

The Intersection of Science and Literature in the works of Robert Louis Stevenson

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Abstract: The works of Robert Louis Stevenson depict his intense fascination in exploring scientific matters in his literary arena marking his keen interest in areas of psychology, anthropology and aspects of evolutionary theory. In works, such as “Treasure Island” and “Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde”, Stevenson uses theories on psychology to interpret and present his characters, there by portraying intersection of science and literature. The life of Stevenson evidently shows the author’s attempts to learn significance of science in explaining and comprehending the mysteries of universe. It is this same interest that influences Stevenson in using his understanding of science to frame the psyche of his own characters. The literary style of imparting scientific knowledge to illustrate one’s characters and draw the narratives eventually opens a new scope of literary technique that develops intersection of science and fiction. The study and analysis of Robert Louis Stevenson’s works help contribute to the debates and discussions on interweaving of fiction and science by opening up various narrative styles and techniques of writing.

Keywords: *Stevenson, Science, Literature, Psychology, Intersecting, Evolutionary*

Introduction

Robert Louis Stevenson, being one of the most influential writers of Victorian era, have contributed several prominent works to the literary world of fiction that emphasizes his interest in the intersection of science and literature. These works include his best works of fiction such as “Treasure Island” and “Strange Case of Dr

Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.” Being at a period which witnessed the emergence of significant changes and developments in the course of psychology, evolutionary theories, cultural anthropology and biology, Stevenson was very much influenced by the boost of inventory knowledge of his times. This automatically reflected in his major works, emphasizing the curiosity he maintained for science and wonders of nature.

Stevenson explored various aspects of scientific innovations, theories and discussions of his time period making him renowned and celebrated writer of the nineteenth century. The focus of his literary writings carefully analyzed the implications of science and traversed through physical, social as well as natural discourses of the subject. But this does not necessarily hide the ambiguity that his ideas depicted. Ferguson and Reid (2007), in their criticism of the works of Stevenson notes the ambiguity that the author shared in presenting various concepts of science in his literary narratives. They point out the vagueness and uncertainty that remained in weaving science into fictional works of Stevenson by exposing the dubiety of his engagement with the scientific. Reid particularly observes Stevenson’s advocacy of natural selection in parallel to him being not ready to accept that evolutionary theory did not need to reckon for purposive social selection, altogether making his ideas strained in nature. However, despite these

conflicts, Stevenson undoubtedly brought an innovative style by effortlessly weaving the intersection of science and literature via

his characters and narratives. Figure 1 shows the various aspects highlighted in the work of Stevenson:



Figure 1 Various aspects highlighted in the work of Stevenson

This seamless blending action of science into fiction by Robert Louis Stevenson is evident in several of his works. In “Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde”, he uses the split personality theme, integrating psychology into the psyche of his characters to develop them. By depicting the duality of human nature and combining elements of postmodern psychology, Stevenson creates two coexistent characters in the novel that put forward several challenges and complexities of human nature. In “Treasure Island” also, Stevenson explores psychology through framing complex characters that pose moral ambiguity, there by depicting how duality exists in a person. Through the complexity that the author instills in his characters, he is trying to correlate and comprehend the developments of psychology and human nature prevalent at his period of writing.

In fascinating tales such as “The Ebb-Tide”, Stevenson incorporated and explored the potentiality of theory of Darwin, particularly the evolutionary theory and its hierarchies. Similarly, in several of his ‘South Seas’ writings, he expresses the skepticism he shared on various scientific concepts, especially theories of evolution and eugenics. Analyzing all these works, it is evident that Stevenson was successful in intersecting science and literature, depicting his ability to explore the dynamics of consciousness and civilization that is laid upon various steps of evolution. The quality of the works of Stevenson, that persistently interacts with science, initiates several discussions on the existence of literature and science as a discourse, transcending boundaries of fiction, philosophy and facts.

Literature Review

The works of Robert Louis Stevenson is undoubtedly a reflection of his keen interest in exploring the scientific. Thereby, his works depict an effortless interplay and intersecting of science and literature, where the author integrates theories of evolution, psychology, anthropology, biology as well as social sciences in his narratives. By carefully weaving characters that are complex and challenging and placing them in backgrounds equally fascinating, Stevenson lays a framework in his fictional world to combine theories such as evolution to explore the relations between class, civilization, criminality etc. This coherently establish the brilliant incorporation of various branches of science to comprehend and explore the rational, social as well as consciousness arena of humankind.

