



Robert Louis Stevenson's  
*Treasure Island*

Questions for Socratic Discussion  
by Missy Andrews



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## QUICK CARD



<b><i>Reference</i></b>	<i>Treasure Island</i> by Robert Louis Stevenson ISBN- 10: 0486275590 ISBN-13: 978-0486275598
<b><i>Plot</i></b>	When a mutinous pirate band descend on the Admiral Benbow Inn, young Jim Hawkins is swept up in a search for hidden treasure. The quest takes him and his friends across the Caribbean to Treasure Island, where they engage in a desperate struggle with scheming pirates.
<b><i>Setting</i></b>	Late 1700's. Coastal England near Bristol. The Admiral Benbow Inn. The Caribbean Sea and Skeleton Island. Jim's boyhood.
<b><i>Characters</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Jim Hawkins, a young boy (protagonist)</li><li>• Squire Trelawney, a magistrate and Jim's ally</li><li>• Dr. Livesey, a constable and Jim's friend</li><li>• Billy Bones, and old pirate who lodges at the Admiral Benbow Inn</li><li>• Long John Silver, an old pirate and the story's prime antagonist</li><li>• Various other pirates: Pew, Israel Hands, Captain Flint, Ben Gunn, etc.</li></ul>
<b><i>Conflict</i></b>	Man vs. Man Man vs. Himself
<b><i>Theme</i></b>	Lost innocence Deception (the difference between appearances and reality) Adventure The journey motif The nature of evil Avarice as the root of evil

## QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: SETTING



### **Does the story happen in one spot, or does the action unfold across a wide area? (1c)**

The story begins at the Admiral Benbow Inn, in coastal England somewhere near Bristol. From there, it ranges from the Old Anchor Inn in Bristol, to a “distant” Caribbean island, the exact location of which is intentionally withheld, but which is called both Skeleton Island and Treasure Island. This must lie somewhere near Mexico since the company lands on an island inhabited by Mexican Indians 24 hours after their departure from the island.

### **What is the mood or atmosphere of the place where the story happens? (1d)**

Initially, the atmosphere is bleak and lonely. The main character’s family is in difficult financial straits, and these are worsened when the father becomes ill. The presence of a treacherous pirate at the Admiral Benbow Inn casts a portentous cloud over all. Following the death of this character and the discovery of a treasure map he kept among his things, the mood changes. While still beset by dangers and skullduggery, the skies turn sunny for sea adventure, belying the storms to come.

### **Is the setting a real or imaginary place? If it’s imaginary, is it subject to the same physical laws as our world is? (1g)**

While the English place names are real enough, the island described is fictitious.

### **Among what kinds of people is the story set? What is their economic class? How do they live? (1h)**

The story is set among pirates, of course! These antagonists are most responsible for the atmosphere of the story. They are bloodthirsty cutthroats, bent on gold and not troubled much by issues of morality and law. Held in check only by the promise of riches and the charismatic leadership of their mutinous captain Long John Silver, their pent up, malignant energy puts wind in the sails of the plot.

### **How long a period does the story cover? (2b)**

The story covers a period of months. It takes place in the 1700s and begins in the month of January.

**In what time of life for the main characters do the events occur? Are they children? Are they passing into adulthood? Does setting the story in this particular time of the characters' lives make the story better? How? (2e)**

The story takes place in the boyhood of the main character. Were it set in his adulthood, the narrative would have proven less sunny, less adventurous, and less believable. In addition, the naiveté of youth creates conflict between trusting Jim and manipulative Silver.

**In what intellectual (or historical) period is the story set? (2f)**

Historically speaking, the story takes place in the period of maritime warfare and piracy that stretched from the mid 1500s to the late 1700s. The exact dates of the story are not given. Readers are told only that the story takes place in the “year of our Lord 17--.”

