

## **Robert Louis Stevenson’s Outlook on Childhood, Youth and Age**

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**ABSTRACT :** *Robert Louis Stevenson ( 1850 -1894) is one of the greatest essayists of the Victorian Era. His essays included in three collections 1) Virginibus Puerisque 2) familiar Studies of men and Books 3) Memories and Portraits reflect his outlook on different stages in life. Besides being highly autobiographical, his essays reflect his courageous and buoyant disposition, fortitude in the face suffering, his philosophy of life, moralizing tendency and individualistic style. Present paper aims at analysing and presenting R.L. Stevenson’s outlook on the three important stages in human life – Childhood, youth and Age as reflected in his essays in ‘ Virginibus Puerisque’ and ‘ Memories and Portraits.*

**KEYWORDS :** *Stevenson, essays, life, outlook, childhood, youth and age*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

‘Life’ is a mysterious word which weaves an intricate web around everyone. Literature with its timeless appeal helps us to form our own outlook on life. It enriches us, moulds us and helps us look at the world through the eyes of the writer so that we can come out through the web of life untangled and unscathed. An essayist is the spectator of life. Life with all its diversity appeals to him. From life itself he draws the material for his expression. Being a versatile genius, Stevenson touched everything and adorned whatever he touched. His outlook on the three important stages of human life – Childhood, youth and Age has become more relevant than ever in the materialistic world. Childhood, Youth and Age are the milestones on the way of human life. Though interwoven compactly, the stages have their own conspicuously distinct characteristics. Where childhood symbolizes innocence, Youth is related to adventure and the Age to wisdom. It is a difficult task to understand the complex psychology of human mind at every stage and also to offer the valuable insights to solve the problems that arise in the long journey called life.

Stevenson accepts the challenge by choosing Childhood, Youth and Age as themes to ponder upon.

### **STEVENSON’S OUTLOOK ON CHILDHOOD**

It is quite obvious that the childhood – that innocent stage of human life, attracts him more than the other stages. In the words of J.H. Fowler<sup>1</sup>, “This delicate study of the mind of children has all the more interest as proceeding from the future author of ‘The Child’s Garden of Verses<sup>2</sup>’”.

Stevenson’s outlook on childhood forms the theme of the essay ‘Child’s Play’. He shows deep insight into child psychology as he himself, being an invalid, had spent hours together staying inside the room and playing with his toys. So “In his essay on ‘child’s play’ he has a good deal to say of the power of make-believe in children, with illustrations from his own experience<sup>3</sup>”

Stevenson points out the difference between the grown-ups and a child. He skillfully shows how children live in their own world of imagination and how their ‘world of moonshine and golden mist’ is different from the world of grown-ups. Like a skilled psychoanalyst he analyses child-psyche by citing examples from personal experiences. Yet the facts are not put into plain scientific terms. What makes the theme more interesting is the beauty of apt words chosen by him and the craftsmanship with which he makes the analysis more appealing as well as emotional. Stevenson shows deep understanding of child’s innocence when he states that ‘nothing can stagger a child’s faith; he accepts the clumsiest substitutes and can swallow the most striking incongruities’ (Child’s play, VP., p. 138). He highlights the importance of ‘play’ in child-life. It is not that only toys are needed. They can play with almost anything. Their imagination can transform even the dullest object into the most attractive one. Stevenson strikes out wrong notions about child’s power of imagination as

what children display is not the power of imagination but a pedestrian fancy- "It is grown people who make the nursery stories; all the children do is to jealously preserve the text" (Child's Play, VP., p. 138)

Fame and honour, the love of young men and the love of mothers, the business man's pleasure in method, all these and others they rehearse in their play hours. Their motto is 'Art for art' and they use the doings of grown folk as the raw material for the play. It is the play which entertains them. Stevenson uses his wit and insight to explain what play is to child, and exhorts parents to lighten up the most beautiful period in the life of a child by understanding their world of 'dim sensations'. His precious advice to the parents is unmatched in its emotional appeal-

"O conscientious parent! Let them doze among their playthings yet a little! for who knows what a rough, warfaring existence lies before them in the future?" (Child's Play, VP., p. 146).

