

The Battle of "Good" and Evil in Robert Louis Stevenson's "The Suicide Club"

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Robert Louis Stevenson's "The Suicide Club" was first published in his collection of short stories called *New Arabian Nights*. Stevenson, in this story, presents a fallen world of murder, suicide and betrayal, on the one hand, and addiction to decadent sensuous intoxication through drugs, alcohol and opulent food, on the other hand.

The actual reason for this decadent evil is disclosed in a rather casual aside: "[One of the club members] professed that he would never have joined the club, if he had not been induced to believe in Mr. Darwin. 'I could not bear,' said this remarkable suicide, 'to be descended from an ape.'" (Stevenson 13) Indeed, even before Darwin in the Nineteenth Century, Copernicus in the Sixteenth, and Galileo in the early Seventeenth Century shook the traditional notions of the place, purpose and significance of man in the universe. As opposed to Ptolemy, who claimed that the earth was the centre of the universe, Copernicus and Galileo posited a revolutionary hypothesis: that the earth and other planets move around the sun, a "heretic" argument that impaired the traditional Christian belief in the central position of man and the earth. To make things worse, Darwin dealt a further blow to the notion of such primacy. Man was made in the image of God and, the only one among His creatures, to be endowed with reason, he was appointed as lord of all the beasts on earth. Darwin, however, made man kin to the ape, an animal ruled by base instinct, thereby wresting from him his claim to rational thought and a system of morality, on which his primacy was founded.

And still another shock was to unsettle the Victorian male. Darwin's idea of sexual selection and female choice (i.e. it is the female who chooses her mate) turned upside down the traditional sexual hierarchy. In the Genesis, Eve is said to be created as a helpmeet for Adam; yet the notion of the female as subservient to the male – a notion further reinforced by the popular figure of the Victorian angel in the house – was challenged by Darwin's threateningly dominant, sexual female who pulled the strings and thus emerged as a threat, a rival to him. Once the strict lines of demarcation between the human and the animal as well as the male and the female were profoundly blurred, the Victorian men found themselves to be haunted by a nightmare of chaos, ambiguity and

ambivalence. Their humanity and manhood/maleness were at stake, a threat that provoked great anxiety, paranoia and outrage. And this according to Stevenson is the actual evil.

Stevenson's Suicide Club then powerfully rejects the Victorians' loss of faith in a reassuring orderliness in existence – and in God. The members of the club, who are all part of the world of Darwin, have lost their humanity, their manhood, their Christian code of ethics and their purpose in living – indeed Stevenson betrays a disturbing fear of effeminacy, or homophobia – and they are hence willing to also lose their lives. This "half maniacal society" consists of eighteen members, who are all male, young and bachelors (Stevenson 12). Most of them are "in the prime of youth, with every show of intelligence and sensibility in their appearance, but with little promise of strength or the quality that makes success" (Stevenson 12). The aim of the club is to help its members to put an end to their lives by randomly selecting one member to kill another.

The fact that its president is a man of about 50 years, while most of the members prove to be rather young, and that he wears large side-whiskers – supposedly a sign of masculinity, and finally, that his name should never be disclosed indicates an assumption to Godhead, as reminiscent of that of the fallen archangel Lucifer. A young member of the club introduces Prince Florizel of Bohemia and Colonel Geraldine to the club by offering them cream tarts. These "palatable" delicacies obviously act as a metaphor for the fruit of the tree of knowledge (Stevenson 8). Just like Eve tempting Adam to eat the apple, the young man tempts them to eat the cream tarts and seduces them into joining the Suicide Club, or re-enacting the Original Sin. One cannot, however, commit suicide in the name of God as the Prince suggests, because suicide itself is entirely unchristian. The President of the Suicide Club takes advantage of this fact, for his club enables those who have grown tired of living to end their lives without having to commit suicide. One of the members has to murder another. Yet, as homicide is also a sin, the President has to bring a solution to this as well. He simply replaces all these sinful and criminal acts by a game of cards, where divine Providence and Christian responsibility and justice give way to sheer luck or accident. They take seats around "a long green table, ... the President "shuffling a pack of fifty-two cards..." begins "slowly dealing the cards about the table in the reverse direction, pausing until each man had shown his card" (Stevenson 16-17). The member who gets the ace of spades becomes the victim and the one who gets the ace of clubs is to murder him. Suicide, murder, "legalised" as mercy-killing, and gambling have thus replaced a purpose-oriented life, human strivings and the very struggle for survival itself. The club members no longer attempt to discover purpose and order in a Darwinian world that, so they believe, refuses to evidence either. Actions and aspirations hence appear to be obsolete. In fact, the card game shows how readily they resign themselves to the gloomy idea that human existence is charac-

terised by randomness altogether. Until it is their turn to die, the club members seek to numb their minds that cannot bear the thought that they are descended from an ape, through heedless decadent sensuous intoxication. Not only is the Christian ideal of asceticism replaced by such hedonism, but the fact that the Prince and the Colonel so readily succumb to the temptation of the palatable cream tarts demonstrates their loss of reason and consequent regression to an animal that lives solely through its senses and primarily craves for food. Furthermore, the guests enjoying "tempting viands... fruits and goblets of champagne" playing roulette and baccarat are presented as the focal points of the sham party organised by the Colonel (Stevenson 47).