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## QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CHARACTERS



### **Who is the story about? (Protagonist)**

Protagonists in the story include the following:

Jim Hawkins (Main Character) – a pre-adolescent boy robbed of his father and his livelihood by the pirate Bones. Jim goes on a high seas adventure in search of the buried treasure Bones left behind. The story chronicles both this quest and the journey to manhood that it entails.

Admiral Trelawney – a local magistrate in Jim’s community.

Dr. Livesey – a local constable for Hawkins’s community who is also Jim’s family doctor and friend.

Captain Alexander Smollet – honest captain of the ship Hispaniola.

Billy Bones – the old pirate (whom Jim calls “the captain”) who resides for a time at the Old Benbow Inn. It is from Billy Bones that Jim gains possession of Flint’s map and learns first to fear the one-legged man.

Tom Redruth – an old servant of Trelawney’s.

Abraham Gray – an honest sailor who refuses to mutiny.

Ben Gunn – a marooned pirate and one-time mate of captain Flint who figures prominently in the resolution of the story’s conflict.

### **Questions about Jim Hawkins (protagonist):**

#### **Make up a list of adjectives that describe the character. (3f)**

In terms of character qualities and disposition, Jim is a typical young boy. He is impetuous, adventure seeking, and naïve. He has ultimate faith in his own ability and decision making, but is crippled by short-sightedness. Honest and loyal, Jim is never tempted to join Silver in his acts of piracy, not even to save his own skin. However, his childish nature leaves him trusting and susceptible to the manipulations of others.

**Of what nationality is the main character? (3g)**

Jim is English.

**What does the main character do for a living? (3h)**

He is the son of a poor innkeeper's wife. His father dies early in the story, leaving him the man of the house. This position leaves him responsible for his mother's financial stability and adds purpose to the treasure hunt.

**What does the character say about himself to other people? (3j)**

In retrospect, Jim recognizes his own character flaws and writes of them. He sees his own immaturity, short-sightedness, and insensitivity to others, especially in light of his island escapades.

**What do other characters think or say about him? (3k)**

Silver sees himself in the boy.

**Is the character a member of any particular religious or social group? (3l)**

The character belongs to a group of upright men who include the Doctor, Trelawney, and Captain Smollett. Touched by a lust for adventure, they take to the sea in search of buried treasure. They plan to split their findings.

**What does the character think is the most important thing in life? (3m)**

In terms of the plot itself, Jim wants to find Flint's treasure. However, as the story progresses, Jim comes to value the integrity of his own actions above all else.

**How does the personality of the character reflect the values of the society (or individual) that produced the story? (3o)**

This veneration of upright conduct is indicative of the 19th c. British gentleman.

**Is the character a type or archetype? Is he an "everyman" with whom the reader is meant to identify? (3p)**

The character is an archetype of pre-adolescent boyhood. His struggles, while much larger and more romantic than the average child's, reveal the innocence, dependence, and spirit of his age group.



**Is the character a “sympathetic character?” Do you identify with him and hope that he will succeed? Do you pity him? Why? (3q)**

Not only the character’s family circumstances but also his trusting nature make Jim a sympathetic character. The foolishness of his behavior in no way lessens this since most readers can identify with the naïvely adventuresome spirit of youth. Though many of his actions are thoughtless and misguided, they stem not from evil intentions but childishness.

**Who else is the story about?**

Antagonists in this story include:

Long John Silver (Main Character) – Leader of the pirate band and one-time mate of Flint. Now he’s under cover as the ship’s cook on Jim’s voyage. Although he has but one leg, Jim is sure that this agreeable fellow couldn’t be the pirate that Bones feared.

Israel Hands – a mutinous pirate aboard the Hispaniola whose treachery nearly kills Jim.

Pew – an old blind pirate who slips Billy Bones the Black Spot.

Captain Flint – feared in life and death, he is the pirate captain whose treasure they all seek.

Job Anderson – a violent pirate aboard the Hispaniola.