Books take children into another world, which for them is more real than reality. In 'Penny Plain and Two pence Coloured' Stevenson describes how his little toy-theatre, colourful story books and juvenile drama added a dash of colours to his childhood. Narrating his own tale, the analysis he makes of children's world gives precious insights into their psyche. As a grown up man, he still remembers the hours he had spent as a child, in front of a stationer's shop full of story books with coloured pictures. Entering the shop, pretending to be an intended purchaser is an added delight. Going through the 'pages of gesticulating villains, epileptic combats, bosky forests, palaces and war-ships, frowning fortresses and prison vaults'- (A penny plain, MP., pp. 215, 216) it was a giddy joy.

Stevenson calls such joys offered by the books 'joys of paradise', and explains the fascination of children for them in apt words, 'but for such joys of paradise, we could have faced the Terror or Jamaica himself' (A Penny plain, MP., p. 216). While reading the story books, children get oblivious of the world around. Stevenson is reminded of an incident in his childhood when he was engrossed in reading the 'Arabian Entertainments' and had no idea when his clergyman grandfather came in behind him. The moment Stevenson saw him, he grew blind with terror. But instead of getting angry his grandfather told him that he envied him. Even grown-ups long for childhood.

Stevenson tells from his own experience that nothing is comparable to the pleasures and joys of childhood. He proudly narrates how majestically he travelled in those realms of gold. Stevenson appreciates Skelt's unforgettable dramas. He writes about the indelible impressions his works created on his mind. The memory of the minute details in Skelt's drama, which he enjoyed in childhood are still fresh in his mind.

"England, the hedgerow elms, the thin brick houses, windmills, glimpses of the navigable Thames, when at last I came to visit it, was only Skelt made evident; to cross the border was, for the Scotsman, to come home to Skelt; there was the inn-sign and there the horse-trough, all foreshadowed in the faithful Skelt". (A Penny Plain, MP., 224)

Stevenson explains how the world was plain before he knew Skelt and how it was transformed from a poor penny world to the world all coloured with romance. Stevenson expresses his indebtedness to Skelt for making his childhood colourful and bright with his tales. He is yet ready to buy another new work from Skelt- if only he would come from the tomb to give him more books. The joyous world of childhood has been painted so sensibly by Stevenson that it instantly takes the reader back into his own childhood days and creates a longing in his heart for the lost moments of happiness that are not felt anymore.

Stevenson's Outlook on Youth and Age

Childhood does not last forever. It undergoes a strange metamorphosis. 'Youth' develops

through it. Youth can be understood better if compared to the 'Age'. With this view in mind, Stevenson defines the relationship between 'Youth' and 'Age' from an entirely different angle. Many writers as well as poets have expressed their views on the theme, yet Stevenson's subtle wisdom, combined with the personal experience, gives the all time favourite theme a totally new and interesting dimension. Combination of wisdom and action is needed to lead a successful human life. Unfortunately, old age, though rich in wisdom, lacks action. For this very reason, Stevenson finds 'Youth' to be a golden period to make significant achievements in life. Though Stevenson did not live to be an old man, his flashes of insight regarding old age not only amuse and teach but also compel the readers to brood and introspect about the illusions of youth and the disenchantments of old age.

Stevenson sets his own life as a standard for the adventurous, the courageous and the young. He exhorts the young to keep animal spirits alive and to lead the life of courage and adventure. For him period of youth should be considered as the golden period in man's life.

Stevenson explicitly states that the sayings and proverbs which discourage persons from ambitious attempts are meant for the use of mediocre people. He cites the examples of Joan of Arc and Columbus to appreciate the spirit of adventurous young who choose untrodden path. For him it is better to gallop up and down the bombshells like the generals than to read the stories of bravery idly at home. As Youth and Age are the inevitable stages on the way of life, Stevenson urges everyone to pay due respect to them for they have their own glories. Change is the basic principle of life and it should be accepted wholeheartedly. All our attributes are modified. Views at forty do not remain the same as they were at twenty. Remaining the same is akin to the condition of an unteachable brat, who is well birched and none the wiser.

