

1992

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Recommended Citation

Scheick, William J. (1992) "The Ethos of Stevenson's "The Isle of Voices"," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 27: Iss. 1.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol27/iss1/12>

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William J. Scheick

The Ethos of Stevenson's "The Isle of Voices"

On first encounter, Robert Louis Stevenson's "The Isle of Voices" (1893) seems a slight work,¹ and this impression may account for its long-standing neglect by literary critics. Several other stories by Stevenson, however, have recently undergone favorable critical reconsideration, including not only *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886)² but also "The Beach of Falesá"³ which appears with "The Isle of Voices" in *Island Nights' Entertainments* (1893). Stevenson, it would appear, is slowly emerging in our critical perception as a serious writer whose craft cunningly combines social message with artistic strategies.⁴

¹Stevenson's contemporaries dismissed the story as lacking in purpose: see, for example Paul Maixner, ed., *Robert Louis Stevenson: The Critical Heritage* (London, 1981), pp. 411-22. For the background and history of this story, see Roger G. Swearingen, *The Prose Writings of Robert Louis Stevenson: A Guide* (Hamden, CT, 1980), pp. 178-80.

²In *Fictional Structure and Ethics: The Turn-of-the-Century English Novel* (Athens, GA, 1990) I emphasize Stevenson's management of narrative structure as a means of instructing his readers on the dual impulses of the self and the therapeutic value of community (pp. 5-6).

³See, for example, Katherine Bailey Linehan, "Taking Up with Kanakas: Stevenson's Complex Social Criticism in 'The Beach of Falesá,'" *English Literature in Transition*, 33 (1990), 407-22.

⁴In *Robert Louis Stevenson and the Fiction of Adventure* (Cambridge, MA, 1964)

In describing the narratives in *Island Nights' Entertainments* Stevenson spoke of their "queer realism," and he singled out "The Isle of Voices" as "the most extravagant" tale in the collection.⁵ The phrases "queer realism" and "extravagant" express Stevenson's preference for romance over realism in his own fiction.⁶ Because it is intrinsically dialectical,⁷ romance appealed to him as a medium, more flexible than verisimilitudinous fiction, for philosophical inquiry into the nature of existence.

Stevenson preferred romance because in it he could artistically blend imaginative dream (art) and experiential reality (life) without as many restraints as the conventions of realism seemed to impose. Romance, in other words, could be extravagant; it could achieve a heightened effect by exceeding the limits of moderation, balance, reason, and necessity.⁸ This genre thereby provided Stevenson with a medium with fluid boundaries, a fictional topographic feature ideal for vexing his audience's complacent ontological and epistemological bearings as well as for advocating social or personal reform. Moreover, like other practitioners of "ethical romance,"⁹ Stevenson sometimes, as in "The Isle of Voices," explored the capacity of romance to transform itself into a reflexive statement about the "fantastic" nature of both art and life.

The plot of "The Isle of Voices" is deceptively simple. Keola resents his father-in-law's ability to produce money by means of magic, which enables him to purchase goods from foreign traders. One day, the sorcerer Kalamake asks his son-in-law to participate in the process, and they arrive on a

Robert Kiely specifically situates Stevenson's artistic consciousness in the late work, where early sleight-of-hand entertainment progresses to "adventure as a symbolic chart of the formidable risks" of life (p. 268).

⁵*The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, ed. Sidney Colvin (New York, 1923), IV, 153.

⁶See, for instance, Stevenson's reply to Henry James's "The Art of Fiction" (1884) in "A Humble Remonstrance" (1884), which Stevenson reprinted in *Memories and Portraits* (1887).

⁷Evan Carton, *The Rhetoric of American Romance: Dialectic and Identity in Emerson, Dickinson, Poe, and Hawthorne* (Baltimore, 1985). On dualism in Stevenson's writings, see Edwin M. Eigner, *Robert Louis Stevenson and Romantic Tradition* (Princeton, 1966).

⁸For a pertinent taxonomic description of the genre, see Richard Chase, *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (Garden City, NY, 1957).

⁹William J. Scheick, "Ethical Romance and the Detecting Reader: The Example of Chesterton's *The Club of Queer Trades*," in *The Cunning Craft: Original Essays on Detective Fiction and Contemporary Literary Theory*, ed. Ronald G. Walker and June M. Frazer (Macomb, IL, 1990), pp. 86-97.

strange island where they can be heard but not be seen by its itinerant residents. By burning certain leaves, Kalamake transforms seashells into shining coins; but after their return Keola broods over the small reward he receives for the venture and then threatens his father-in-law with exposure unless further bounty is forthcoming. In revenge, Kalamake tricks Keola and abandons him to drown in the Sea of the Dead. However, Keola is rescued by sailors, albeit he later jumps ship and swims to a strange island. Eventually he recognizes this island (seemingly haunted by the voices of invisible spirits) as the place he had visited with his father-in-law. Nervously, he takes another wife, but learns to his horror that her tribe plans to eat him. He flees to the beach where the ghostly sounds occur and where fortuitously he is saved by his (invisible) first wife, whose rescue of her husband requires the abandonment of her father on the island of voices.