**Questions about Long John Silver (antagonist):**

**How does the author’s description of the character inform you of his antagonism? Does he have any physical attributes or personality traits that mark him as antagonistic? (4e)**

A colorful character, Silver is described as a peg legged man who carries a crutch. A pet parrot sits upon his shoulder. The text describes him as intelligent, clean, good natured and of a pleasant temperament. Beneath his benign appearance, however, Silver remains calculating and ruthless. His only concerns are his own objectives and interests. Consequently, his antagonism towards Jim and the others isn’t at all personal. He seeks the same treasure they desire and counts them his enemies as long as they stand in the way of it. However, when his desire changes, he counts them once again his mates. He is amoral, unmoved by pity, fear, or innocence. This absence of a moral compass makes him the epitome of evil, an equivocating ruffian. Silver illustrates the consequences of denying an external source of law. He is, in fact, the ultimate embodiment of any good natured man who fails to acknowledge authority.

**Is the character reprehensible, so that none would wish to be like him? (4g)**

On the surface, Silver is not reprehensible; rather, he is a charismatic personality. This makes him all the more dangerous. It is only an inner knowledge of Silver that makes him despicable.

**How do the character’s words and actions affect those around him? (4h)**

Silver has ability to control the thoughts and actions of his crew. His intelligence and strength of personality make him a master manipulator.

**Does his presence corrupt? (4i)**

Indeed, Silver’s presence has the power to corrupt some.

**Is the character strangely attractive? Does he draw others into his wicked sensibilities? (4j)**

He is strangely attractive. His personality, on the surface, is kind and charming. He convinces not only young Jim, but also the doctor and Trelawney of his goodness. Even the captain is taken in by his behavior. He corrupts many an honest mate on board the ship. However, when his charm fails to produce its desired effect, he turns quickly to force and violence.

**Is the antagonist truly evil by definition? (4m)**

The antagonist is truly evil, by definition. He has so strayed from goodness as to have entirely lost his moral compass. Instead he equates goodness with what best serves him at any given moment.

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## QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CONFLICT AND PLOT



### **What does the protagonist want? Does the protagonist try to capture an object? (5a,d)**

Driven by both his family's financial want and his own boyish yen for adventure, Jim wants to discover Flint's treasure.

### **Does he attempt to overcome something – a physical impediment or an emotional handicap? (5b)**

His main impediment is his own youthful naïveté. Like most children, he is idealistic, trusting, and arrogant. He lacks life content and wisdom. These are not defects in childhood, but earmarks of it. It is this element that makes us remember childhood wistfully, and makes adults fiercely protective of children. However, Jim's childhood necessarily must come to an end, and he must learn to protect himself. This is a man vs. himself conflict involving discernment.

### **Does he strive to overcome something outside himself? (5c)**

Not only must he cross vast seas to reach his destination, but he must also leap over the menacing pirates aboard his ship who wish to find the treasure for themselves. This is a man vs. man conflict.

### **Do his objectives change throughout the story? (5f)**

By the story's climax, Jim is less concerned with finding the treasure than he is with saving both his life and the lives of the honest men in his company from the vicious pirates. At various points, this engenders different short term objectives including obtaining a ship, remaining hidden, and reaching shore unharmed. Additional objectives include securing the doctor and Trelawney's good faith in him after his impulsive abandonment of the group without explanation.

### **Why can't the protagonist have what he wants? (6)**

Jim is kept from the treasure by the brigands as a whole. He is challenged in his quest for the ship by Israel Hands. He is badly esteemed by his friends, for a time, because of his own foolishness.

### **What other problems are there in the story? Are there other things in the story (people, responsibilities, etc) that distract the main characters from their goals? (7a)**

Trelawney's loose lips prove a hindrance to their trip. Also, Jim's relationship with Silver delays his discovery of Silver's true character. He finds it hard to believe, even when

hearing it with his own ears, that Silver has dealt doubly with him. This conflict is short lived, however, as Jim witnesses the self-serving and malicious cruelty of Silver in specific incidents on shore.

