Castaways and Conquerors: Exposing American Imperialism in Jules Verne's *The Mysterious Island*

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Abstract

At first glance, Jules Verne's *The Mysterious Island* seems like a simple adventure story, but a deeper examination reveals how it embodies the ideas prevalent in nineteenth-century America. Focusing on postcolonial and Marxist angles, this article reveals how the castaways' supposedly perfect society on a deserted isle reproduces processes of colonial expropriation and capitalist appropriation. The absence of Indigenous peoples, the transformation of the island's landscape, and the collective approach to labor highlight the novel's engagement with imperial and economic concerns. Additionally, Captain Nemo's intricate role—opposing colonial rule while also validating and testing the castaways—underscores the narrative's internal tensions. Ultimately, the essay contends that *The Mysterious Island* offers a commentary on American identity, emphasizing how it intertwines with expansionist aims and capitalist ideologies, and prompting readers to reconsider what "progress" meant to nineteenth-century audiences.

Keywords: The Mysterious Island, Post-Colonialism, Marxism, , American Studies, Imperialism

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1. Introduction: Entering Verne's Archipelago of Ideas

Jules Verne's *The Mysterious Island* (published in French as *L'Île mystérieuse* in 1874) occupies a unique position within his oeuvre. Often grouped with *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas* and *In Search of the Castaways* as part of the "Voyages extraordinaires," the novel captivates readers with its tales of ingenious science, daring exploration, and human triumph over adversity. Yet, *The Mysterious Island* is more than just an adventure story; it is deeply intertwined with the intellectual currents of its time. The mid-to-late 19th century, a period Eric Hobsbawm describes as the age of capital, witnessed the rise of European colonialism, the burgeoning of industrial capitalism, and fervent debates surrounding class, labor, and the concept of 'progress' (Hobsbawm 9). While Verne enjoyed immense popularity and seemingly celebrated scientific advancement and imperial expansion, recent scholarship has unveiled deeper layers within his writing. As William Butcher observes in *Jules Verne: The Definitive Biography*, Verne's novels, despite their adventure-driven plots, 'engage with complex themes of colonialism, capitalism, and identity,' revealing a more nuanced perspective than previously acknowledged.*The Mysterious Island* can be also read simultaneously as an ode to scientific ingenuity and as a subtle, perhaps even unconscious, commentary on the ways in which colonialism and capitalism shaped contemporary perceptions of the world.

The narrative follows five castaways—Cyrus Smith (an engineer), Gideon Spilett (a journalist), Pencroff (a sailor), young Herbert Brown, and Neb (a former slave)—who find themselves stranded on an uncharted Pacific island after their balloon crashes during the American Civil War. Through their collective skills and resourcefulness, they transform the wilderness into a thriving settlement. They also encounter Ayrton, a character seeking redemption from Verne's earlier novel *In Search of the Castaways*, and discover that their

mysterious benefactor is Captain Nemo, an Indian prince dispossessed by British colonizers (a figure who links back to *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas*).

To fully grasp the multifaceted nature of *The Mysterious Island*, this essay examines the novel through post-colonial and Marxist lenses. We will analyze how the conspicuous absence of indigenous inhabitants reflects a colonial mindset, and how the castaways' treatment of their newfound home either reinforces or challenges prevailing 19th-century notions of "civilizing" the "other." We will also explore the significance of Captain Nemo as a figure of anti-colonial resistance, and how his presence complicates the novel's colonial subtext. Subsequently, we will adopt a Marxist perspective to investigate the novel's portrayal of labor, production, and power dynamics among the castaways. Ultimately, we will synthesize these theoretical frameworks to demonstrate how *The Mysterious Island* intertwines colonialist ideologies and capitalist ambitions under the guise of "progress". The impetus for post-colonial critiquecan be traced to Edward Said's groundbreaking *Orientalism* (1978), which exposed how Western literature participated in the construction of colonial discourses. Meanwhile, Marxist readings of literature find a major impetus in the works of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and later critics such as Terry Eagleton and Fredric Jameson, who connected textual form and narrative content with underlying economic and class struggles. To demonstrate the synergy between these theoretical approaches, we will analyze specific passages from *The Mysterious Island*, noting how they exemplify or complicate post-colonial and Marxist critiques.

