my first chapter I present the imperial ideas and Victorian values that are conveyed, whereas in my second chapter I discuss Ballantyne's stereotyping of the natives. As a result of my study of this novel, I have exemplified how the author portrays the three British boys as representative of the Victorian ideals of the time. I have also illustrated their assumed superiority over nature and their roles as colonisers. Furthermore, my analysis of *The Coral Island* has revealed how Ballantyne communicates both white superiority as well as the Western 'obligation' to civilise primitive people through Christian conversion. Consequently, the novel promotes the ideology of its time. As a result of my findings, I would like to argue that *The Coral Island* should today be viewed as a text conveying historical ideas and values rather than as an exciting children's classic.

Keywords: The Coral Island Ballantyne Classic Postcolonial Imperialism

Table of Contents

Introduction	4
Chapter One: Victorian Values and Imperial Ideas	6
Chapter Two: The Stereotyping of the Natives	15
Conclusion	26
Bibliography	27

Introduction

In *The Coral Island*, R.M. Ballantyne presents an exciting adventure story targeted for young boys. Describing the events that befall three British boys after their shipwreck on an isolated island in the South Pacific, the novel is intended to provide the reader with both fact and fiction and thus have the function of being both educational and entertaining. However, written in the 1850s during the rise and expansion of the British Empire, *The Coral Island* is to a great extent a product of its time. Consequently, this colonial, didactic text conveys not only moralising aspects on the subject of sensible conduct and Christian values but also on imperial ideas, apparent through the author's portrayal of the native inhabitants of the islands. By contrasting the natives' customs and behaviour with that of the three young Britons, Ballantyne creates a demonised image of the natives as 'Other', which in this essay will be defined as opposite to Western standards. In spite of the novel being very well-received at the time of its first publication and having been considered a children's classic ever since, the dated imperial ideas and racist values conveyed are highly questionable and do not reflect our modern day society. In this essay, I will therefore claim that despite its earlier status, *The Coral Island* should not be classified as good children's literature today but should rather be historicised. Due to its controversial contents, the novel would be more suitable to use in a critical context than be regarded as an entertaining reading for young people. In order to prove my thesis and question this novel's classical status, I will in this essay demonstrate how Ballantyne conveys imperial and racist ideas to the modern reader.

Through adopting a postcolonial approach and applying postcolonial theory, I will aim to exemplify in what ways *The Coral Island* is problematic as a children's book today, highlighting aspects such as the image of the natives contrasted with that of the British boys. In my argumentation, I will discuss the pervading imperial values that are present in the novel

and argue that these ideas become influential upon the reader through the author's use of realism and a first person narrator. In particular, I will focus my argumentation on this novel's canonical status as a children's classic. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a classic is that which constitutes "an acknowledged standard or model; of enduring interest and value". This is the definition I will use in my questioning of *The Coral Island's* status.

In *Colonial & Postcolonial Literature*, Elleke Boehmer states how Victorian boys' adventure stories were designed to foster a new generation of men ready to serve the great Empire (72-75). As a result, Ballantyne has incorporated many Victorian ideals such as courage, comradeship, patriotism and Christianity in *The Coral Island*. The time of the novel's publication was highly characterised by a strong belief in the own moral and cultural supremacy, resulting in a sense of humanitarianism and naïve racism towards other peoples - issues that are noticeable in Ballantyne's novel. As Boehmer further explains, the expansion of the British Empire was dependent on successful trading. Thus, British missionaries and commissioners working for the Empire were sent to the far corners of the earth in a civilising mission to enhance the conditions for further economic growth through advocating Christianity and Western culture. Consequently, moral ideals were created to correspond to the economic needs of the time and a justification for exploitation was invented in the name of God (36-40).

In order to present my argument clearly, I will make a division of the results of my study and present these in two chapters. Initially, I will discuss *The Coral Island's* status as a children's classic and present the imperial ideas and Victorian values that are conveyed in the novel. This first chapter will also contain an analysis of the three main characters in their role as colonisers. The second chapter will be dedicated to Ballantyne's portrayal of the natives. As a result, I hope to exemplify in what ways *The Coral Island* conveys dated and racist ideas to the young reader and consequently, I hope to provide a modern, postcolonial reading of this all-time children's classic.

Chapter One: Victorian Values and Imperial Ideas

In *The Coral Island*, Ballantyne created a didactic, moralising handbook intended for young boys. As is further stated in *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, the novel was “designed to teach readers about geography, natural history, religion, morality and the responsibilities of empire” (Birch, “Ballantyne, R.M.”). Being written in the early Victorian period, the novel to a great extent also reflects the empire-building spirit of the age (Birch, “Coral Island, The”). Thus, the three young Britons that are shipwrecked on the Coral Island are turned into colonisers by Ballantyne, claiming the land in the name of the King.

In this chapter, I will aim to discuss which values, ideas and ideals typical of the time the author expresses to the young reader and by what means they are conveyed. In addition, I intend to show how Ballantyne portrays the three young British boys as colonisers. However, in order to question this novel’s status as a classic and to provide critical context, I will introduce this first chapter by discussing the notion of the classic and *The Coral Island*’s classification as such in relation to its overtly ideological contents.

