

Robert Louis Stevenson and the Paradox of Late Victorian Anti-Colonialism: A Postcolonial Critique

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I. Introduction: Defining the RLS Paradox in Postcolonial Studies

Robert Louis Stevenson (RLS) occupies an exceptionally complex and controversial position within the discourse of late Victorian literature and postcolonial studies. His life trajectory, moving from a celebrated novelist within the British metropole to an influential political actor and permanent resident in the Samoan Islands, necessitates a critical examination of his dual role: simultaneously a product of imperial culture and one of its most trenchant and active critics. Stevenson's unique self-exile culminated in his adoption by the Samoan people, who bestowed upon him the honorific title *Tusitala*, the "Teller of Tales". This position — as a trusted observer and participant on the periphery of empire — established a profound ethical and literary paradox that defines his legacy.

The core paradox lies in the fundamental disjunction between his canonical fiction, which often internalized and displaced the anxieties of empire — such as moral decay and unchecked greed — and his later political writings, which offered an explicit, actionable, and anti-colonial analysis of Western power structures in the Pacific. To understand this complex figure, it is essential to analyze his corpus through a rigorous theoretical framework that evaluates how a metropolitan author navigated the moral and political consequences of late-19th-century imperialism.

A. Theoretical Framework: Key Postcolonial Concepts for RLS Studies

The critical apparatus for evaluating Stevenson relies heavily on concepts established within postcolonial theory, a field

that emerged prominently in the 1970s and is founded upon concepts of resistance and the construction of the “Other”. Foundational theoretical terms are critical to dissecting Stevenson’s work:

* **Orientalism:** This concept, central to the field, describes the depiction of culture and society in the colonized world as exotic, backward, and fundamentally opposed to Western (Occidental) tradition. Orientalism often leads to the glorification and distortion of alien cultures, simplifying them and reinforcing power imbalances.

* **The Subaltern:** Derived from the work of Gayatri Spivak, the subaltern refers to the colonized subject whose voice is often missing from historical accounts and who occupies a realm largely distinct from the colonial administration’s viewpoint. Stevenson’s later work directly engages with the challenge of amplifying the subaltern voice.

* **Hybridity:** Introduced by Homi K. Bhabha, hybridity refers to the blending of colonial and Indigenous cultures, which often creates new spaces of resistance and identity that challenge imperial authority. Stevenson’s identity as Tusitala is a primary example of cultural hybridity.

* **The Metropole:** This term designates the “home” base of the colonial power—for instance, Great Britain—the center whose ideological and political control RLS’s activism ultimately sought to undermine.

The overarching function of postcolonial critique is to challenge the centrality and universality historically accorded to European perspectives, moving beyond simple representational critiques to demonstrate the constitutive role of colonial origins in shaping the contemporary international order. By utilizing these theoretical lenses, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive evaluation of Stevenson’s ambiguous yet crucial contribution to anti-colonial thought.

B. Thesis Statement

Stevenson’s corpus serves as a crucial case study in the late Victorian metropole’s ideological rupture, simultaneously internalizing imperial anxieties and the moral corrosion

of capitalism in his canonical fiction, while externalizing a radical and actionable anti-colonial stance through political engagement in the Pacific, establishing a complex and disputed legacy that requires analysis through the dual lenses of cultural anxiety and political dissent.

II. The Metropolitan Anxiety: Imperialism and the Split Self in RLS's Fiction

Before his permanent commitment to the Pacific, Robert Louis Stevenson wrote fiction that, while ostensibly focused on adventure or Gothic horror, contained profound moral critiques of the very capitalist and expansionist ideology that underpinned the British Empire. These earlier works reveal a sensitivity to moral decay and unchecked ambition, which ultimately provided the intellectual foundation for his later political dissent.

