Kidnapped Short Guide

Kidnapped by Robert Louis Stevenson

BOOKRAGS

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Overview

Unlike most Victorians, Stevenson considered the romance a valid literary form. He claimed that the form provided mental relief from the pressures of everyday life and felt that romances needed to be written as carefully as any other type of literature. Thus, while Kidnapped may seem to be merely a good adventure story at first, it also should be appreciated for its substantial literary value.

The adventures of David Balfour in Kidnapped proceed along a wild but understandable course; the plot is symmetrical and easy to follow. David loses his parents, leaves home to learn about his inheritance, is kidnapped to keep him from that birthright, and spends much of the book trying to get back home so that he can obtain his due.

What sets this adventure story apart from so many others are the little touches that illuminate character.

Stevenson also builds suspense as he develops realistic motivations for the characters' often violent and dangerous acts. Although he emphasizes action in the story, Stevenson provides intriguing insight into the psychological and emotional background of his unusual characters.

Realistic details draw the reader into the rugged setting of the story, and Stevenson's dramatization of the Scottish rebellions against England in the eighteenth century offers the reader a fascinating account of history.

The hero of the story, David Balfour, recounts the excitement and historical detail surrounding his childhood abduction and adventures from a mature, adult perspective. Using this viewpoint to tell David's story enables Stevenson to create a coming-of-age tale within a romantic novel. Through his adventures, David learns about human nature; he learns to develop a code of behavior for himself based on the virtues of honesty, courage, and loyalty.

These qualities help David to survive his occasionally violent, sometimes humorous ordeals.

About the Author

Robert Louis Balfour Stevenson was born on November 13, 1850, in Edinburgh, Scotland, the only child of Margaret Balfour Stevenson and Thomas Stevenson, a lighthouse engineer. The formative years of Stevenson's life were influenced by his father's emphasis on duty and responsibility, and his mother's warm affection.

These two forces played a great part in the development of both Stevenson's personal attitudes and the themes and topics of his writing. He tended to rebel against the stern old-world rigors of Scottish culture and to appreciate deeply the warmth and sympathy of human affection. His poor health intensified his desire to escape the cold and the austere; Stevenson contracted tuberculosis when a child and was intermittently ill for the rest of his life. The first sign of true rebellion, at first not revealed to his parents but later causing a rupture with his father, was his disaffection for the strict tenets of the Calvinistic tradition of his family. The next was his decision to discontinue the study of engineering, a program he had entered at Edinburgh University in 1867 to please his father.

Stevenson's desire to please the people he cared for had prompted him to undertake the study of law in 1871, but his principal enthusiasm was writing. He decided to teach himself to write and published a historical essay when he was only sixteen.

Stevenson's mode of self-instruction has caused considerable discussion among critics and biographers. By his own admission, Stevenson was a "sedulous ape" of writers whose styles he admired, including William Wordsworth, Charles Lamb, Daniel Defoe, and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Because he believed that style was an artificial achievement that should look easy and natural, he asserted that imitating great stylists provided the best writing instruction.

Probably the main literary influence on him, though, was Sir Walter Scott, with whom Stevenson has been frequently compared. Stevenson resembled Scott (who was lame) in having a physical infirmity that caused him to love adventure, and in enjoying the study of Scottish history, an interest Stevenson incorporated in several of his bestknown works.

His love of adventure and travel led Stevenson, after his graduation from law school in 1875, to roam the world.

His first major trip took him through parts of France and Belgium; it was in France that he met Fanny Osbourne, the woman who was to become his wife. His love for Osbourne, who was separated from her husband and soon divorced him, drew Stevenson to California, where he married her in 1880. Ten years older than Stevenson, Fanny became a stabilizing force in his restless life. She traveled with him and cared for him during his periods of sickness.

The rest of Stevenson's life was devoted to travel—to Europe, to America, and then to the South Seas—and writing. A versatile writer, he composed short stories, novels, travel books, essays, poems, and plays for a varied audience.

Stevenson's broad appeal compensated for the lack of depth and substance that some critics noted in his writing.

Stevenson left England and Scotland and settled in Samoa in 1890, soon earning the nickname "Tusitala," or "teller of tales." After several productive years at his estate, he died suddenly, from apoplexy, on December 3, 1894.

Stevenson's tomb stands atop a mountain on Samoa overlooking the Pacific.

Throughout his brief life, Stevenson never wavered from his conviction that, despite hardship and disappointment, one must live as fully and courageously as possible. The vitality of his life and his writings reflects this ideal.

Characters

While David and Alan are the principal actors in the plot of Kidnapped, there are a number of secondary and tertiary characters who people the ship and the landscape of the story. In accord with Stevenson's penchant for double identity, Captain Hoseason is seen by David as "two men, and [he] left the better one behind as soon as he set foot on board his vessel."

In the Highlands, David encounters a number of colorful men who, despite being, many of them, outlaws, display a high sense of honor and courtesy.