One of the prominent criticisms that explored the literary techniques of Stevenson is by Julia Reid, Richard Ambrosini, and Richard Drury (2007). In this, they put forward how Stevenson emerges as a scientist in his fictional world by drawing various concepts of evolution and eugenics in his literary narratives. Reid on the other hand goes a step ahead by collecting rare archival data that composes of Stevenson's handwritings exposing his interest on scientific, particularly psychology. The critics express how Stevenson shared a deep anxiety on various aspects related to evolutionary biology that resulted in skepticism regarding the same ideas. This skepticism, even though depicted in his fictional works, did not hinder him from exploring and interlinking human psyche with class and other anthropological as well as social concepts. Anne Stiles (2006) notices Stevenson's immense knowledge on neurological theories and contemporary psychological

concepts of behavioral patterns by examining his fictional works. It is only with intense knowledge and exposure to these theories of the late nineteenth century that any author could bring satire into fiction such as "Strange case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" where Stevenson portrays the conventions of dual mentality and human psyche. Anne Stiles traces the author's influence on psychological studies prevalent at the time of his writings and also exposes how he attributed the condition of dual personality of his characters in the novel to bilateral brain hemisphere asymmetry, exactly the way medical system of the period recognized it.

Interestingly, Stevenson denied in several interviews about using any medical theories in constructing his famous, complex characters. However, various studies of his works by critics such as Colley (2008), Anne Stiles (2006), Comitini (2012) etc. suggests Stevenson's engagement and inspiration from several French and British medical case studies in creating the characters of his novel. This lays in parallel to the fact that Stevenson was well qualified to engage with the scientific considering his previous knowledge in engineering as well as his background of correspondences with lots of scientists. The fictional works of Stevenson clearly depicts that he did not merely reflect the theories and concepts prevalent at the time of his writing. Apart from that he actively involved in debates and discussions about these concepts, where he used his literary medium often to expose the limitations of science in portraying the social realities of human existence as well in comprehending the complex morality of human psyche.

Glab (2014) critically examines the work of Stevenson, noting his framework of writings set up in a Gothic convention. At

times, on reading novellas like *Jekyll and Hyde*, it reflects the author's attempts to mimic the delicacy of late Victorian theories and psychological concepts. By placing the set up of the story in a Gothic romance convention, Stevenson uses the literary techniques and its privilege to carefully parody the limitations of scientific objectivity. For example, in instances where Jekyll engage in a "perennial war among his members", it contrastingly also reflects the inability of the doctor to succumb to objectivity of the factual or scientific world in the face of a very overwhelming subjective reality. The incidents like this exposes the limitations of science in addressing the extreme complexities of human consciousness, thereby creating more challenges.

Critics such as Macduffie (2006) explored various other concepts of Stevenson's way of writing where he puts forward the idea of thermodynamics incorporated in the fictional world of *Jekyll and Hyde*. He investigates the novel to find out the ways of intersection of science into literature and proposes the use of concepts of thermodynamics, physical science and aspects of metamorphosis in the novel to establish the strange situation of the characters as an irreversible condition. In all these critical works, there is a resemblance of the ability of the author to combine discourses of science to relate it to the psyche, conscious and unconscious of the human mind existing in a rational reality ruled by scientific objectivity.

Stevenson's interest in science, as mentioned above, was not limited to psychology. He did merge or combine different discourses of science in a carefully crafted manner to study the nature of humankind. Hustis (2009) examines how Stevenson's works are influenced by the

concepts of Nietzsche, particularly the principles of good and evil which he thoroughly examines in his two novels *Jekyll and Hyde* and *Treasure Island*. However, he also shows keen interest on evolutionary concepts noticeable in his tale "Ebb Tide" that tells the narrative of a group of sailors estranged on a distant and secluded island. Here, even though Stevenson explores the potential disastrous consequences of evolutionary theory correlating to purposive social selection, he interestingly lays a scope to link it to the psychological aspects of good and evil as well. By placing the characters in challenging situations as such, he is testing the morality of human psyche, intrinsically analyzing the parameters of civilization and savagery.

Stevenson, through his works intends to challenge science to extend its scope in comprehending and including subjective realities in a better way. Swearingen (2006) critically examines several works of Stevenson to find out the unique literary skill and style possessed by the author to powerfully criticize, satirize and represent various aspects. In stories like "The Bottle Imp", the author also attempts to use science to expose and mimic the superstitions and its influence on the Victorian society. Hence various works of Stevenson depicts intersection of scientific on diverse levels that not only explore narrative and literary representations but also challenge, satirize and exhibit a powerful interweaving of philosophy, scientific and subjective reality in the works of fiction.

Conclusion

The works of Stevenson depict brilliant, careful and effortless interweaving of science into literature exhibiting not only an

innovative style in literary discourse but also pointing the powerful scope of fiction to incorporate complex ideas and concepts. Several of the fictional works of Stevenson represent characters that are complex, fascinating and diverse in presenting limitations of scientific objectivity in understanding the subtle subjective realities of human nature. The interest of the author in intersecting science into literature is not merely a display of his knowledge and correspondences with the scientific but a powerful and significant literary attempt to represent and question various conventions of society. In doing so, Stevenson influences and inspires other writers to examine as well as explore the scope of fiction to combine various other complex discourses within it in its ability to depict diverse narratives and themes.

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