

# The coral island essay



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R. M. Ballantyne wrote *The Coral Island* in 1857 during the Victorian Era and the peak of the British Empire which was a time in history where there were clear gender divisions. Men were expected to defend, protect and to be strong and women were submissive, dependent and protected by men. Evidence of this was clear in *The Coral Island* through the male characters of Jack and Ralph and the damsel in distress characters such as Avatea and women during the fight between the war canoes.

Further to this, the British males were seen to be stronger and wiser than the male savages from the Polynesian Islands. The three boys were extremely brave when they felt women needed protection and despite being outnumbered, they felt they could rescue them. When 40 blacks showed up on Coral Island and went to battle, Jack showed his British bravery when he ran out single handedly to save a girl they thought was about to be killed as well as save a baby that had been tossed aside. Despite being outnumbered, Jack could not bear the treatment he observed of the baby and the young girl, Avatea.

At one point, Jack felt he was about to die but managed to survive and eventually the Ralph and Peterkin showed up with the other savages and helped fight. Jack then brought the baby to the mother and said, " I'll bring her round". The battle demonstrated the bravery of Jack, Ralph and Peterkin and how they felt it was their role to protect women and babies that were being ill-treated. They also earned the respect of the Chief Tararo. Jack fighting when he was so out numbered showed that he felt his British background made him stronger and wiser. Ralph, Jack and Peterkin think they can go an island to rescue Avatea without any fear.

When Ralph finds Tarao on another island and enquires about Avatea, he is upset to hear that Avatea is being forced to marry a chief on another island instead of the man she loves. Once again, Ralph, Jack and Peterkin feel it is their place as young men to interfere and help save the damsel in distress. “ Both were worried by what I could tell them of probable fate of the girl Avatea” Despite the many people on the island of Mango, and their lack of understanding of the culture of the savages, the three boys felt they were wise enough to save Avatea.

They naively go to the island where they nearly got killed in their attempted rescue. Luckily it all works out for the boys when Tararo eventually accepts Christianity and releases the boys from prison. Arriving on the Island of Mango and trying to rescue Avatea demonstrates that the boys felt she was helpless and they were strong enough and wise enough to help her. Again, the boys felt that being British was enough to outwit the savages on the island. Ballantyne also implies that the British men were superior to the male savages.

On page 35 shortly after landing on the island, Peterkin states, “ of course we’ll rise, naturally, to the top of affairs. White men always do in savage countries” implying that the British males are superior to the savages. By using “ white men” we assume again that women do not have a place. The Coral Island is a book that has all male characters such as Jack, Ralph, Peterkin, Chief Tarao, Bloody Bill and other male pirates who are all brave men capable of fighting battles and few women. Women other than Avatea do not feature in the book and Avatea is seen as a helpless female in need of being rescued.

The only other mention of women was when the war canoes were fighting and the women were being dragged into the forest by the hair and having their babies taken from them. Ballantyne clearly demonstrated the views of the time that women were to be submissive and in need of protection. Men were the decision makers and were brave and strong. The book shows clearly the gender roles of the Victorian Era and that the British males thought themselves to be superior than other males in the world.