Cluny Macpherson, the chief of a band of outlaws, is exceedingly polite and yet addicted to gambling. When a serious duel is about to take place in the home of Duncan Maclaren, the host manages to transform the contest into a competition to see who can play the bagpipes better, Alan or Robert Oig Macgregor — it is typical of Alan's nature that, although he has competed against a person whom he views as a bitter enemy, he admits that Macgregor is after all the superior piper.

The novel is based partly on an actual murder that took place in Scotland, and the inclusion of so many well-developed characters helps the interest in this text to be far beyond what one expects of a "boys' book," which too many readers have judged it to be. One last trait of the Scots that Stevenson understood well and illustrates repeatedly is caution and prudence. Mr. Rankeillor knows very well that one of the persons before him is the outlaw Alan Breck; so, he cleverly accepts "Mr. Thomson" for the person he claims to be and remarks that "I have forgotten my glasses" and thus cannot be sure that he would recognize Thomson again. It is typical of Alan's pride that he is not pleased and that his vanity is a bit wounded. All in all, these people are very true to life, especially for that time and place.

Setting

The story takes place in Scotland and the waters around it in the summer of 1751. David's travels take him over much of the Scottish countryside, especially the Highlands. Most editions of the novel contain background explanations that clarify the historical situation. The 1700s saw two Scottish rebellions against England caused by the decision that the House of Hanover would rule both countries. The Scots wanted their own royal family, the Stuarts, to rule again; they fought bloody wars in the attempt to accomplish this goal. The last revolt, in 1745-1746, ended with defeat for Scotland. By 1751 many of the Highland chiefs were either in hiding or had escaped to the Continent, and their followers were still supporting them with money and assistance.

One of the principal conflicts in the text exists between the attitude of David, who represents the Whig Lowlander acceptance of the Hanoverian monarchy, and that of Alan Breck Stewart, who stands for the rebellious Highland resistance to British control and, in some cases, the hope that the Stuarts might again rule the British Isles. This issue causes considerable friction in the plot, as it did in history. Stevenson manages to achieve an admirable objectivity toward both sides of the controversy.

Among the perennial historical lessons in the book lies the fact that armed rebellion, successful or not, never leads to absolute peace and serenity.

Social Concerns

From a historical point of view, one of the chief conflicts in Kidnapped is that David Balfour and Alan Breck Stewart are from different parts of Scotland and hold opposing political beliefs. David is a Lowlander with loyalist sympathies, while Alan is a Jacobite with a price on his head for aiding the cause of the Stuarts in their endeavor to seize the throne of England. At the time of the story, 1751, sentiments on both sides of the issue ran high. From a social standpoint, these two characters have lived very different lives. David comes from the small community of Essendean, among common folk; Alan, however, has traveled widely and consorted with persons of all levels of society.

One important social revelation in the novel is the high sense of honor among people of but modest rank. In the Highlands, where Alan is from, the people often surprise David by exhibiting a sensitivity and civility unexpected in such rude surroundings.

And, even the bragging, rowdy Alan can be gracious, as in the fact that he refuses to speak Gaelic with his comrades because he knows that David does not understand the tongue. Thus, while Alan brags of being "a bonny fighter," which indeed he is, he also displays a profound respect for character, as in the way he treats the honorable lawyer Mr. Rankeillor.

Techniques

The main device in Kidnapped is that David Balfour narrates the entire text.

The reader knows only what he knows and tends to believe what David believes. Thereby an element of realism is developed, in that the headlong plot is not slowed by deep thoughts and profound speculations, such as might be expected from the author himself in a third-person narrative or from a more sophisticated narrator. David tends to believe what he is told, at least for the first several chapters. As he becomes more aware of the machinations of his enemies, he grows more wary, but in a quite credible manner. For example, in the early scene in which the wicked uncle, Ebenezer Balfour (it has been speculated that Stevenson used his mother's maiden name as something of a tribute to her), tells David that he must lock the lad out of the house while Ebenezer is absent, David accepts the strange suggestion with unexpected equanimity, although he is surprised. Also, he is remarkably unperturbed by his uncle's crude attempts to kill him. Although he is temporarily indignant, the feeling passes, and he soon is ready to follow Ebenezer's suggestions. It would be difficult for an author to create this sense of honest naivety with any other point of view.

Themes

The most salient theme is that virtue and courage will prevail over craftiness and evil. In advancing this thesis, Stevenson uses the time-honored quest motif. After being kidnapped at the instigation of his wicked uncle and meeting with Alan, David must travel afar, fight battles, and even kill enemies.

Another thematic element is Stevenson's repeatedly exposed belief that there are positive and negative sides in nearly everyone. Several of the men on the ship where David is taken illustrate this belief. Second officer Riach shows some kindness to David, but his kindness is chiefly confined to periods of drunkenness; when he is sober, he tends to be mean. On the other hand, Mr. Shuan is the opposite: kind when sober and violent when drunk, as when he kills the cabin boy in a fit of drunken rage. Even Alan Breck, with all his bravado and tendency to violence, can be sensitive and caring. In a serious conflict between Alan and David, when tempers are flaring and David offers to fight Alan with swords, Alan pauses and refuses because "it would be murther" — he is a skilled swordsman, and David has shown little aptitude for this sort of combat.

