

“My Timber Leg”—Long John Silver’s Crutch in Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island*

Treasure Island's (1883) pirate leader Long John Silver has one leg and uses a crutch, and yet, both Silver's disability and crutch are barely acknowledged or discussed in most of the criticism on Robert Louis Stevenson's adventure novel. I argue that the representation of Silver often challenges stereotypes about disability and complicates Victorian conceptions of prosthetics. For much of the novel, Silver is active, strong, mobile, and dexterous, moving at one point like a “trained gymnast”; he doesn't resemble Simi Linton's list of stereotypes of disabled persons as “dependent, childlike, passive, sensitive, and miserable.” His crutch, too, differs from other Victorian prosthetics. Erin O'Conner shows how the Victorians connected loss of limb and loss of masculinity; artificial limbs were seen to restore that loss. But Silver opts for a crutch (nicknamed his “timber leg”), not an artificial leg. His stump is immediately visible to others, and yet Silver remains both masculine and “sexually vigorous,” to use critic Leslie Fielder's words. Importantly, Silver is always in complete control of his crutch; a syntactic analysis reveals that he is always the agent moving and using the crutch. Conversely, in Victorian literature, wheelchairs sometimes seem to move of their own volition, carrying their occupants. Herbert Sussman and Gerhard Joseph's analysis of Charles Dickens's fiction reveals how some prosthetics start to strangely run themselves. Additionally, I argue that Silver's crutch not only serves as a mobility aid but also as a pirate aid—it helps him fuse with the movements of the rolling ship and becomes a deadly weapon to kill a noncompliant seaman. Towards the novel's end, however, Silver struggles to keep up with the able-bodied men. I argue that the novel, instead of suggesting that Silver's disability has finally doomed him, reveals the tenuousness of able-bodiedness, as other characters quickly become sick, insane, or otherwise incapacitated. Ultimately, *Treasure Island* rejects the conventional paradigm, presented in David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder's *Narrative Prosthesis*, that disabled characters tend to be cured or eradicated by story's end—Silver, still a disabled man, lives and escapes. In conclusion, this paper uses disability studies to add to the robust critical conversation about Silver's complicated, hybrid, and changeable identity.