They have not only lost their humanity, but are in danger of losing their manhood as well. Darwin's notion of sexual selection and female choice, as noted above, undermined the preconceived definitions of maleness. According to Sussman "the governing terms of manhood became contradiction, conflict [and] anxiety" (Sussman 15). The text of "The Suicide Club" abounds with indications of the slipperiness and ambiguity of sex/gender roles. Victorian society says that men must marry because as Sussman says "for the Victorians the opposite of manliness is madness" (48). Once the traditional male-female binary, his role as progenitor and thus the male's sense of his own masculinity – so vital for his self-definition – are taken away, all certainties seem to disappear as well, leaving him in a state of intolerable anxiety and madness.

It is implied that the club members, whose sexualities are questionable and who are all bachelors will leave no progeny, which renders them unfit for the struggle for survival. That they are doomed to become an extinct species is also implied by the fact that the murder game they play decreases their number.

Indeed, they have all taken refuge in an all-male club, for outside it, women, such as Madame Zéphyrine, have asserted their primacy. Another character, Silas Q. Scuddamore, can only peep into this woman through a hole on the wall – the only sexual titillation that is left for the male, whose masculine power is taken away. Madame Zéphyrine, the only female character in the story, turns out to be a direct descendent of Eve: her "hope of enchanting" Silas by "the knock-down look of her eyes" and "the revelation of [her] ... admirable foot and ankle" are all indications of her flirtatious, passionate and cunning character that she appears to have inherited from the wily temptress, Eve. Although she complains about the condition of women in Western society: "Alas, we poor women, what slaves we are!" it is she who pulls the strings (Stevenson 30). Prince Florizel and the Colonel decide to restore justice and order in their society by appointing the latter's brother to kill the President of the unchristian Suicide Club. Madame Zéphyrine, however, crosses their plan: she is involved in the murder of the Colonel's brother – to what extent the reader does not know – and thus prevents the murder of the President and the dissolution of his club. Her motive

appears to be clear: to further the extinction of the male species. For man, Madame Zéphyrine, like Eve, is thus a source of evil and death. And like Eve, she is the reason for his fall. It proves to be his fascination with this woman that results in Silas' involvement in the murder of the Colonel's brother, for beguiled by her sexual attraction, he becomes a convenient instrument in her plan to get rid of the corpse. She appoints a meeting at the corner of the Luxembourg Gardens, an obvious reference to the Garden of Eden, where Eve tempted Adam to commit a sin. After waiting there for Zéphyrine in vain, Silas returns to his hotel room to find the corpse in his bed. Like the wind, Madame Zéphyrine, who is named after Zephyr, the west wind, gives direction to the events and actions in the story, and thereby emerges as a principal agent, rather than a slave. She looms so threateningly over the male that he loses his sense of his male primacy and phallic power and seeks refuge in an all-male territory – the club.

This escape cannot, however, remedy the Victorian males' loss of masculinity. They are portrayed by Stevenson, who obviously shares their anxiety, as effeminate characters, also associated with homosexuality, who attempt to recover their maleness by exaggerated male pursuits. First of all, in the story, the only female derives her name from Zéphyr, the male west wind, while the Colonel's name, Geraldine, is a woman's name. The Prince's name Florizel can moreover be traced back to "flower," usually associated with women. Yet it proves to be not only their names, but also their actions and general behaviour that undermine the boundary between the male and female sex/gender.

For example, the Prince decides to rid the world of the prevailing evil by having the President of the Suicide Club killed in a duel. The Colonel, in order to find some men who shall assist the Prince in this duel, hires some hansom cab drivers "to kidnap single gentlemen in evening dress ... but military officers by preference" (Stevenson 46). When I say hansom, I see that you hear "handsome," but I am talking about cabs here. So there's obviously an underlying ambiguity, which is reinforced by the fact that the sham party starts "to move beyond the bounds of the homosocial into the dangerous zone of feminization and even effeminacy" (Sussman 6). At the party, the Colonel organises for these gentlemen,

he was not so much like a host as like a hostess, and there was a feminine coquetry and condescension in his manner which charmed the hearts of all. (Stevenson 49)

That the Colonel can "adapt not only his face and bearing, but his voice and almost his thoughts, to those of any rank, character, or nation" is an implication that the clear distinctions of social class, sex, gender and ethnicity have melted away. There is a problem of masculinity; males are pleased and delighted by the appearance of other males. For instance, the Colonel says that the appearance of the soldiers

has pleased his hansom cabmen and delighted him. Like some members of the club, the men they kidnap are all after some sort of adventure. In order to restore their masculine power, the Colonel, the Prince and the President resort to deadly weapons that function as phallic symbols. For the duel the Colonel brings the Prince his case of swords and gives loaded pistols to the two soldiers that assist the Prince while the President is depicted with a knife in his hand. Moreover, the Colonel, his brother and the two soldiers are portrayed as wearing official uniforms, which reinforces the notion of an attempt to reassert their endangered masculinity.

