R.L. Stevenson's 'Most Grim and Gloomy Tale':
The Ebb-Tide as Deconstruction of Colonial Adventure Narrative
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In June of 1889, while travelling through the South Seas, Robert Louis Stevenson wrote to his friend Sidney Colvin that, 'the Pacific is a strange place, the nineteenth century only exists there in spots; all round, it is a no man's land of the ages, a stir-about of epochs and races, barbarisms and civilisations, virtues and crimes.'[1] Indeed, as Stevenson's writing intersects with the reality of the colonial experience in the South Pacific, his adventures present a complex depiction of villainy which functions as an ideological subversion of contemporary trends in Victorian adventure narrative. While some of his South Seas fiction – particularly 'The Beach of Falesá' (1892)[2] – has to some extent been critiqued in this light,[3] there remains a need for more specific consideration of this work within the broader context of nineteenth-century adventure narrative. This essay therefore explores Stevenson's employment of particularly colonial constructions of the villain trope through a close reading of his 1894 novel *The Ebb-Tide*, with a focus on how the text portrays villainy as an interconnected matrix of ordinary vice and extra-ordinary evil, which unite to create a nightmarish experience for its characters. By interposing more or less 'standard' types of Victorian adventure villains alongside average human beings – including, at times, the adventurers themselves – with a capacity for treachery, Stevenson complicates the moral dynamics surrounding one of the mode's most essential topoi, thus leading to a new appreciation of his interaction with colonial narrative discourse. In turn, this contributes to the author's more extensive re-casting of an adventure aesthetics for a modern audience.

As is so frequently the case with adventure narrative, the dialectical component of Stevenson's work crystallises into sundry villains – some more, some less atrocious in their behaviour. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to assume that these villains are illusory bogles; for Stevenson, with his unremitting preoccupation with moral quandaries, evil comprises a very real element of the world, and one which is often best expressed – from a fictional perspective – through embodiment in villainous characters. Indeed, from a theoretical as well as a practical point of view, Stevenson allows the evil associated with villains to inhabit a tangible place within narrative. He observes, 'the sum of the contemporary knowledge or ignorance of good and evil is, in large measure, the handiwork of those who write.'[4] Hence, not only

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[1] Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, ed. Bradford A. Booth and Ernest Mehew, 8 Vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994-1995) (Vol 6) 312.

[2] Robert Louis Stevenson, 'The Beach of Falesá', *Island Nights' Entertainments.* Second Vailima ed., Vol. 15 (New York & London: Scribner's / Heinemann [in association with Chatto & Windus; Cassell & Co, and Longmans, Green & Co], 1921-1923).

[3] See, for example: Menikoff, Barry, *Robert Louis Stevenson and 'The Beach of Falesá': A Study in Victorian Publishing with the Original Text* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1984).

[4] Robert Louis Stevenson, 'The Morality of the Profession of Letters,' *Fortnightly Review* 29 (January-June 1881) 516.

should the writer 'tell of the kind and wholesome and beautiful elements of our life; he should tell unsparingly of the evil and sorrow of the present.'[5]

According to Stevenson, evil fulfils both functional and morally exploratory purposes within narrative, affording the necessary foils to propel story as well as providing a forum for ethical inquiry. In order to accomplish this, he frequently appropriates certain tropic features of Victorian adventure. As Margaret Bruzelius notes, 'the tension of [Victorian] adventure stems partly from the attraction between the demonic male and the hero. The progress of the hero is reflected by his engagement with, and final rejection of, the solipsistic and profoundly enticing claim to absolute authority made by the demonic male.'[6] This 'demonic male' is clearly a staple of Stevenson's oeuvre, ranging from an extremely mild, almost comic, scoundrel embodied by *Kidnapped*'s Alan Breck Stewart,[7] to the genial-but-deadly Long John Silver in *Treasure Island* [8] to *The Master of Ballantrae*'s [9] seductively malevolent James Durie and the shrewd cruelty of *The Ebb-Tide*'s John Attwater. These villains typically possess formidable personalities, which threaten to overwhelm their analogous adventure protagonists. Despite the fact that, as Bruzelius points out, Victorian 'adventure always finally banishes these figures as outsiders, it nevertheless represents them as seductive, beautiful, and endlessly, if fruitlessly, energetic.'[10] This essay investigates manifestations of villainy in Attwater, the primary villain of *The Ebb-Tide*, in order to demonstrate how in Stevenson's fiction the idea of villainy intermingles with imperial reality to portray a world in which the colonist, rather than the colonised, often embodies evil in its most frightening and destructive form.