### **What happens in the story? (8)**

The story begins at the Admiral Benbow Inn, located in a seaside village in southern England. Protagonist Jim Hawkins is the young son of the inn's owners. One day Jim meets an old drunken seaman named Billy Bones, who becomes a lodger at the inn and warns Jim to beware of a seafaring man with one wooden leg.

Billy Bones is soon visited by a mysterious sailor named Black Dog. Bones and Black Dog get into a fight, during which Black Dog flees and Bones suffers a stroke. While Jim cares for him, Bones confesses that he was once the mate of the late notorious pirate, Captain Flint, and that Flint's old crewmates are searching for Bones' sea chest.

Later, a blind pirate named Pew (who also belonged to Flint's crew) appears at the inn and forces Jim to lead him to Bones. Pew gives Bones "the Black Spot," a warning that he has been marked for execution by the pirates at ten o'clock that evening. Billy Bones drops dead of shock at the sight of the Black Spot. Jim and his mother open Bones' sea chest to collect the money due for his unpaid lodging expenses, but they are interrupted by the pirates storming the inn. Hurriedly, they grab whatever they can from the chest, including a mysterious oilskin packet, and flee the inn.

Led by Pew, the pirates find the sea chest but are enraged that the oilskin packet (what they call "Flint's fist") is missing. Just then local authorities approach the inn, causing the pirates to flee. All escape except Pew, who is run down in the road and killed by the magistrates' horses.

Jim shows the oilskin to two trusted friends, Dr. Livesey and Squire Trelawney, who discover that it contains an account of Captain Flint's piratical career and a map of the island where he has buried his treasure. The three immediately make plans for an expedition to recover the treasure: they buy a sailing ship called the "*Hispaniola*," hire Smollett as captain and Long John Silver as cook, and put Silver in charge of hiring the rest of the crew. Jim is alarmed to find that Silver has one wooden leg, like the sailor Billy Bones warned him of. Unbeknownst to Jim and his friends, Silver hires most of Flint's old pirate crew to man the *Hispaniola*.

During the voyage, Jim overhears Silver and the other crewmen planning a mutiny. Jim discovers that Silver was Captain Flint's quartermaster and that many of the crew were also Flint's men. They plan to steal the treasure and murder the ship's officers.

When the *Hispaniola* arrives at Treasure Island, Jim goes ashore with Silver and his men. He runs away from them after he sees Silver murder a crewman loyal to Captain Smollett. Jim encounters Benn Gunn, a pirate marooned by Flint several years before. Meanwhile, Trelawney, Livesey, and their men take up a defensive position in an abandoned stockade on the island. The pirates assault the stockade, touching off a bloody battle in which both sides suffer casualties, but the pirates are forced to retreat.

Later that night, Jim sneaks out of the stockade and rows to the *Hispaniola*. He cuts the anchor cable and sets the ship adrift. Boarding the ship, he finds one pirate dead and another, Israel Hands, badly wounded. Hands tries to murder Jim, but Jim escapes into the ship's rigging and eventually shoots Hands dead. Jim then beaches the *Hispaniola* and returns to the stockade, where he is surprised to find that the pirates have taken over. Jim is captured and held hostage by Silver, whose control over the mutinous crew is growing weaker by the hour. Silver regains control of the gang by producing the treasure map and leading his men to the place where Flint's treasure was buried. To everyone's surprise, the cache has already been excavated and all the treasure is gone. The enraged pirates turn on Silver and Jim, but are immediately set upon by Dr. Livesey and his men, who kill two and scatter the rest. Silver surrenders and promises to mend his ways.

The party travels to Benn Gunn's cave, where Gunn has hidden the treasure. They divide it among Trelawney and the loyal crew and return to England, marooning the surviving pirates in the process. On the journey home, Silver escapes with part of the treasure and is never seen again.

