

# The Dark Frigate Short Guide

## The Dark Frigate by Charles Boardman Hawes

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## Overview

A tale of adventure set at sea, *The Dark Frigate* chronicles the moral dilemma of Philip Marsham, a young lad forced into the service of pirates. Hawes portrays the pirates who capture Philip's ship, the *Rose of Devon*, as predominantly evil men. In his quest for literary realism, Hawes overturns some almost sacred conventions of the romantic adventure story: Philip does not marry the tavern maid to whom he had been betrothed; he is never reunited with his grandparents; and the fortune that he inherits is squandered in support of Charles I of England, the displaced monarch who is later beheaded. A young man drawn to yet ultimately disillusioned by the romantic urge to go to sea, Philip is left to find his place in a world of political turmoil and nebulous moral structure.

Though contemporary critics found the ending of *The Dark Frigate* disappointingly inconclusive, modern readers should appreciate Hawes's realism and honesty.

## About the Author

Charles Boardman Hawes, teacher, editor, and writer, was born in Clifton Springs, New York, on January 24, 1889. He attended school in Bangor, Maine, graduated from Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine, in 1911, and attended Harvard College as a Longfellow Fellow from 1911 to 1912. He taught at Pennsylvania's Harrisburg Academy for a year and then, in 1916, married Dorothea Cable, with whom he had two sons. Hawes settled with his family in Gloucester, Massachusetts, a seaside town whose rich maritime heritage proved an inspiration for the aspiring young writer. Images of the New England seacoast inform Hawes's two books written for adults, *Whaling* (1924) and *Gloucester by Land and Sea* (1928).

One of Hawes's major contributions to American literature was his work in children's periodicals, first as a staff member of *The Youth's Companion* and later as an associate editor of *Open Road*, a boys' magazine that continued publication until 1954. *Open Road*, which touted itself as "the quality magazine for older boys," published serially two of Hawes's young adult novels—*The Mutineers* and *The Great Quest*—before they appeared in book form. Some of Hawes's shorter pieces, such as "The Esperanto and Her Men" (December 1920), "Peter Ronco" (October 1921), and "Out of the Storm" (December 1921), also appeared in *Open Road*. The magazine's editors wished to offer moral guidance without distorting the truth or turning away young readers with heavy-handed preaching; the formula they developed featured an appealing mix of action tales and realistic fiction. Always careful to avoid sentimentality on one hand and sensationalism on the other, Hawes found that his writing style meshed well with the magazine's editorial goals.

Ironically, Hawes's devotion to realism—often at the expense of happy endings—has prompted many unfavorable comparisons between his work and that of the more romantic Robert Louis Stevenson. Although Hawes is sometimes faulted for not living up to his great predecessor, his purposes in *The Dark Frigate* and other novels of the sea differed from those of Stevenson. Hawes wanted to show the harsh realities characteristic not only of sea voyages but of human life in general.

Hawes died an untimely death at age thirty-four on July 15, 1923, in Springfield, Massachusetts. His widow accepted the 1924 Newbery Medal, for *The Dark Frigate*, in his stead.

## Setting

The *Dark Frigate* opens on the eve of revolution. The 1640s were to see the ascension to power in England of Oliver Cromwell, who drove Charles I from the throne and ushered in a nearly twentyyear period of Puritan rule. As the country prepares for war, the political struggles on land are mirrored by the tumult at sea, where bloodthirsty pirates continue to terrorize oceangoing craft. Once associated with the dash and daring of such men as Sir Francis Drake—who thrilled the English populace with his attacks on Spanish galleons during the late sixteenth century—piracy has, by the middle of the seventeenth century, lost all tinge of glamor.

As the book begins, young Philip Marsham is forced out of a tavern in Southwark, where he has been recuperating from an illness. He teams up with two rather unsavory companions, one of whom leads him to the *Rose of Devon*, an aging craft docked at the seaport of Biddeford. At first bound for fishing waters in the North Atlantic, the *Rose of Devon* is taken over by pirates and subsequently sails south to the Bahamas, where the crew begins to sack villages and plunder passing ships. Repulsed by the ongoing torture and violence, Philip eventually jumps ship and turns informant. The only person acquitted when the crew is brought to trial in London, Philip inherits a fortune from his grandparents but donates his money to the Royalist cause. After the Puritan takeover, Philip sets sail for Barbados, his ship once again the *Rose of Devon*.

