

The Black Arrow Short Guide

The Black Arrow by Robert Louis Stevenson

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Overview

The Black Arrow is an exciting adventure story full of intrigue, suspense, hair-breadth escapes, and desperate fights. It also contains an unusual love story: the heroine first appears disguised as a boy, and the hero, conditioned to be indifferent or hostile to women, comes grudgingly to admire and then to love her. The Black Arrow offers valuable insights into history and rates among the best novels available about the fifteenth-century English civil conflict known as the Wars of the Roses.

About the Author

Robert Louis Stevenson was born on November 13, 1850, in Edinburgh, Scotland. A semi-invalid as a child, he suffered from tuberculosis for much of his life. He rebelled against his puritanical Scottish Calvinist upbringing, becoming an agnostic and adopting a bohemian way of life as a young man.

After studying law, he was admitted to the bar in 1875 but never practiced the profession. Instead, he turned to literature, publishing essays noted for their polished style and personal charm in *Cornhill Magazine* and other periodicals.

Despite his precarious health, or perhaps in defiance of it, he led an adventurous life, hiking, canoeing, and wandering around France and Belgium.

He recounted these adventures in two travel books, *An Inland Voyage* (1878) and *Travels with a Donkey in the Cevennes* (1879), that revealed his romantic temperament and an interest in picturesque history, people, and places.

In love with Frances Osbourne, a divorced American woman, Stevenson followed her to California, where he lived briefly in Monterey and in a mountain mining camp. He later recorded this adventure in *The Silverado Squatters* (1893). In 1880 Stevenson married Osbourne, who was ten years older than he, and became a stepfather to her son, Lloyd, with whom he later collaborated on several books. He returned to Europe, where tuberculosis drove him to seek treatment in various sanitariums.

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

Stevenson attained popularity in 1883 with his first novel, *Treasure Island*, a spellbinding tale of eighteenth-century piracy and buried treasure that he initially created for his stepson. In 1885 he published *A Child's Garden of Verses* and *Prince Otto*, a romantic novel now largely forgotten. The next year, he published two of his greatest works, each quite different from the other. *Kidnapped*, an adventure story set in 1746 Scotland, shows Stevenson's indebtedness to Sir Walter Scott's romantic novels and ranks with *Treasure Island* among classic adventure stories. Dr.

Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, a sinister science fiction novella, is perhaps Stevenson's most famous work, repeatedly adapted for film and stage.

In 1887 Stevenson published *The Merry Men*, another memorable collection of tales, but then another bout with tuberculosis forced him to travel in search of a healthier



climate. He wrote *The Black Arrow* and *The Master of Ballantrae* (1889), an adult novel set in eighteenth-century Scotland, over the next two years at Saranac Lake, New York.

Stevenson and his family sailed to the South Pacific in 1889, settling in Samoa in 1890. Despite his frail health, he became actively involved in island politics and earned the respect and admiration of the islanders, who named him *Tusitala*, or "teller of tales." Collaborating with his stepson, he wrote a comedy, *The Wrong Box* (1889), and tales of adventure, *The Wrecker* (1892) and *The Ebb Tide* (1894), while continuing on his own to write essays and shorter narratives such as *Island Nights' Entertainment*, a collection of tales that includes *The Beach at Falesa* (1893). In 1893 Stevenson published a sequel to *Kidnapped* entitled *Catriona in England and David Balfour in America*.

In 1894 Stevenson began *Weir of Hermiston*, yet another novel set in eighteenth-century Scotland. Stevenson died of a cerebral hemorrhage on December 3, 1894, before he could complete this grim drama of a puritanical judge who condemns his own son to death, but the fragment that survives is his most powerful writing, making his early death all the more regrettable. He was buried in Samoa on a mountaintop overlooking the Pacific.

Setting

Set in late fifteenth-century England, *The Black Arrow* takes place during the Wars of the Roses, a long civil conflict between the House of Lancaster, symbolized by the red rose, and the House of York, symbolized by the white rose.

Historically, the Yorkist faction, led by Edward IV and his brother Richard III, overthrew the Lancastrian ruler Henry VI. Ultimately, Henry VII conquered Richard III in the 1485 Battle of Bosworth, but the book ends well before this turn of events.

