Poetic Techniques In Robert Louis Stevenson' Poems

I will be discussing three poems of which Robert Louis Stevenson composed and will be identifying how the poetic techniques used throughout his poems create their themes. These themes vary from loneliness, being concerned with nature and the seasons, and dedication.

Robert Louis Stevenson was of Scottish descent born on the 13th of November, 1850, in Edinburgh, Scotland. According to ‘Famous Authors’, Stevenson was a novelist, poet, essayist, and travel writer. His first successful novel was ‘Treasure Island’, published in 1884, followed by ‘A Child's Garden of Verses’ in 1885, and ‘The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde’ in 1886. Which was representative of Neo-romanticism during the modernist period of English literature. ‘Poets. Org’ then goes on to add that Stevenson was an incredibly popular and successful writer. In regards to his poetry, the ‘Scottish Poetry Library claim that Stevenson was best known for his poetry book for children; ‘A Child’s Garden of Verses’.

Stevenson inherited the weak lungs of his mother and faced many difficulties from birth. Before the age of two, a young lady by the name of Alison Cunningham joined the household and acted as his nurse. Cunningham was one of Stevenson’s main influencers as she would often read him the ‘Pilgrim’s Progress and ‘The Old Testament. The (Poetry Foundation) stated Alison Cunningham was the reason behind Stevenson’s poetry book ‘A Child’s Garden of Verses’, and was published as a dedication to her.

‘A Child’s Garden of Verses’ includes some of Stevenson’s most famous poems; “The Land of Counterpane”, “My Shadow” and “The Lamplighter” (RLS Website, 2018). Though all poems in the book are written from Stevenson’s experiences as a young boy and the highs and lows he endured growing up. The ‘RLS Website’ states that “In the last poem of the collection, “To Any Reader”, Stevenson reminds his readers that all children eventually grow up and that these poems are memories of a time that has passed. This poem also serves to show that A Child’s Garden of Verses is not just a book for children, but addresses adult themes like loss and loneliness.” ‘Annapolis Valley Regional Library’ quotes that the collection is “one of the best-loved poetry collections in the world”.

‘The Land of Counterpane’ is a poem that paints a vivid image of what Stevenson’s childhood was like growing up, playing with toys, and using his imagination as a way of coping through his darkest days (SBWE, The Blog, 2010). The poem explores two main themes each contrasting with one another; loneliness and happiness. With Stevenson spending most of his childhood ill, alone and in bed, as a child, he found joy in his day by using his imagination to transform his bed into an expansive, fun, and active world. This creating a testament showcasing the power of imagination and play in a child’s mind (EBSCO Host Connection, 2011). The poem consists of 4 stanzas each containing 4 lines with a rhyme scheme of AABB. In lines 8, 10, and 12, he refers to “going through hills” (line 8), “up and down sheets” (line 10), and “planted cities all about” (line 12). These lines create imagery and are forms of similes as he uses his imagination to compare these gestures to real-life objects through the positioning of his body under his blanket whilst in bed, with the print of his knees being transformed into hills, allowing “his ships in fleets All up and down among the sheets” and by bringing his toy trees and houses out to plant cities all about on his imaginative world also referring to his blanket (Man of Tin blog,

2016). The line “I was the giant great and still” in stanza 4 shifts from past tense to present using the word “was” to emphasize and make known that he is reflecting on the fun that head with his imagination. This poem is of relevance in today’s society for those who may be or have previously suffered from serious illnesses during their childhood and perfectly portrays the feelings and emotions they may have been dealing with at the time. Thus, clearly outlining why it is one of Stevenson’s most famous poems due to its significance on people in today’s day and age.

Stevenson’s second poem ‘My Shadow’ is again a poem he wrote from a perspective of a little boy and explores the child’s thoughts as he is fascinated and curious about his own shadows watching and experimenting as the child keeps trying to understand the nature of his shadow, and is surprised by how it grows tall and small in the same day (Beaming Notes, 2016). ‘My Shadow’ is made up of 4 quatrains and also has a rhyme scheme of AABB. The themes in this poem range from curiosity, surprise, and experimenting. Throughout the poem, there are a number of different poetic devices used including similes, personification, imagery just to name a few. Stevenson has used personification all throughout the poem in regards to the shadow that is almost classified or thought to be another child in the perspective of a child. Similes are evident in lines 7 & 8, “For he sometimes shoots up taller like an Indian-rubber ball, And he sometimes gets so little that there’s none of him at all.” In this he compares the jumping of his shadow with an Indian rubber ball, implying it jumped so high (Literary Devices, 2019). Other techniques that Stevenson has used include imagery. This is evident throughout the whole poem for e.g. in the last line “Had stayed at home behind me and was fast asleep in bed.” Is a line that automatically paints a picture in the reader's mind. This left capturing the innocence of children and their wild imaginations which of course to this day is relatable and will continue to be for the generations that are yet to come.

The last poem I have selected from Stevenson’s poetry book is ‘The Lamplighter’. ‘The Lamplighter’ may seem uninteresting or odd to some, but Stevenson’s use of poetic devices and his creative thinking make it seem extraordinary and almost magical (Revolvy, 2019). The character ‘Leerie’, is portrayed as a romantic wanderer who charms the imagination of the child-narrator, trapped behind the window of his house in the evening dusk and musing on ambition (The Bottle Imp, 2019). The poem states a clear divide between adult and child in stanza 2 where Stevenson explains that Tom is a driver, Maria goes to sea and his Papa’s a rich banker. “But I, when I am stronger and can choose what to do, O Lerrie, I’ll go round at night and light the lamps with you.” Thus, representing childhood as a time where choice did not really exist. The speaker believes that his age stops him from pursuing what it is that he wants and explores choice and goes on to state that a person gains the ability to choose as they grow older and stronger furthering the theme of maturation (Revolvy, 2019). This poem, not surprisingly, was written from the perspective of Stevenson as a young boy growing up with poor health and explores themes such as loneliness and hope. The poem this time consists of 3 quatrains with a rhyme scheme of AABB. The poetic devices used in this poem include personification which is evident in the first line, “My tea is nearly ready and the sun had left the sky”. This indicating or trying to convey that the sun has can do human-like things. The poem uses numerous amount of lexical repetitions to highlight an important imagine; and, with, to are repeated, where and is repeated again in Stevenson’s use of anaphora which can be seen at the beginning of some neighboring lines (Key To Poetry, 2017). This poem like the previous two is a reflection of Stevenson’s past through his imagination and allows and influences the children and adults of today’s society to relate and captivate the hearts of those who too were like Stevenson.

Overall, it is understood why Stevenson was found to be an incredibly popular and successful writer. His work captured the hearts and minds of many and connected well with those who were going through or dealing with the same circumstances as Stevenson. Stevenson was the man who 'seemed to pick the right word upon the point of his pen, like a man playing spillikins,' as G. K. Chesterton put it. He was also greatly admired by many renowned authors (New World Encyclopedia, 2019).

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