In her analysis of Jules Verne's *The Mysterious Island*, Gretchen Murphy highlights a problematic aspect of the novel's colonial narrative. "A key challenge is that *The Mysterious Island* rarely depicts direct confrontation with an Indigenous population," she writes. "Rather, Verne's castaways encounter an island they presume to be empty (or nearly so) of inhabitants, thereby facilitating their claim to ownership and exploitation" (Murphy 150). This lack of

indigenous folks makes the colonizers' actions seem simpler and wipes away the moral issues of their takeover. Yet, as many post-colonial scholars observe, the absence of explicit colonial violence or indigenous resistance is itself an ideological gesture—one that normalizes the travelers' appropriation of territory (Said 1993). Similarly, the novel's glorification of technological prowess might betray a certain endorsement of bourgeois capitalist values, in which the unfettered application of scientific know-how transforms nature into wealth, reflecting the illusions of a self-sufficient utopia. This idea resonates with critiques of how colonial narratives often present colonized lands as "empty" or "underutilized," thus justifying their exploitation (Spivak 1988).In essence, *The Mysterious Island* is not merely an escapist adventure novel: it is a microcosm for analyzing how empire, labor, and the promise of "civilization" underwrite the 19th-century imagination. The castaways perceive themselves as benign conquerors—"castaways and conquerors," so to speak—who bring order and productivity to the wilderness. Meanwhile, Captain Nemo's haunting presence attests to a darker side: the victim of Britain's colonial oppression, Nemo ironically aids these men who replicate, in miniature, the very processes by which colonial societies are forged.

We begin with a post-colonial analysis, examining how the narrative addresses (or obscures) the island's original inhabitants, how it frames the castaways' arrival and exploitation of resources, and how Nemo's backstory adds layers of complexity to the book's colonial undertones. Next, we adopt a Marxist lens to scrutinize the novel's depiction of labor, class relations within the castaways' newfound society, the role of technology in production, and the subtle politics of resource control. By synthesizing these perspectives, we will illuminate how *The MysteriousIsland* reflects the intertwined ideologies of empire and capitalism, while also acknowledging elements that resist easy categorization, thereby

complicating any simplistic assertion that Verne wholeheartedly endorsed imperial expansion.

2. Post-Colonial Analysis: The Island as a Space of Imperial Projection

2.1 The Island's Indigenous Inhabitants: Absence, Erasure, and Silent Justification

The Mysterious Island is notable for its lack of indigenous presence. Shortly after the survivors land on the island in their balloon, they effectively claim ownership by christening it "Lincoln Island" in honor of U.S. President Abraham Lincoln (Verne 22). This act of naming evokes historical colonial practices—such as Columbus's bestowal of Spanish or Christian names upon Caribbean islands—which, as Edward Said observes, serve as a form of "textual appropriation" aimed at justifying the colonizers' claims (Said 88). By imposing their own nomenclature, the castaways erase any prior identity the island may have possessed: "And thus, in the presence of these men of good will and resolute hearts, an unknown island took its place in the world by receiving the name of 'Lincoln Island'..." (Verne 2). While the text frames this act as patriotic and a tribute to Lincoln's values, it simultaneously suggests an act of appropriation consistent with colonial naming practices.

Although Verne does not explicitly state that indigenous peoples inhabited the island, he scatters subtle hints (such as the presence of certain cultivated plants and semi-feral goats, suggestive of prior human contact) that allude to earlier inhabitation (Verne 46). However, the novel's central focus is on normalizing the castaways' unchallenged dominion. Post-colonial scholars have analyzed how colonial discourse often relies on the notion of *terra nullius*, or "empty land," to legitimize settlement. Homi K. Bhabha's work, for instance, examines how colonial discourse constructs the colonized subject as a "degenerate type" to justify conquest and establish systems of power, a process that often involves denying or erasing the pre-existing presence of indigenous populations: "The objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonized as a population of degeneratetypes on the basis of racial

origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction" (Bhabha,101).He later adds, "The construction of the colonial subject in discourse, and the exercise of colonial power through discourse, demands an articulation of forms of difference—racial[2] and cultural." (Bhabha, 102).The castaways' discovery that "no savage footstep" exists reinforces their belief that the island is theirs by default. The text portrays their presence as beneficial, introducing "agriculture, domestic animals, and rational organization" to an otherwise "wild" location (Verne 61). Albert Memmi also argues that colonial rhetoric "frequently depicts the colonizer as a bringer of civilization, thereby denigrating existing or potential indigenous cultures that remain unseen or undervalued" (Memmi 81). *The Mysterious Island* participates in a more subtle version of the same narrative by emphasizing the castaways' industriousness and productivity as a moral justification for their settlement.

