

FRENCH INFLUENCE IN THE ESSAYS OF R. L. STEVENSON

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Abstract:

Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894) was a Victorian essayist, known for his highly popular essays and novels. His essays are highly autobiographical. They reflect optimism and courage, inspiring the readers to be strong even in the face of suffering. The fact that Stevenson himself lived his life in the penumbra of death makes his essays all the more appealing. French influence is also quite discernible in his collection of essays 'Virginibus Puerisque'. Hence, an effort has been made to study the French influence in his selected essays.

Keywords: R.L. Stevenson, french influence, virginibus puerisque, essays

Introduction:

Stevenson's trips to France in search of health and his persistent study of French literature from early childhood created a lasting impression on his mind, which finds expression in his works. His visits to France cover three phases of his life (*A Study in French Influence, I*). During his childhood he was in the South of France, Chietly at Mentone, from January to March 1863. During his youth he was in Mentone and in Paris from October, 1873 until late in the following spring. The third period was after Stevenson's marriage, from October 1882 to August, 1884, when he was in south of France.

Stevenson learnt French, read French history and literature. It is in this second phase that he wrote 'Ordered South' and started working on an article about Walt Whitman. 'The list of his ten favourite writers at this time included: Montaigne, Horace, Pepys, Shakespears, Hazlitt, Burns, Stern, Heine, Keats and Fielding. It issignificant that Montaigne is the only Frenchman, but also that he leads the group. Again in 'Ordered South', reference is made to Montaingne and indeed he is mentioned throughout Stevenson's essays (*A Study in French Influence, 8*).'

In 1875, he developed interest in the writers of 15th century. The practical results of this interest appeared the form of two essays; one on Charles d' Orleans, and another on Francois Villon. In Stevenson's personal life too, France played an important role. It was at Grez, in 1876, that Stevenson first met his future wife, Mrs. Osbourne. Most of his travelogues and

short stories also have French background. Stevenson spent the happiest time of his life in Hyeres and produced here most of his works – ‘Prince Otto’. The Silverado Squatters, The Black Arrow, The Child’s Garden of Verses and many essays that were later became famous. Stevenson’s impressionistic mind reflected the impressions of France and French literature in his work. Swinnerton, who as a rule criticizes Stevenson very deliberately, makes this point.

“Wherever he went, his journey or his place of residence provided him almost at once with a practicable background for literary work of some sort. His travel books, his stories-these all show immediately the stage of his life’s journey to which they belong.(*R.L.S A Critical study, 171*)”

Thus, to study French influence, it is essential to take up certain characteristics of French Literature and to show in a general way how these characteristics are reflected in Stevenson’s own writings. It is also essential to show how Stevenson made use of his own knowledge of France and her people in the essays he wrote.

French influence (Allusions to France and French literature):

Stevenson had a sense of style. At ‘Fontainebleau’ the sparks were fanned into a steady flame in the company of young artists around him. To quote H.D. Macpherson, “This love of style for its own sake was evident in a love of form that is truly French. Not to write in a slipshod, rambling manner; not to use two words where one might suffice; to be clear, direct, to say exactly what one meant-all these were characteristics of Stevenson’s. They constituted his cult as a lover of form, and in following this cult it was the masters of French Literature who represented the Gospel. Not that he admired them all ! Rather he learned from their faults, as in the case of Dumas, that one could become incoherent as the result of too much fluency. “There is but one art –to omit”, he, however, learned from more than one French author.(*A Study in French Influence,35.*)”

Stevenson's familiarity with France and French literature thus inspired him to deal with French subjects in his essays. Most of these essays were written at the beginning of his literary career, and constituted what he had seen and done in France as a very young man. ‘*Ordered South*’ as well as his stories of travels like ‘*An Inland Voyage*’, ‘*Travels with a Donkey*’ and ‘*A Mountain town of France*’ were all inspired by his actual experiences.