Contextualising *The Ebb-Tide* as Adventure
So what is the best way in which to engage in a critical reading of villainy in *The Ebb-Tide* as a revaluation of the colonial adventure? And, for that matter, can the text truly be considered an adventure? Unlike Stevenson's previous novels *The Master of Ballantrae* and *Treasure Island*, which invite obvious categorisation as adventure texts, *The Ebb-Tide* to some extent resists straightforward classification. Indeed, while Julia Reid contends, that, 'in *The Ebb-Tide* Stevenson moves beyond the adventure genre, deftly weaving together naturalistic realism with political allegory and a proto-modernist symbolism,'[11] this essay suggests that the novel can still be categorised within the adventure mode. It is a dark adventure, certainly, but an adventure

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[5]Stevenson, 'Morality of the Profession' 517.
[6]Margaret Bruzelius, *Romancing the Novel: Adventure from Scott to Sebald* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2007) 90-1.
[7]Robert Louis Stevenson, *Kidnapped*, Second Vailima ed. 9 (New York & London: Scribner's / Heinemann [in association with Chatto & Windus; Cassell & Co, and Longmans, Green & Co], 1921-1923).
[8]Robert Louis Stevenson, *Treasure Island*, Second Vailima ed. 5 (New York & London: Scribner's / Heinemann [in association with Chatto & Windus; Cassell & Co, and Longmans, Green & Co], 1921-1923).
[9]Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Master of Ballantrae*, Second Vailima ed., Vol. 14, (New York & London: Scribner's / Heinemann [in association with Chatto & Windus; Cassell & Co, and Longmans, Green & Co], 1921-1923).
[10]Bruzelius, *Romancing the Novel* 91.
[11]Reid, Julia, *Robert Louis Stevenson, Science, and the Fin De Siecle* (Houndmills, Basingstroke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) 43.

nonetheless. *The Ebb-Tide* contains typical nineteenth-century adventure tropes such as a journey in quest of riches, an exotic setting, and (of course) a version of the demonic male as characterised by Attwater. Furthermore, Stevenson himself seems to categorise the text into this narrative mode, as demonstrated by his repeated references to the text's trio of unlikely protagonists as 'co-adventurers.'[12] A brief glimpse into the history of the novel's conception also demonstrates that its theoretical origin does indeed lie in the adventure tradition.[13]

At times, Stevenson seemed perplexed by the narrative development of this 'most grim and gloomy tale. It will run to something between *Jekyll and Hyde* and *Treasure Island*. I will not commit myself beyond this.'[14] He wrote to his mother that she would think *The Ebb-Tide*: 'vile ... horror upon horror's head accumulated: barratry, drunkenness, vitriol, are the three golden strands that hold it together; and out of the four characters, three are mere wolves and foxes. Yet I think it has a certain merit, too; if the public will accept so gross a business, of which I am doubtful.'[15] His comment implies that the very essence of *The Ebb-Tide*'s plot detours from a typical Victorian adventure yarn to an extrapolation of the concept of villainy. The novel is supported by a framework of vice and propelled by the actions, not of heroes among villains, but of 'wolves' (or, at best 'foxes') among their own kind. Interestingly, despite the fact that Stevenson expected critical disapproval of the tale, he nevertheless considered it to be keenly relevant to the contemporary literary 'tide.'[16] He wrote to Henry James that:

> the grimness of that story is not to be depicted in words. ... Well, there is always one thing: it will serve as a touchstone. If the admirers of Zola admire him for his pertinent ugliness and pessimism, I think they should admire this; but if, as I have long suspected, they neither admire nor understand the man's art, and only wallow in his rancidness like a hound in offal, then they will certainly be disappointed in *The Ebb-Tide*.[17]

According to this explanation, the purpose of *The Ebb-Tide* is not to 'wallow' in the worst of villainous behaviours but to explore them, unflinchingly depicting the reality of evil in the world and garnering insight from that portrayal in order to engage with it as a practical moral dilemma.

An argument might therefore be made for *The Ebb-Tide* as being primarily a work of realism. Indeed, to this end Oliver S. Buckton contends that Stevenson's

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[12] Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Ebb-Tide.* Second Vailima ed., Vol. 18 (New York & London: Scribner's / Heinemann (in association with Chatto & Windus; Cassell & Co, and Longmans, Green & Co), 1921-1923) 52. Further references to this work will be included as page numbers in parentheses in the text.

[13] See Stevenson, *Letters* Vol. 6, 289; Vol. 6, 330; Vol. 6, 401; Vol. 8, 158; Vol. 6, 423; Vol. 8, 31; Vol. 8, 67. Although *The Ebb-Tide* began as a collaborative effort with Stevenson's stepson, Lloyd Osbourne, it became increasingly Stevenson's own, to the extent that there was discussion of deleting Lloyd's name from the title, since he had 'nothing to with the last half' and the first half had been heavily revised by Stevenson. See Stevenson, *Letters* Vol. 8, 156. Indeed, the manuscript of *The Ebb-Tide* is wholly in Stevenson's handwriting. See editorial note in Stevenson, *Letters* Vol. 8, 91.

[14] Stevenson, *Letters* Vol. 8 29.

[15] Stevenson, *Letters* Vol. 8 79.

[16] Stevenson, *Letters* Vol. 8 103.