2.2 The Castaways' Mindset: Civilizing Mission or Pragmatic Settlement?

Though the castaways in the novel are not official agents of a colonial empire—indeed, they are Americans thrown off course—they nonetheless exhibit many of the attitudes characteristic of 19th-century European (and American) perspectives on foreign lands. They systematically exploit the island's resources, from constructing their dwelling in "Granite House" to forging iron, brick, and glass, effectively domesticating the landscape. There is an unspoken assumption that their presence is justified because they can "improve" the territory. Gideon Spilett remarks that the group "had effected a miracle of industry, which seemed to justify the presence of men upon the most ungrateful soil" (Verne 79). The word "justify" is telling here.It suggests an underlying belief that the land acquires moral or natural value only once it has been shaped by rational labor, an idea deeply resonant with John Locke's assertion in his *Second Treatise of Government* that "Whatsoever then he removes out of the State that Nature hath provided, and left it in, he hath mixed his *Labour* with, and

joyned to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his *Property*" (Locke 287-8). This labor theory of property was historically invoked to rationalize colonial claims.Implicit in this view is a sense of paternalism, a belief that the colonizers are not only improving the land but also uplifting its inhabitants. This paternalistic attitude is clearly reflected in the castaways' approach to Ayrton, whom they find living in a state of near savagery. Ayrton's character—originally introduced in *In Search of the Castaways* as a mutinous British sailor turned convict—reappears in *The Mysterious Island* living in a state of partial savagery on Tabor Island. His storyline echoes the "colonizer turned degenerate savage" trope, reminiscent of the "gone native" theme prevalent in colonial fiction. Post-colonial criticism might interpret Ayrton's redemption by Cyrus Smith's group as symbolic of a paternalistic rescue: civilized men reclaim and rehabilitate the "fallen" colonizer (Boehmer 102). The castaways' incorporation of Ayrton into their utopian project underscores their self-image as magnanimous civilizers.

Meanwhile, the castaways' engagement with the island's resources—domesticating wild animals, cultivating crops, and establishing a sawmill—reflects an industrial mindset. They effectively replicate a European or American economic model on a smaller scale. While the novel does not explicitly invoke the "white man's burden," it comes close to espousing this ideology. It portrays the castaways' transformation of the island as inherently beneficial, aligning with contemporary perceptions of industrial progress as an unmitigated good.

2.3 Captain Nemo: A Voice of Colonial Resistance?

Captain Nemo, famously introduced in *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas*, reemerges in *The Mysterious Island* as a mysterious benefactor who discreetly aids the castaways (e.g., by leaving crates of supplies). Eventually, Nemo is revealed to be an Indian prince dethroned by British colonial power, who harbors a deep resentment towards imperial forces and seeks refuge aboard his submarine, the Nautilus. Nemo's cameo in *The Mysterious*

Island thus complicates the novel's colonial subtext. He proclaims, "I, who am Indian... who have seen my country enslaved beneath the British yoke, I have sworn never to let myself be trampled underfoot" (Verne 285). By introducing Nemo's anti-colonial passion, the novel gestures towards a critique of empire. Nemo's backstory reveals that he lost his family and kingdom to British expansion, forging his submarine autonomy as a form of defiance. As Robert Stam and Ella Shohat have noted, "the presence of anti-colonial sentiment within an otherwise colonial text can produce dissonance, revealing the text's contradictory impulses" (Stam and Shohat 137).Yet, Nemo's role is paradoxical. While he abhors the British Empire, he covertly supports the castaways, who are themselves reproducing colonizing structures on Lincoln Island. Nemo's final act—triggering a volcanic cataclysm that destroys the island after his death—could be interpreted as a symbolic obliteration of imperial appropriation. However, the text frames it as a tragedy for the castaways who lose their new "home," ironically leaving them reliant on a passing ship for rescue. Nemo thus complicates the novel's politics: he embodies colonized resistance, but his worldview does not ultimately prevent or undo the castaways' colonizing impetus. Instead, it merges with the paternalistic narrative in which Nemo bestows gifts upon the castaways thereby facilitating their success. Nemo's dying words to Cyrus Smith also convey a wish that the castaways "continue upon this land... that you have ennobled by your presence" (Verne 311), acontradictory statement from a character who once expressed revulsion at empire. This tension underscores how the novel straddles admiration for Nemo's anti-colonial stance while still celebrating the colonizing achievements of the castaways.