In the article ““What Is a Classic?”: International Literary Criticism and the Classic Question”, Ankhi Mukherjee discusses different definitions of ‘the classic’ as a concept. In her references to lectures held by both T. S. Eliot and John Coetzee on the same topic, she states their view of the concept, which is that of questioning the classical status of certain novels as being products containing contemporary values (1027). In her interpretation of John Coetzee’s definition of the concept, Mukherjee further states that “the classic is that which survives critical questioning” (1028). According to Sainte-Bauve, who is also quoted in Mukherjee’s article, a true classic is “an unequivocal, moral truth commuted into a form that is not fixed [...] but fine and meaningful” (1030). Furthermore, Sainte-Bauve also emphasises the classic as a work containing common values, contemporary with all times (1030).

It is within this context that the classical status of *The Coral Island* can be questioned. As will be exemplified further on in this essay, this novel does not convey any universal, timeless moral truth, but rather moralistic ideas closely related to the ideology of the time of its publication. The values expressed are fixed and narrow-minded rather than meaningful and hence, they are not contemporary with the values of our modern society.

According to T. S. Eliot, quoted in Mukherjee's essay, the classical concept is closely related to the concept of empire. The importance of the classic is constituted by the heritage it passes on into modern time and without it, Eliot claims we will lose our awareness of history (1031). In employing this view of the classic, the canonical status of *The Coral Island* becomes perhaps less problematic. The novel does constitute a heritage of the past and thus, it should be historicised in terms of the dated values and ideas it contains. However, its classical status should not entail that its values of the past should be adopted into our modern value-system. Instead, they should be studied critically for what they really are, old values that are products of a different time. Although, by acquiring an awareness of historical values we can simultaneously discern how some of these values may to a certain extent still be present in our society. This in turn can encourage critical scepticism towards the values in question.

In his essay "Ideology and the Children's Book", Peter Hollindale discusses the inevitable presence of ideology in literature for children. He states that when an author composes his story, he simultaneously conveys his own values and ideology to the reader, either explicitly or unconsciously (27-32). Furthermore, Hollindale argues that unless the young reader is made aware of the presence of ideology, there is a risk that the child will incorporate these ideas and values as well (30). However, according to Hollindale, this should not entail that certain books should not be read by children, instead the young reader should be taught to read critically (23; 27; 37). I agree with Hollindale's view of how moralistically questionable literature for children should be approached. Nonetheless, in my opinion, the ability of critical reading is closely related to the extent to which the young reader has developed its

reading abilities. Consequently, a young reader still struggling with the language will have less ability to read the contents critically. For this reason, although approving of Hollindale's opinions, I would like to claim that the problematicity related to children's literature thus remains. In my opinion, books with questionable contents would therefore better be introduced at a later stage in the young reader's reading development, when the reader has acquired the critical mind necessary for understanding what the contents in reality convey. Otherwise, as Hollindale points out, there will be a risk that the young reader agrees too readily with the narrator's views and thus adopts them.

When applying Hollindale's views of ideology in children's literature to *The Coral Island*, we can discern how R.M. Ballantyne communicates both imperial ideas and Victorian values to the young reader rather explicitly. When having recently arrived at the Coral Island, Peterkin, the youngest of the three castaways articulates the empire-building spirit of the age: "I have made up my mind that it's capital- first-rate-the best thing that ever happened to us, [...] We've got an island all to ourselves. We'll take possession in the name of the King; [...] Of course we'll rise, naturally, to the top of the affairs. White men always do in savage countries" (16). Through this declaration, the young British boy expresses both patriotism and a belief in British, or white, superiority. However, since Peterkin is portrayed as a joker, this utterance could be perceived as irony. Even though this may be the case, Peterkin still seems to voice a common idea among the three boys, which is that of 'claiming the land' as a result of their landing on a new, undiscovered territory. This can be further noticed through a statement by the older boy Jack, where he is urgent to begin their new life on the island: "we are wasting our time in *talking* instead of *doing*" (emphases in original; 17). Even though these three sailors are only boys, they quickly assume the role of colonisers and thus prove their loyalty towards their native country.

Interestingly, this domination can be related to the concept of hegemony which is discussed by Edward Said in *Orientalism*. Said explains how it is "the idea of European

identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures” that has resulted in a dominant culture (7). Hence, Ballantyne’s young heroes are energising this European idea of cultural dominance through establishing their perceived right to claim superiority.

In *Colonial & Post-colonial Literature*, Elleke Boehmer explains that in the adventure story, “the young male hero was portrayed as a British ‘lad of spirit’, ‘full of life and energy’, who from an early age proved his integrity and fearlessness” (67). These are issues that are most apparent in *The Coral Island*. The young British heroes in the form of Ralph, Peterkin and Jack are well-equipped with wisdom and reason which in combination with the surrounding richness of the island provide them with all the necessary supplies for leading a comfortable life. When having been informed by the older and wiser Jack about the contents of coconuts, Peterkin exclaims: “Meat and drink on the same tree! [...] washing in the sea, lodging on the ground- and all for nothing! My dear boys, we’re set up for life; it must be the ancient paradise- hurrah!” (25). Through their sensible conduct, methodical reasoning and inventive strategies, the young Britons manage to devise procedures to overcome the obstacles they face. By relying on their own knowledge and reason they conjure up ways of constructing a boat, successful hunting methods as well as means of lighting a fire. In this way, they are to a great extent representative of this ‘lad of spirit’, which Boehmer emphasises. Consequently, they also personify the Victorian ideal of the self-made man characterised by the ability of self-improvement and hard work.