A. Colonial Greed and Capitalist Critique in *Treasure Island*

Treasure Island (1883) operates as far more than a simple adventure story; it is fundamentally a moral investigation into the corrosive effects of unearned wealth. The novel is centrally “a book about money” and the pursuit of treasure, and it implicitly challenges the established Victorian value system that prized hard work and personal sacrifice by glorifying the theft of fortune. The historical setting of 18th-century piracy allows Stevenson to comment obliquely on the prevailing contemporary economic practices.

The narrative establishes colonial greed as the “basic issue under scrutiny”. The pirates, motivated by avarice, engage in constant betrayal, violence, and shifting loyalties, demonstrating the moral degradation intrinsic to the pursuit of wealth without ethical restraint. Stevenson implies that men driven by such short-sighted desires are inherently “unsuitable for colonial ventures,” suggesting that the underlying moral character of the imperial agents themselves is flawed.

The critical reading of the text suggests that Stevenson uses the pirates' rapacity as a mechanism to criticize the predatory nature of 19th-century commercial imperialism. The

historical critique of piracy aligns precisely with Stevenson's later condemnation of European firms—like the German firm DHPG in Samoa—which generated immense profit through “land alienation, forced labour, and taxation”. The pirates' amoral violence, enacted purely for gold, mirrors the sanctioned rapacity of European consuls and merchants operating under the veneer of civilization in the Pacific.

This critique reaches its structural climax with the revelation that the treasure map leads to a “deserted hole”. This deflated climax, where the pirates find nothing, underscores the theme of the “uselessness of wealth” and the moral emptiness inherent in the colonial model of resource extraction and immediate capitalist accumulation. Stevenson thus employs the adventure genre to integrate a subtle, yet foundational, critique of the economic ideology fueling late Victorian expansionism, foreshadowing the explicit political targets he would later identify in Samoa.

B. Jekyll and Hyde: Atavism, Degeneration, and the Fear of the Internal Other

Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1886) provides a psychological mapping of the cultural anxieties that simultaneously drove and destabilized the late Victorian metropole. The novel engages directly with fin-de-siècle theories of evolution and degeneration, illustrating the pervasive fear that, despite the advancements of the Industrial Revolution, the possibility of evolutionary regression—a return to a ‘primitive’ state—remained a threat.

Mr. Hyde is consistently described using language that signals a profound biological and moral devolution: he is “hardly human,” “something troglodytic,” and gives an impression of deformity. Hyde personifies the “concentrated evil present in not some, but all people,” reflecting Stevenson's concern that definitive evil was not external but internal, complicating the Victorian belief in moral certainty. The primary conflict focuses on the struggle to preserve identity and control the “unseen vice” within the civilized self.

From a postcolonial perspective, this internal struggle reflects the deep-seated anxieties of empire. Hyde, the “unwanted

horror,” can be interpreted as the psychological manifestation of the ‘savage’ or ‘primitive’ Other that the imperial project sought to control, subjugate, or eradicate abroad. The fear is not merely that this savagery exists in the colonized world, but that contact with empire, through its inherent moral compromise and brutality, contaminates the imperial subject, causing a regression to the very ‘troglodytic’ state the British claimed to rule over.

The novel specifically negotiates the tension within degenerationist theory concerning whether malaise is strictly hereditary or stems from “environmental influence” and “infection by others”. The anxiety over the split self in London acts as a microcosm of the anxiety over the split empire: the morally superior center (Jekyll) masking a brutal, primitive foundation (Hyde). This Gothic fiction, preceding Stevenson’s activism, demonstrates that the author’s critique of moral decay and social corruption was already fully functional; his later anti-colonialism in the Pacific was merely the externalization of these internal, metropolitan concerns.

III. The Ethnographic Gaze and the Darker Pacific Narrative

Stevenson’s move to the South Seas, beginning with his chartering of the schooner *Casco* in 1888, marked a pivotal shift in his thematic focus, moving him from analyzing the psychology of the metropole to documenting and fictionalizing the experience of the periphery. His subsequent writings, *In the South Seas* and *The Ebb-Tide*, reflect the challenge of writing about colonial spaces while simultaneously being a beneficiary of the imperial systems he sought to understand or critique.

