

# Conceptualising Childhood: Robert Louis Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verses*

JEAN WEBB

*University College Worcester, UK*

**ABSTRACT** *The paper discusses the construct of childhood in Robert Louis Stevenson's collection of poems, 'A Child's Garden of Verses', by employing notions of child development drawn from Piaget and Vygotsky. From a literary perspective Stevenson's collection is located on the boundaries of Romanticism and Modernism.*

A number of critics, including Morag Styles (1998), have commented upon Robert Louis Stevenson's ability to capture the notion of the quality of childhood in his collection of poems for children, *A Child's Garden of Verses*. The collection was first published in 1885, at a point which can be critically defined as a shift from late Romanticism to Early Modernism. Some critics, such as Ann C. Colley (1997), regard it as Stevenson's expression of nostalgia—that is, Stevenson's search for the lost childhood and the lost child within himself. As Colley comments:

His verses offered him a form of hope, of promise, that he could, for the moment, place himself in the track of his former self and re-enter what was irrevocably absent and seemingly unavailable. He could reclaim what was once himself.

(Colley, 1997, p. 303)

However, my intention in this paper is to consider the nature of Stevenson's construction of childhood and the child-world Stevenson creates from a wider perspective as a concept of childhood itself, and thereby to raise some questions for consideration, particularly in relation to late Romanticism and Early Modernism.

My first question surrounds the title: why 'a garden' of verses? It is well-known that this title was not Stevenson's first choice. He stated in a letter to his friend Sydney Colvin, that he would have been happy with the more general 'Rimes for Children'. However, there are implications in the finally selected title for the notion of childhood constructed within the text. In one way the phrase, *A Garden of Verses*, is misleading, since there is no central focus on an actual garden in the text. The section entitled 'Garden Days' is but eight

poems out of the sixty-eight in the collection, and is placed close to the end of the book, being the second to last section in the text. Rather, what the reader has is a representative space which has suggestions of the characteristics which being in a garden space imply (see Mallan, 2001). The garden is an extension of the enclosed domestic space of the house, where there is safety, but also the space for free and imaginative play. It can be a place of adventure, discovery, pondering, and engagement with the outside world. Growth, change and an awareness of the cycles of nature are also part of the life of a garden, and of those who tend and nurture the plants and create the landscape of the garden as an entity.

The term 'garden' also has a moral implication in Christian terminology, referring to the Garden of Eden, where innocence was and was then lost. As the child subject is placed in the garden, then the positioning in this text is one of innocence. In this sense the title also implies that in longing for a return to an Arcadian existence, Stevenson's position is different from that of the later A.A. Milne, or Kenneth Grahame. In contrast Stevenson's collection of poems also looks outward into a projected future with the child preparing for the formulation of the as yet undefined self, whereas the intention of Milne and Grahame is to produce a more enclosed world, safe from the 'wide, wide world' beyond.

Stevenson locates himself as author of the text from the beginning with its dedication:

*Dedication*

TO ALISON CUNNINGHAM  
FROM HER BOY

For the long nights you lay awake  
And watched for my unworthy sake:  
For your most comfortable hand  
That led me through the uneven land:  
For all the story-books you read,  
For all the pains you comforted,  
For all you pitied, all you bore,  
In sad and happy days of yore:-  
My second Mother, my first wife,  
The angel of my infant life—  
From the sick child, now well and old,  
Take, nurse, the little book you hold!

And grant it, Heaven, that all who read  
May find as dear a nurse at need,  
And every child who lists my rhyme,  
In the bright fireside, nursery clime,  
May hear it in as kind a voice  
As made my childish days rejoice!  
(Stevenson, 1952, p. xiii)

The dedication identifies the protected place for the young Stevenson as he was guarded and tended by his nurse, Alison Cunningham, who cared for his reality and also led him into the world of the imagination with 'all the story-books you read' for which he thanks her. However, the uncertainties and anxieties of childhood do not go unmarked, for this is, to Stevenson, an 'uneven land', where he needs a guide and protector. Whilst Alison Cunningham made this world of childhood a particular place for him, by addressing his nurse, in turn Stevenson is re-making a place of childhood and creating his own narrative, by giving back Cunningham, and himself, a representation in verse of a celebration of his own childhood. With this is a sense of cyclical safety, a returning to the protected space within the re-constructed memory of self. Stevenson is therefore creating a construct of childhood which attempts to recall the nature of childhood as he experienced it, and also to add to it the experience of the reflective adult, producing, therefore, innocence and experience combined. The result is a synthesis of the 'ideal projection' and the knowledge of the 'real' or lived experience, placing the poems on the boundaries between Romanticism and Modernism. The awareness of the gap between the ideal and the real enables Stevenson to nominate and question uncertainties and refuse closure, whilst also capturing a sense of the 'reality' of childhood.