[17] Stevenson, *Letters* Vol. 8 107.

writing can frequently be aligned with a nineteenth-century literary trend which sought to: 'reanimate the corpse of Victorian realism through a revitalized use of Gothic and sensational motifs.'[18] Similarly, Joseph Bristow maintains that, 'in Stevenson's later fiction, the dream of adventure would fall by the hollowness of its own convictions. In two later works,'The Beach of Falesá' and *The Ebb-Tide*, the island story witnesses grown men abandoned to the "realism," one might call it, of imperial politics.'[19] Similarly, Reid writes that *The Ebb-Tide* demonstrates how 'romance itself, it appears, is degenerate: the ironic invocations of romance literature, such as Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Virgil, suggest that adventure's energies are depleted.'[20] Ann C. Colley likewise asserts that the South Sea fiction abandons (at least to some extent) the vestiges of romanticism.[21] Certainly, in contrast to some Victorian ideals of adventure, *The Ebb-Tide*

> charts Stevenson's transition from romance to a radicalized disillusionment with adventure – a transition impelled by his confrontation with the brutal energies of imperialism. Its imagery of disease and corruption questions the curative value of romance, undermining the notion that it might restore a morbidly overcivilized world to a bracing and primitive virility. Instead, the novel represents the forces unleashed by romance as pitiless and destructive.[22]

Yet are such claims actually substantiated by a careful reading of the text? Or can the work be read as Stevenson's dismantling of colonial trends rather than of adventure *per se*? After all, as Stephen Arata points out, 'the most visible feature of the late-Victorian male romance is its engagement with issues of empire.'[23] This essay suggests that, through an intentional re-negotiation of adventure tropes such as villainy, Stevenson presents a fascinating subversion of colonial literary ideology. And, by extension, he offers an effective critique of the larger socio-political framework which is generally tied to this mode in the context of late nineteenth-century narrative convention.

Colonial Deconstruction in *The Ebb-Tide*

The Ebb-Tide begins on a Tahitian beach, with a description of three impoverished beachcombers: Herrick, an incompetent Oxford graduate; Davis, an American captain deprived of his ship; and Huish, a crass London clerk. Partly from greed and partly from despair, they devise a scheme to steal a schooner, the *Farallone*, of which Davis has been offered command due to its being considered contaminated after the previous captain and mate died of smallpox. Their voyage becomes complicated,

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[18] Oliver S. Buckton, 'Reanimating Stevenson's Corpus,' *Nineteenth Century Literature* 55.1 (2000) 23.

[19] Bristow, Joseph, *Empire Boys: Adventures in a Man's World* (London: Harper Collins Academic, 1991) 121.

[20] Reid 48.

[21] Ann C. Colley, *Robert Louis Stevenson and the Colonial Imagination* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing, 2004) 57. Indeed, Bristow also believes that *The Ebb-Tide*, 'indicates a further shift away from romance' (122).

[22] Reid 52.

[23] Stephen Arata, *Fictions of Loss in the Victorian Fin De Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 79.

however, when the schooner's cargo of champagne proves too tempting for the brazenly hedonistic Huish and alcoholism-prone Davis. Robert Kiely suggests that, until the *Farallone* strays from its course, 'Stevenson has succeeded in making the story come as close as possible to his early definition of "open-air adventure" in which the immediate demands of self-preservation subordinate and simplify the problems of the will.'[24] Yet this statement overlooks the possibilities of villainy which seem to lurk beneath the story's surface from the onset. In his initial description of 'the trio,' Stevenson notes that the three men, 'wore flimsy cotton clothes, the same they had sweated in by day and run the gauntlet of the tropic showers; and to complete their evil case, they had no breakfast to mention, less dinner, and no supper at all' (6). His use of the term *evil* is perplexing here (surely *unfortunate* would do as well?), unless we are to believe that it hints at broader existential questionings which emerge within the course of the narrative. This essay maintains that, in *The Ebb-Tide*, Stevenson's formulates a construction of villainy as being manifested through the constructs of ordinary and extra-ordinary evil, which unite to shape a nightmarish environment. The following sections will provide a detailed consideration of these queries.

The Ordinary Villain
Stevenson observes that his 'trio' in *The Ebb-Tide* consists of 'three rogues ... three types of the bad man, the weak man, and strong man with a weakness, that are gone through and lived out.'[25] His allusion to the primary characters of the story as 'types' demonstrates an aspect of universality in his portrayal: they are purposefully constructed as 'ordinary' people. Yet he refers to them as 'a troop of swine' whose behaviour 'is really so deeply beneath any possible standard, that on a retrospect I wonder I have been able to endure them myself until the yarn was finished.'[26] This depiction represents a definite subversion of the Victorian 'boy's own adventure' protagonist: as Robert Dixon notes, such 'heroes typically travel away from England and civilisation into other lands whose savage inhabitants are inferior – morally, physically and economically – to the Anglo-Saxon adventurer.'[27] In *The Ebb-Tide*, however, the adventurers' behaviour is frequently portrayed as morally inferior to the native peoples of the Pacific whom they encounter.[28]

Nevertheless, Stevenson's primary characters cannot be read as entirely unsympathetic. Herrick in particular emerges an intensely pitiable, if somewhat pathetic, character.[29] The universal qualities demonstrated by Herrick as chief protagonist serve the function of making *The Ebb-Tide*, in Hugh Epstein's words, 'Stevenson's most pitiless exposure of the illusions men construct in pursuit of the

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[24] Robert Kiely, *Robert Louis Stevenson and the Fiction of Adventure* (Cambridge, MA: Oxford University Press, 1964) 180.