A. In the South Seas: Exoticism, Representation, and the Limits of Sympathy

In the South Seas (published posthumously) is Stevenson’s fieldwork memoir, an attempt at non-fiction that chronicles his initial voyages and observations, often read alongside ethnographic fiction like *The Beach of Falesá*. Postcolonial theory asserts that travel writing frequently contributes to the creation and reinforcement of the “Other” for a Western audience.

In analyzing Polynesian culture, Stevenson contended with the prevailing European fascination that often simplified Polynesians as the “natural man” or, paradoxically, as “conditionally Caucasian”. This ambiguity placed them in an intensely scrutinized position within colonial racial hierarchies. This intense, often racialized focus on origins is known as the ‘Polynesian Problem’ and illustrates the inherent bias of the colonial gaze.

The text reveals the tension between Stevenson’s desire for genuine observation and the pervasive theoretical frame of Exoticism. Exoticism inherently involves the “glorification and distortion of cultures perceived as alien,” simplifying the ‘other’ and reinforcing power imbalances. While Stevenson’s intention was often sympathetic, his documentation risked reducing the “richness and agency” of Pacific Islanders to fit a Western narrative structure. The ethnographic project, even when undertaken by a sympathetic writer, often struggles to fully escape the objectifying tendencies inherent in Western representational practices.

B. The Ebb-Tide and the Critique of Quasi-Colonialism

Published in 1894, *The Ebb-Tide* (co-written with Lloyd Osbourne) represents a significant darkening of Stevenson’s Pacific fiction, moving away from ethnographic description toward a brutal moral judgment of Western imperial agents. The novel utilizes a gruesome realism to explore the consequences of quasi-colonialism, particularly through the figure of Attwater.

Attwater, the pearl-trader on New Island, functions as the distilled essence of imperial enterprise, establishing “a business, and a colony, and mission of [his] own”. He represents the “imperial trinity” of trader, settler, and missionary, embodying the fusion of economic exploitation and ideological control that characterizes colonial rule. Attwater rules the natives with a “rod of iron,” dispensing “harsh justice with blistering Christian evangelism,” demonstrating the horrifying synergy between piety and profit that marked late-century empire.

The novel's critique extends beyond simple administrative incompetence. The demonic figure of Attwater, who effortlessly handles and outwits the three moral "losers" of the story and scorns traditional Western morality, is interpreted as a profound challenge to all Western values. The story's narrative momentum "ebbs back to the origins of Western empire-building," suggesting the foundational corruption and moral horror that underpinned the entire system.

The progression in Stevenson's Pacific writing—from the observational style of *In the South Seas* to the chilling condemnation found in *The Ebb-Tide*—demonstrates a critical transition. Living alongside and defending the Samoan people provided the author with the ethical clarity necessary to shift his literary focus from observing the colonized to morally indicting the colonizers. His direct political experience gave him the moral authority to condemn the composite character of the imperial agents represented by Attwater.

IV. Tusitala: Stevenson as Anti-Colonial Activist in Samoa

Stevenson's final years (1889–1894) were defined by intense political engagement in Samoa, marking his transition from a writer of empire to an active participant against it. His political writings and actions earned him the unique distinction of being a European advocate for Indigenous sovereignty.

A. Historical Context: RLS's Immersion in the Samoan Crisis (1889–1894)

Stevenson first arrived in Apia in December 1889, purchasing the land for his Vailima estate shortly thereafter in January 1890. His arrival coincided with severe political unrest following the decisive Sāmoan defeat of German forces at Fagali'i in late 1888—an event noted by historians as the "first serious defeat of an advanced white power in the Pacific".