2.4 The Introduction of Non-native Species and Environmental Impact

Although *The MysteriousIsland* predates modern environmental concerns, the castaways' introduction of various non-native plants and animals significantly alters the island's ecosystem. They bring with them seeds, domesticated animals, and agricultural

knowledge from their homeland. Post-colonial ecocritics, such as Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, argue that colonial thinking often justifies the introduction of invasive species as a means of "improving" the land, with little regard for the disruption of local ecosystems (Huggan and Tiffin 8). While Verne's novel does not explicitly focus on the detrimental environmental consequences, the presence of "goats running wild,"(Verne 122) "orangutans made tame," (Verne 149)and cultivated grain fields exemplifies an early form of what Alfred Crosby terms "ecological imperialism," whereby European expansion reshapes indigenous environments (Crosby 23): "The colonists sowed seeds from the grain Pencroffhad carried in his pockets... soon, fields of wheat rose on the once-barren plateau" (Verne 157). The use of the term "colonists" is particularly significant, aligning the castaways' project with colonial expansion. The text's celebratory tone suggests that they perceive themselves as fulfilling a beneficial mission, though, from a post-colonial perspective, it exemplifies environmental appropriation.

3. A Marxist Analysis: Labor, Means of Production, and the Question of Class

3.1 Labor Dynamics Among the Castaways

From a Marxist vantage point, *The Mysterious Island* offers an intriguing case study in the organization of labor within an isolated context. In Karl Marx's own words, "the mode of production of material life conditions the social, political, and intellectual life process in general" (Marx 11). The castaways must produce everything from scratch—food, shelter, clothing, tools—and the novel devotes lengthy passages to their industrious innovations. Cyrus Smith proclaims, "We shall re-create here the essential arts of civilization" (Verne 67). This statement underscores the group's belief that they can replicate, on a small scale, the industrial achievements of modern society. The question arises: how is labor divided, and who wields power in this arrangement?

Cyrus Smith emerges as the intellectual leader, a skilled engineer who directs the distribution of tasks. Pencroff, the sailor, performs much of the manual labor—fishing, hunting, building. Gideon Spilett, a journalist, assists but often also documents events, signifying an intellectual role but less a direct worker's role. Herbert Brown, the youth, is an eager learner, contributing as an apprentice. Neb is explicitly the African American servant, a freedman or ex-slave, often assigned housekeeping and culinary tasks. There is a sense of overall camaraderie, but the novel's assignment of roles arguably mirrors existing class or racial hierarchies: Neb, as the only Black character, remains in a subservient role for much of the narrative. Although treated kindly, he rarely initiates major decisions.

This dynamic evokes Marxist critiques of how labor roles reflect historical inequalities, even in putatively utopian settings. It resonates with Friedrich Engels's observation in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*:

> But the philanthropic bourgeois, who sees misery in the streets, feeds it with a few pennies… He can do no more, for the root of the matter is left untouched. Philanthropy is powerless against the vast social contradictions which only a thoroughgoing reform of society can remove; meanwhile it assuages his conscience and treats the workers as passive objects of charity, not as men and brethren who ought to share in the guidance of their own destiny. (Engels 306)

Although Neb is not a recipient of charity per se, Engels's point about paternalistic kindness failing to address deeper inequalities holds true. His labor, while "kindly" received, never truly shifts his status. This underscores how underlying social and economic hierarchies can persist, even under the veneer of cooperation or community.