As even this abbreviated synopsis of the plot suggests, "The Isle of Voices" may be extravagant in narrative matter, but it nonetheless conveys a sense of some serious purpose. There is no hint in it of any agreement with the Wildean notion that art is "of no ethical value" and "has no influence upon action."¹⁰ On the contrary, "The Isle of Voices" stresses the nature and consequences of greed. This thematic concern with avarice is particularly appropriate if this story was, as Stevenson's wife reports,¹¹ primarily intended for a Polynesian audience.

In the last four years of his life, Stevenson directly observed Polynesian culture, and as his *In the South Seas* (1896) documents, he saw greed and its complement, theft, as abiding characteristics of the islanders. He noted, in a representative instance, how they were especially "greedy of things new and foreign."¹² Of course, as his earlier writings indicate, the Polynesians were hardly unique in this vice, and obviously the foreign traders in "The Isle of Voices" are similarly motivated. Although Stevenson explicitly remarked elsewhere that he did not agree with the observation that the South Sea islanders were innocents corrupted by foreigners,¹³ he nevertheless at least intimated his disappointment and irritation that such a spiritual malaise should exist unabated in a place so naturally opulent.

¹⁰Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Harmondsworth, 1949), pp. 68, 241.

¹¹"Preface," *Islands Nights' Entertainments* (New York, 1923), p. viii. Page citations for "The Isle of Voices" are given in my text and refer to this "Biographical Edition."

¹²*In the South Seas* (New York, 1923), p. 335.

¹³*In the South Seas*, pp. 94-100.

This natural richness figures importantly in "The Isle of Voices." When Kalamake makes "bright" and "shining" coins, he does so on an island of "fresh and beautiful" palms with "fans like gold," and he uses sea shells that "glittered" (pp. 219, 224, 227). These images suggest that the natural world of the islanders is already replete with a wealth (*kaupoi*) that surpasses the monetary "treasure" (p. 219) into which it is debasingly transformed, a wealth free for the taking by any viewer with the sensibility to appropriate it through aesthetic appreciation. The temptation of foreign goods (as Stevenson's *In the South Seas* also notes) reinforces Kalamake's and Keola's avarice. Both men are blind to the indigenous affluence of their lives.

As is characteristic of many other ethical romances, "The Isle of Voices" exposes this oversight by mingling imaginative dream and experiential reality in such a way as to suggest that all of life is at any moment like a dream. Keola experiences the strange collision of two modes of being (visibility and invisibility) "like one that dreams" (p. 255), which analogy recalls Kalamake's remark during Keola's first venture on the island of voices: "All this is like a dream and shadows. All will disappear and be forgotten" (p. 226). But Kalamake's comment applies not only to the condition of invisibility but also to life in the visible world; for as Keola discovers, when he is invisible he is merely situated in another part of the visible world. Stevenson, in short, expresses an ancient notion, found in pagan and Christian thinking alike, that the life humanity experiences as substantial is essentially as shadowy and fleeting as is a dream.

This thematic equation of life and dream is potentially experienced by the audience of the story as a frustration of the seemingly stable, empirically-reinforced capacities of reason. Reason cannot come to terms with the fantastic elements of this story, particularly with how, as if on a Möbius band, the condition of invisibility flows from and back into the condition of visibility. This resistance to the reductional and normalizing nature of reason is a feature of the extravagant nature of Stevenson's ethical romance, which potentially destabilizes its audience's complacent sense of ontological and epistemological bearings in order to urge a reformation of perception.

This process of destabilizing is a form of dying away from the world as conventionally seen through darkened glasses, to paraphrase St. Paul. It is a death of one mode of dream-perception that is preferable to the ultimate end of one's life-dream. Death is emphasized throughout Stevenson's story.¹⁴ Not only is Keola nearly drowned in the Sea of the Dead by Kalamake and nearly eaten by his second wife's tribe, but his experience while invisible on the island of voices is accompanied with a "pang . . . like death" and his

¹⁴See, relatedly, Joseph J. Egan, "Grave Sites and Moral Death: A Reexamination of Stevenson's 'The Body-Snatcher,'" *English Literature in Transition*, 13 (1970), 9-15.

later experience while visible on that same island produces a fear "as sharp as death" (pp. 223, 255). Whether visible or invisible, Keola is pursued by death, the end of either dream, either version of life. And that physical death may indeed be the final demise of all of one's dreamlike alternatives for existence is implied in Stevenson's story; for if the itinerant inhabitants of the island believe that the "bodiless voices" (p. 253) they hear belong to *aitu* (ghosts or spirits), Stevenson's audience knows better, knows that these voices belong to living people "fantastically" circuited (as if on a Möbius band) through some sort of space-time warp. In this way, Stevenson's audience is instructed about the insubstantial dreamlike nature of life as well as about its fleeting endurance, so fragile before the rupture of death that quite possibly, like Kalamake, one may "never more [be] heard of" (p. 259) again and so never have lived a more fulfilling version of life.