Samoa was governed under the tripartite authority of Germany, Britain, and America, with the Germans wielding the greatest economic influence through the *Deutsche Handels- und Plantagen-Gesellschaft* (DHPG), a firm established in 1857. The DHPG had systematically amassed profit and power through "land alienation, forced labour,

and taxation". Stevenson observed that Apia functioned as a 'foreign town' where "a handful of whites have everything," leaving the natives excluded from the administration and economy of their own capital. This concentration of power in Apia was openly described by Stevenson as the "seat of the political sickness of Samoa".

B. A Footnote to History and the Practice of Witnessing

Stevenson's most significant political document from this period is *A Footnote to History: Eight Years of Trouble in Samoa* (1892), which covers the turbulent years from 1882 to 1892. The book was written with the "immediacy of front-line journalism", based on his intense, on-the-spot involvement in local affairs.

In his analysis, Stevenson minced no words regarding the source of the islands' instability. He stated bluntly that the 'head of the boil' afflicting Samoa was "the German firm" (DHPG). His critiques specifically targeted the "militarism and meddlesome officialdom" of the German administration, accusing them of widespread corruption and malpractice. He publicly attacked colonial officials like President von Pilsach and Chief Justice Cedercrantz for using tax-payer money to purchase the local newspaper, the *Samoa Times*, in an effort to secure "safety and strength in gagging the local Press of Apia". Furthermore, he highlighted the moral scandal of European officials receiving grossly unequal salaries compared to Samoan chiefs.

To ensure his radical political treatise resonated with his metropolitan audience in London, Stevenson employed specific rhetorical strategies. He published his defense of the Samoan people through a series of letters to *The Times*. Crucially, he framed the resistance of Samoan chieftain Mata'afa Iosefa using familiar European analogies, comparing him to the Jacobite figure of "the king over the water" and describing the local turmoil as a 'reign of terror,' invoking the French Revolution. This strategic linkage of Samoan independence movements to romantically-charged European struggles against oppression was a vital geopolitical maneuver. By articulating Samoan politics within recognizable Western

political discourse, RLS legitimized the cause and ensured his “front-line journalism” received serious attention from the governing powers in London, Berlin, and Washington.

C. The Politics of Patronage, Reciprocity, and the Indigenous Perspective

Stevenson’s commitment went beyond publishing; he provided practical political support. He openly backed Mata’afa Iosefa in the struggle for supremacy and, when five Samoan chiefs were imprisoned in August 1891, RLS helped secure their release, providing them with aid and patronage.

In a unique act of political reciprocity, the released Samoan chiefs repaid his advocacy by physically building a road for his Vailima estate. This road, celebrated on 7 October 1894, was named the “Road of Loving Hearts”, symbolizing mutual political solidarity and respect. This physical act cemented RLS’s position not as a ruler, but as a European ally accepted within the local political framework, achieving a remarkable level of cross-cultural trust.

However, even in this position of deepest solidarity, a residual element of paternalism surfaced. During the celebration of the road, Stevenson’s speech used the event to lecture the chiefs on the importance of “being industrious” and employed the Western “parable of the talents” (Matt 25: 14–30) to encourage them in defending their country. This reliance on Victorian moral instruction, even while advocating for Samoan sovereignty, illustrates the difficulty for even the most profoundly committed European intellectual to fully abandon the deeply ingrained belief in the superiority of Western ethical and governmental modes. While RLS achieved genuine political hybridity, his philosophical framework retained elements of the ideology he otherwise fought against.

V. The Legacy and Contemporary Postcolonial Critique

The analysis of Robert Louis Stevenson’s relationship with postcolonialism cannot be complete without examining how his legacy is currently treated by the colonized societies he defended. Contemporary Pacific Islanders, particularly

writers and artists, have utilized Stevenson's unique history as a starting point for their own narratives of cultural memory and resistance.

A. The Subaltern Speaks Back: Reconsidering Tusitala

The title *Tusitala*, the "Teller of Tales," which Stevenson carried until his death and burial on Mount Vaea, is not merely a memorial; it functions as a crucial site for postcolonial reclamation.