## Social Sensitivity

Hawes rather backhandedly expresses his disapproval of racial and ethnic prejudice by placing biased remarks in the mouths of unappealing characters.

The sleazy band of pirates, for instance, mocks Jacob, who is Jewish, and an insensitive, foppish "gentleman" aboard the *Sybil* makes a derogatory racial remark. Many readers may feel that such remarks were best left out of the book altogether.

A degree of class prejudice may be spotted in the contrast drawn between Philip's two romantic interests, Nell Entick and the vaguely sketched Anne Bristol, daughter of Sir John. Nell is portrayed as practical and self-serving, in contrast to the ethereal and refined Anne. In general, however, there is little class or gender prejudice in *The Dark Frigate*. Hawes shows women, like men, to be victims of their circumstances; Nell cannot afford to be romantic. Furthermore, one character is never elevated above another solely by virtue of social class. Each stratum in society has its good and bad characters, its likable and unlikable ones. And chief upon Hawes's list of sins appears to be lack of sensitivity for one's fellows. Hawes is also careful to present a balanced view of the religious conflict that took place in the mid-1600s, and to support characters who are authentically dedicated to their faith. Jacob's religious views are respected, while the hypocrisy of the cowardly Christian pirate Martin Barwick is exposed.

Some scenes from *The Dark Frigate* are very brutal. The force-feeding of the cook, whose offenses are minimal, and the terrible torture of Will Canty—which takes place in the cabin while Philip, on deck, asks what they are "doing to him"—are emotionally draining and verge on the disgusting. These scenes, however, are in keeping with Hawes's desire to be realistic, and are never sensationalistic. The violence serves as a reminder that pirates were not Halloween characters but, rather, depraved and dangerous people who plundered, tortured, and killed to get what they wanted.

# Literary Qualities

Frequently compared to Robert Louis Stevenson's classic *Treasure Island* (1883), *The Dark Frigate* strongly differs from its predecessor in authorial intent.

Most striking is that Hawes chose lawabiding characters such as Captain Candle and Sir John Bristol as Philip's mentors, whereas Stevenson selected Long John Silver, the pirate captain, as the surrogate father figure in his novel.

Hawes firmly wished to impress upon his readers the horror of piracy, and fashioned Tom Jordan as the embodiment of cold-blooded cruelty. Although Long John Silver remains one of young adult literature's most engaging characters, his world is one that Hawes would expose, through his own work, as purely fictional. Nonetheless, because of the overlapping subject matter in the two novels, *The Dark Frigate* is unlikely ever to escape from the shadow of *Treasure Island*.

Although many critics have deemed its ending unsatisfying, *The Dark Frigate* remains a thrilling suspense tale enlivened by Hawes's use of symbolism.

Hawes constantly refers to the *Rose of Devon* as dark or shadowy, suggesting moral suspicions about the craft.

Named for a flower that connotes intense but short-lived passion, the *Rose of Devon*—whose old age hearkens back to an era when piracy was condoned—ironically outlives its pirate cast and survives to carry Philip to Barbados at the end of the book. Hawes may be implying that while the rose fades for individuals, it is a recurrent power in life, like the urge to go to sea. Names of characters are likewise suggestive.

Jordan's nickname, "the Old One," hints at the pirate captain's satanic qualities, while Captain Candle's name symbolizes both his religious nature and his fragility. Winterton, a cold contrast to Candle, is also a match for his name.

Hawes successfully uses his stylistic power to debunk romantic myths about pirates. If readers find the incidents of the cook's torture and Will Canty's death repulsive, they are reacting as Hawes would have wished. Hawes must also be credited for his vivid evocation of a historical period unfamiliar to many young readers. He unobtrusively weaves references to the political events of midseventeenth-century England into the text, and accurately depicts the waning days of open-sea piracy.

Passages written predominantly in dialect may present some difficulty for modern readers, as will Hawes's occasional use of vocabulary that would send the average graduate student to a dictionary. Overall, however, Hawes's beautiful descriptive passages, his economical and deft characterizations, and his ability to capture the thrill of the sea while avoiding romantic excess, have made *The Dark Frigate*—and its very modern anti-hero, Philip Marsham—memorable for generations of readers.