"It is as if a ship captain should sail to India from the Port of London; and having brought a chart of Thames on Deck at his first setting out should obstinately use no other for the whole voyage". (Crabbed Age & Youth, VP., p. 54).

Stevenson strongly opposes the life led with caution. He criticizes a hungry man, who refuses a whole dinner and reserves all his appetite for the dessert, before he knew whether there was to be any dessert or not? So it is the present that matters the most. He draws a fine conclusion after much deliberation and urges one and all, "to love play things as well as child; to lead an adventurous and honourable youth, and to settle when the time arrives, into a green and smiling age". (Crabbed Age and Youth, VP., P.60) Youth and the college life are the two sides of the same coin. When we peep into our youthful days, the college life flashes before the eyes. College life is unforgettable. Those golden days of youth remains embedded in the mind. For Stevenson the 'past' is so alive that he used it as one long theme for his essays in 'Memories and Portraits'. Thus the memories of his college days forms the theme of 'Some College Memories'.

The brightest period of college days has been unfolded in the most delicate manner. Stevenson reveals that the east-windy morning journeys up to class, infinite yawnings during the lecture and unquestionable gusto in the delights of truantry, made up the sunshine and shadow of his college life. The memories of his witty professors are still fresh in his mind. He describes them using his unique style combined with witticisms and humour. He narrates the unforgettable incident related to his very ambitious friend who studied day and night for the exam, forgetting the world around him. When on one fine morning he looked at the rising sun, his mind was seized by a nameless terror and the same night he was tossing in a brain fever. Through the revival of the past memories the essay gives a message that the precious time of youth should not be wasted merely in studies. The youthful energy should also be channelised in proper way and be used in constructive manner. Stevenson always wanted to be a writer. Right from his childhood he started his sincere efforts to become the writer. When in college, his dream was partially materialized when he was chosen as one of the editors for the College Magazine. The sweet memories related to his college magazine forms the theme of 'A College Magazine' in 'Memories and Portraits'.

Stevenson admits that he played 'a sedulous ape' to the great writers, and suggests that there is no alternative to hard work and laborious practice if one wishes to attain perfection in any profession which he wants to follow. To prove his point he cites his own example and states that imitation is not a crime. Not at least if it is done to achieve a certain noble end. Man learns by imitation. No one is original in the true sense of the term. Even the great writers like Montaigne, Cicero and Burns were imitative. There is nothing in such training that shall clip the wings of originality. It is in his *College Magazine* that Stevenson got his first chance to see his writing in print. He knew the fate of the magazine very well. 'It ran four months in undisturbed obscurity, and died without a gasp'. (*College Magazine*, MP., p. 73). In the end, adding a dash of humour he concludes by telling the readers how he went again to work with his 'penny version-books', having fallen back in one day from the printed author to the manuscript student.

Thus, Stevenson's outlook on Childhood, Youth and Age beautifully evolves through his own experience of life and is still offering us new insights to look at these very precious and inevitable stages of life.

Conclusion :-

In conclusion it would suffice to quote the noted critic Frank Swinnerton. He appreciates the ease with which Stevenson has succeeded in balancing the three important stages in human life

In the opinion of Frank Swinnerton:

"To read the essays with the ingenuous mind of youth is to feel wisdom, grown old and immaculate, passing from author to reader. It is to marvel at this debonair philosopher, who finds himself never in a quandary, and who has the strategies of childhood and of youth balanced in his extended hand. It is to proceed from childhood to youth, and from youth to the married state; and our adviser describes to us in turn, with astonishing confidence, the simplified relations, which otherwise we might have supposed so intricate<sup>4</sup>".

Indeed, the innocent childhood, adventurous youth and wise old age get a just treatment by Stevenson. It is his own childhood, youth and age that find reflection in the essays. Perusal of his essays becomes all the more a pleasurable act as what he says is enriched with the personal experience.

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