However, the three main characters possess other qualities as well. In Jack, the oldest, wisest and most mature in the trio, Ballantyne has fashioned a strong leader functioning as an educator. He is described as well-educated, “clever and hearty and lion-like in his actions” (9), as a result, he quickly becomes the natural leader of the group, admired by the two younger boys. Jack’s strong leadership becomes especially apparent in situations of great danger and it is his determination and ability of sensible reasoning at these times which results

in Ralph's and Peterkin's blind trust in his capability of saving them from these perils. This is the case when the little group's safety is threatened by the attack of a shark during a fishing excursion and also when caught by bad weather at sea (45-46; 129-131). As a result, the reader is given the impression that without Jack's leadership and wisdom, the three castaways would not have managed as well.

Although Jack is given the role as an educator of his fellow comrades, Ralph is the one who educates the reader in flora and fauna and sensible conduct. Through Ralph's scientific interest and keen observation, the reader is informed about the marine life, the nature of the tides and many other issues related to the boys' new exotic life. All information conveyed is thus based on Ralph's empirical studies and sensible conclusions. As Joseph Bristow argues in *Empire Boys*: "In these books, the boy has little or nothing to learn [...] wisdom is instead a natural resource dwelling within him" (95). Even though the young boys acquire knowledge through observation, they prove that they already possess wisdom through their methodical reasoning.

This particular importance of keeping an agile mind, being observant and approaching the world with a scientific interest is especially emphasised by Ballantyne:

this want of observation is a sad and very common infirmity of human nature, there being hundreds of persons before whose eyes the most wonderful things are passing every day, who nevertheless are totally ignorant of them. I therefore have to record my sympathy with such persons, and to recommend them a course of conduct which I have now for a long time myself adopted – namely, the habit of forcing my attention upon *a//*things [...]. (99)

In this way, Ballantyne is conveying his overt didacticism to the reader, thus encouraging good, sensible conduct.

Likewise, this advocating of good behaviour could be noticed in the attitudes that are sometimes shown towards the more childlike and ignorant Peterkin. Although consciously

casted as the carefree but harmless joker he is at times the object of ridicule in terms of his inappropriate behaviour or ignorance; “Peterkin, who, being of a very unobservant nature, had been too much taken up with other things to notice anything so high above his head [...]. But whatever faults my young comrade had, he could not be blamed for want of activity or animal spirits” (22). In a similar way, Peterkin is somewhat ridiculed when being caught unawares talking to his cat, to which he proclaims his high affection (109-110). Furthermore, Peterkin is not as skilled as the other boys; he can neither dive nor swim with any great ability.

In *Imperialism and Juvenile Literature*, Jeffrey Richards states that as a part of the popular imperialism that emerged during the 1850s, the importance of masculinity was emphasised, “which combined sportsmanship, chivalry and patriotism” (2). Even though Peterkin may not be a particularly good sportsman, he attempts to prove his manliness through his ability as a good hunter. In spite of being more childlike compared to the older boys, in terms of his more open display of feelings, Peterkin remains a true British boy through the loyalty and affection he shows towards his friends. When fearing that something has happened to Jack during his dive, Peterkin is overwhelmed with joy when realising that he is safe: “No sooner did Jack gain the rocks [...] than he threw his arms round his neck and burst into a flood of tears” (93). In this way, Ballantyne accentuates the value of good comradeship.

Similar to how Ballantyne emphasises the Victorian ideals of e.g. patriotism and sensible conduct, as the story progresses, his evangelical ideas also become transparent with some frequency. Of the three heroes, Ralph is the one to personify the good Christian, also contributing a moralising voice to the narrative. Not only is Ralph determined to continue saying his prayers despite the loss of his Bible (28) but he also expresses his immense gratitude towards his creator over the exotic wonders that are surrounding him:

here and there, in groups, and in single trees, rose the tall forms of the coconut palms, spreading abroad, and waving their graceful plumes high above all the rest, as if they

were a superior race [...]. Oh, it was a most enchanting scene, and I thanked God for having created such delightful spots for the use of man. (68)

In this passage, it also becomes apparent that Ballantyne confers views to the reader regarding the status of man in relation to nature. The message in this context is that of man being the master of nature, as a result of nature being created for the purpose of man. Furthermore, through the mentioning of race and superiority as being natural aspects, part of nature, the reader is made aware of Ballantyne's view in the racial issue: that different races have different values, where some are superior and others are subordinate.

By setting his story on an uninhabited island, Ballantyne has assigned his young boy heroes the roles of colonisers - a mission they enthusiastically accept. Thus, they not only become the governors of the island, but also the explorers of it, mapping the unknown territory through various expeditions. They study animal life and vegetation closely and with curiosity. Based on their conclusions, the young Britons then form their conceptions of their new reality, comparing the unknown to that which they are already familiar with.

Having the fortune of being cast upon a very fruitful island, the three boys lack no food and their new home is seen as one big garden ready for them to exploit with its extensive supply of meat, fruit and vegetables (67; 107). In this way it is illustrated how they are masters over nature, a fact that is proved during their encounter with a shark: "The monster's snout rubbed against the log as it passed, and revealed its hideous jaws, into which Jack instantly plunged the paddle, and thrust it down its throat" (46). This action becomes symbolic for the white boys' superiority in relation to nature. Through their strength, innovativeness and wisdom, they exceed and excel as the true Britons they are. In spite of being very far from home, the boys preserve their Western traditions and in that way, patriotism is further emphasised. Consequently, the castaways rest during the Sabbath day and perform daily bathing rituals to maintain civilisation whilst surrounded by everything exotic and unfamiliar (85; 74-75).