[25] Stevenson, *Letters* Vol. 8 160.

[26] Stevenson, *Letters* Vol. 8 107.

[27] Robert Dixon, *Writing the Colonial Adventure: Race, Gender and Nation in Anglo-Australian Popular Fiction, 1875-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 31.

[28] See, for example, Stevenson, *Ebb-Tide* 76.

[29] Interestingly, Alistair Fowler suggests that Herrick's character maintains autobiographical overtones for Stevenson. 'Parables of Adventure: The Debatable Novels of Robert Louis Stevenson.' *Nineteenth-Century Scottish Fiction: Critical Essays.* ed. Ian Campbell (Manchester: Carcanet New Press Limited, 1979) 116.

ideal construction of the self.'[30] In Stevenson's adventures it is only through a final shattering of the illusion represented by an individual's 'goodness' that redemption becomes possible.[31] Thus, despite Guy Davidson's suggestion that Herrick 'might be regarded as a prototypical anti-hero,' it seems more appropriate to consider him merely a deeply flawed protagonist whose predisposal towards an ordinary form of villainy threatens to be his undoing.[32] Indeed, Herrick's previous adoption of an alias is portrayed as symptomatic of his 'moral bankruptcy,' and at the beginning of the tale he is already painfully aware of his own deficiencies (10). When Captain Davis confides in him that, 'if you're the man I take you for, we have a chance' (in reference to stealing the champagne), Herrick's response comprises a telling commentary on his self-perceived identity: 'I don't know what you take me for ... You can scarce take me too low' (41).

While Herrick's realisation of his own capacity for evil marks him out (in Stevenson's construction) as a possible candidate for redemption, the same cannot be said of Huish. Despite the narrator's remark that, 'there is no one but has some virtue; that of the clerk was courage,' Huish is blatantly vicious, described at one point as having 'an evil countenance' (14, 65). He is also referred to as gazing at Herrick 'with a toothless smile that was shocking in its savagery' (126). Near the conclusion of the story, when Huish has struck upon the idea of killing Attwater with vitriol, evil is most readily apparent in his description: 'Huish sat there, preening his sinister vanity, glorying in his precedency in evil; and the villainous courage' (187). That Stevenson, the perennially meticulous wordsmith, employs this quantity of words pertaining to evil ('sinister vanity,' 'villainous courage') in so short a description can hardly be taken lightly. Huish is certainly a wretched villain, although not an especially formidable one. The final member of the trio is Davis, capable of both kindness and cruelty, an alcoholic prone to bouts of extreme sentimentality as well as moments of violent rage. These three men – the weak, the base, and the volatile – on their quest for illegal gain seem to constitute anything but the traditional crew of heroes sailing off into a rosy sunset. Indeed, this portrayal certainly represents an act of conscious reversal by Stevenson as he employs, and then intentionally subverts, the prevalent colonial adventure trope in favour of a more universalised portrayal of villainy.

The text's emphasis on moral distortion is crystallised by the increasing importance which Stevenson places upon the schooner's chronometer (48). Chronometers are nautical time-measurers, which, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, differ 'from watches in having a more perfect escapement and a compensation balance, and are used for determining longitude at sea, and for other exact observation.'[33] The *Farallone*'s chronometer is slightly deficient from the onset

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[30] Hugh Epstein, 'Victory's Marionettes: Conrad's Revisitation of Stevenson,' in *Conrad, James and Other Relations*, ed. Keith Carabine and Owen Knowles (Lublin, Poland: Maria Curie Sklodowska University) 194.

[31] See, as examples, Charles Darnaway in Robert Louis Stevenson, 'The Merry Men.' Second Vailima ed., Vol. 11 (New York & London: Scribner's / Heinemann [in association with Chatto & Windus; Cassell & Co, and Longmans, Green & Co], 1921-1923) and Prince Otto in Robert Louis Stevenson, *Prince Otto*. Second Vailima ed., Vol. 5 (New York & London: Scribner's / Heinemann [in association with Chatto & Windus; Cassell & Co, and Longmans, Green & Co], 1921-1923).

[32] Guy Davidson, 'Homosocial Relations, Masculine Embodiment, and Imperialism in Stevenson's *The Ebb-Tide*,' *English Literature in Transition (1880-1920)* 47.2 (2004) 128.

