**Chapter 8, The Beach of Falesá**

**Introduction**

This chapter will introduce us to some poetry and to a well-known story by the widely read writer Stevenson. First, we look at **Stevenson's childhood** home in Edinburgh (the capital of Scotland). Then we look at Stevenson's South Pacific domestic realist story 'The Beach of Falesá'. We'll explore the complicated relationship between 'home' and 'abroad' in this story. We'll consider how Victorian readers might have approached literature written about foreign subjects. As an author, Stevenson's popularity has proved to be *long-lasting*, with many of his books still printed to the present day and many film adaptations to his stories. Stevenson's writing from and about the Pacific expanded the imagination of millions of British readers, giving them an insight into societies they could never have experienced first-hand. The act of reading brought distant lands home to British readers.

**At home with the Victorians: Edinburgh life**

Robert Louis Stevenson was a Scottish novelist, poet, essayist, and travel writer. His most famous works are 'Treasure Island' and 'Kidnapped'. He was from an upper-middle-class Scottish family. His father was one of the best engineers in the Victorian era, and his mother's family had many lawyers and clergymen. His family's house (17 Heriot Row) was located in the Edinburgh's New Town where the neighbours were wealthy and of high status. He was born with a disease, he barely could finish a semester without being withdrawn from school. He was cared for by his personal nurse, Cummy. She used to read him the Bible and works on Presbyterian morality rather than fiction. His domestic life was privileged than that of many other authors. He grew up in material security and comfort. However, prosperity and social respectability in the Victorian era brought with it a greater level of *attention* to one's domestic life and *restrictions* on liberty. Stevenson allowed his mind to wander through reading about faraway lands.

**Activity 1**

Refer to P. 443 for a better understanding of **Stevenson's house**. The house is arranged in *4 levels,* the kitchen and storage in the basement, the reception and dining rooms on the ground floor, the main bedrooms on the first floor, and other bedrooms (including Stevenson's nursery) on the top floor. Like all the Victorian houses, the aim of this distribution of space is to separate public from private spaces and to maintain the privacy of the family. Stevenson's nursery room was on the very top floor of the house. The view from his nursery provided glimpses of the wider *world beyond.*

He had never been allowed to go outside because of his sickness, which made him isolated from the real life in Victorian Edinburgh. He didn’t know about the unmodernised Old Town and the life of poverty, crimes and pollution. Unlike the natural childhood environment of the Romantic poets as Wordsworth and Shelley, Stevenson's childhood was physically secure but psychologically stifling or suffocating. On the other direction of his room, the view looks out onto the *elegant Queen Street Gardens*, a private green space only for Edinburgh's wealthy inhabitants. Stevenson would see other children playing while he remained confined indoors because of his health. From home, he *read extensively* and *developed his imagination*, that later became the hallmark of his fiction.

**Activity 2**

His childhood has shaped his imagination and literary ambition through writing poems and stories about romantic adventure. *"Foreign Lands"* and *"Travel"* were two of 65 poems brought together in "A child's Garden of Verses".

The poem **"Foreign Lands"** indicates the child Stevenson's attraction and curiosity with the world that lay beyond his house. He images himself as a boy climbing a cherry tree, to catch sight of what lies beyond his home. He has the ambition to know what is outside his home and discover the world. His vision moves from the *near* to the *distant* and finally to the *imaginary* (next door's garden, the road outside, the river flowing into the sea then the fairyland). His imaginative vision of the wider world literalized from his own childhood experience. Stevenson’s interest in the wider world outside the home started in early childhood. In this poem, he draws upon *two senses* of the word 'foreign'. **1.** Foreign as in *strange* and *unfamiliar* (like 'the next door garden' that he has seen for the very first time). **2.** Also foreign in the sense of *abroad* rather than home (the ships heading out through the Firth of Forth, and the imaginary road leading to fairyland).

In the poem **“Travel”,** Stevenson presents a more *conventional* vision of abroad, (here, abroad is everything home is not). He started this poem in one of the most famous works in Victorian Britain, *Defoe's Robinson Crusoe*. He imagined lonely Crusoe building boats on the desert island, then his focus shifted to the wonders the world. He wrote about the *Great Wall of China*, *jungles and deserts, crocodiles and mosques*. He lists and describes all the things that he encountered in travelling abroad that are not be found at home, from *camels* to *red flamingos*. This poem captures the spirit of adventure and romance that was still associated with travel and exploration in the 19th century. The **child’s poetic voice** imagines his adult self as an explorer, a commander of a camel caravan who will find a deserted city in the sands.

From his domestic space, he grew to become one of the greatest *writers* of the era and also one of its most celebrated *travellers*. He spent his childhood in the nursing room reading books and staring at the outside view. He used his imagination to travel around the world to live the adventure and to escape from his unpleasant reality domestic life. During his teens and twenties, he made **lengthy trips** away from Edinburgh, but he always came back home. Stevenson saw himself as a *citizen of the world*, rather than the inhabitant of a single city or place. In **1888**, he left for the Pacific, never to return. The rest of this chapter examines how Stevenson's representation of home and abroad changed he emigrated.