According to Edward Said in *Orientalism*, to acquire knowledge of another civilisation “means rising above immediacy, beyond self, into the foreign and distant” and “To have such knowledge of such a thing is to dominate it, to have authority over it” (32). Through mapping and exploring their surroundings, the young boys attempt to make sense of their new environment and thus gain knowledge about the yet unknown. However, as they acquire an understanding of the unfamiliar, they simultaneously develop an ability to take control over their situation and as a result, dominate their surroundings through hunting and other forms of exploitation.

Through attributing his characters various admirable qualities, Ballantyne created three role models whom the Victorian boy could aim to imitate. In this way, Ballantyne propagates the virtues of the time; not only are his heroes loyal, brave and sensible but they are also having the scientific interest of the colonial explorer, the morals of the good Christian and the qualities of the strong leader. Even though not all three boys possess all these virtues, they all contribute with some admirable qualities and hence form the ideal group of settlers, thus representing “the best of the West”, as Elleke Boehmer expresses it in *Colonial & Postcolonial Literature* (68).

In order to communicate these ideals successfully to the reader, Ballantyne employs the device of a first person narrator in the form of 15-year-old Ralph: “Indeed, with regard to all the things I saw during my eventful career in the South Seas, I have been exceedingly careful not to exaggerate, or in any way to mislead or deceive my readers” (56). In this way, the author also conveys realist pretensions to the reader, with the probable intent to make the contents more easily accepted by the reader. As a result, Ballantyne manages to convey his didacticism and educational instructions rather effectively. As Stuart Hannabuss argues in “Ballantyne’s Message of Empire”: “Ballantyne speaks through the central characters [...] What they say is of importance because it reveals what the author thinks and what he thinks the reader should think” (56). The values conveyed by Ballantyne reflect the Victorian ideals

of the time, of which a few are still admired, such as courage, good sportsman- and comradeship, sensibility and loyalty. However, the modern reader of *The Coral Island* is simultaneously exposed to ideas of white superiority and the view of man as being master over nature, values that are not contemporary with our modern society. In addition, ‘unmanly’ characteristics such as weakness and ignorance are looked down upon. Even though this may to some extent still be the case in our society, this is a problematic message to convey to a young reader.

In ““The Broken Telescope”: Misrepresentation in *The Coral Island*”, Fiona McCulloch claims that rather than reflecting imperialism and colonialism, *The Coral Island* is instead interrogating these issues. McCulloch further argues that it is made obvious to the reader that all facts presented are interpreted from a Western perspective and as a result, the power which these issues might have upon the reader is reduced (142; 139). However, I do not agree with McCulloch that this novel is questioning imperialism and colonialism. Instead, as will be further illustrated in this essay, *The Coral Island* does in many ways energise imperialist and racist ideas. McCulloch’s second claim that the interpretive view is apparent enough for the reader not to accept the validity of the facts presented, is an interesting observation which might apply to the critical adult reader. Nevertheless, issues such as these are less apparent to a young reader, who may not yet have developed an ability of critical reading and hence, it is the most pervading ideas which become the most influential.

In this chapter, I have aimed to exemplify which Victorian values and imperial ideas that Ballantyne conveys to the reader and attempted to illustrate the British boys’ roles as colonisers. In the following chapter, I will discuss the author’s portrayal of the natives and demonstrate how Ballantyne recycles the stereotype of the cannibalistic savage.

Chapter Two: The Stereotyping of the Natives

In contrast to some other novels by Ballantyne, the facts that are mixed with the fiction in *The Coral Island* are not based on the author's own experience and knowledge. As is stated by Stuart Hannabus in "Ballantyne's Message of Empire", all the necessary details needed to create an image of realism are instead derived from Reverend Michael Russell's *Polynesia: a History of the South Sea Islands* from 1852 (61). According to Hannabus, the "extensive borrowings, in terms of local colour and in terms of viewpoint and ideology, are clear to see" (61). Consequently, through using a subjective primary source, the 'facts' conveyed to the reader by Ballantyne were unreliable even at the time of the novel's first publication, containing numerous misrepresentations and exaggerations. At that time, the novel was representative of imperial ideas such as white superiority and benevolent imperialism in the form of humanitarianism. Today, however, we can discern that the ideology conveyed is highly racist. Through attributing the natives with demonised features and assigning them cannibalistic and diabolical customs, Ballantyne creates an image of these islanders as extremely 'other' in comparison with the three virtuous British boys.

In this chapter, I will discuss Ballantyne's portrayal of the natives in *The Coral Island* and explain in what way the author employs stereotyping in order to emphasise the differences between the whites, the sensible and civilised and the blacks, the irrational and savage. Having focused on the author's representation of the three boy heroes in my first chapter, I will now illustrate how the image of the savage is represented by Ballantyne. Finally, I will conclude my argumentation regarding this novel's controversial status as a classic in the light of the textual evidence provided in this chapter.