[33] *Oxford English Dictionary*, 10 Nov. 2008 www.oed.com.

of the voyage, and its inability to properly measure emerges as a significant metaphor for the skewed 'moral scale' of the schooner's occupants (discounting the Kanaka crew). Not surprisingly, as Captain Davis becomes more and more dissipated, he relies increasingly – and blindly – upon the chronometer, thus demonstrating his own moral neglect (72). Indeed, Davis' effort to resist the temptation of the stolen champagne is alarmingly brief: 'the Rubicon was crossed without another struggle. The captain filled a mug and drank' (62). Conversely, Herrick's acquiescence to taste of the 'forbidden fruit' is related with all the drama and tragedy of the biblical Fall. 'The champagne creamed and bubbled in the mug; its bright colour, its lively effervescence seized his eye. "It's too late to hesitate," he thought. His hand took the mug instinctively; he drank, with unquenchable pleasure and desire of more; drained the vessel dry, and set it down with sparkling eyes' (63). The similarities between this account and the one recorded in the book of Genesis are noticeable: 'and when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes ... she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat.' [34] This textual parallel engages with a Calvinistic conceptualisation of original sin of which Stevenson, like so many other Scottish authors, was intensely aware. It thus offers theological implications of the protagonists' 'ordinary' villainy as a representation of inherent sin. After drinking the champagne, Herrick recoils from a realisation of the gravity of the deed, as his conversation with Davis shows:

> 'Take some more of this. Here, drink this. I order you to! Don't start crying when you're out of the wood.'
> 'I'm not crying,' said Herrick, raising his face and showing his dry eyes. 'It's worse than crying. It's the horror of the grave that we've escaped from.'
> 'Come, now, you tackle your soup; that'll fix you,' said Davis, kindly. 'I told you you were all broken up. You couldn't have stood another week.'
> 'That's the dreadful part of it!' cried Herrick. 'Another week, and I'd have murdered some one for a dollar! God! and I know that? And I'm still living?' (64)

The seemingly minor transgression of drinking stolen champagne may at first seem odd when juxtaposed against the crime of murder, yet it proves enough to unleash the Hyde-like beast of inherent evil amongst the inhabitants of the *Farallone*.

Significantly, as Davis and Huish sink further and further into the slough of irresponsibility which will eventually endanger the lives of everyone aboard the *Farallone*, their inebriated revelry begins to grate upon Herrick: 'a wave of nausea overcame Herrick at the wheel.' He avoids entering the cabin, sending one of the crewmen to check the time because 'he would not look himself [in at the clock], from horror of the tipplers.' Even when the intoxicated duo come onto the schooner's deck, 'he paid no heed [to their calls], although his belly quivered with disgust and rage' (68-70). Herrick comprehends not only the malicious nature of the clerk, but also Davis's duplicity, for like Captain Hoseason in *Kidnapped*, Davis is truly a dichotomised man. On land 'a vigorous seaman,' almost respectable, and at sea, not

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[34] Genesis 3:6 (KJV)

simply a knave, but a 'drooping, unbuttoned figure that sprawled all day upon the lockers, tippling and reading novels ... the fool who made of the evening watch a public carouse on the quarter-deck,' passing hours 'in slavish self-indulgence or in hoggish slumber' (70-1). Herrick's horror at the behaviour of his fellow white men aboard the schooner is inextricably linked to the realisation of his own potential for vice. Despite the fact that the novel ends with Davis's supposed conversion, which may imply some redemptive potential for this character, we are tempted to wonder if instead it is Herrick who has been standing on the brink of it all along. Indeed, while for Davis the attainment of salvation from his villainous self seems both problematic and ironic, for Herrick it remains an elusive possibility.

The Extraordinary Villain
The second means by which villainy is manifest in the text is through evil of an extra-ordinary, or even semi-divine, nature. Buckton observes that readers 'can certainly identify elements of the fantastic in *The Ebb-Tide*, especially the uncanny desertion of the island and the sinister quality to the figurehead.'[35] Moreover – and unsurprisingly – the fantastical aspects of the text are not merely vaguely supernatural, but rather maintain strong theological overtones. Alistair Fowler points out that *The Ebb-Tide* is 'deeply involved with his [Stevenson's] quarrel with God,' and this struggle is frequently considered to be enacted chiefly through the character of Attwater.[36] Indeed, as the *Fallarone*'s journey proceeds, there are hints of an impending encounter with the supernatural. It can be argued that Stevenson's text demonstrates a significant imaginative alignment with Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner,'[37] in which an 'ordinary' protagonist engaged in the tropic adventure voyage commits a single momentous transgression which then forms the impetus for a nightmarish experience. The thematic similarities between these two narratives are certainly marked, since they both reflect heavily on the plight of human beings thrust into supernatural realms to deal with both the physical and the psychological ramifications of their guilt. The fact that the exotic world of *The Ebb-Tide* is patently *less* supernatural than that of Coleridge's text is surely a function of its era as much as anything else. For a more modern text it can be considered to exhibit the same considerable weighting towards the supernatural – or, to use that term of solidly Scottish etymology, *uncanny* – that the 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner' maintains for its own period of composition. Significantly, Stevenson's schooner travels beneath 'the blinding heaven of the tropics,' like an inverse of Dante's journey through celestial realms (48). Where the Italian poet moves from hell and purgatory toward heaven, Stevenson's trio seems to be, figuratively speaking, descending in the opposite direction. Significantly, the low point is embodied by Attwater, whose indifference to all humanity and 'silken brutality' render him thoroughly horrific (117). Rather than occupying the role of hero in the text, Attwater – with his polished savagery – is very much the antihero, and the result certainly rates among the most terrifying in Stevenson's repertoire of extraordinary villains.