## Themes and Characters

Recently orphaned, Philip becomes enmeshed in a world of piracy, and his resulting moral predicament forms the central theme of *The Dark Frigate*. His desire for high romance, coupled with a distaste for schoolwork, compels him to choose life at sea over a secure but boring life with his wealthy grandparents. His decision to leave forces Philip to sacrifice romance as well as familial love; although he pledges his heart to the tavern maid Nell Entick, he finds on his return that she has married another man. Friendship is yet another ideal demonstrated to be at the mercy of circumstance. A possible warm friendship between Philip and Will Canty, a shipmate on the *Rose of Devon*, never develops because the two react differently to their ethical predicament aboard the pirate ship.

Hawes never reduces his characters to stock figures of good and evil; aristocrats, everyday people, and pirates alike are complexly drawn. Philip himself is by no means a morally perfect character—he laughs at an unfortunate man in the stocks, and taunts a cook whom the mutineers have singled out for torture. Even the villains display a wide range of behavior, the disloyal and cowardly ones generally coming off worse than those who, despite their proclivity for evil, display a degree of honesty. Among the non-seafaring characters, Mother Taylor, keeper of the inn at Biddeford, is notable. Given the opportunity to inform on the pirates during their trial, she claims not to know any of the men—a denial that could cost her her life. Although Hawes does not systematically reward good and punish evil, he does affirm basic justice by sparing Philip the gallows that await his less reluctant fellow pirates.

A gallery of powerful characters populate the novel, among them Sir John Bristol, a nobleman who befriends Philip; Captain Candle, the original captain of the *Rose of Devon*; Tom Jordan, the pirate captain who murders Candle; and Captain Winterton, master of the *Sybil*, who eventually brings the pirates to justice. The kindly Candle is unable to prevent the mutiny; both his cabin Charies Boardman Hawes decorations and his clothing are ornate, suggesting that his heart is not wholly devoted to the rough sea. Winterton, who later succeeds in outsmarting and outfighting Jordan, is a "tall grave man, with a cold face and hard cold eyes," a physical and emotional opposite to the gentle Candle.

Jordan, nicknamed "The Old One," is a cold and cruel man. Shortly after slitting Candle's throat, he jokes that the captain has been "snuffed out." Jordan tortures the ship's cook by making him eat quantities of salt fish and then denying him water, and later attempts to bury Will Canty alive. At the end of the book, however, Jordan's sense of loyalty—misdirected throughout so much of the novel—leads him to defend Philip, thus securing the boy's acquittal.

The fate of Will Canty epitomizes Hawes's view of the world as unfair.





Canty is a brave man who defies Tom Jordan, not just at the moment of takeover, when he refuses to drink with the mutinous pirates, but also later, when he plots his escape from the ship.

The fact that Jordan finds Canty out owes more to quirks of fate—such as the resentment of the cook, who turns informant in order to save his own neck— than to any rational system of justice.

Philip, meanwhile, whose opposition to Jordan could just as easily have been detected, escapes with his life.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Compare Captain Candle and Captain Winterton. With which captain would you prefer to sail if offered the choice. Why?

2. Why does Philip quit school early?

Do you think his decision is a good one?

Why or why not? Likewise, do you think it is right or wrong of him to leave his grandparents? What advantages would there have been to living with them?

3. Sailors on the Rose of Devon's original crew react in different ways when Tom Jordan takes over the vessel.

How does Hawes use this episode as a means of characterization? Do some of the new pirates seem worse than others?

4. Early in the book the author hints that Philip admires and is drawn to Will Canty. Why do the two not become closer friends?

5. Philip Marsham supports the Royalist cause in England's civil war.

Does he lack respect for the Puritans?

Why or why not?

6. Before his experiences on the Rose of Devon, Philip makes fun of a man in the stocks. Do you think he would do the same at the end of the novel? Why or why not?

7. Why is Sir John Bristol an important character in the story? What does Philip gain from his friendship with Sir John?

8. After his trial, Philip attempts to find the Scottish smith who crafted his trusty dirk, or long knife, but finds the smithy abandoned. When he seeks out those he has loved in the past, he finds Nell Entick already married and his grandparents dead. Why do you suppose Hawes constructed the story in this way?



## Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Research and report on the civil war that fractured English society during the mid-seventeenth century.
2. Even the pirates in *The Dark Frigate* have some standards, one of which is loyalty to their leader. Which characters are disloyal? What are their reasons for disloyalty, and are any of these reasons valid? What characters demonstrate very strong loyalty? Write an essay about loyalty in the novel, and decide which characters, in your opinion, are justified in being loyal or disloyal to their various leaders.
3. Many critics have faulted Hawes for not making Tom Jordan more closely resemble *Treasure Island's* Long John Silver, who, despite being a pirate, is a warm and likable character. Why do you suppose Hawes portrays Jordan as cold and cruel? Do you think Hawes made the right choice?
4. Many stories about the sea conclude with the heroes returning to a safe haven. No such fate awaits Philip, who returns home only to face a multitude of disappointments, and who finally sails off on yet another voyage. Draft a final chapter for *The Dark Frigate* that examines Philip's life twenty years after he sails for Barbados. Try to remain true to what you see as Hawes's original intent.

Has Philip settled down in one place?

Why or why not?

5. Just before the mutiny, Tom Jordan lets a man drown who threatens to capsize a lifeboat. Later, many of the crew of the sinking ship are abandoned. The narrator comments that it is sometimes necessary to sacrifice one life for the good of many. Do you believe this to be true? If yes, under what circumstances?

If no, why not? Write a paper in which you state your views on this subject.

## For Further Reference

Gary, Dorothea Cable (Hawes).

"Biographical Note." In *Newbery Medal Books, 1922-1955*. Boston: Horn Book, 1955. This anecdotal sketch, written by Hawes's widow long after his death, provides a few interesting insights but is short on facts. Also included in the volume is her Newbery Award "Acceptance Paper for Her Husband."

Duffus, Robert L. "Under a Full Suit of Canvas: Four Books of Whalers and Windjammers, Harpooners and Shantymen." *New York Times Book Review* (November 16, 1924): 5. This interesting review of *Whafing*, one of Hawes's books for adults, quotes Hawes on people's tendency to romanticize the notion of going to sea.

Hines, Jack. "With Scuppers Forever Running Blood: The Dark Frigate by Charles Boardman Hawes (Boston: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1923)."

*New York Times Book Review* (November 11, 1923): 5. This contemporary reviewer finds *The Dark Frigate* sadly lacking in romanticism. Hines faults Hawes for failing to wrap up the plot neatly, and blames Hawes for Captain Candle's brutal death.

Kelly, R. Gordon, "American Boy—The Open Road." In *Children's Periodicals of the United States. Historical Guides to the World's Periodicals and Newspapers Series*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984. A fascinating article that tells of Hawes's role as an associate editor of and contributor to *The Open Road*, and shows that Hawes believed he had a serious moral purpose as a writer for boys. The bibliography tells which issues of *The Open Road* are available in the Library of Congress.

Kirkpatrick, D. L., ed. *Twentieth-Century Children's Writers*. 2d ed. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983. Entry on Hawes contains plot summaries and analyses of his three major novels, and compares the author unfavorably to Robert Louis Stevenson.

Meigs, Cornelia, ed. *A Critical History of Children's Literature*. New York: Macmillan, 1969. Hawes's work is discussed in its historical context in the chapter "Childhood's Golden Era: Introductory Survey." Part 4 of the book, "Adventure in the Past," contains biographical information as well as analyses of Hawes's sea novels.

Ward, Martha E., and Dorothy A. Marquardt. *Authors of Books for Young People*. New York: Scarecrow Press, 1964. Includes a brief biography that mentions Hawes's work for *Open Road* magazine.

## Related Titles

The Dark Frigate was the third sea novel for young adults that Charles Boardman Hawes wrote. His first, *The Mutineers*, is the story of a sixteen-year-old boy, Benjamin Lathrop, who sails for China, undergoes many hardships, and eventually returns to the outstretched arms of his loving family. The second, *The Great Quest*, chronicles the adventures at sea of twenty-year-old Josiah Woods, a passenger on board a ship that takes on a cargo of slaves.

In both of these earlier works, Hawes depicts ship captains as sadistic and suggests that life at sea is a great deal rougher than life on land. The conclusions of both novels also bring a measure of peace to their protagonists.

By the time he wrote the more inconclusive *The Dark Frigate*, Hawes had departed completely from the conventions of the romantic sea novel and had come to view the brutality of life at sea as a metaphor for the reality of life on land.



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