Even though Ballantyne communicates imperial thoughts already in the beginning of *The Coral Island*, it is not until the natives' arrival to the island that his overt ideology becomes

truly crude. Thus, the boys' first encounter with these 'savages' is very expressive in terms of how the natives are portrayed;

The foam curled from the prow, and the eyes of the rowers glistened in their black faces as they strained every muscle of their naked bodies; [...] then, with a shout of defiance the whole party sprang, as if by magic, from the canoe to the shore [...] the men crowded to the water's edge, with stones in their hands, spears levelled, and clubs brandished, to resist the landing of their enemies. (138)

In this way, Ballantyne demonises the natives to the reader already during their first appearance. He does not only convey a strongly subjective image but also attempts to affect and shape the reader's opinion to accept that of the author. This demonisation is expressed through Ballantyne's focalisation of the violence, nakedness and exoticism which this appearance of the natives involves. Their dark colour is emphasised through the contrasting with their white, glistening eyes, where the glistening aspect suggests something animalistic and wild in their characters. Furthermore, Ballantyne suggests a supernatural strangeness in relation to these foreigners through his mentioning of magic. The image of the natives is further established through Ralph's reflections when witnessing the bloody battle between the two tribes: "they looked more like demons than human beings" (138). This perception is then reinforced when witnessing how the natives practice cannibalism: "Scarcely had his limbs ceased to quiver when the monsters cut slices of flesh from his body, and, after roasting them slightly over the fire devoured them" (140).

By this forceful 'othering' of the natives, Ballantyne is trying to differentiate these islanders from the three British boys. In *The Empire Writes Back*, Bill Ashcroft states that: "In order to maintain authority over the Other in a colonial situation, imperial discourse strives to delineate the Other as radically different from the self [...]. Otherness can thus only be produced by a continual process of what [Homi] Bhabha calls 'repetition and displacement' [...]" (103). By this displacement, which involves creating a distorted image of the natives,

disconnected from truth and reality, Ballantyne thus attempts to claim and accentuate Western authority and superiority.

In her article “Corrupting Boyhood in Didactic Children’s Literature”, Jessica Webb argues that the message conveyed to the reader in relation to this passage is that British values can conquer even the most savage native warrior (86). This is an interpretation with which I agree. As a result of the three boys’ intervention in the battle and Jack’s glorious victory over one of the ‘gigantic’ chiefs, “the most terrible monster I ever beheld” (139), the white boys’ superiority over the natives is established and the message to the reader is clear. As Webb points out, even though the native warriors are all adults, the three virtuous British boys manage to overcome them (86). Later on, the righteous Britons do not only prevent the natives from ‘devouring’ their enemies, but also attempt to teach them civilised behaviour through the ceremony of burial (146). Consequently, the idea of conversion to Christianity and Western traditions as the only true path is conveyed early by Ballantyne.

It is, however, the mere presence of cannibalistic customs in *The Coral Island* which results in the most forceful ‘othering’ of the natives by being contrasted with the good and sensible conduct of the three British boys. In *Rule of Darkness*, Patrick Brantlinger states that oppositions such as good and evil, civilised and savage are often juxtaposed in imperial discourse (265). In Ballantyne’s novel, this emphasis on differentiating the natives from the Britons is clearly noticeable, resulting in such polarisation as discussed by Brantlinger. Even though Ballantyne’s first portrayal of the natives is characterised by stereotyping, the descriptions conveyed further on is considerably more demonising and the ideology more crude. When encountering the pirate Bloody Bill, Ralph is told that:

there’s thousands o’ the people in England who are sich born drivellin’ *won’t-believers* that they think the black fellows hereaway at the worst eat an enemy only now an’ then, out o’ spite; whereas I know for certain [...] that the Fiji islanders eat

not only their enemies, but one another; and they do it not for spite, but for pleasure.

It's a *fact* that they prefer human flesh to any other. (emphasis in original; 174)

Despite the fact that he is initially sceptical towards this information, Ralph's worst expectations are realised when confronted with the dreadful customs and horrific deeds performed at the island of Emo. The reader is informed of a brutal mass killing as well as of the monstrous native custom of sacrificing infants to a gigantic eel, having the role of a god (195; 182). The first event is followed by the comment: "O, reader, this is no fiction. I would not, for the sake of thrilling you with horror, invent so terrible a scene. It was witnessed. It is true [...]" (196). In these passages, it is made apparent how presumptions are created towards the natives which both Ralph and the reader are encouraged to accept. Through Bloody Bill, Ralph is informed about the natives' 'true' character and these preconceptions are then 'confirmed' through Ralph's own observation of the natives' violence towards each other. In turn, the reader is assured of the veracity of the events through the main character's declaration of them being true. In this way, Ballantyne reinforces the Western prejudices of the time and thus substantiate the stereotyping of 'the savages'.

Through this displacement, Ballantyne is however not only establishing Western conceptions of the 'Other' but simultaneously also creates an image of how the natives should perceive themselves. As Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin point out, "the conscious and unconscious oppression of the indigenous personality and culture by a supposedly superior racial or cultural model" result in a "*cultural denigration*" (italicised in original; 9). In *The Coral Island*, this denigration is practiced at two levels; firstly, through the main character's condemnation of native traditions and secondly, by the author's utter rejection of the value of the native culture. Certainly, Ballantyne's ideas are communicated through the main character. However, the effects of this denigration can be seen at different levels; on the fictional level, the natives will internalise the Western perception of themselves as primitive and degraded, with the possibility of a final rejection of their own culture. This effect can be

seen when Ballantyne's three boy heroes visit the island of Mango, inhabited by a native tribe that has converted to Christianity and adopted a Western lifestyle. Although, the rejection of native culture can also have effects on another level; by communicating Western superiority, Ballantyne is not only condemning the culture of the Pacific islanders but in fact all cultures that are different from Western culture. Thus, there is a risk of internalising these perceptions among the common reader.

