The Lantern Bearer: A Life of Robert Louis Stevenson Short Guide

The Lantern Bearer: A Life of Robert Louis Stevenson by James Playsted Wood

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Overview

Robert Louis Stevenson's writings took on a wide variety of subjects and form.

Famous for his romantic adventures, which inspired many of the romantic novels written in the late nineteenth century, Stevenson was also an essayist, a poet, and a promising modern novelist. A tireless experimenter, at the very end of his life he hit upon the right method for combining depth of character with an effective plot in the unfinished Weir of Hermiston (1896).

Stevenson believed that writing should be performed with "gusto," and when health permitted, Stevenson lived his life with gusto as well. Like that of his subject, James Playsted Wood's writing contains, as one reviewer put it, "such rush and color it sounds as if RLS had just left the room." Wood's vigorous style suits the personality he analyzes, and brings to life the strong-willed author of such classics as Treasure Island (1883), Kidnapped (1886), and Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1886).

About the Author

James Playsted Wood was born on December 11, 1905, in Brooklyn, New York, to William Thomas and Olive Padbury Hicks Wood. He earned two degrees from Columbia University, a bachelor's in 1927 and a master's in 1933. While working on his master's degree, Wood taught English at Du Pont Manual Training High School in Louisville, Kentucky, and continued teaching there until 1937. From 1937 until 1946, he was a member of the English department at Amherst College in Massachusetts, beginning as an instructor and eventually becoming an assistant professor. A member of the U.S. Army Air Forces during World War II, Wood served in the Pentagon office of the chief of staff, General George C. Marshall. He became a major and earned the army commendation medal. During the war, on August 14, 1943, he married Elizabeth Craig, a teacher of Latin, French, and Greek.

In 1946 Wood left both the military and Amherst College to work as assistant to the director of research at the Curtis Publishing Company in Philadelphia. He stayed with the Curtis Company until 1962. During this same period, Wood became associated with the children's magazine Jack and Jill, first as a contributor of stories, articles, and poems and later as managing editor (1954-1955) and contributing editor (1959-1964). A full-time writer since 1966, Wood has written extensively about magazines, advertising, and the stock market.

Wood targets much of his writing for young people. For very young readers he has produced several fantasy books, and for young adults he has written both historical fiction and literary biographies. Many of his biographies for young adults profile nineteenth-century writers; with the exceptions of British authors A. Conan Doyle and H. G. Wells, whose lives extended into the twentieth century, he has not dealt with any recent literary figures.

Setting

Wood's biography covers the life of Robert Louis Stevenson from his birth in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1850 to his death in Samoa in 1894. Diagnosed with tuberculosis—a serious lung disease common in the nineteenth century— early in his childhood, Stevenson traveled a great deal throughout his life in search of healthy environments. As a young man he often visited Europe, especially France, and also traveled to the United States, spending time in both Monterey and San Francisco in 1879.

Stevenson married Fanny Osbourne in the U.S. in 1880 and returned with his wife to Europe, where they visited a famous hospital for tuberculars in Davos, Switzerland. The couple lived in Hyeres in southern France from 1882 to 1884, and in 1887 moved to Saranac, New York, the location of another famous hospital for tuberculars. Between 1888 and 1890 the Stevensons cruised the South Sea Islands, and in 1890 they settled in Samoa, Stevenson's final home.

Social Sensitivity

Stevenson is remembered as a writer of romances, essays, and travel books.

In all of his work Stevenson displayed the talent that prompted the painter John Everett Millaise to remark: "Nobody living can see with such an eye as that fellow, and nobody is such a master of his tools." Stevenson's eye, as Wood plainly shows, was not blind to the miseries of the places he visited. Although he was an agnostic, Stevenson came to the defense of the Christian missionaries because he believed they were trying to improve the lives of the people in the South Seas. For similar reasons he also championed Father Damien's work in the leper colony on Molokai.

The role of white planter in Samoa had a natural appeal to a personality as theatrical as Stevenson's. But he genuinely liked the Polynesian people and did all he could to win just treatment for them. As a consequence of his efforts, the island authorities—whether English, American, or German—regarded him as a nuisance. Wood provides interesting coverage of Stevenson's attitudes toward the civil war in Samoa during the 1890s. By supporting Mataafa for king rather than the authorities' choice, Stevenson was, for a time, in danger of being deported. Not a reformer by nature, Stevenson used his only weapon, his writing, to combat the wrongs he observed in society.