**Reading 'The Beach of Falesa'**

In this section, we look at the composition, publication, and reception of this story, as well as Stevenson's ambitious intentions for the story.

'The Beach of Falesa' is best defined as a **novella** or a short novel. It is a **hybrid form** (too short to be considered a novel, too long to be a short story). Stevenson wrote the story to be *serialized* in a newspaper. The *newspaper* determined the length of this form of serialized stories. It was published under the title of *“Uma, or the Beach of Falesa (Being the narrative of a South-sea Trader)”*. The story had a **large readership**, but the unfamiliarity of the topic and the *foreign words* in the title required the addition of a **subtitle** ('Being the Narrative of a South-Sea Trader') to make the story understandable to a mass British readership.

The **content** matter of the story caused *problems* because Wiltshire, the Scottish trader that 'represents English man', tricks Uma, the native girl, into marriage through a false contract, lasting one night. This was inappropriate and indecent to the editor and to the Victorian community. So, the editor published the story in the newspaper after he had removed any reference to the false marriage. Later, Stevenson published his story as a book without omitting the part of false marriage. 'The Beach of Falesá' is a **hybrid** **story** work in its *form and content*. Other than being a mix of a short story and a novel, the story mixes *realism* with more *romantic* and *poetic* modes, it even gives a central place to the *supernatural*.

As he was one of the leading champions of adventure romance in the late 19th century, he **criticized** the 19th-century realist novel for what he saw as its *excessive attention to detail*. He described realism as a technical method that risked portraying reality at the cost of entertaining readers. However, when he moved to Samoa, he was beginning to move away from adventure romance and towards realism. He found out that when he meets real natives and live a real journey in new lands, he can better convey his experience through realistic stories.

**Activity 3**

In the opening paragraph, we can notice the *poetic and descriptive* language used by the first-person narrator (the Scottish copra trader John Wiltshire). The opening paragraph describes Wiltshire's first glimpse of the island, Falesa, as their boat nears the land. Wiltshire arrives in a time of transition, when it was neither night nor morning. His language is full of *strong visual imagery* conveying the beauty of the natural world (e.g. the broad and bright moon, the pink dawn, and the daystar that sparkled like a diamond). Wiltshire engages all his senses in describing his first impressions of the island (the smell of the wild lime and vanilla, the cool temperature of the breeze blowing in his face, the prospect of hearing new words in a tongue that is quite strange). Stevenson's opening paragraph sets the scene for his British readers, encountering this story about the Pacific on the other side of the world. He lets his readers see Falesa for the first time through the perspective of his first-person narration. Stevenson uses the captain's *dialogue* with Wiltshire to provide us with the back-history of the trade settlement at Falesa, and indicate the strange problems of the place. The captain points out that the windward side of the island is uninhabited, and that John Adams, one of the first white traders on the island, declined into illness and insanity.

The opening of the story attracts the reader through the romance of the first encounter with a Pacific island and then presents us with a *realist account* of the problems of previous foreign traders on Falesa. Stevenson draws upon the adventure romance and travel writing traditions and the expectations of his readers before showing them **the reality of life on Falesa**, which, despite its beauty, is far from being an exotic island paradise.

**A new realism**

In this story, Stevenson was attempting something *new* in his literary career, he started writing stories that could be described as **realistic**. He wrote to his friend and literary advisor that this's the first realistic South-Sea story, i.e. with *real South-Sea character and details of life*. Despite the fact that the plot of the story intentionally uses the *supernatural* (the taboo around Wiltshire's house, and the islanders' belief in the devil), Stevenson's narrative deals with these phenomena in a realist way. Case's cave of evil spirits is exposed as a *trick* created with luminous paint and Aeolian harps. While Falesa is an imaginary island, Stevenson took great efforts to make his representation of island life as *accurate* as possible, basing many of the attitudes, practices, beliefs and aspirations of the islanders on the Samoans, whom he interacted with on a daily basis. There are *two* other aspects of realism in Stevenson's story that we'll encounter next: the use of *dialect* in the narrative, and the *circulation of books*.

**New forms of English**

The language that is been used in the story is **dialect and slang**. Stevenson used many Polynesian ones, mainly *Samoan*. He was aware of the differences of dialect, accent and usage in the British Isles. He said that we don’t have one pure English, but *Englishes* with different dialects and accents such as Wales, Scottish and Irish. The story attempts to realistically represent a new, evolving and unstable of English, called **Pidgin**, which emerged as a new language out of the trading relationships on the beach between different communities, for example, Americans and various Pacific Islanders across the Pacific. This fast-changing, mixed form of English continued to evolve. It was given *formal reorganization* after the translation and publication of the Bible. Among the main translators in the 19th century is the *'British and Foreign Bible Society'*, which was committed to printing cheap Bibles in English and circulating them as widely as possible. They were also translated into local languages and dialects to support missionary work. As we see, Uma’s Bible is one these translations, where the language is Pidgin. Lacking a language in common, Uma uses the *English-based island Pidgin* trading language to communicate with her husband, Wiltshire.