Eminent Samoan writer Sia Figiel directly engages with this legacy through her play, *O Tusitala: Tellers of Tales*. Figiel's work critically revisits Stevenson's household and the corresponding period of Samoan history, but fundamentally transforms the narrative by placing the "Indigenous characters centre stage". The play utilizes the voices of the colonized subjects—the cooks, gardeners, and household staff—to reflect on the Samoan civil war and the rising colonial interventions by Germany, Britain, and America.

This act is a vital form of remediation that allows the Subaltern voice to speak back to the colonial archive. By using RLS's history as context, Figiel transforms the European narrative into an Indigenous history, exploring the perspectives that Stevenson himself, despite his advocacy, may have inadvertently overlooked or marginalized in his official records. The unique cultural memory surrounding *Tusitala* made this engagement possible. The Samoan people's decision to grant Stevenson this specific, high-value Indigenous title was an act of cultural integration; they acknowledged his power (storytelling) while simultaneously placing him within their system, making him accountable to their society rather than solely to the judgment of his European peers. This historical bridging mechanism allows contemporary Pacific artists to directly engage with and re-interpret the colonial encounter, validating Stevenson's unique role while asserting Indigenous narrative control.

B. Provincializing the Metropole: RLS and Decentering European Dominance

The academic movement of postcolonial critique often seeks to “systematically ‘provincialise Europe’,” challenging its perceived centrality as the sole source of historical momentum and the origin of the international order.

Robert Louis Stevenson’s political evolution mirrors this theoretical goal. His physical relocation to Samoa instigated a necessary geographical and intellectual decentering. While his early fiction focused on the internal decay of the metropole caused by imperialism (as seen in *Jekyll and Hyde*), his activism shifted his attention entirely to the brutal external abuses perpetrated by the great powers in the periphery.

His published defense of Samoan sovereignty and custom in *A Footnote to History* demonstrated a profound ethical break from the imperial worldview. Stevenson recognized the Samoan society as possessing its own complex internal politics and “ancient customs”, systems that were being arbitrarily dismantled by foreign powers driven by self-interest and bureaucratic incompetence. This recognition aligned his efforts with the central postcolonial goal of challenging the epistemological privilege accorded to European understandings of knowledge and governance. Stevenson’s willingness to risk his reputation to defend a marginalized community in the Pacific validates his role as an early, if imperfect, precursor to postcolonial thought originating from within the intellectual class of the metropole.

VI. Conclusion: Reconciling Stevenson’s Postcolonial Identity

Robert Louis Stevenson’s legacy in postcolonial studies is defined by productive contradictions. He remains a figure whose work simultaneously reveals the ideological infrastructure of late Victorian imperialism and mounts a vigorous resistance against it. His trajectory follows a clear ethical arc: from an implicit critique of capitalist corruption and imperial moral anxiety evident in his canonical works like *Treasure Island* and *Jekyll and Hyde*, to an explicit, politically active denunciation of colonial administration in his final years in the Pacific.

RLS was not immune to the ideological biases of his time, as evidenced by residual paternalistic language and the unavoidable limitations of his ethnographic gaze. However, his active political defiance, his direct alliances with high-ranking Samoan chiefs, and his willingness to use his metropolitan platform to expose corruption earned him a unique position. He achieved a degree of cross-cultural inclusion that transcended his origins, culminating in the revered title *Tusitala*.

Ultimately, Stevenson occupies a vital and complex space: he was a European intellectual who voluntarily subjected himself to the consequences of his principles in the periphery. His political writings function as a crucial document of early anti-colonial theory, profoundly challenging the foundational morality and administrative competence of the late British and German Empires. His contested legacy – now being actively reclaimed and reinterpreted by Indigenous Pacific artists – confirms his status as an essential figure for understanding the limits and possibilities of anti-colonial dissent originating from within the metropole's intellectual establishment.

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