Literary Qualities

Some reviewers of The Lantern Bearer have complained that although Wood captures the spirit of adventure inherent in his subject's life, his writing skills do not approach those of Stevenson. Wood does succeed, however, in presenting a very complex personality. He admits that Stevenson was a poseur who loved costumes, whether a barrister's robes or the planter's white drill and riding boots that he considered appropriate on his Samoan estate. While most poseurs have nothing substantial behind the roles they play, Wood shows that Stevenson was a skilled professional who overcame physical handicaps to accomplish work every bit as difficult as the engineering feats of his father and grandfather.

Wood employs short declarative sentences to portray his subject and, as in all his biographies, succinctly incorporates a great deal of information in a relatively brief space. Wood presents the essential facts of his subject's life while giving insight into his subject's character. Noted for his vigorous, enthusiastic style, Wood sometimes resorts to simplified, choppy prose, perhaps in an effort to clarify the material for young adult readers. But most of the book is written in a straightforward style, free of condescension.

Themes and Characters

Robert Lewis (later Louis) Balfour Stevenson was born on November 13, 1850, in Edinburgh, Scotland, to a family of established middle-class professionals. His father, Thomas Stevenson, and grandfather, Robert Stevenson, were both engineers who specialized in the construction of lighthouses and breakwaters. Stevenson's mother, Margaret Isabella Balfour, came from a long line of ministers.

Wood portrays Stevenson as a person uncertain of his identity, always trying on new roles and costumes. An invalid for much of his childhood and young manhood, Stevenson had ample time to invent adventurous dream worlds for himself. When his health permitted, he traveled about the world, putting his frail physique to tests—such as a journey across the western U.S. by wagon train—that nearly killed him. Stevenson likewise pushed himself as a writer, working hard to perfect his style. Wood maintains that as Stevenson matured as a writer, he became less interested in romance and more interested in realistic character portrayal.

Unlike several earlier biographers, Wood does not sentimentalize Stevenson but instead depicts him as a complex combination of boyishness and maturity. Impulsive and stubborn, Stevenson initially attempted to honor his father's wish that he follow the family profession and in 1867 entered Edinburgh University to study engineering.

But in 1871 he gave up engineering for law and passed his preliminary examinations for the Scottish bar the following year. During his student years he visited bars and brothels, and profoundly shocked his parents by proclaiming himself an agnostic—that is, someone who does not believe that the existence of God can be proved.

Stevenson never practiced law; by 1875 he was writing essays and working out ideas as to what constituted good writing. That year, while paying one of his frequent visits to the art colonies at Grez and Fontainbleu in France, he met and fell in love with Fanny Osbourne, a married American woman ten years his senior. Upon her return to America in 1878, Stevenson diverted himself by traveling in France and by collaborating on plays with his friend, William Ernest Henley. Fanny divorced her husband and married Stevenson in San Francisco in May 1880. Despite their puritanical morality, Stevenson's family accepted Fanny, and Stevenson and his father reconciled. Wood presents Fanny as a practical woman who acted as both nursemaid and manager for her husband.

Ill health afflicted Stevenson throughout his life, but despite near fatal hemorrhages, he pursued his writing. Wood emphasizes Stevenson's stoic approach to life and suggests that one of his greatest qualities as a person and a writer was his ability to transcend personal difficulties and make life more colorful for those around him. When Stevenson settled in Samoa in 1890, for instance, he gained the affection of the local community and earned the nickname "Tusitala," meaning "storyteller."

While in Samoa he wrote his finest piece of fiction, a fragment entitled Weir of Hermiston (1896). He died suddenly of a brain hemorrhage on December 3, 1894, at Upolu in Western Samoa.

As the biography's title, The Lantern Bearer, implies, Wood focuses thematically on Stevenson's ability to illuminate the world around him through his writing and his perseverance in the face of great physical suffering. Although he presents Stevenson's weaknesses, Wood highlights Stevenson's courageous battle against a debilitating disease, his fascination with words, his struggle to perfect his writing style, and his instinctive sympathy with the oppressed. He expresses his theme in his portrayal of Stevenson as an inspiring writer and human being sensitive to the quirks and joys of life.

Topics for Discussion

1. In your opinion, what are the strengths of Wood's biography of Stevenson?

2. Even as a grown man, English prime minister Winston Churchill used to read Stevenson's Treasure Island once a year.

What do you think this says about Churchill? About Stevenson?