In sum, the chief lesson in this novel is that one must learn and practice a valid moral code of behavior. While David begins his adventure as a goodhearted lad, he emerges at the close as a more sophisticated young man who understands, both himself and the world and more seriously appreciates the need for honesty, courage, and responsibility.

Adaptations

This lively adventure story has lent itself especially well to cinema adaptations. They begin with the 1917 silent verison, produced by Edison and directed by Alan Crosley. The next popular version was Danish, starring Holger-Madsen as Long John Silver. In 1938, Twentieth Century Fox brought out another adaptation, directed by Alfred L. Werker and starring the late John Carradine. Roddy McDowell starred in the Monogram production, directed by William Beaudine, in 1948. In 1960, Disney created yet another version, starring Peter Finch and Peter O' Toole and directed by Robert Sevenson. Another pair of British actors, Michael Caine and Jack Hawkins, took lead roles in the Omnibus production of 1971, directed by Delbert Mann.

There is even an animated version, produced in Australia in 1972. The latest adaptation is a 1995 made-fortelevision movie, directed by Ivan Passer, and co-executive produced by Francis Ford Coppola. Filmed entirely in Ireland, it starred Armand Assante as Alan Breck (with considerably more emphasis on this character than is found in the novel).

Topics for Discussion

1. Readers have noticed Stevenson's fascination with duplicity. In what ways do various forms of duplicity play a large part in the novel?

2. David and Alan have been judged by some critics as two parts of a whole, rounded person. How are they shown to have opposite and also complementary qualities? Do these traits truly "fit" together?

3. What does the episode of David's stay on the island contribute to the story? What aspects of his personality does it emphasize?

4. What seems to be the Highlanders' chief motivation in maintaining their loyalties to a lost cause?

5. The visit to the cave of Cluny Macpherson is not integral to the plot, but it enriches the characterization of both David and Alan. How?

6. David tells himself several times, especially after the murder of Colin Campbell, that he would be better off escaping alone than with Alan, who is suspected of the murder. Why does he not at least propose the separation to his friend?

7. Stevenson is known for his love of setting. How do the various locations, particularly in the Highlands, add to the force and vigor of the events?

8. Do the reasons for the quarrel between David and Alan seem valid? Is the settlement of the dispute readily believable? Why?

9. At the conclusion of the narrative, several matters remain unresolved, such as Alan's escape and the murder mystery. Is the ending satisfactory?

10. David is repelled by bloodshed, yet he sees plenty of it and even causes some himself. How can his revulsion be reconciled with his active participation, especially on the ship?

11. Stevenson believed strongly in the element of chance in human life. How much of a part does accident play in the plot of Kidnapped? Do these events seem credible?

12. Can one believe Ebenezer Balfour's extreme miserliness and excessive attention to security in view of the probable reasons that he became this type of miserable person?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Although Stevenson considered Kidnapped his best novel, some critics prefer David Balfour. Is the sequel a better literary production?

2. Although a knowledge of eighteenth-century Scottish history is not necessary for an appreciation of the book, in the year of publication (1886) many readers in England and Scotland would have had some grasp of that era.

How does the study of the period of a "historical" novel facilitate understanding the book? How does the use of Scottish words and phrases make the novel seem more realistic and help the contemporary reader to gain a sense of eighteenth-century Scotland?

3. At one point, David complains about the Highlanders he has met, telling Alan that they could all use a bath. How does Stevenson seem to feel about these extraordinary people? Is he sympathetic or critical?

4. The plot of this book has been termed episodic. Are there any episodes that could be eliminated without detracting from the structure and effect of the novel?

5. Stevenson places much emphasis on the loyalty of Highlanders to their chief. Does this feeling seem valid and realistic? Are there logical reasons for the attitude? Is it better understood in historical perspective?

Literary Precedents

The bildungsroman, a genre of novel about the development from youth and innocence to age and experience has an old tradition in world literature. While Stevenson probably did not have such an intention in mind, Kidnapped does bear a thematic resemblance to Goethe's Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship (1795-1796), Dickens's David Copperfield (1849-1850) and Great Expectations (1860-1861), and Twain's The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884). The tradition has been followed by many authors in later years also. The novels of Sir Walter Scott offer numerous tales of young men learning about life and experiencing lively adventures.

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Related Titles

The 1893 sequel to Kidnapped has two titles, David Balfour and, in Britain, Catriona. The latter title alludes to Catriona Drummond, with whom David falls in love while he is helping Alan Breck to escape to the Continent.

Some critics believe that the sequel surpasses Kidnapped by being more historically oriented and "mature."

Also, the love affair adds a dimension not found in the earlier volume.

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