ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON. Born, November 13, 1850 – Died, December 3, 1894. Famed Scottish novelist, short story writer, essayist, poet, and author of the Gothic-tradition classic *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, numerous children's adventure tales, such as, *Treasure Island*, and children's nursery rhymes, such as, *A Child's Garden of Verses*. Stevenson's short life adds to the mystique and aura of his work, which is an impressive collection of outstanding achievements in various popular literary forms.

The literary world affectionately remembers Robert Louis Stevenson as a man who never grew up, and his verses reveal a child's attitudes. He wrote sympathetically in *A Child's Garden of Verses* in 1885:

"When I am grown to man's estate
I shall be very proud and great
And tell the other girls and boys
Not to meddle with my toys."

Nevertheless, this disarming poet wrote other works that are not guileless children's tales! Despite his precarious health, or perhaps in defiance of it, he led an adventurous life, hiking, canoeing, and wandering around France and Belgium.

Stevenson saw that the novel is a selection of and reorganization of certain aspects of life - "life is monstrous, infinite, illogical, abrupt and poignant; a work of art, in comparison, is neat, finite, self-contained, rational, flowing and emasculate."
Robert Louis Balfour Stevenson grew up in Edinburgh, Scotland and this profoundly shaped his writing. He was born on November 13th 1850 and from earliest childhood he was frequently ill with tuberculosis, which influenced a fertile imagination. It was assumed that Stevenson would follow the profession of his father, Thomas Stevenson, a distinguished lighthouse and harbor engineer. In 1867, he entered Edinburgh University to study engineering. Due to his ill health, he had to abandon his plans to follow in his father's footsteps. Stevenson changed to law and in 1875 he was called to the Scottish bar. By then he had already started to write travel sketches, essays, and short stories for magazines. When he was twenty-one years old he announced his intention of becoming a writer. He rebelled against his puritanical Scottish Calvinist upbringing, becoming an agnostic and adapting a bohemian way of life as a young man. His battle with tuberculosis forced him to continually seek milder climates than Scotland.

Since his childhood, Stevenson suffered from tuberculosis. During his early years, he spent much of his time in bed, escaping his physical limitations through books and composing stories before he had learned to read. He was prevented by ill health from going much to ordinary schools. The Stevenson House was the center of his world and his mind was nourished by ceaseless reading as well as stories told by “Cummie” of ghosts, ghouls, and Scottish history. Stevenson was largely raised by his mother and devoted nanny, Alison Cunningham (known as “Cummie”), to whom he dedicated A Child's Garden of Verses (1885), calling her, “My second mother, my first wife.” The poems, his only book of verses, communicated the fears as well as the pleasures of childhood. A Child's Garden of Verses was a great success - its poems have also become
popular as songs. With this one volume, Stevenson became one of the great children's poets.

To Alison Cunningham
From Her Boy

From the long nights you lay awake
And watched for my unworthy sake:
For your most comfortable hand
That led me through the uneven land:
For all the story-books you read:
For all the pains you comforted:

For all you pitied, all you bore,
In sad and happy days of yore:--
My second Mother, my first Wife,
The angel of my infant life--
From the sick child, now well and old,
Take, nurse, the little book you hold!

And grant it, Heaven, that all who read
May find as dear a nurse at need,
And every child who lists my rhyme,
In the bright, fireside, nursery clime,
May hear it in as kind a voice
As made my childish days rejoice!

R. L. S.
Tales of Scottish history and literature kindled a life-long passion for the open air, the sea and adventure.

He traveled with his father around Scotland on his engineering business as well as journeying with his parents to the Continent. At the age of sixteen he produced a short historical tale.