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[35] Oliver S. Buckton, *Cruising with Robert Louis Stevenson: Travel, Narrative, and the Colonial Body* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2007) 160.
[36] Fowler 116.
[37] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner,' *The Oxford Book of English Verse*, ed. Christopher Ricks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 357-73.

Kiely points out that Attwater 'personifies evil, not as a grotesque aberration, as in Mr Hyde, nor as a temporary failure of vision, as in Deacon Brodie, nor as a glamorous vice, as in the Master of Ballantrae, but as an integral part of the human organism.'[38] Attwater is human, certainly, but he is also somehow more – somehow beyond the average mortal in scope. If James Durie, the antihero of *The Master of Ballantrae* does indeed have, 'all the gravity and something of the splendour of Satan in the *Paradise Lost*,'[39] then Attwater possesses a great deal of Lucifer's archetypal *hubris*. When asked by Attwater what to call the marvel of his diving 'machines,' Herrick tellingly responds: 'self-conceit' (131). Attwater's pride extends to his delusion of being a self-appointed 'judge in Israel, the bearer of the sword and scourge' (133). His villainy is far more dangerous than that of Huish or Davis because it is more powerful, more complex, and frequently cloaked in a veneer of light. Indeed, Herrick is shocked to find that, far from being a mere object for hatred, Attwater 'intrigued, puzzled, dazzled, enchanted, revolted him' (139). According to Fowler, Attwater is 'by turns flattering and insolent; brutal and pious; evangelically sincere and unscrupulously Machiavellian; the object of satire and subject of enigma.'[40] In this character, Stevenson has succeeded in creating a villain who is mysteriously incongruous. Here is an entity defined by paradoxes, not the least of which involves both natural and supernatural aspects.

Like other critics, Davidson points out that, besides being 'a businessman and an exploiter of native labour, Attwater is also a religious fanatic, intent on inculcating his harsh version of Christianity in the natives.'[41] Yet Herrick's struggle to grasp the essence of Attwater seems more like that of a man engaging with a much vaster problem than that of a religious zealot. Herrick gives every impression of the ordinary man grappling with a larger idea of villainy as it relates to the existence of God in an ostensibly harsh universe. Vanessa Smith points out that Attwater 'terrifies Herrick with his godlike'[42] presence (he certainly impresses Herrick with his seemingly divine knowledge: 'he knows all; he sees through all' [163]). Yet her observation that 'it is the ability to negotiate between the culture of his origins and that of his adopted context which renders Attwater an insurmountable force'[43] does not fully account for his dual (and seemingly mutually exclusive) roles of semi-divine being and mere mortal.

While Attwater's apparently supernatural attributes furnish him with vast power, his humanity entails an inherent evil which, when mingled with this power, is what makes it especially awful. As Kiely puts it, 'Attwater is both an example and a minister of the doctrine of original sin.'[44] Attwater tells Herrick: 'oh, I can do everything ... You do not understand; what must be, must' and refers to himself as a Determinist (142). But if he is the demi-god of his own island kingdom, then he must also be the one ordering this insular universe. Herrick realises this and – with all the vehemence of a man grappling with the divine – accuses him of murdering a servant:

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[38] Kiely189.
[39] Stevenson, *Master of Ballantrae* 236.
[40] Fowler 118.
[41] Davidson 131.
[42] Smith 164.
[43] Smith 164.
[44] Kiely 189.

'It was a murder,' he screamed. 'A cold–hearted, bloody-minded murder! You monstrous being! Murderer and hypocrite! Murderer and hypocrite! Murderer and hypocrite!' he repeated, and his tongue stumbled among the words.

The captain was by him in a moment. 'Herrick!' he cried, 'behave yourself! Here, don't be a blame' fool!'

Herrick struggled in his embrace like a frantic child, and suddenly bowing his face in his hands, choked into a sob, the first of many, which now convulsed his body silently, and now jerked from him indescribable and meaningless sounds. (157)

Later, Herrick despairingly confides his horror to Davis: 'the whole thing is over, I tell you. There is nothing to do here, when he knows all. ... Oh, it's no use, I tell you! He knows all; he sees through all. We only make him laugh with our pretences – he looks at us, and laughs like God!' (162-3)

Attwater is more than a mortal; at times, he is able to act 'like God.' Indeed, Kiely believes that *The Ebb-Tide* reveals 'an idea of a deity marked, like his [Stevenson's] own creation [Attwater], by a fascination with sin, a love of vengeance, and a knowledge of evil.'[45] But is Stevenson implying that Attwater is, in fact, truly a representation of God? Or, is he a construct of villainy beyond the natural scope of humanity – yet fallible nonetheless? The answer to this question lies at the moment in the text when Herrick finally gives himself up to Attwater, and it is in this passage where Stevenson's exploration of the idea becomes apparent:

'Here I am. I am broken crockery; the whole of my life is gone to water; I have nothing left that I believe in, except my living horror of myself. Why do I come to you? I don't know. You are cold, cruel, hateful; and I hate you, or I think I hate you. But you are an honest man, an honest gentleman. I put myself helpless in your hands. What must I do? If I can't do anything, be merciful and put a bullet through me; it's only a puppy with a broken leg!'