“There is a vein of youthful pathos running through each of them, which characterizes Stevenson’s mental attitude at the time. All were written at the period when he was still groping for self expression, as well as for means of settling his many personal problems (*A Study in French Influence,39.*)”

French influence is evident in the very selection of the title for his collections of essays-*Virginibus Puerisque* in the very first essay with the same title in the collection. To drive home the point that after marriage ‘gins and pitfalls lie about their feet, Stevenson has given the

excerpts from the play 'Maitre Guerin' by Emile Augir, 1864. Most of the part of conversation between the characters is given in French (VP, 2). French phrase 'metier defemme' meaning 'woman's part' is used to describe the qualities essential for woman. It seems, whenever Stevenson wants to express himself aptly, French phrases naturally come to his mind.

In 'On Falling in Love' he refers to a well known French theorist who was debating a point eagerly in his 'cenacle' meaning – Friend circle (*On Falling in Love, VP, 26*). In the same essay there is reference to 'Marius', in 'Les Miserables' - a novel by Victor Hugo – a Frenchman. Explaining how difficult the art of speaking is he quotes a French phrase – 'L' art de bien dire' (*Truth of Intercourse, VP, 38*) for 'the art of speaking'. Stating that want of power has more to do with the wise resolutions of age, Stevenson quotes a French saying, "Sir Jeunesse savait, si Vieillesse pouvait" meaning "if youth knew, it age had the power", Even Knox and Montaigne as well as the city 'Perigord' in S.W. France where Montaigne spent much of his life find mention. 'French Revolution' also find mention in 'Apology for Idlers'.

'Ordered South' – is full of vivid descriptions of Mentone, Riviera. He visited the place often, on doctor's advice. It is the beauty of nature that forms the background. The essay is full of vivid description of French landscape. In 'The English Admirals', Stevenson has quoted a lengthy passage from 'Glory' – the essay written by Montaigne – a Frenchman, as well as the father of English essays. 'Carolus Duran, a French portrait – painter finds mention in 'Some Portraits by Raeburn'.

Some of Stevenson's autobiographical essays in 'Memories and Portraits' reflect his love for France and French literature. In 'A College Magazine', In the words of H.D. Macpherson, 'The first part is of particular interest, because it is here that he discusses his method of self instruction, his playing the "sedulous ape" to nine authors, two of whom, Mantaigne and Baudelaire, are French. It is likewise here that he acknowledges the "bracing influence of old Dumas" in his plays (*R.L.S A Study in French Influence, 43*). In the second part he praises one of his fellow editors for his qualities and compares him to a character in Balzac. Another French book- 'the Essais' of Montaigne finds mention very often. The book influenced him greatly. To quote H.D. Macpherson:

"R.L.S. and the 16th Century Frenchman had much in common. In the face of illness and complete discouragement each lived and taught an optimistic philosophy; each was quite unconventional yet had a hatred of innovations: each was a sceptic living among orthodox surroundings. Even the most avid of Stevensonians must admit that Montaigne's message will ever reach a larger audience because it is based on a broader and more sound philosophy, and because it has in it an appeal to humanity of every age and nation, Stevenson's is the lesser message; or rather, he is singing here and there a single melody of the old master's to a smaller audience. The charm of Stevenson's essays is his own, but consciously or unconsciously he seldom wanders far from his model." (*R.L.S A Study in French Influence, 46*)

Literary career apart, even in personal life Stevenson's best friend was a Frenchman 'Jules Simoneau', who kept a café in a little old abode building. "If there ever was a man who was good friend to me it was Jules Simoneau", he wrote afterwards on the flyleaf of one of his books."(*The Life of R.L.S, 180*)

Conclusion:

Thus, French influence is to be found in Stevenson's personal life as well as in his literary career. Quite often he has expressed his debt to the old French Essayists. His essays are full of their style, phrases, words and idioms. He is appreciated for "The French finish and fastidiousness of his style; in which he seemed to pick the right word up on the point of his pen, like a man playing spillikins.

A writer can write well if he feels sound –body, mind and spirit "Happy I was only happy once; that was at Hyrees" wrote Stevenson to Sidney Colvin from Valima, in 189168. Which sums up the French Influence on his life as well as on his essays which reflect his 'point of view' so well.

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