As an adult, there were times when Stevenson could not wear a jacket for fear of bringing on a hemorrhage of the lung. Literature, however, seized him and he began to travel more and further. London, Bournemouth, France and the Continent all drew him – for his health and sheer wanderlust. Ever and again, he returned to Edinburgh and his family house. On one of his voyages to France, he met his future wife, an American, Fanny Vandergrift Osborne, and her family in an artists’ colony near Paris. She was a married woman with two children (Belle and Lloyd), and 11 years his senior. She returned to the United States to get a divorce. In 1879 Stevenson followed her to San Francisco, California where they married in 1880. After a brief stay at Calistoga, which was recorded in The Silverado Squatters (1883), they returned to Scotland, and then moved often in search of better climates.

After they married, they traveled together in Europe in various locations dictated by Stevenson’s health. Fanny promptly devoted herself to nursing her new husband, protecting and encouraging him to write the works for which he is remembered. Poems, letters, magazine articles, reviews and novels were written in these years, including A Child’s Garden Of Verses, Treasure Island, The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Hyde, The Black Arrow, The Master of Ballantrae, Kidnapped, and The South Seas.
Stevenson's father died in 1887. Stevenson and his family sailed to the South Pacific in 1889, settling on the island of Upolu, Samoa in 1890, where he purchased an estate which he called Vailima. He had nearly 20 servants. During this time, Stevenson enjoyed a period of comparative good health. With his stepson Lloyd Osborne he wrote The Wrong Box (1889) and other works. He became actively involved in island politics and earned the respect and admiration of the islanders who named him “Tusitala” or “Teller of the Tales”. The writer himself translated it “Chief White Information.” Fanny was called “Flying Cloud” – perhaps referring to her restlessness. She had also suffered a mental breakdown in 1893.

Stevenson died of a brain hemorrhage on December 3, 1894, in Vailima. Fanny Stevenson died in 1914 in California. Her ashes were taken to Samoa and buried alongside her husband, on the summit of Mount Vaea.

Little Known Facts About Robert Louis Stevenson

1. Who may have invented the sleeping bag? Stevenson took a large fleece-lined sack with him to sleep in on his journey through France which he describes in his book Travels With A Donkey In The Cervennes.

2. Who was Long John Silver? The one-legged pirate cook, the dark hero of Robert Louis Stevenson’s most famous novel Treasure Island is said to be based on the author’s friend and collaborator William Ernest Henley, whom he met when Henley was in Edinburgh for surgery to save his one remaining leg from Tuberculosis. Stevenson wrote several plays with Henley.
3. Who was the real Dr. Jekyll? In the story *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde*, one of the first “psychological” thrillers, Robert Louis Stevenson portrays how two contrary personalities – one conventional and “good”, the other an example of uncontrolled “evil” – can co-exist in one body. It is said this was an idea modeled on the late 18th century case of Deacon Brodie, a respectable Edinburgh businessman by day who was a gambler, adulterer, armed robber and murderer by night – and nobody knew until he bungled a robbery, was eventually caught and hanged on a gallows of his own invention. Based on a dream, it was written and printed in 10 weeks.


5. How did Robert Louis Stevenson die? Although probably afflicted throughout his life by Tuberculosis, Robert Louis Stevenson actually died in 1894 at Vailima, his home on the South pacific island of Upolu, Samoa, helping his wife make mayonnaise for supper, of a cerebrial hemorrhage (stroke).

6. What were some of his best writings? Robert Louis Stevenson was one of the greatest letter-writers in the English language and the complete collection is now available in eight volumes, edited by Bradford A. Booth and Ernest Mehew, 1994-5. These are the best possible introduction to Stevenson's life and work. Biographies include *Voyage to windward* by J.C. Furnas, 1950; *RLS: a life study* by Jenni Calder, 1980; and *Dreams of exile* by Ian Bell, 1994. The pioneering critical work was *Robert Louis Stevenson* by David Daiches, 1947. This has been followed by a slowly growing critical interest in Europe and North America as well as in Scotland. In his letters he describes everyday life, his dreams, his travels, his observations of cultures and people, and his thoughts. He corresponded with about everybody who was anybody in late 19th century English language literature.