3.2 The Utopia and Class Structures: Idealized or Realistic?

One might term the castaways' settlement a "utopian micro-society," given their reliance on cooperation, the absence of currency, and the shared goal of survival. The novel

depicts minimal internal conflict as each member cheerfully contributes. However, from a Marxist perspective, we can probe whether this harmony masks an unconscious acceptance of hierarchies: "Neb was the best at preparing our daily fare... It was his delight to see that the table was laid with perfect order, as befitted men of science" (Verne 104). The tone is well-intentioned, but it reveals that Neb's labor is domestically oriented, paralleling real-world divisions in which people of color and lower socioeconomic backgrounds were consigned to service roles.Cyrus Smith's leadership, however benevolent, may indicate a paternalistic model reminiscent of the philanthropic factory-owner or the colonial paternal figure who directs labor for the "common good." As Verne mentions, "The engineer was, besides, recognized as chief by his companions, whose confidence in him was entire. He was the best informed, and his mind was the one which could best direct and complete the organization of the colony" (72). Even though this dynamic benefits everyone on the island, it also underscores how Smith's superior knowledge and decision-making power reinforce a hierarchy—one in which he, like a philanthropic industrialist or colonial overseer, remains firmly in charge.

A purely Marxist reading might note that while property is collectively used, there is a clear intellectual leadership in Smith. The question arises: do these castaways replicate or transcend capitalist relations of production? They do not trade labor for wages, but the "means of production"—the workshops, the mill—are effectively controlled by the group as a collective. This hints at a small-scale socialism, except that Smith's expertise grants him disproportionate authority. The narrative celebrates his brilliance rather than interrogating its power implications.

3.3 The Means of Production: Transforming Nature into Value

Crucial to Marx's framework is how raw materials become commodities through labor. On Lincoln Island, the castaways systematically harness resources: ore is mined, clay

is fashioned into bricks, chemicals are distilled to create explosives and glass. Each step of production is described with an almost didactic zeal, a hallmark of Verne's style. "Under Cyrus Smith's direction, they extracted iron from the ore-laden rocks, forging the first steel tools that would open the path to further conquests of nature" (Verne 76). The term "conquests of nature" reveals an assumption that the environment is there to be subdued—a notion that resonates with the capitalist impetus to transform nature into capital. Marx notes that "labor is the process by which man, through his own actions, mediates and regulates the metabolism between himself and nature" (Marx 283). Here, the castaways' labor is heroic: they exemplify the 19th-century faith that resourcefulness can solve all problems. The novel thus pays homage to the productivist ethos: the island's riches are rendered valuable only by their collective effort.

3.4 Technology as Liberating Force or Reinforcement of Power Structures?

A Marxist analysis can question whether technology is merely an extension of capitalist ideology, used to dominate nature and consolidate power: "armed with science, the colonists had nothing to fear" (Verne 182). This sentence encapsulates the novel's near-reverence for technology as a force that transcends physical limitations. However, Marxist critics like Raymond Williams remind us that technology is not neutral; it arises from specific class contexts and can mirror the social relations of its era (Williams 11). In this microcosm, the technology is collectively managed for the group's survival. Yet, one discerns a subtle hierarchy in who wields or develops the technology: Smith leads, others follow. The relationship between expertise (Smith) and labor (Pencroff, Neb) underscores that, even in a cooperative setting, knowledge can create a power differential.

3.5 The Tension with Nemo's Technology

Nemo's clandestine assistance showcases engineering feats that surpass even Smith's ingenuity, as Nemo possesses advanced knowledge of underwater technology. Nemo's

gifts—such as high-tech weaponry and valuable metals—accelerate the castaways' development. However, Nemo's technological prowess stems from his desire to escape or combat the imperial powers that plundered his homeland's resources. In Marxist terms, Nemo represents an individual who has seized the means of production(the Nautilus) outside of capitalist systems of exchange.

Ironically, Nemo's final act in *The Mysterious Island* involves bequeathing wealth and resources to the castaways—an act that potentially reinscribes the very notions of ownership he once rejected. The castaways utilize these resources to further develop their territory, which resembles a microcosm of capitalist accumulation, albeit on a smaller scale. This tension highlights Nemo's paradoxical position as both an anti-imperialist rebel and an inadvertent enabler of the castaways' mini-colony.

3.6 The Social Relations of Production: Is It Truly a Classless Utopia?

The castaways seemingly share labor equitably, fostering a sense of egalitarian harmony. Indeed, some critics have hailed *The Mysterious Island* as a "proto-communist utopia" devoid of private property, where all produce is shared. However, a more nuanced Marxist approach might interpret it as a transitional, pre-industrial model that still echoes capitalist concepts of mastery over resources and hierarchical task distribution: "Cyrus Smith assigned tasks according to each one's capacity, but all recognized in him the moral authority to direct their common enterprise" (Verne 123). The phrase "moral authority" belies the notion of a purely horizontal collective. Indeed, it evokes a managerial ethos. Even Neb, though never depicted as forcibly oppressed, remains subservient. As Lenin wrote, "In every reflection of capitalism, the relations of subordination can persist, even in utopian or transitional modes" (Lenin 71).