'If I were you, I would pick up that pistol, come up to the house, and put on some dry clothes,' said Attwater.

'If you really mean it?' said Herrick. 'You know they – we – they – But you know all.'

'I know quite enough,' said Attwater. 'Come up to the house.'

And the captain, from the deck of the *Farallone*, saw the two men pass together under the shadow of the grove. (176)

In a text full of shattering illusions, Stevenson shatters this last one. Attwater is too much the clay man, like Judge Hermiston in *Weir of Hermiston*,[46] too much 'Adam' to ever attain fully divine status. He does not, as Herrick so dreads, 'know all' – he only knows 'enough,' as Stevenson makes abundantly clear by his technique of shifting narrative perspective at the moment of this – perhaps Attwater's only –

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[45] Kiely 190.

[46] Robert Louis Stevenson, *Weir of Hermiston.* Second Vailima ed., Vol. 18 (New York & London: Scribner's / Heinemann [in association with Chatto & Windus; Cassell & Co, and Longmans, Green & Co], 1921-1923).

admission of weakness. The scene, and (for that matter, the chapter) ends with Captain Davis's perspective. Attwater *is* a villain, but he cannot be an omniscient deity because, from Davis's point of view on the *Fallarone*'s deck, the reader is looking down on him. Whether or not Herrick can appreciate this, Stevenson's ultimate contextualising of Attwater's villainy, it nevertheless presents a great moment of hope amidst the almost overwhelming grimness of *The Ebb-Tide*. Still, the reality of this character's almost supernatural evil, in conjunction with the more pedestrian villainy of the protagonist trio, serves to engender a truly nightmarish atmosphere within the text.

The Nightmare of Villainy

In *The Ebb-Tide*, Stevenson seems to be consciously constructing a potential for the glamorous facade of colonial adventure to fade whilst the 'romance' deteriorates into a nightmarish version of itself. And while such a dark contextualisation of adventure is a familiar aspect of the post-World War I narrative landscape, it certainly demonstrates an innovation to the colonial-era novel. Indeed, the foregrounding of a complex, and often morally problematic, setting is present throughout Stevenson's oeuvre. Much like *Treasure Island*'s Jim Hawkins, Herrick begins his voyage relying upon 'reminiscences of sea romance' for interaction with the realities of everyday seafaring life (55). Since no consequences have yet occurred for his compliance in the crime of stealing the *Farallone* and her cargo (indeed, in a manner of speaking, the crime has not yet occurred), Herrick still maintains a typical Stevensonian dream-like state of innocence. However, the act of drinking the champagne – with its manifold connotations – destroys his idyllic illusions of virtue, causing him to lament: 'it's some beastly dream' (64). At this point in the story, Herrick's nightmare is only beginning. The *Farallone*'s approach to the island is marked by an eerie sense of the area's dubious reality, its impression of the surreal. Stevenson writes that 'the isle – the undiscovered, the scarce-believed in – now lay before them and close aboard; and Herrick thought that never in his dreams had he beheld anything more strange and delicate. The beach was excellently white, the continuous barrier of trees inimitably green' (108).[47] The island possesses an aura of both beauty and strangeness such as we expect to encounter only in dreamscapes, and it serves as a prophetic mirror to the fantastical mixture of magnificence and grotesquery that the *Farallone*'s crew will encounter there.

Herrick quickly perceives the island's geography as one of moral confusion: in a building belonging to Attwater he sees 'a binnacle with its brass mountings and its compass idly pointing, in the confusion and dusk of that shed, to a forgotten pole' (128-9). Like the faulty chronometer aboard the *Farallone*, this compass reveals the sense of ethical disorder that reigns in Attwater's island domain. It is of course significant to Stevenson's use of dreamscape imagery that the shed housing this compass is shadowy and chaotic, since such are the attributes of nightmares. Indeed, the bewilderment with which Herrick responds to his spatial surroundings on the island is paralleled by his reaction to the character of Attwater:

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[47] See also Stevenson's longer descriptions for a fuller sense of the island's surrealist atmosphere 102-3.