Jim returns to the Admiral Benbow, where he pursues a quiet life, having had his fill of adventure.

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# QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: THEME



## **What does the protagonist learn? (11)**

Jim learns that charm is deceitful and some people are, too. He learns that kind manners and charisma are often subterfuge for malevolent schemes and self-seeking, donned for the purpose of manipulation. He learns to be suspicious instead of trusting.

## **Is the protagonist sacrificed in some way? (11d)**

In a sense, Jim's innocence is sacrificed in the process of gaining this knowledge. Never again will he fail to consider the possible aims of others. Never will he intuitively trust in the kindness of others. This loss of innocence represents Jim's passage from child to man in this coming of age story.

## **What is the main idea of the story? (13)**

Universal themes in the story include:

- Loss of innocence
- Coming of Age
- The Nature of Evil
- Appearances vs. Reality
- The Journey (a motif)
- Avarice as the root of all kinds of evil

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## QUESTIONS ABOUT STYLE



### *Allusion*

**Does the author refer to other works of literature, historical events, works of art, or well-known ideas in his work? (17f)**

Many allusions are made to legendary pirates and their crews. These all serve to underscore the evil nature and violent end of pirates. In addition, some reference is made to famous maritime battles and ships.

- Pirates Kidd, Blackbeard, Davis, England, and Roberts were all historical persons.
- Israel Hands was a historical person and a crew member of the infamous pirate Blackbeard.
- The *Cassandra* was a real ship.
- Flint himself was a historic person who died in Savannah in 1733.

### *Foreshadowing*

**Does the author provide any clues early in the story of things to come in the plot? (17a)**

Early in the story when Jim is still at home at the Admiral Benbow, Billy Bones warns him to watch for a one-legged man:

“He had taken me aside one day, and promised me a silver fourpenny on the first of every month, if I would only keep my ‘weather-eye open for a seafaring man with one leg,’ and let him know the moment he appeared” (p.2).

Later Jim admits misgivings at reading Trelawney’s report of hiring a one-legged sailor as cook of the Hispaniola:

“Now, to tell you the truth, from the very first mention of Long John in Squire Trelawney’s letter, I had taken a fear in my mind that he might prove to be the very one-legged sailor whom I had watched for so long at the old “Benbow” (p.33).

However, his mental image of this fearsome sailor fails to match the real figure of Silver. Consequently, Jim dismisses his qualms:

“I thought I knew what a buccaneer was like—a very different creature, according to me, from this clean and pleasant-tempered landlord” (p.33).

Even so, readers continue to suspect the manipulative sailor for all his obsequious behavior with Jim and the Squire. When Silver leads the crew in the familiar song of Bones' as the company weighs anchor, Jim should have doubted their honesty by association.

The fact that Black Dog, another pirate from the Benbow experience, was present in Silver's inn and was known to fraternize with the wicked pirate Pew furthers readers' suspicions. Captain Smollet's feelings about the crew deepen the doubts, as does Silver's parrot's name: Captain Flint. In addition, both his familiarity with pirate battles and the reckonings of the pirate island leave him suspect. While all these matters fail to forewarn Jim, they foreshadow the approaching action of the story.

Jim's acquaintance with Ben Gunn also provides foreshadowing. Gunn's seemingly crazed words and strange behavior cloud Jim's perception of their meaning.

"Well, you just put your trust in Ben Gunn- Ben Gunn's the man to do it" (p.65).

"And Jim...I'm rich" (p.65).

These comments foreshadow the climax of the story when Gunn has his little vengeful joke on the pirates, scaring them silly and robbing them of their treasure.

### **Do characters utter statements that appear ironic in retrospect after action occurs? (17c)**

"15 men on a dead man's chest..." The pirates' song serves both to indicate the presence of pirates throughout the story, and to foreshadow their fateful end. Consequently, the irony of the line "with one man of her crew alive what put to sail with 75..." becomes apparent in the last page of Jim's summary of his narrative.