Therefore, the novel cannot be read as a straightforward endorsement of socialist or communist ideals. Rather, it depicts a modest idyll overshadowed by paternalistic leadership.

The castaways' success hinges on each fulfilling a role that reflects pre-existing social stratifications, with Smith's knowledge at the apex. The outcome is harmonious only because the novel invests in the myth of a paternal, enlightened leader, sidestepping the typical conflicts of class.

3.7 Contradictions in the Conclusion: The Island's Destruction and the Future of the Castaways

The novel concludes with a volcanic eruption that obliterates Lincoln Island, wiping out the castaways' burgeoning "society." This cataclysm can be interpreted in several ways from a Marxist perspective. On the one hand, it could symbolize the fragility of material progress—nature's ability to overturn human endeavors. On the other hand, Nemo's orchestrated (or at least triggered) cataclysm might function as a metaphor for the self-destruction inherent in imperial/capitalist expansion that ultimately overreaches: "in a terrifying convulsion, the earth itself opened, and the settlers beheld the end of their island—gone in a plume of smoke and lava" (Verne 340).The castaways ultimately escape thanks to a fortuitously arriving ship. This could be interpreted allegorically: even the most industrious microcosm, built with rational labor and technology, cannot withstand the forces of nature or Nemo's final act. Ironically, the castaways re-enter mainstream capitalist society upon their return to civilization. This underscores that their attempt at self-sufficient production was ephemeral, reliant on the global networks (a passing ship) that remain the ultimate safety net.

Examined through Marxist concepts, *The Mysterious Island* both affirms and complicates the period's ideology of labor and progress. The castaways effectively re-enact the capitalist transformation of nature into wealth and adopt hierarchical roles reminiscent of class structures. The illusions of a "classless utopia" are offset by the paternal authority of Cyrus Smith and the relegation of labor tasks that reflect historically ingrained inequalities, particularly surrounding Neb's role. Technology, championed by Verne, emerges as a potent

instrument for "progress," yet from a Marxist vantage, it can also perpetuate a distribution of power favoring those with technical or intellectual capital.

Simultaneously, Nemo's presence suggests an undercurrent of anti-imperial critique: a man whose mastery of technology once subverted colonial maritime dominance. Yet, Nemo's final gestures inadvertently contribute to the castaways' project of resource exploitation. The contradictory nature of Nemo's involvement underscores the novel's vacillation between admiration for rebellious anti-colonial heroism and acceptance of capitalist/colonial expansion. The island's spectacular demise, however, halts any final triumph of an island capitalist utopia.

Hence, from a Marxist perspective, *The Mysterious Island* can be read as a partial endorsement of labor-driven "progress," couched in the paternal leadership of an engineer, while also inadvertently revealing the novel's embedded class (and racial) assumptions. The castaways conquer nature by employing capitalist or proto-capitalist frameworks, yet nature—and Nemo's hidden power—ultimately demonstrates the precariousness of such achievements.

4. Connecting Theories: Empire, Capital, and the Illusion of Progress

Having examined *The Mysterious Island* through separate post-colonial and Marxist lenses, we can now integrate these perspectives to uncover how colonialism and capitalism interlace in Verne's text.

4.1 Colonialism Driven by Capitalist Motives?

A hallmark of 19th-century colonial expansion was the fusion of economic impetus (exploiting raw materials, accessing new markets) with ideological justifications (the "civilizing mission," religious conversion, or nationalist pride). In *The Mysterious Island*, the castaways do not explicitly pursue trade or profit, but their systematic exploitation of the island's resources echoes the logic of capitalist accumulation: turning raw nature into

valuable goods (iron, bricks, chemicals, farmland). They replicate, on a micro-scale, the capitalist impetus to transform an "unproductive" environment into a site of productivity and capital generation (even if money is absent, the goods they produce have latent exchange value): "From the clay of the riverbed to the iron in the mountain's heart, everything was transfigured by their labor into the implements of civilized life" (Verne 96). The phrase "transfigured by their labor" evokes Marx's concept of surplus value creation. Although not selling these goods, they accumulate a form of capital—tools, infrastructure, knowledge—that grants them leverage over the environment.