3. Robert Louis Stevenson became a fully qualified lawyer but never practiced. Why not?

4. A master of several prose forms, Stevenson also wrote verse all of his life but never considered himself more than an amateur as a poet. How do the requirements for good prose and good poetry differ?

5. How did his long years of invalidism affect Stevenson as a writer?

6. What qualities did Fanny Stevenson possess to make her marriage successful?

7. A modern writer of thrillers, Stephen King, has admitted that he has difficulty creating believable women. Likewise, Stevenson's works, especially the earlier ones, do not depict women in major roles. Why is this?

8. Stevenson's earlier biographers turned him into an overly sweet, almost saintly character. How do you think Stevenson would have felt about this sentimental view of his life?

9. During his university years, Stevenson declared himself an agnostic.

What does this term mean? Some of his biographers have seen him as a puritan, a true descendant of the Scots Covenanters who sought to spread Presbyterianism in the seventeenth century.

Are they seeing the man correctly?

10. Stevenson loved costumes. He wore black velvet jackets, flowing ties, long hair, and, later in life, a tropical planter's clothes. Why is it that a person with such a dramatic flair never wrote successful plays, despite several attempts to do so?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. The problem of evil is an ancient philosophical topic. It absorbed Stevenson all of his life. Choose one of Stevenson's works and discuss how it addresses evil.

2. Discuss the part played by Scotland in Stevenson's works. Some readers have said that he was never more preoccupied with Scotland and her history than he was when in exile from his native land. Why is this?

3. Stevenson's works have been called "romances." Read Stevenson's defenses of romances as a literary genre. Do you think that Stevenson's points are valid?

Do you think that his works are romances? Why or why not?

4. Most critics agree that with Weir of Hermiston Stevenson succeeded in writing not a romance but a novel. Compare this uncompleted work with some of his earlier romances. What are some of the differences?

5. Read In the South Seas, "The Beach of Falesa," and The Ebb-Tide, all written during Stevenson's years in Samoa.

What attitudes does Stevenson display toward this part of the world, its peoples, and the European colonizers?

For Further Reference

Furnas, Joseph Chamberlain. Voyage to Windward: The Life of Robert Louis Stevenson. New York: William Sloane Associates, 1951. This is still the best biography of Stevenson.

Graham, Kenneth. English Criticism of the Novel, 1865-1900. London: Oxford University Press, 1965. This book explains why Robert Louis Stevenson's romances were considered healthy alternatives to the realistic novel.

Hennessy, James Pope. Robert Louis Stevenson. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974. A sympathetic account of Stevenson's life and works.

Noble, Andrew, ed. Robert Louis Stevenson. Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble, 1983. An excellent collection of essays about Stevenson's life and work. Includes articles by Andrew Jefford about writer Vladimir Nabokov's admiration for Stevenson's work—especially Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde—and by James Wilson on Stevenson's skill as an essayist and travel writer.

Saposnik, Irving S. Robert Louis Stevenson. New York: Twayne, 1974. A study of all of Stevenson's works, this book is particularly good on such themes as civilization versus barbarism and the problem of evil, lifelong preoccupations of the novelist.

Related Titles

Wood has written three other biographies of British writers for young adults. The writers —Lewis Carroll, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and H. G. Wellsare identified with the Victorian era, although Doyle and Wells lived into the twentieth century. All three wrote books that appeal to mature readers as well as young adults.

In The Man Who Hated Sherlock Holmes, Wood gives a lively account of Conan Doyle's life, concentrating on his attempts as a writer to build his reputation on something other than his Sherlock Holmes detective stories. Conan Doyle also wrote romances such as The White Company (1891) and Rodney Stone (1896), but readers still identify ,him with the great detective.

The Snark Was a Boojum is a rather frank biography of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, better known as Lewis Carroll.

Wood hints that Dodgson was somewhat abnormal in his sexual tastes, although the life that emerges in this book is balanced and appealing. Wood includes a good analysis of Carroll's work.

The title I Told You So! indicates the egotistical confidence of H. G. Wells.

Trained as a biologist by T. H. Huxley, Wells believed that scientific progress would establish a socialistic new world in the future. Of all his eighty or so works, Wells's scientific fantasies have proved to be the most enduring. Both The Time Machine (1895) and The War of the Worlds (1898) have been adapted to film. Wood provides a surprisingly in-depth portrait of this writer in his brief book.

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Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor
Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design
Amanda Mott

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)
ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)
ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature□Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction□19th century□Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction□20th century□Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3□dc20 96-20771 CIP

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996