### **Other instances of foreshadowing include the following:**

-Jim describes his taking "French leave" to search for Gunn's coracle as folly. This foreshadows the danger in which he places himself during this adventure.

-Israel Hands' contrived excuse to rid himself of Jim long enough to obtain a knife was accompanied by foreshadowing (p.109). Even Jim caught this. Unfortunately, he failed to weigh the full measure of Hands' depravity.

-Finally, the Doctor's warning to Silver to "look out for squalls when you find it" (p.133) foretells the empty hole at the treasure site.



***Symbolism***

Minor instances of symbolism occur in the text: the use of the Jolly Roger, the pirate flag, and again the use of the black spot, an indication of pirate mutiny and coming death for a captain. These don't carry any deep metaphorical meaning. Likewise, the pirates' song, so often repeated during the story, indicates the presence of pirates. Furthermore, the pirates' name for the island, Skeleton Island, betrays the evil that's been done there in the past and that awaits the crew upon landing.

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## QUESTIONS ABOUT CONTEXT



### Who is the author? (18)

Robert Louis Balfour Stevenson was the only child of a civil engineer and a preacher's daughter. He grew up in Edinburgh, Scotland in the late 1800s, but spent much time in the southern portions of Europe seeking warmer climates. Always sickly, he experienced many childhood respiratory illnesses, and later as an adult suffered tuberculosis. As a result, he spent much time reading. His father, a civil engineer who designed lighthouses, hoped Stevenson would become an engineer. When Robert failed to show interest in this, his father urged him towards a career in law. Although Stevenson passed his bar exam, he never practiced law. Instead, he turned his attention to writing. First, he published book reviews in magazines. Later, he began writing stories and verse.

In 1880, he met and married a divorcee, Fanny Vandergrift Osbourne. It was while on a family vacation with her that he was inspired to write *Treasure Island*. The idea for the story came by way of a watercolor map that his step-son created on a family vacation. Stevenson called it "Treasure Island," and immediately began spinning yarns about this imaginary place. These stories he committed to paper at his step-son's urging, sharing them with his family. After he'd written a few chapters, he sold the story to a magazine friend of his, who published the story in monthly installments under the title, *The Sea Cook or Treasure Island*. When the story was complete, Stevenson published the story in book form. He captivated the imagination of the nation and earned his place among the famous fiction writers of his day. Other stories were quick to follow in the subsequent eight years. These included such favorites as *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, *Kidnapped*, and *The Black Arrow*.

Stevenson credited Washington Irving and Edgar Allan Poe as influences upon his work. He additionally named a publishing friend of his, William Henley, as the inspiration for his famed character Long John Silver, adding quickly that he'd removed all his friend's good moral qualities from his literary likeness.

Stevenson traveled a great deal during his lifetime, usually in search of a climate more suitable for his health. In 1888 he moved to Samoa where he continued his prolific and energetic writing career until the day of his death. Ironically, it was neither tuberculosis nor respiratory infection, but a severe brain hemorrhage that ended his life at the age of 44.