**Activity 4**

Wiltshire’s home life faces some *complications* with his native wife because of the differences of the cultural encounter and also indicates the global circulation of books and ideas by the end of the 19th century. The domestic life of Wiltshire and Uma doesn’t represent the *idealism* of Victorian home. His wife is not English and the communication is kind of weak between the couples. While Wiltshire, the narrator, speaks in *standard colloquial English*, Uma's responses (as represented by Wiltshire) show the word order and simple structure of *Pidgin English*. Stevenson's **commitment to realism** is at its clearest here, he portrays an everyday marital argument. Uma was worried about her husband going to the windward side of the island. Wiltshire’s is not able to convince her that he'll be safe. Despite his superior British knowledge and her native ignorance, Wiltshire brings out the Bible in an attempt to satisfy Uma, and prove that he will be secured from the bad spirits and devils that live on the other side of the island. She says that the Bible was no use against the island spirits. Far from passivity, and despite her own fears of the devils, Uma *secretly follows* Wiltshire into the cave. This episode of swearing an oath on the Bible and carrying it as a protection against evil spirits indicates Uma's *unconditional support* for Wiltshire and shows their marriage in the spirit as well as the letter of the law. The couple has a common, textual point of reference, the Bible. 'The Beach of Falesa' reminds us of the increasing *interconnectedness* brought about by trade and empire. This interconnectedness, as Wiltshire and Uma's domestic life shows, brought with it problems as well as opportunities. The main problem was the possibility of the *mixing of the races* and the *reduction* of the British values.

**Stevenson in the South Pacific**

Stevenson’s new life in the Pacific engaged with the peoples, cultures and places he encounters. Critic **Mary** **Pratt** has used the term **'contact zone'** to refer to 'social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and fight with each other, often in contexts of highly *asymmetrical* (or uneven) relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths. For the majority of traders, missionaries, and settlers, the specific place of contact zone where the trade and conversation and all other forms of exchange took place was at the **beach**. In this story, the entire narrative is played out in this contact zone. While Stevenson's engagement with Pacific culture and its contact zones were emotionally and creatively positive, not all encounters were so unproblematic. For example, Stevenson's description of Wiltshire's first encounter with his opponent *Case*, which takes place in *the contact zone of Falesa's beach.*

**Activity 5**

Wiltshire's first response to Case is one of spontaneous *racial and national solidarity*. Wiltshire didn't have contact with his countrymen for a long time. Stevenson's narration allows us to see Case through Wiltshire's eyes. The first excitement at meeting a fellow Briton on Falesa is replaced by a growing sense of *uncertainty* about Case's social, national and moral status. While Wiltshire notices that Case is highly educated and an expert accordion player, he is also quick to notice Case's chameleon-like ability to adapt to circumstances and situations. Case is not what British Victorian readers would call a *'gentleman'*. Wiltshire's racial solidarity is gone when he was certain that Case does not represent the values or principles of home.

Wiltshire's engagement with Case highlights one of the central problems, that European imperial expansion in the 19th century presented a set of fixed ideas about race and nationality. On the one hand, British traders, missionaries and settlers were expected to be *ambassadors* of British virtues and to remain faithful to those values however long they spent 'abroad'. On the other hand, their increasing distance and dislocation from the values of 'home', and the fact that the contexts of social class meant nothing, resulted in the loss of the racial and national attitudes that they had brought with them. In 'The Beach of Falesa', Case has spent so long in the Pacific that he no longer has a noticeable nationality beyond the fact that he is English-speaking. Racial and national categories were increasingly weakened by the realities of trade, imperial expansion, and emigration and settlement. Ironically, the further the British travel from home, the more strictly they tried to live by the ideals and principles of the mother country, and yet, making a new home abroad always meant creating a new, mixed way of life.

**Activity 6**

We learn that the events of the story were sometime in the past and that Wiltshire has moved away from the island, and has had children with Uma, who are nearly grown up. Wiltshire describes his wife as an 'A 1 wife' and doesn't attribute her mistakes to her character, but to her *race*. Wiltshire's own **racial prejudices** are clear throughout the story, he thinks that the Islanders are *worthless* or less than him because they *lack logic*, and often uses racially *offensive terms* like 'Kanaka'. Also, he does not want his daughters to marry Pacific Islanders, despite their own mixed origin. Wiltshire is *unapologetic* about his prejudice, he reflects the *unthinking prejudices* of many Victorian British traders, settlers and emigrants. However, he *succeeded* in making a home for himself and his family in the Pacific. He no longer refers to Britain as home, but rather as a white man's country.

The Beach of Falesa' was as *far* from the domestic world of late Victorian readers as can be imagined. It is set in a strange, *fictionalised* and unidentifiable location, with a plot involving an *interracial romance*, the *supernatural* and a fight to the death between good and evil. Stevenson combines elements of the *adventure* story with *romance* and *travel* narrative, while Wiltshire's sarcastic first-person narration helps maintain the reader's interest. However, 'The Beach of Falesa' is also a domestic story, the account of Wiltshire's establishment of a life with Uma which was written in a realist style.

Composed by: Mennah Alshafey.