However, Ballantyne does not only portray the natives as primitive savages but also as exotic curiosities. In *Rule of Darkness*, Patrick Brantlinger observes that writers of the time, if being explorers, often portrayed the natives as "objects of curiosity", whereas missionary writers instead regarded these foreign people as "weak, pitiable, inferior mortals who need to be shown the light" (181). Even though his main characters watch in horror while native tribes are combating, they are simultaneously intrigued by the exoticism and foreignness which the scene provides (138; 237-238). Nonetheless, Ballantyne also emphasises the dangers which this fascination could entail: "I began to find that such constant exposure to scenes of blood was having a slight effect upon myself, and I shuddered when I came to think that I too was becoming callous" (192). As Brian Street argues in *The Savage in Literature*, there was a constant fear among travellers of turning native when visiting exotic areas (116).

In the article "Sober Cannibals and Drunken Christians: Colonial Encounters of the Cannibal Kind", Nigel Rigby observes that Ballantyne emphasises the fact that sensible conduct is a result of sound surroundings (176). Consequently, Ballantyne aims to illustrate the risk of degeneration which 'bad' environments constitute. Interestingly, in order to portray the native environment as primitive and hence, as harmful for civilised people, Ballantyne does not only employ descriptions of brutal violence but also attempts to diminish the value of the native customs. Thus, rituals related to native taboos are ridiculed, as when Bloody Bill informs Ralph of this native custom: "it's a law that whoever touches the head of a living chief[...] his hands are tabued; so in that way the barbers' hands are always tabued, and they

daren't use them for their lives, but have to be fed like big babies, as they are, sure enough!" (181). However, it is not only the native gods and customs which are turned into objects of scorn by Ballantyne. As Street maintains, through the ridiculing of the chief by depicting him as a drunken, child-like madman and his subjects as weak primitives, Ballantyne mocks both 'primitive law' and the 'primitive' man (133).

In spite of being objects of ridicule and condemnation, the natives are simultaneously pitied for their ignorance, as when the chief is introduced to the function of a water pump and is expressing enthusiastic amazement over the device. However, the fact is also more explicitly expressed through Ralph's philosophical thoughts upon the natives' violent deeds: "how little wonder that these poor ignorant savages, who were born and bred in familiarity therewith, should think nothing of them at all, and should hold human life in so very slight esteem" (192). Thus, it is suggested that the natives' ignorant behaviour is linked to the malevolent and unenlightened environment that is surrounding them. As a result, Ballantyne emphasises the need for Western intervention in order to save these lost souls through the conversion to Christianity.

This urge for civilisation and enlightenment is further expressed by Ballantyne through the claimed differences between islands to which missionaries have been sent and areas which are still heathen. Through Bloody Bill, Ralph is informed that "I don't care what the Gospel does to them, but I know that when any o' the islands chance to get it, trade goes all smooth and easy; but where they ha'n't got it, Beelzebub himself could hardly desire better company" (169). In this sentence, the real underlying motive for civilising the natives is articulated clearly; to convert the natives into Christianity promotes trade and hence, it is not necessarily an act with humanitarian motives. The contrast between 'civilised' and heathen natives is further accentuated through the comparison of unchristian natives with the demon of Beelzebub.

However, it is not until the three British boys' arrival to the island of Mango, inhabited by both Christian natives and heathen tribes that the contrast becomes truly emphatic. The Christian area of the island has idyllic surroundings with neat cottages, paved paths, a village church and its inhabitants are wearing clothes after the European model. As a result, it is proving a great contrast to Ralph's previous experience of native village life (228-229): "Everything around this beautiful spot wore an aspect of peace and plenty; [...] I could not avoid contrasting it with the wretched village of Emo [...] 'What a convincing proof that Christianity is of God!'"(228). In all, the village is characterised by order and civilisation.

In contrast, when visiting the heathen village on the same island, the protagonists are immediately exposed to violent and bloody scenes, being witnesses to unscientific methods of warfare and barbaric human sacrifices (236; 242-243). Thus, Ballantyne's illustrations become considerably more violent and his exaggerations and condemnation of the heathen practices more forceful. After having witnessed a native being buried alive, the three boys are told that this is "a *ceremony* usually performed [...]" (emphasis in original; 243). Similarly, another native religious custom is described to end with shouting to the sacrificed bodies which is followed by kicking of the corpses, generating laughter among the native spectators (242). In this way, Ballantyne demonises the natives even further; through his description, the reader is persuaded to agree with the author's views of the natives' bestiality. Here, Ballantyne also exemplifies the utmost crimes that can be committed towards humankind: the violation of the dead and the burial of the alive. However, as Street points out in *The Savage in Literature*, Ballantyne "is less concerned to 'explain' such customs, by whatever theory, and merely adduces them as an added example of the inhuman savagery of the heathens" (150).