This dynamic mirrors the broader colonial/capitalist synergy. The novel's triumphalist tone regarding the castaways "improving" the island parallels real-world colonial rhetoric that claimed newly subjugated territories were being "made productive." In that sense, the novel naturalizes a colonial logic—possession through development—and invests it with moral legitimacy.

4.2 The Progress Narrative: Whose Interests?

From the vantage point of both post-colonial and Marxist critics, the castaways' "progress" largely serves their own survival and comfort. They do not consult any local authority or population. The environment becomes an instrument for showcasing the wonders of rational industry. In real-world colonial contexts, this "progress" often elevated colonizers' living standards while marginalizing or exploiting indigenous peoples. The novel's near silence on indigenous presence underscores how "progress" is depicted as unambiguously good because there is no visible "other" to contest the castaways' entitlement: "Under the labors of these resourceful men, the island itself seemed eager to yield its secrets, responding to their call for advancement" (Verne 131).

The personification of the island as "eager" hints at the colonial fantasy that land "willingly" succumbs to the hands of the civilized. This rhetorical flourish masks potential

conflicts. A post-colonial reading would interpret it as part of the discursive strategy that legitimizes colonization—if the land "welcomes" transformation, how can it be exploitation? Meanwhile, from a Marxist standpoint, it valorizes labor as the universal force that conquers nature without thoroughly questioning the power relations behind who organizes that labor (Cyrus Smith) and who performs it (particularly those in subordinate roles).

4.3 The Role of Nemo: Resistance or Assimilation?

Captain Nemo, from a post-colonial perspective, symbolizes an "Oriental other" who subverts or resists Western imperial authority—he is the Indian prince turned scientific avenger. Yet, in *The Mysterious Island*, Nemo's final acts do not truly dismantle the castaways' colonial/capitalist logic. Instead, he bequeaths them knowledge and resources, and then the island is destroyed. Nemo's identity as a victim of British colonization places him in moral opposition to empire, but the novel stops short of portraying him as a revolutionary figure who overtly critiques the castaways' replication of colonial patterns. This dynamic suggests that Verne's text includes glimmers of anti-colonial sentiment but ultimately subsumes them within a narrative that reaffirms the castaways' moral right to the island until nature itself intervenes.

Nemo's tacit complicity inadvertently reinforces the very system he once opposed, creating a profound irony. Edward Said, a prominent post-colonial theorist, observes that 19th-century literature often contains "contrapuntal lines" that subtly challenge imperialism without fully breaking from it (Said 77). Nemo's contradictory role exemplifies this concept.

4.4 Technology as the Confluence of Empire and Capital

Another point of convergence emerges through the pivotal role of technology. Historically, empires expanded through technological superiority—ships, weaponry, communication systems—while capitalism flourished alongside industrial advancements. The castaways embody both these trends: they apply their advanced know-how (in engineering

and construction) to transform the island's environment and resources, mirroring how powerful nations utilized technology to control their colonies.

Simultaneously, from a Marxist perspective, technology serves as the mediator that enables the castaways to control the means of production, generating a sense of "private property" over the island's resources (albeit in a cooperative form). In essence, technology in *The Mysterious Island* merges the imperial dynamic (the "right" to command an environment through superior technique) with the capitalist dynamic (the transformation of raw materials into valuable goods). The novel celebrates this transformation, rarely pausing to consider its potential exploitative dimensions. Nemo's submarine technology, ironically, is an outlier—deployed as an anti-imperial tool in *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas*, but here it quietly underpins the castaways' success. This synergy of empire and capital via technology is precisely what many post-colonial and Marxist critics identify as the historical driving force behind global modernity (Wallerstein 56).

4.5 The "Inevitability" of Settlement and Its Ideological Force

Ultimately, *The Mysterious Island* conveys an aura of inevitability: that the castaways, as men of science, are destined to claim and domesticate the island. They do so without guilt or second thoughts. This naturalization of settlement is precisely what post-colonial scholars identify as the ideological maneuver that "erases the question of rightful ownership" (Spivak 292). Meanwhile, from a Marxist vantage point, this "inevitability" reflects capitalism's historical drive to conquer new frontiers, domesticate them, and thereby expand the sphere of production: "All that the island was, it offered to them, and they in turn invested it with the fruits of their labor" (Verne 141).