On considering the nature of childhood experience in these poems, what is especially notable is the resonance Stevenson's poems strike with the work of later theoreticians of child development, particularly with Levin Vygotsky and Jean Piaget in their consideration of the nature of child play. In *A Child's Garden of Verses* Stevenson situates the child subject within a physical setting, which has the potential for imaginative exploration and adventure, i.e. for play through the reading experience.

Levin Vygotsky stated that:

In play a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behaviour; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself. As if in the focus of a magnifying glass, play contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form and is itself a major form of development.

(Vygotsky in Singer & Singer, 1990, p. 156)

Thinking about *A Child's Garden of Verses* in this way, the adult Stevenson is, as it were, a head taller than his child self, and he is shifting the focus of the magnifying glass onto particular areas of his own experience for examination, condensing, whilst expanding experience. As Jean Piaget noted:

Through play children find endless ways to develop their symbolic capabilities by using materials in interesting and useful ways that is meaningful to them, e.g. a climbing frame becomes the pirate ship. (Piaget, 1962, p. 148)

Stevenson's poems are linguistic symbols which enable the mind-space to create and organise the space into new shapes; for a counterpane to become the

hills where soldiers march, or the vessel of sleep in which to sail to new lands beyond the bounds of reality. Whereas Piaget wrote of play as being without structure and as free from conflict, when play is placed within a literary context the imaginative play within these poems is structured by the constraints of the poem itself, for the reader is taken into an experience, and returned at the ending of the poem. Stevenson also places conflict in these poems as puzzlement, the conflict of the known child-space with the unknown entity of life within which the child is placed. The collection begins by situating the child subject within particularly defined places. In the first poem, 'Bed in Summer', that place is the 'day-space' of existence:

In winter I get up at night  
 And dress by yellow-candle light.  
 In summer quite the other way  
 I have to go to bed by day.

I have to go to bed and see  
 The birds still hopping on the tree,  
 Or hear the grown-up people's feet  
 Still going past me in the street.

And does it not seem hard to you,  
 When all the sky is clear and blue,  
 And I should like so much to play,  
 To have to go to bed by day.  
 (Stevenson, 1952, p. 1)

Here is the Modernist awareness of the confusion and puzzlement of childhood. The premise is, to quote the apt phrase of the poet Philip Larkin, that 'Days are where we live, where can we live, but days?' Yet the division of day and night is not so simple. Social rules come into play, and restrict the experience of the child. During the winter the child has to be dressed in the quasi-artificial light of the sun, the 'yellow candle-light', and yet when there is an abundance of the real thing, convention and care demand that the child is removed from the activity of experiencing, with the bustle and turmoil of the adult world still going on outside of the safe enclosed space of the child in bed.

The early poems in the collection set a series of boundaries about the child: day and night in 'Bed in Summer', and 'A Thought':

It is very nice to think  
 The world is full of meat and drink,  
 With little children saying grace  
 In every Christian kind of place.  
 (Stevenson, 1952, p. 2)

The thought which Stevenson invites the reader to contemplate circulates upon the comforting understanding of the child that the necessities of food and drink are provided for all children, and that there is an embracing centrality of the

childhood experience i.e. the suggestion here, that the 'known' world (for the child) is Christian, and therefore in some way 'safe'. The third poem, 'At the Seaside', brings in a sense of puzzlement.

When I was down beside the sea,  
A wooden spade they gave to me,  
To dig the sandy shore.  
My holes were empty like a cup,  
In every hole the sea came up  
Till it could come no more.  
(Stevenson, 1952, p. 19)

The sea is a different type of boundary. It is a physical reality which changes the reality of the physicality of the land. The child is given a wooden spade by adults, and thereby makes his mark on the shore, by using the given tool. Despite his efforts the sea invades. The child makes a hole, and then it is no more; it is a sea-filled space, and so its very nature has changed. In certainty the child has made a hole in the sand, yet that materiality has changed by circumstances beyond his control. The very shore upon which the child stands, has a dual personality: both solid and liquid. Stevenson moves his subject from certainty to uncertainty, with the child being left in a state of puzzlement. This sense of puzzlement is that which characterises the Modernist sensibility, that open frame of understanding which identifies those gaps which cannot be filled.

The poem 'My Shadow' (1952, pp. 19–20) also broaches the question of duality and the uncertainty of the self in this case.

I have a little shadow that goes in and out with me,  
And what can be the use of him is more than I can see.  
He is very, very like me from the heels up to the head;  
And I see him jump before me, when I jump into bed.

Here is the dark mirror-image of the child, part of the child yet moving independently; with the shape of the child, but in fluid form.