Despite the fact that the native inhabitants are repeatedly referred to as cannibals, the three main characters only actually witness real cannibalism once during the story, in relation to the battle at the Coral Island (141). Apart from this, descriptions of actual cannibalism are absent

in the novel. As a result, it could be argued that this creates a more positive image of the natives. However, I would claim the opposite. In fact, after only having witnessed cannibalism once, the three boys quickly assume that this is a widespread practice among all Pacific Islanders. This perception also corresponds to their already established preconceptions of the natives as being cannibals. As Jack states when noticing two canoes approaching the Coral Island: “whether war canoes or not I cannot tell; but this I know, that all the natives of the South Sea Islands are fierce cannibals, and they have little respect for strangers” (137). Instead of allowing his protagonists to then re-evaluate their conceptions of the natives during their further encounters with them, Ballantyne reinforces the image of the natives as cannibalistic savages.

In his attempt to further communicate moralising ideas of correct behaviour and Christian beliefs to the reader, Ballantyne is aided by the character of the native missionary. However, even though the man is immediately admired by the three boys for his knowledge and work, the author has not been able to resist emphasising the man’s colour. Although being ‘coal-black’ he is described as a mild-looking native and is thus given the role of a ‘noble savage’ (226; 230; 235). Interestingly, the missionary does not only spread the Gospel to the young Britons, but assists in reinforcing the racist ideas expressed earlier in the novel by others;

I trust that if you ever return to England, you will tell your Christian friends that the horrors which they hear of in regard to these islands are *literally true*, and that when they have heard the worst, the “*half has not been told them*” [...] You may also tell them [...] of the blessings that the Gospel has wrought *here!* (emphases in original; 235)

In this passage, through assuring the reader of the seriousness of the situation, Ballantyne advocates the necessity of mission in order to rid the islands of these ‘horrors’. The proposed solution is to convert and conform to Western values, of which the advantages are illustrated through the peaceful natives who have already adopted Christianity.

However, the native missionary does not only condemn the religion of the heathen natives but also declares that if the young Britons are not devoted Christians “you are, in the sight of God, much worse than these savages [...] for they have no knowledge [...] while you, on the contrary [...] call yourself Christians. These poor savages are indeed the enemies of our Lord; but you, if ye be not true believers, are traitors!” (239). In this way, Ballantyne articulates the ostensibly benevolent humanitarianism of the missionary and simultaneously conveys religious morals to the reader. Nonetheless, this seemingly harmless attitude towards the natives is perhaps more abusive than the fiercest description of cannibalism. Through this statement, it becomes apparent that Ballantyne has adopted the racial ideas of the time. As Elleke Boehmer points out in *Colonial & Postcolonial Literature*, “primitive cultures were regarded as the fossilized survivals of earlier evolutionary stages” (81). Consequently, Ballantyne’s savages are regarded as undeveloped primitives in need of Western intervention in order to progress. Due to their assumed place at the bottom of the racial ladder, they are infantilised as a result of their ignorance and pitied for their own culture and lack of civilisation by Western standards.

In *The Empire Writes Back*, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin explain the psychiatrist Frantz Fanon’s approach to the sociological and psychological effects of colonisation. The authors state how, according to Fanon, the colonial “discourse is employed as mystification and its resulting power to incorporate and so disarm opposition” (125). When applying these ideas to *The Coral Island*, it becomes apparent how Ballantyne attempts to rationalise both missionary presence and Western intervention through his demonisation and mystification of the native inhabitants. Thus, the author intends to overcome both the opposition among the natives through their eventual internalisation of Western conceptions as well as among fellow Westerners as a result of the now rationalised presence.

In this way, Ballantyne repeatedly asserts the necessity of bringing knowledge and Christianity to these heathen natives. This urge for intervention is symbolically illustrated

through the three British boys' mission of rescuing the native Christian woman Avatea from a forced marriage to a heathen man. The young Britons immediately assume the roles of chivalric knights as the true Christians they are and are determined to prevent this event from being realised (221). By allowing them to succeed in their cause, Ballantyne establishes the positive effects of Western intervention. The story of *The Coral Island* is then concluded by a description of the heathen natives' ultimate conversion to Christianity. In this way, Ballantyne illustrates both the primary stage of colonialism and the invincibility of the British boys and Western culture through the final defeat of native society.

Consequently, the natives' internalisation of the Western perception of themselves is thus realised. As Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin point out in relation to post-colonial societies: "the participants are frozen into a hierarchical relationship in which the oppressed is locked into position by the assumed moral superiority of the dominant group, a superiority which is reinforced when necessary by the use of physical force" (*The Empire Writes Back*, 172). Even though physical force was not used in this context, the natives were conquered by the means of religion and morality. Through their final surrender to Christianity and Western culture, the natives' position as subordinate becomes established.

In *Rule of Darkness*, Patrick Brantlinger quotes Martin Green as follows: "the adventure tales that formed the light reading of Englishmen for two hundred years and more after *Robinson Crusoe* were, in fact, energising the myth of English imperialism" (11). By using emotive language in relation to his portrayal of the natives Ballantyne is encouraging the readers to adopt his subjective views rather than form opinions of their own. As a result, he is reinforcing the myth of English imperialism. Therefore, it is both the imperial ideas conveyed as well as the way these are enforced upon the reader which constitute this novel's controversial contents.