7. Was Robert Louis Stevenson modern? Yes. He was only 44 when he died in 1894 and would only have been 80 in 1930. What do you think he would have though of Steinbeck, Faulkener, Virginia Woolf et al.?
8. What were some of Robert Louis Stevenson’s favorite writings? Among Stevenson's own early favorite books, which influenced his imagination and thinking, were Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Dumas’s adventure tale of the elderly D'Artagan, *Vicomte de Bragelone*, and Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, "a book which tumbled the world upside down for me, blew into space a thousand cobwebs of genteel and ethical illusion, and having thus shaken my tabernacle of lies, set me back again upon a strong foundation of all the original and manly virtues." (from *Reading in Bed*, ed. by Steven Gilbar, 1995) Also Montaigne's *Essais* and the Gospel according to St. Matthew were very important for him.

Although he began writing fiction as a teenager, it was not until 1877 that his first short story was published, and 1882 before he began to publish longer fiction.

9. How did Robert Louis Stevenson see the novel? Stevenson saw that the novel is a selection of and reorganization of certain aspects of life - "life is monstrous, infinite, illogical, abrupt and poignant; a work of art, in comparison, is neat, finite, self-contained, rational, flowing and emasculate."

Robert Louis Stevenson’s Writings

His first articles were published in *The Edinburgh University Magazine* (1871) and *The Portofolio* (1873).

Stevenson's first short story, an atmospheric tale of the roguish poet Francois Villon in medieval Paris entitled *A Lodging For The Night* (1876), set the tone for his later fiction. Other romantic, adventurous, and sometimes sinister tales were collected in *New Arabian Nights*. He wrote four moderately successful plays in collaboration with the poet W. H. Henley.

He wrote two novels based on his travels in France and Belgium: *An Inland Voyage* – 1878 – Stevenson’s canoe tour of the rivers and canals of France and Belgium. He followed this in 1879 with *Edinburgh, picturesque notes* and an account of a walking tour in the Cevennes, *Travels With A Donkey In Cervennes* – 1879. Based on his walking trip in France. "I travel for travel's sake," Stevenson wrote, "The great affair is to move."
Treasure Island, his most popular novel and romantic adventure story, which appeared first serialized in Young Folks July 1881-June 1882 under the alternative title of "The Sea-Cook or Treasure Island". It was for his stepson, Lloyd Osborne, that Stevenson wrote this first novel in 1883, a spellbinding tale of eighteenth-century piracy and buried treasure, full of suspense, plot and contrast in moral codes. The novel turned out to be a huge success for Stevenson, bringing popularity, money and fame.

He collected his early essays in two volumes, Virginibus Puerisque (1881) and Famous Studies Of Men And Books (1882).

The Silverado Squatters – 1883. Based on his adventures in Monterey, California in a mountain mining camp.

A Child’s Garden Of Verses. 1885. In 1885, he published A Child's Garden of Verses, his only book of verses, but with this one volume, he became one of the great children's poets.


Kidnapped – 1886. The story of David Balfour, Stevenson’s distant ancestor.

The Strange Case Of Dr. Jekyll And Mr. Hyde. January 1886. A sinister science fiction novel portraying duel personality, perhaps Stevenson's most famous work, repeatedly adapted for film and stage. The story has been considered a criticism of Victorian double morality. It sold 40,000 copies in Britain in six months. Stevenson said later that its plot was revealed to him in a dream. In the end, Jekyll kills himself, but the last words of the confession are written by his alter ego: "Here then, as I lay down the pen and proceed to seal up my confession, I bring the life of that unhappy Dr. Jekyll to an end."