Stevenson's narrative begins in the village of Tunstall in east Norfolk toward the end of Henry VI's reign. Seventeen-year-old Dick Shelton's search for vengeance of his father's murder and his rescue of a young heiress lead him through the English countryside, where he fights beside Richard, Duke of Gloucester, later Richard III; joins forces with the mysterious John Amend-All's followers; and steals a ship in an ill-fated attempt to rescue the heiress. Dick encounters a variety of characters, some fictional, others drawn from history.

Gloucester plays a significant role in the story, and Dick's adventures occur against the historical backdrop of a civil war notorious in English history.

Social Sensitivity

The Black Arrow focuses on betrayal and warfare, and though Stevenson presents many exciting adventures, he laments the "deplorable necessities of war" and makes it clear that war is a disaster. Dick may win his sweetheart and regain his small estate, but for the country at large war brings only death and devastation. Thus on one level Dick's adventures are good fun, while on a deeper level they expose the horror of warfare. In battle, many on both sides die pointlessly. To the peasants and common people, it makes no difference whether Lancaster or York rules; their lives remain equally grim. Neither side is wholly right or wrong. After Dick helps win the battle of Shoreby, the victorious Yorkists sack the town, victimizing the innocent civilians. The Yorkists triumph, but readers familiar with English history know that they will ultimately suffer a tragic end.

Literary Qualities

Stevenson revived Romanticism with his historical adventure novels. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Sir Walter Scott began writing spirited stories of the Middle Ages and of Scotland set during the Renaissance and eighteenth century. Scott's historical fiction was enormously popular and influential for three generations, but by Stevenson's time, when realism was on the rise, readers were losing interest in Romanticism. Stevenson's psychologically complex characters and his sharp sense of time, place, language, and historical detail reveal the realist influence on his work. Many of his details of fifteenth-century life came from *The Paston Letters*, a body of correspondence written between 1422 and 1509 to a prominent Norfolk family. Stevenson lacks Scott's depth, but his fast-paced narratives testify to his skill as a stylist.

Like Scott, Stevenson deftly recreates Scottish dialect in *Kidnapped*, *David Balfour*, and *Weir of Hermiston*, but also like Scott, he indulges in artificial archaisms in the dialogue of his medieval stories, and archaic language flaws *The Black Arrow*, though it becomes less pronounced as the narrative moves along.

The Black Arrow is not a major novel, nor did its author consider it so. Primarily of entertainment value, the book rises above its genre through the author's vivid realism, sense of moral ambiguity, and narrative verve.



Themes and Characters

The Black Arrow is the story of an adolescent hero caught in a confusing world of rapidly shifting loyalties. Following the murder of his father, Sir Harry Shelton, Dick Shelton has been placed under the guardianship of the dubious Sir Daniel Brackley. Sir Daniel is a turncoat, siding with either the Lancastrians or the Yorkists depending on which faction seems to be winning the prolonged conflict. His chief supporters are Sir Oliver Oates and Bennet Hatch.

Dick only gradually realizes that Sir Daniel is capable of great evil. His first hint comes early in the novel when one of Sir Daniel's men is killed by a black arrow bearing the words "John AmendAll." Soon after, a note appears from the mysterious John Amend-All, accusing Sir Oliver of murdering Dick's father and warning that three more black arrows await Sir Daniel, Sir Oliver, and Bennet Hatch. While Sir Daniel's forces contend with the band of outlaws intent on avenging wrongs with their black arrows, Dick himself becomes a target of Sir Daniel's devious plots. The narrative traces his series of narrow escapes, in which he is aided by the outlaws, who prove to him that Sir Daniel's crimes include ordering the murder of Sir Harry Shelton.

In many ways the novel is an account of Dick's maturation. A misogynist early in the story, he outgrows his hatred for women only after the heroine disguises herself as a boy and earns his respect.

Held captive by Sir Daniel, Joanna Sedley dons the disguise to make her escape. Dick helps the disguised Joanna, who calls herself John Matcham, when he finds her stranded in a marsh. Dick agrees to bring John along with him, though the boy's effeminate manner annoys him. By the time Dick discovers Joanna's true identity she has already rescued him from drowning and saved him from Sir Daniel's murder scheme.

