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The Representation of History and Romance in Robert Louis Stevenson's Historical Novels

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Abstract: Robert Louis Stevenson, best known for his adventure and psychological narratives, also made significant contributions to historical fiction. This article examines Stevenson's historical novels, particularly *Kidnapped* (1886), *Catriona* (1893), and *The Master of Ballantrae* (1889), to explore how he combines historical accuracy with the imaginative elements of neo-romanticism. The study highlights Stevenson's skill in merging the realities of Scottish history with universal themes of loyalty, betrayal, and moral conflict. By analyzing narrative strategies, character development, and the interplay between fact and fiction, the paper argues that Stevenson revitalized the historical novel in the late Victorian era. His works not only reflect the socio-political tensions of nineteenth-century Scotland but also anticipate the global readership of modern historical fiction.

Keywords: Robert Louis Stevenson; historical novel; Victorian literature; neo-romanticism; Scottish identity; Jacobite history; adventure and romance; narrative technique; dualism; moral conflict; nineteenth-century fiction; European reception; genre innovation.

Introduction: Historical fiction emerged in the early nineteenth century as a powerful literary form capable of bringing the past vividly to life. Building on the legacy of Sir Walter Scott, Robert Louis Stevenson (1850–1894) developed his own distinctive approach to the genre. While Stevenson is often remembered for adventure classics such as *Treasure Island* and *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, his historical novels occupy a unique position in Victorian literature.

Stevenson's *Kidnapped* and its sequel *Catriona* present not only the Jacobite history of Scotland but also a

narrative of personal growth and identity. Similarly, *The Master of Ballantrae* dramatizes fraternal rivalry against the backdrop of eighteenth-century political unrest. In these novels, Stevenson intertwines historical accuracy with elements of romance and moral exploration, creating texts that engage both the intellect and the imagination.

The aim of this paper is to analyze Stevenson's historical novels as literary works that balance historical representation with neo-romantic sensibilities. By focusing on narrative techniques, character psychology, and the socio-cultural context of nineteenth-century Britain, the study seeks to demonstrate how Stevenson revitalized the historical novel tradition and secured a lasting place in the canon of world literature.

Literature Review

The study of Robert Louis Stevenson's historical novels has generated considerable scholarly debate. Early critics often regarded Stevenson primarily as a writer of adventure stories rather than a serious novelist. However, more recent scholarship recognizes his historical novels as important contributions to both Victorian literature and the neo-romantic tradition.

According to Richard Ambrosini, Stevenson's historical fiction is marked by "a constant dialogue between the imagination and the historical record," which situates his works within the wider European tradition of the nineteenth century [1]. Jenni Calder argues that Stevenson's *Kidnapped* should not only be seen as a juvenile adventure but as a subtle exploration of Scottish identity and politics in the post-Jacobite era [2]. Similarly, Roslyn Jolly highlights the "ethical and psychological dimensions" of Stevenson's historical characters, suggesting that they embody the moral uncertainties of Victorian society [3].

Furthermore, Penny Fielding emphasizes Stevenson's narrative experimentation, particularly his use of dual perspectives and unreliable narration in *The Master of Ballantrae*, which challenges traditional notions of historical truth [4].

Scholars also stress the international reception of Stevenson's works, noting their popularity in Germany and other European countries, where they were praised for blending romantic adventure with national history [5].

Thus, the literature indicates that Stevenson's historical novels deserve close critical attention, not only as entertaining narratives but also as profound reflections on history, identity, and morality.

Historical Context

Robert Louis Stevenson wrote his historical novels

during the late Victorian era, a period when British readers were deeply engaged with questions of national identity, history, and morality. The influence of Sir Walter Scott, often called the father of the historical novel, was crucial for Stevenson. Like Scott, he drew upon the dramatic history of Scotland, yet he reinterpreted it through the lens of neo-romanticism, emphasizing psychological depth and adventure alongside historical fact [6]. Stevenson's historical fiction thus reflects both the traditions of nineteenth-century British literature and the innovative spirit of a writer seeking to modernize the genre.

Kidnapped and Catriona

In *Kidnapped* (1886), Stevenson situates his story in the aftermath of the Jacobite rebellion, weaving the real historical event of the Appin Murder into the fictional adventures of David Balfour. The novel explores themes of loyalty, betrayal, and survival, while also dramatizing the cultural tensions between Lowland and Highland Scotland [7]. Through his partnership with Alan Breck Stewart, David undergoes a process of personal growth that mirrors Scotland's own struggle for unity and identity. The sequel, *Catriona* (1893), extends this narrative by focusing on David's moral choices and pursuit of justice. In these works, Stevenson combines accurate historical detail with the excitement of romance, thereby producing novels that are both educational and entertaining.

The Master of Ballantrae

Stevenson's *The Master of Ballantrae* (1889) is often regarded as his most complex historical novel. It tells the story of two brothers divided by loyalty during the Jacobite uprising. James Durie, the elder, embodies ambition and treachery, while Henry, the younger, represents patience and loyalty. Their fraternal conflict reflects the political divisions of eighteenth-century Scotland but also symbolizes universal struggles between good and evil [8]. Stevenson complicates the narrative by employing multiple narrators, a technique that casts doubt on the objectivity of historical truth. This narrative ambiguity anticipates modernist strategies, making the novel an important link between Victorian and twentieth-century fiction [9].

Romance and Neoromanticism

A hallmark of Stevenson's historical novels is the blending of factual history with the imaginative qualities of romance. As part of the neo-romantic movement, Stevenson revitalized traditional historical settings by filling them with adventure, suspense, and moral conflict. His vivid depictions of the Scottish Highlands, for example, serve not only as realistic landscapes but also as symbolic representations of freedom, danger, and identity [10]. In this way, Stevenson ensured that his

historical novels transcended documentary realism and became enduring works of art that engage readers' imaginations across cultures and generations.

Contribution to the Genre

Stevenson's historical novels represent a major contribution to the development of the genre. At a time when historical fiction risked becoming formulaic, he re-energized it by incorporating psychological depth, moral ambiguity, and experimental narrative techniques. His works were widely translated and read in Europe, particularly in Germany, where critics praised their fusion of romance and historical truth [11]. By revitalizing the historical novel and extending its international appeal, Stevenson secured his place as one of the central figures in the evolution of nineteenth-century fiction.

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