This controversial content has been discussed by many critics over the years. In "The Government of Boys: Golding's *Lord of the Flies* and Ballantyne's *Coral Island*", Minnie

Singh claims *The Coral Island* to have an important role as a pioneering text within the genre of adventure stories for boys, since it was written “*for* boys and *about* boys” (emphases in original; 206). I agree with Singh that the novel can be seen from this perspective. It is an inescapable fact that the novel has influenced writers such as J.M. Barrie and R.L. Stevenson, as Singh mentions: “R.L. Stevenson gratefully acknowledged Ballantyne in the verses that preface *Treasure Island*” (207). Nevertheless, even though it might have been revolutionary for the adventure genre when it was first published, *The Coral Island* is today a text conveying dated ideas. Hence, I would like to claim that its earlier status is no longer a sufficient reason for this novel to be continually classified as a children’s classic.

However, the question is whether Ballantyne’s imperialist message would be considered harmful even today, or whether it should simply be regarded as Frank Kermode suggests, as “a document in the history of ideas” (quoted in “The Representation of the Cannibal in Ballantyne’s *The Coral Island*”, 1). In my opinion, these options do not exclude each other. As have been exemplified in this chapter, *The Coral Island* does not convey any enduring values as should be expected by a novel considered as a classic. Patrick Brantlinger notes that “the retrospective critique of ideology cannot alter or improve upon the past, of course, but perhaps it can help change patterns of domination and racist thought in the present by revealing that the past is, for better or worse, our inheritance” (x-xi). I find this observation to be very accurate. *The Coral Island* is in many ways a racist text, but I would not insist that it for that reason should be excluded from the canon. However, I would like to encourage the reader of this novel to employ critical study rather than unreflective acceptance of the ideas conveyed. In that way, *The Coral Island* can be historicised instead of just being regarded as an exciting children’s classic.

Conclusion

In this essay I have endeavoured to demonstrate in what ways *The Coral Island* contains imperialistic and racist ideas by adopting a post-colonial approach. As a result, I have aimed to interrogate this novel's status as a children's classic and provided textual evidence to support this thesis. Furthermore, I have claimed that rather than being appreciated as a good children's classic, *The Coral Island* should today be historicised. Through his characterisation of the three young British castaways in relation to his portrayal of the native inhabitants of these Pacific islands, Ballantyne communicates the ideology and values of the time: white superiority and the Western 'obligation' to civilise primitive people through Christian conversion.

In the first chapter, I aimed to illustrate which Victorian and imperial ideas and values are present in *The Coral Island*. I also provided an analysis of the qualities of the three main characters and exemplified in what ways they are representative of the Victorian ideals of sensible conduct, good leadership, patriotism and religiousness. In addition, I also endeavoured to illustrate their assumed superiority over nature and their roles as colonisers. My second chapter was focused on Ballantyne's stereotypical portrayal of the natives as primitive and ignorant savages. In this chapter, I also exemplified how the author attempts to promote Western intervention through missionary work, ideas which are endorsed through his exaggerated descriptions of the natives' savagery.

As a result of the textual evidence provided in these two chapters, I would like to maintain my claim that *The Coral Island* should not be taught or regarded as a children's classic but should instead be considered as a text conveying historical ideas and values. Thus, the reading of this novel should be accompanied by a critical scepticism towards the message that is conveyed together with an awareness of the presence of ideology.

Bibliography

Primary Source:

Ballantyne, R.M, *The Coral Island*, London: Wordsworth Editions, 1993.

Secondary Sources:

Ashcroft, Bill, Griffiths, Gareth, Tiffin, Helen, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures*, London: Routledge, 1989.

Birch, Dinah, *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Boehmer, Elleke, *Colonial & Postcolonial Literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Brantlinger, Patrick, *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830-1914*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988.

Bristow, Joseph, *Empire Boys: Adventures in Man's World*, London: Harper Collins Academic, 1991

“classic”, *OED Online*. November 2010. Oxford University Press. 12 Mars 2012.

<<http://dictionary.oed.com/>>.

Dutheil, H. Martine, “The Representation of the Cannibal in Ballantyne’s *The Coral Island*. Colonial Anxieties in Victorian Popular Fiction” *College Literature* 28.1(2001): 105-122.

Hannabus, Stuart, “Ballantyne’s Message of Empire” *Imperialism and Juvenile Literature*, edited by Richards, Jeffrey. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989. 54-65.

Hollindale, Peter, “Ideology and the Children's Book” *Literature for Children: Contemporary Criticism*, edited by Hunt, Peter. London: Routledge, 1992.19-40.

McCulloch, Fiona, ““The Broken Telescope”: Misrepresentation in *The Coral Island*” *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 25.3 (2000): 137-145.

- Mukherjee, Ankhi ““What is a Classic?”: International Literary Criticism and the Classic Question” *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 125. 4 (2010): 1026-1042.
- Rigby, Nigel, “Sober Cannibals and Drunken Christians: Colonial Encounters of the Cannibal Kind” *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* (1992): 171-182.
- Said, W. Edward, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, London: Penguin, 1995
- Singh, Minnie, “The Government of Boys: Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* and Ballantyne’s *Coral Island*” *Children’s Literature: Annual of The Modern Language Association Division on Children’s Literature and The Children’s Literature Association* 25 (1997): 205-213.
- Street, Brian V, *The Savage in Literature: Representations of ‘Primitive’ Society in English Fiction 1858-1920*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975.
- Webb, Jessica, “Corrupting Boyhood in Didactic Children’s Literature: Marryat, Ballantyne and Kingsley” *Atenea* 27. 2 (2007): 81-93.