> Herrick was like one in a dream. He had come there with a mind divided;
> come prepared to study that ambiguous and sneering mask, drag out the
> essential man from underneath, and act accordingly; decision being till then
> postponed. Iron cruelty, an iron insensibility to the suffering of others, the
> uncompromising pursuit of his own interests, cold culture, manners without
> humanity: these he had looked for, these he still thought he saw. But to find
> the whole machine thus glow with the reverberation of religious zeal,
> surprised him beyond words; and he laboured in vain, as he walked, to piece
> together into any kind of whole his odds and ends of knowledge; to adjust
> again, into any kind of focus with itself, his picture of the man beside him.
> (132)

With all the lethargy of a dreaming man, Herrick struggles to reconcile Attwater's admirable and evil aspects, which seem to him so wholly diametrical. This correlates with some aspects of Stevenson's earlier representations of villainy. Francis Russell Hart notes how, for Jim Hawkins in *Treasure Island,* 'Long John Silver 'is a moral enigma, and Jim becomes puzzled by him and responsible for him, his destroyer and saviour.'[48] Similarly, in *The Ebb-Tide*, Attwater's seemingly incompatible attributes signify not only his uncanny embodiment of evil but also the nightmarish surrealism intrinsic to his island environment. To some extent, then, this potential for nightmare should be viewed as significant in demarcating modern adventure narrative from earlier works in this mode, since for Stevenson the modern adventure is always prone to transformation into a nightmarish version of traditional romance. And, as a close perusal of Stevenson's work demonstrates, he is both aware of this transformation and intent on manipulating current literary conventions to subvert colonial narrative and generate an alternative aesthetics of adventure.

When Herrick reaches the conclusion that death is his only escape from the appalling choice between complicity in Attwater's murder and the betrayal of Davis and Huish, his resulting attempt at suicide is portrayed as the climax of a living nightmare. After swimming away from the *Farallone* with the intention of drowning himself, Herrick has the following realisation:

> to stop swimming – there was no mystery in that, if he could do it. Could he?
> And he could not. He knew it instantly. He was aware instantly of an
> opposition in his members, unanimous and invincible, clinging to life with a
> single and fixed resolve, finger by finger, sinew by sinew; something that was
> at once he and not he; at once within and without him; the shutting of some
> miniature valve in his brain, which a single manly thought should suffice to
> open; and the grasp of an external fate ineluctable as gravity. To any man
> there may come at times a consciousness that there blows through all the
> articulations of his body the wind of a spirit not wholly his; that his mind
> rebels; that another girds him and carries him whither he would not. It came
> now to Herrick, with the authority of a revelation. There was no escape
> possible. The open door was closed in his recreant face. He must go back into
> the world and amongst men without illusion. (172)

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[48] Francis Russell Hart, *The Scottish Novel: A Critical Survey* (London: John Murray, 1978) 156.

Paradoxically, although this moment represents the final devastation of his once-held 'illusion' that he might somehow be 'good,' it simultaneously heralds the beginning of his eventual escape from the nightmare of his own villainy – a nightmare that began with crime of stealing a schooner and will end with inescapable bloodshed. It may be tempting to concur with Davidson's proposal that, '*The Ebb-Tide* to an important extent envisages the moral frailty of its characters as indicative of the absurdity or meaninglessness of the human condition. Eschewing a redemptive narrative arc, as well as any intimation of alternative ethical soundness, Stevenson presents a thoroughly pessimistic vision.'[49] Yet Herrick's imminent escape from the nightmarish island resists such a negative reading, instead offering the possibility that this character's recognition of his own propensity for villainous behaviour *does* have redemptive potential. By identifying and confronting his moral delinquency, the text suggests, Herrick may finally achieve that state of spiritual devastation which allows for the redemptive act. And, if Stevenson's narrative is read as a performance of literary insurgence against nineteenth-century colonial ideology, then his protagonist's acceptance of guilt certainly takes on profound theoretical implications for the philosophical underpinnings of adventure.

Conclusion

This analysis of *The Ebb-Tide* substantiates the text's categorisation as an adventure narrative in which Stevenson employs the villain trope in a unique and culturally relevant manner. By manipulating the tropic framework of nineteenth-century colonial adventure, he presents a disturbingly universal depiction of villainy which applies as easily to the adventurers as to those whom they seek to control.[50] This text demonstrates the means by which villainy can be manifest through a combination of ordinary and extra-ordinary entities, which combine to constitute a nightmarish experience of evil. Clearly, in Stevenson's re-formulation of an adventure aesthetic, the recognition of villainy and the dangers of ignoring it become an intrinsic function of the modern adventure construct. Indeed, through works such as *The Ebb-Tide*, he advances the notion that, despite some appearances of enlightenment, the modern condition cannot afford to bypass the evil which engenders villainy, since by its very nature modernity demands acknowledgement of evil. Yet, significantly, Stevenson's portrayal of villainous behaviour never supersedes redemptive possibilities, thus providing a hopeful vision for this story and perhaps – by extension –for the adventure mode.

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[49] Davidson 138.

[50] Indeed, to this end Buckton proposes that 'the parallels between Tembinok and Attwater ... demonstrate the extent to which Stevenson views tyrannical rule and colonial domination as crossing boundaries of race and nation'(*Cruising with Robert Louis Stevenson*, 246).