The funniest thing about him is the way he likes to grow—  
Not at all like proper children, which is always very slow;  
For sometimes he shoots up taller like an India-rubber ball,  
And he sometimes gets so little that there's none of him at all.

This is not an easy relationship with other images of the self; it is an uncontrollable apparition, unbounded by conventional social rules as understood by the child:

He hasn't got a notion of how children ought to play,  
And can only make a fool of me in every sort of way.  
He stays so close beside me, he's a coward you can see;  
I'd think shame to stick to nursie as that shadow sticks to me!

The shadow is an image of the self which is constructed of light and dark. It is unreliable, morally flawed, and antagonistic toward his constrained physically

solid ‘other’. They are one, and yet not one; separate at times and yet always attached, if only in the mind of the child:

One morning, very early, before the sun was up,  
 I rose and found the shining dew on every buttercup;  
 But my lazy little shadow, like an arrant sleepy-head,  
 Had stayed at home behind me and was fast asleep in bed.

Moving from the notion of the child’s physical understanding and puzzlement at the world, I want to continue by considering the nature of the world of the imagination in Stevenson’s collection. His starting point is the centrality of the child; the placing of the experience within the child’s reality, as for example in ‘Pirate Story’:

Three of us afloat in the meadow by the swing  
 Three of us aboard in the basket on the lea  
 Winds are in the air, they are blowing in the spring,  
 And waves are on the meadow like the waves there are at sea.  
 (Stevenson, 1952, p. 7)

In the first verse of this poem, where Stevenson is concentrating on the sense of movement, the solidity and safeness of the experience is that this is shared by three children. As in ‘At the Seaside’, the physical nature of their surroundings is of a dual nature: the meadow is both grassland moved by the wind—a sea of grass—and the ocean in the imagination of the narrator. Stevenson’s narrative voice is one which has a child-like understanding, but with the constructing control of the adult—it is not a child’s voice *per se*. Stevenson makes that imaginative space of childhood which he re-enters and enables the reader also to enter. The imaginative space of ‘Pirate Story’ is particularly Romantic. The very landscape of the wind-swept meadow encapsulates the emotion of the excitement of adventure, and itself becomes the site of the imaginative experience: this world becomes another world of the imagination, a place of adventure and travel. Stevenson’s emphasis on travel and adventure is, to me, an essentially a British construct, derived of an imperialist/colonial adventuring sensibility. His numerous references in the collection to kings and soldiers, the foreignness and ‘otherness’ of places named, such as Africa or Malabar, catch both Stevenson’s own desire and interest in travel, and also the spirit of exploration of the 1890s.

As one reads through the collection, the experience of the implied reader grows. Stevenson moves the reader and the constructed child in stages from a safe nexus of self out to boundaries beyond the notionalised garden: from the early poem of the seemingly solitary child standing on the sea-shore contemplating boundless mysteries, to observation and contemplation of the (then) everyday world as in ‘The Lamplighter’, and attempts to capture the energies of bold experience as in ‘From a Railway Carriage’ to the later bold energetic adventures of ‘Historical Associations’. The following extract is taken from ‘Historical Associations’, nearing the end of the collection:

There, then, awhile in chains we lay,  
In wintry dungeons, far from day;  
But ris'n at length, with might and main,  
Our iron fetters burst in twain,  
The all the horns were blown in town;  
And, to the ramparts clanging down,  
All the giants leaped to horse  
And charged behind us through the gorse  
On we rode, the others and I,  
Over the mountains blue, and by  
The Silent River, the sounding sea,  
And the robber woods of Tartary.  
Last we drew rein—a weary three  
Upon the lawn, in time for tea,  
And from our steeds alighted down  
Before the gates of Babylon.  
(Stevenson, 1952, pp. 89–90)

Here the adventurous journey does not end with a return to a physical reality—the energy continues on beyond the end of the poem, leaving the child protagonists, the reader and Stevenson himself, in far off spaces. Notably, this poem is in the 'Garden Days' section, so the adventurers are still bounded by the safety of the garden walls or hedges.

To conclude, I think Stevenson's collection produces a convincing construct of childhood for so many critics, because it creates a replication of a Romantic notion of childhood which dominates the British imagination. This is combined with a Modernist sensibility, which intimates the nostalgic loss of childhood mingled with the knowledge of the darker sides of the imagination and the complexity of experience. Both the physical and imagined landscapes are those which satisfy the cultural imagination, and thereby reflect a particular construction of childhood which is repeatedly admired and celebrated; it is a way of re-visiting the cultural past, a celebration of heritage which seems secure against the uncertainties of this post-modern world.

*Correspondence:* Jean Webb, University College, Worcester, Henwick Grove, Worcester, WR2 6AJ, UK.

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