Joanna is most interesting when disguised as a boy, alternating between timidity and courage, effecting a masculine swagger but unable to subdue her femininity. Once her true gender is revealed she becomes a more standard heroine of romantic fiction and appears only intermittently. The flirtatious Alicia Risingham, who teases Dick, proves to be a more vivacious character.

The outlaws were men who had sworn to avenge the wrongs done to them, and it was they who sent the dreaded black arrows flashing through the air to hit unerringly their mark.

Through his adventures, Dick learns how difficult it can be to distinguish between good and evil. Indeed, The Black Arrow has no absolute villains or heroes. Even Dick, though nominally a hero, makes mistakes. During an attempt to rescue Joanna, he ruins an old sea captain by stealing his ship and causing a wreck in which the first mate dies. After the Battle of Shoreby, Dick tries to redeem himself by persuading Gloucester to spare

the captain's life, but his ship, mate, and livelihood are all gone because of Dick's thoughtlessness.

Though Dick has saved his life, Captain Arblaster tells him, "Y'ave played the devil with me," making Dick "understand the desperate game that we play in life, and how a thing once done is not to be changed or remedied by any penitence."

The outlaws are heroes on one level and villains on another. Ellis Duckworth (John Amend-All), the leader of the outlaws, salvages many desperate situations in the nick of time, but he is ravaged by his violent obsession for revenge. Lawless becomes Dick's chief companion among the outlaws, yet he confesses that he might not be able to suppress his instinct to rob Dick should the opportunity arise.

Just as the heroes are imperfect, even the characters who seem most villainous are not entirely evil. Sir Daniel and Sir Oliver feel some remorse for betraying Dick, whom they both like. Bennet Hatch, Sir Daniel's lieutenant, saves Dick when he and Joanna are trapped beneath the dungeons. Sir Daniel's ally, the Earl of Risingham, turns out to be a man of integrity, sparing Dick's life after he learns of Sir Daniel's treachery.

The most ambiguous character of all is Richard of Gloucester, who appears as a dashing swordsman, a charismatic leader, and Dick's leader and patron. An untrustworthy man, Richard shows no mercy and despises those who do. He knights Dick for his key role in the Battle of Shoreby, but Dick quickly falls from Richard's favor when he requests the release of Captain Arblaster. A politician seeking to fulfill his own ambition through any means possible, he foreshadows his later cruelty as depicted in Shakespeare's Richard III.

Stevenson wrote *The Black Arrow* chiefly as an adventure story, but its historical setting allowed him to comment on the harshness of life in the Middle Ages and the destructive cruelty of civil war. Stevenson emphasizes that while war enables some people to rise in the world and make their fortunes, it is essentially a collective madness that brings death and destruction to most of the people involved.



Topics for Discussion

1. Richard Shelton first appears as a rather naive young man who accepts appearances without understanding the more complex reality of the world in which he lives. How does he become more enlightened and mature?
2. Dick begins as a male chauvinist with no use for women. How does he come to respect, and then to love, Joanna Sedley?
3. To what extent does Joanna qualify as a liberated heroine, and to what extent is she the stereotypical heroine of romantic fiction whom the hero must rescue?
4. In books 1 and 2, Joanna Sedley plays a major role; in the remaining three books she appears only briefly, and Stevenson introduces another woman, Alicia Risingham, as a possible rival for Dick's love. Is it a mistake for him to remove Joanna after book 2?
5. In Shakespeare's plays, in popular mythology, and in such films as the two versions of *The Tower of London* (1939 and 1961), Richard III is a figure of monstrous evil. Stevenson's Richard of Gloucester will become Richard III, but in this novel he is a younger man, not yet steeped in crime, who befriends the hero and advances him. What evidence is there that Richard has the potential for evil and that Dick does well not to remain one of his followers?
6. In *The Black Arrow*, a story of civil war, loyalties and alliances shift. How does Dick discover that his supposed protector, Sir Daniel Brackley, has betrayed him? In changing sides, does Dick turn traitor or discover a new freedom? Are the outlaws subversive criminals, terrorists, or freedom fighters?