## STORY CHARTS

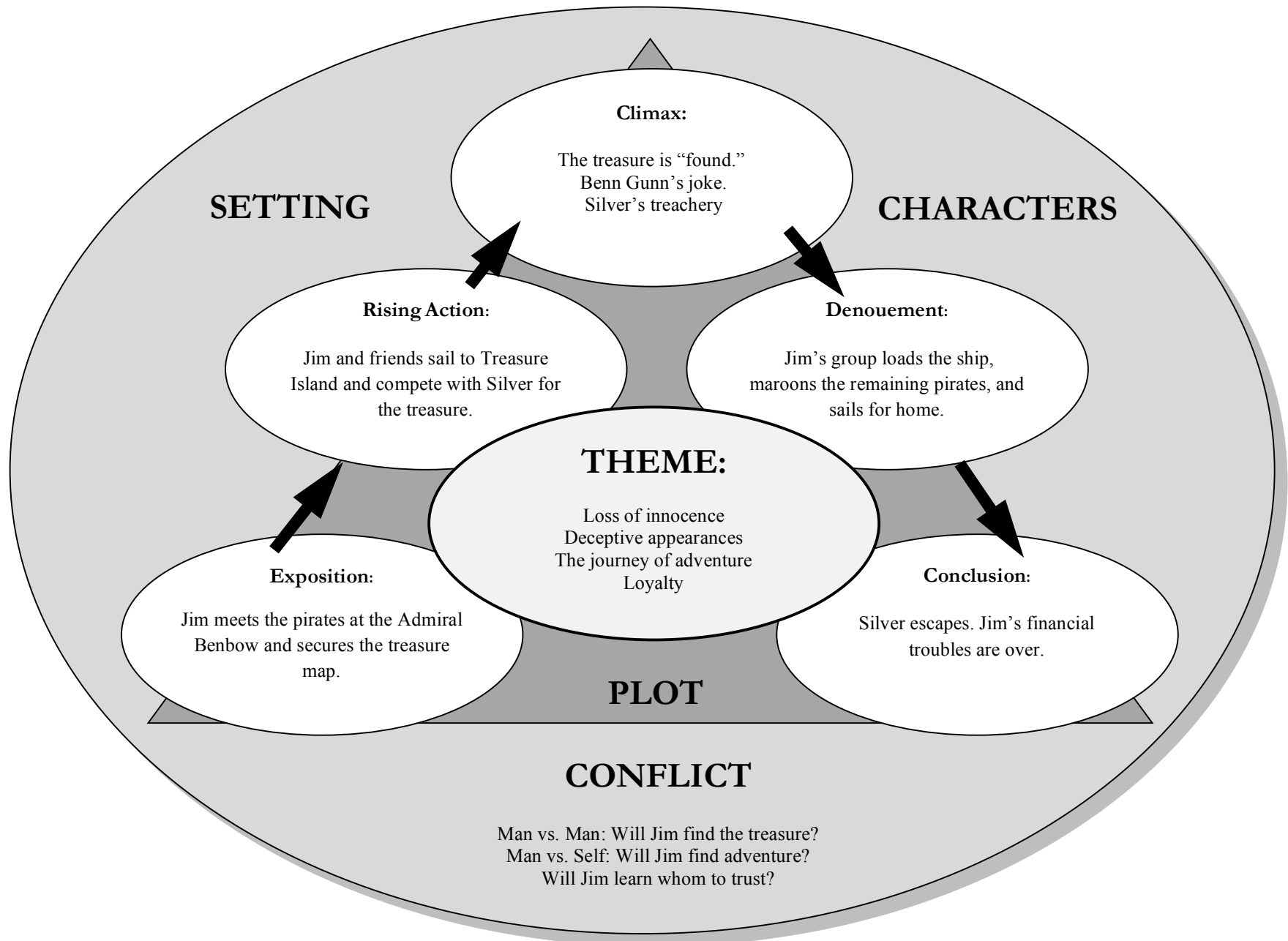


The following pages contain story charts of the type presented in the live seminar *Teaching the Classics*. As is made clear in that seminar, a separate story chart may be constructed for each of the conflicts present in a work of fiction. In particular, the reader's decision as to the *climax* and central *themes* of the plot structure will depend upon his understanding of the story's central *conflict*. As a result, though the details of setting, characters, exposition, and conclusion may be identical from analysis to analysis, significant variation may be found in those components which appear down the center of the story chart: Conflict, Climax, and Theme. This of course results from the fact that literary interpretation is the work of active minds, and differences of opinion are to be expected – even encouraged!

For the teacher's information, one story chart has been filled in on the next page. In addition, a blank chart is included to allow the teacher to examine different conflicts in the same format.



# Treasure Island by Robert Louis Stevenson: Story Chart



***Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson: Blank Story Chart**