Given the fleeting insubstantiality of this fantasy called life, Stevenson's story suggests, one ought to appreciate the dreamlike protean possibilities of that life, especially the abundant riches so often overlooked in everyday experience. As Keola discovers at the end of his terrifying adventure, his first wife bears him the greatest treasure of all: the gift of love that leads her to abandon her wizard father in order to save her ordinary husband's life. In effect, she gives her husband a new birth into the world, and he suddenly sees everything he once took for granted with renewed childlike vision: "Now, when Keola could see his wife at last he was mighty pleased, and he was mighty pleased to be home again in Molokai and sit down beside a bowl of poi" (p. 257). Such simple, commonplace things as a bowl of cooked and fermented taro root, a palm with golden fans, and a glittering seashell are among the countless treasures that abound in one's life-dream. And in order not to forfeit that wealth through a blinding and inexplicable greed, one must see this richness of life for what it is, must experience an appreciative vision of the protean everyday wonders that intrinsically inform and redeem the shadowy, fleeting dream that is human existence.

This ethical message, urging Polynesian and English audiences alike to a personal reformation of vision concerning the riches of life, carries a particularly poignant note. Stevenson published "The Isle of Voices" about a year before he died (1894), and while writing it he was keenly aware of his own approaching death. *In the South Seas*, for example, opens with explicit comments (penned no earlier than 1891) on his expectation of dying shortly as a result of his bad health; and this same concern permeates the letters he wrote during the 1890s. These autobiographical revelations help explain Stevenson's angle of vision in "The Isle of the Dead," as if in it he were meditating on how his own imminent death, or the threat of permanent "invisibility," had highlighted for him those treasures of the visible world that he, like others, had previously overlooked or underestimated.

But the author's personal investment in the "The Isle of the Dead" appears to be even more subtle. Just as in the plot of the story Keola circuits through a space-time warp, so too in the narrative the living author circuits through something akin to a space-time warp. The narrative voice of "The Isle of Voices" is at best a weak presence, only once identifying itself in passing as an "I" (p. 251), as if that voice were "dying away" like the "bodiless voices" Keola hears on the beach. In the sorcery of his extravagant romance, the author, while still visibly alive, paradoxically subsumes his identity in a narrational "bodiless voice," as if the narrator were already an invisible *aitu* of the dead author.

This maneuver reinforces the thematic emphasis of the story. Just as Keola's experience of invisibility (as a foreshadowing of death) awakens him to value the treasures of everyday life, just as perhaps Stevenson's anticipation of his own death quickens his appreciation of the intrinsic opulence of life, the author becomes a disembodied voice on the island of his narrative. On that textual island he tries to "haunt" his audience (on the beach or edge of the narrative, as it were) into a keener perception of the protean extravagance of human existence. And just as Keola leaves the island of voices, so too ideally the haunted audience should escape Stevenson's "isled" text and return to the everyday world with renewed perceptions. The author's *aitu*, his disembodied narrative voice, instructs its audience both through Keola's exemplary realization that no man should try to be a self-centered island of greed and, as well, through the story's own exemplary insistence that no art should try to be a self-centered island of insulated aestheticism devoid of ethical influence on human behavior. Just as Keola discovers the role of community—his wife's love gives him life—in the nurturing of his new perceptions, Stevenson discloses this same valuation of community—his audience's memory gives him life—as a motive behind the extravagance of his ethical romance.

In short, the narrative level of "The Isle of Voices" reperforms the central action and augments the moral of the plot of the story. In this way, Stevenson's ethical romance, which twice refers to the interaction of stories and belief (pp. 236, 245), becomes a reflexive statement about the nature of both life and art. In suggesting that life and art are equivalent to dreams in their mutual fleeting insubstantiality and protean possibilities, this tale represents the use of art *about* life to urge a personal reformation in the art *of* life. Fellow ethical romancer Gilbert K. Chesterton appreciated precisely this feature of Stevenson's "sort of romanticism, as compared with realism": that in returning "to elemental things," to the "first vividness in the vision of life," it "showed mutinous signs of deserting art for life."¹⁵

¹⁵C. K. Chesterton, *Robert Louis Stevenson* (London, 1929), pp. 93, 97, 106, 235.

If Stevenson's story were to succeed in its aim, a kind of sorcery would have been manifested. In *time*, then, the "bodiless voice" of the deceased (invisible) author would in effect circuit back into the visible world—be given new life, as it were—through the communal embodiment of his message in the reformed perceptions and lives of his audience. In a wondrous act of artistic sorcery his romance would amount to a continuous circuit of a once visible (living) author speaking through an invisible disembodied voice, now speaking that absent author back into the visible communal embodiment represented by the reformed lives of his audience. This circuiting back to the visible world of the hearing or reading community (specifically denied Kalamake in the story) would be equivalent to the author's rescue from the island of voices, the island of the text. In "The Isle of Voices" Stevenson was more than a story-teller (*Tusitala*, as the Samoans called him); he was a healing, rather than selfish, sorcerer who (unlike Kalamake) potentially would be "heard of" again in the magical and communal artistry of his ethical romance.

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