Why do Richard and his new protector, Richard of Gloucester, become alienated? What does this alienation say about each of their characters? Is either the side of York or of Lancaster better than the other?
7. Are there any parallels between the political situations of the Wars of the Roses in *The Black Arrow* and the political situations of quarreling factions today?
8. Is the novel's archaic prose style and diction a help or hindrance to the narrative? Can it be justified in terms of realism, or is it an artifice?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. See Laurence Olivier's film version of Richard III (1955) or read Shakespeare's Henry VI, "Part III" and Richard III and compare the characterization of Richard of Gloucester with Stevenson's.

2. Compare John Amend-All and his band of forest outlaws to Robin Hood.

3. Was Richard of Gloucester, later Richard III, the villain that Shakespeare and, to some extent, Stevenson portray? For a contrasting view, read and report on Josephine Tey's *The Daughter of Time* (1951), the portion of Thomas B. Costain's *The Last Plantagenets* (1962) that deals with Richard III, or Paul Kendall's biography, *Richard III* (1955).

4. What moral lesson does Dick learn from his experiences in warfare and combat? How has his recklessness ruined the sailor whose boat he stole?

Can Dick ever make amends?

5. The characters in *The Black Arrow* are not all black and white. Sir Oliver and Bennet Hatch are followers of Sir Daniel Brackley, who has betrayed Dick.

Do they have any lingering loyalty to Dick and any reluctance to see him murdered? Dick's initial antagonist, Lord Foxham, becomes his friend and ally, and his protector and patron, Richard of Gloucester, has sinister tendencies.

Dick himself is not without flaws. Discuss the ambiguities and complexities of Stevenson's characterizations.

6. Read a history of England during the Wars of the Roses and report on the political background of the novel. How did the Wars of the Roses end?

7. Is *The Black Arrow* just an escapist adventure story, or does it have some moral value? If so, what is it?

8. View the Walt Disney film version of *The Black Arrow* and compare it to the book.

9. Compare Richard Shelton to Stevenson's other adolescent heroes: Jim Hawkins in *Treasure Island* and David Balfour in *Kidnapped*. To what extent, and in what ways, do the outlaws resemble Long John Silver and Alan Breck Stewart?

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Related Titles/Adaptations

Stevenson never wrote a sequel to *The Black Arrow*, though he did write two other stories about the Middle Ages: "A Lodging for the Night" and "The Sire de Maletroit's Door." He set several of his adventure stories in the past, though, including his two classics, *Treasure Island* and *Kidnapped*. The first work involves eighteenth-century piracy and buried treasure. Jim Hawkins, the narrator, is the first of Stevenson's adolescent heroes, while the one-legged pirate Long John Silver, alternately ingratiating and villainous, ranks among the author's most memorable characters.

Treasure Island features a polished style, a psychological insight, and a narrative drive that makes it rewarding for readers of all ages.

Kidnapped, also set in the eighteenth century, revolves around the Appin murder of 1746. Eighteen-year-old David Balfour is sold by his treacherous uncle as an indentured servant, but on his way to America he befriends an outlawed Jacobite, Alan Breck Stewart, and together they survive a shipwreck, elude the soldiers seeking the Appin murderer, return to Edinburgh, and reclaim Balfour's rightful inheritance. Stevenson published *David Balfour*, entitled *Catriona in England*, as a sequel to *Kidnapped*. Less compelling than its predecessor, *David Balfour* has greater psychological and moral depth, and Stevenson thought it the better book.

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde departs from Stevenson's tales of adventure. A sinister science fiction novella, the work tells of an experiment that divides the protagonist into two persons, one innocent, the other evil.

The Black Arrow was adapted to film by Columbia studio in 1948. Starring Louis Hayward, Janet Blair, and George Macready, the movie features swashbuckling adventure. In 1985 the Disney studios made a new adaptation, starring Oliver Reed as Sir Daniel. This version is available on video cassette. Also, Stevenson's text inspired a series of celebrated illustrations by the painter N. C. Wyeth. These illustrations are available in the 1987 Scribner's *Illustrated Classics* edition of *The Black Arrow*.



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