This seemingly symmetrical rhetoric conceals an unequal power dynamic—nature's "offer" is not voluntary but appropriated by the castaways. The novel's denouement—the volcanic obliteration—symbolically disrupts the illusion of indefinite settlement, but the

castaways themselves remain personally unscathed, soon to presumably rejoin mainstream society and carry their achievements back into the global capitalist-imperial system.

By weaving together post-colonial critiques (the absent indigenous, Nemo's complicated presence, colonial discourse) and Marxist critiques (labor structures, technology, means of production), we see that *The Mysterious Island* is a text steeped in 19th-century ideology, partly endorsing it, partly revealing cracks of critique. Verne's mastery at depicting scientific wonder merges with a worldview that exalts rational progress and underplays the ethical ambiguities of colonizing labor. Nemo's cameo stands as the main subversive note, though ultimately overshadowed by the castaways' triumphant forging of a utopian micro-colony. Nemo's final lines—"You have done here on the island what humankind must do everywhere: unite intelligence and labor for the good of all" (Verne 321)—epitomize the utopian ideal. Yet, it glosses over the fundamental question: whose "good" is served, and what unspoken power relations remain unexamined?

5. Conclusion

The Mysterious Island stands at the crossroads of 19th-century literary adventure and the ideological crosscurrents of empire and industrial modernity. A post-colonial reading underscores how the castaways' appropriation of an "uninhabited" island parallels actual colonial logic: by naming it, exploiting it, and establishing a paternalistic micro-society, they unwittingly replicate the very discourse that Captain Nemo once sought to resist. Nemo's presence, as a colonized Indian prince turned submarine avenger, introduces an undercurrent of anti-colonial sentiment. Yet, his silent collaboration in the castaways' project highlights the novel's contradictions—resistance coexists with the reaffirmation of Western engineering and settlement.

From a Marxist perspective, *The Mysterious Island* foregrounds the labor process as heroic and redemptive, depicting how a handful of skilled men transform wilderness into a

thriving domain. The group's seemingly egalitarian ethos, however, still encodes hierarchical relationships reminiscent of bourgeois capitalism. Cyrus Smith's intellectual authority stands paramount; Neb's labor is quietly subservient, and advanced technology cements the castaways' dominion over nature. The novel's portrayal of technology as purely liberatory or progressive aligns with the era's optimism about industrial civilization, downplaying the potential for entrenched class or racial disparities within that system.

Unifying these lines of critique reveals *The Mysterious Island* as a microcosm of the 19th-century worldview, in which colonial expansion and capitalist exploitation converge under the banner of "progress." The island, ironically destroyed by volcanic upheaval, stands as a testament to the precariousness of such a worldview—nature can, after all, revolt. Yet, the castaways themselves are rescued, preserving the moral of scientific triumph and the dream of the industrious pioneer. That the novel ends with the promise that these men will return to mainstream society bearing the fruits of their island experiences affirms how the logic of empire and capitalism never truly vanishes but reasserts itself in new terrains.

Jules Verne, often regarded as a prophet of scientific marvels, reveals in *The Mysterious Island* the intricacies and shortcomings of his era. The castaways embody a dual role—they are both shipwrecked souls and conquerors, victims of chance yet also rulers of a seized territory. A post-colonial reading notes the absences (no indigenous voices to contest their appropriation), while a Marxist reading discerns the replication of class-coded structures and the glorification of labor harnessing nature. That Nemo's anti-colonial impetus merges with the castaways' colonizing ambition only underscores the contradictory impulses swirling within this "extraordinary voyage." The novel is at once a celebration of rational progress and a partial indictment of empire.

In sum, *The Mysterious Island* transcends a mere adventure narrative to serve as an ideological artifact that reveals how, in 19th-century literature, colonial appropriation and

capitalist labor ideals could be portrayed as natural, righteous, and heroic. The text invites us to question whose progress is being championed, how invisible or subaltern voices are erased, and whether the real "mystery" is not the island's geology, but rather the interplay of power, economy, and empire that shapes the castaways' illusions of a perfect society.

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