Henry James admired Stevenson's "genuine feeling for the perpetual moral question, a fresh sense of the difficulty of being good and the brutishness of being bad" ('Robert Louis Stevenson' by Henry James in Century Magazine 35, April 1888). Modern readers have set the story against Freudian sexual theories and the split in man's psyche between ego and instinct, although the "split" takes the form of a physical change, rather than inner dissociation. The conflict between Jekyll and Hyde reveals also the era's class phobias. The story of double personality and metamorphosis appealed strongly to Victorian readers. The novel was
partly based on Stevenson's and W.E. Henley's play *Deacon Brodia* (1880), where an Edinburgh councilor is publicly respectable person but privately a thief, murderer and rakehell. The basic theme of true identity have attracted such writers as Mary Shelley (*Frankenstein*, 1818), Hans Christian Anderson ('The Ugly Duckling', 1845), Fyodor Dostoyevsky (*Crime and Punishment*, 1866), Bram Stoker (*Dracula*, 1897), Franz Kafka (*Metamorphosis*, 1915).

*The Merry Men* – 1887. Another memorable collection of Scottish tales.

From his early twenties, ill-health kept him away from Scotland for long periods. But he continued to write about Scotland, and some of his most powerful short stories, *Thrawn Janet* and *The Merry men* for example, have Scottish themes. In these stories, as well as in *Kidnapped* and later fiction such as *The Master of Ballantrae* (1888), he examined some of the extreme and contrary currents of Scotland's past, often projecting a dualism of both personality and belief. This dualism is most famous in *Jekyll and Hyde* and *Kidnapped* (1886), whose two central characters are David Balfour, a Lowland Whig and distant ancestor of Stevenson’s, and Alan Breck Stewart, a Highland Jacobite. The novel revolves around their friendship and their differences, suggesting a metaphor for Scotland itself.


Collaborating with his stepson, Lloyd Osborne. He wrote a comedy, *The Wrong Box* (1889), a rather heavy-handed comedy, and tales of adventure, *The Wrecker* (1892), a Pacific adventure story, and *The Ebb Tide* (1894). He wrote about his Pacific voyages in numerous articles which were published in volume form as *In the South Seas* (1892).

Fascinated by the Polynesian culture, Stevenson wrote several letters to *The Times* on the islanders' behalf, wrote several essays, and published shorter narratives such as *Island Nights' Entertainments* (1893), which contains his famous story 'The Beach of Falesá' (1893), and *The Ebb-Tide* (1894), which condemned the European colonial exploitation. He was critical of the exploitative impact of Europeans and Americans, and in Samoa adopted the cause of a Polynesian chief who was defeated in a brief episode of civil war. He described this in *A Footnote to history* (1892). His South Sea experiences also produced fiction, and for almost
the first time he turned his attention to the contemporary scene. He drew
directly on Polynesian tradition in the short story The Bottle imp, set on the
island of Hawaii, The Isle of Voices, and the epic poem Rahero. But his
story, The Beach of Falesa is rather different. It explores the clash of
cultures between white traders and islanders and is one of Stevenson's
best pieces of fiction. His novel The Ebb Tide (1894) is a remarkable study
of morality and individual responsibility, themes that had absorbed him
earlier. The mature stylist, combining precision and complexity, is seen at
his most challenging.

In 1893 Stevenson published a sequel to Kidnapped entitled Catriona in
England and David Balfour in America. It was at Vailima that he wrote
Catriona (1893), a sequel to Kidnapped, St Ives (unfinished and published
after his death in 1897) and Weir of Hermiston (1896, also unfinished). It
was Weir he was working at on the day he died. Pivoting on the bitterly
fraught relationship between a father and son, the novel employs both
Scottish tradition and the Scots language with memorable force.

Stevenson's last work, Weir Of Hermiston (1896), was left unfinished, but is
considered his masterpiece.

He also contributed various periodicals. The Cornhill Magazine and
Longman's Magazine, where his best-known article 'A Humble
Remonstrance' was published in 1884. It was a replay to Henry James's
'The Art of Fiction' and started a lifelong friendship between the two
authors.

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