Silas appears to be a candidate for the position of the patriarch of a family because he is a young man. However, the fact that instead of having a relationship with a marriageable woman, he is prying into Madame Zéphyrine's affairs symbolises his impotency and lack of phallic power. The fact that his middle name stands for query as emblematic of his curiosity and his reputation as "a born gossip ... a pert [and] invincible questioner," – all traits attributed to woman – further undermines his masculinity (Stevenson 25). In accordance with the saying, "Curiosity killed the cat," he gets into deep trouble, because of his curiosity – that is, his peeping on Madame Zéphyrine – which eventually leads him to the corpse of the Colonel's brother in his bed. Similarly, "the accomplished Prince Florizel of Bohemia, [who] gained the affection of all classes by the seduction of his manner and by a well-considered generosity," is negatively portrayed because in the Victorian society seduction is a quality associated with the female, such as in the case of Madame Zéphyrine. The Colonel's kissing the Prince's hand "with the greatest affection" is presented as an inappropriate behaviour as well, because a man generally kisses the hand of a woman as a sign of courtesy. The disguise of the Prince is referred to by saying that he "travestied his appearance by the addition of false whiskers and a pair of large adhesive eyebrows," which are visible signs of masculinity. It is certainly a conscious choice disapproving of both the disguises and the feminisation or rather effeminacy of the male characters in the story because disguise requires putting on make up which is again a woman's trait (Stevenson 2).

Several characters attempt to restore purpose and order in a world that refuses to evidence either. This paradox, however, mocks man's actions and aspirations. Although these "heroic" characters are descendent from redemptive characters in other fiction or history, they fail to work miracles themselves and instead can only enact a parody or mimicry. Still worse, despite their aim to blot out evil in the world, they are shown to actually participate in it. One more boundary is thus blurred: that between good and evil.

Prince Florizel of Bohemia aspires to the positions of God and Shakespeare's character of the same name in *The Winter's Tale* but fails to act out their redemptive roles. Instead he is actually shown to be more akin to the evil doers Satan and Autolycus, who is another char-

acter in Shakespeare's play. The Prince chooses to be known by the name Theophilus Godall. Theophilus is like a combination of theo and -phile, suggesting the Prince's strong desire for assuming the role of God, the supreme ruling power. However, as Kiely suggests, his "omnipotence extends no further than his last name" (129). The change of name and his attempt at usurping the role of God suggests his kinship to the shape-shifting fallen angel Lucifer, whose sin was vying for the supremacy of God. The name Prince Florizel of Bohemia is also an ironic reference to a character with the same name in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, illustrating for us the reversal of roles prevalent in the Victorian society. The play reflects the struggle between good and evil as well. As Pafford says, Florizel, in the play, "carries the themes of resolution, constancy, and self-sacrifice. Superficially he is the conventional figure of the disguised lover-prince" (Shakespeare lxxviii-lxxix). Stevenson's character is more reminiscent of Autolycus, who "has an eye for the main chance and is not susceptible to charm, female or other.... [and] has the great overriding virtue of being merry-hearted: [Autolycus] is an intelligent rogue, a schemer of ability: [like the Prince in "The Suicide Club,"] he excites admiration and provokes laughter at the same time" (Shakespeare lxxx). Furthermore, while in *The Winter's Tale* Florizel is ready to sacrifice all for the love of Perdita and restore justice by marrying her, Autolycus would not sacrifice anything at all. Thus, Florizel in "The Suicide Club" is more akin to Autolycus, who is morally weak. Indeed, he is the first to eat the cream tarts and join the Suicide Club and thus to commit the Original Sin. A character who denotes order and good in Shakespeare is reconstructed to denote evil in Stevenson's story.

The death of the Colonel's brother is a mere parody of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. In fact, his low rank in the army already suggests his failure. He is chosen by his brother and the Prince to fight the President in a duel in order to rid the world of the evil. However, the duel never takes place. Yet, the Colonel's brother loses his life in his mission while the President remains alive. Moreover, the fact that he shall eliminate this evil by committing an act of murder also points to the notion that he is a flawed Jesus Christ figure. Still, another evil fratricide is evoked. The Colonel and his brother also act out the deadly conflict between Cain and Abel. It is the Colonel himself who appoints his own brother for the task of challenging the President to a duel and thus brings about his death. Furthermore, the Prince plans to have the President, whom he considers to be responsible of evil in the society, killed in a duel, which is but a crime. To make things worse, he goes against chivalric codes withholding from the President the right of choice of weapon.

An "honorary member" of the club, Mr. Bartholomew Malthus is a "paralytic person with strong spectacles," his physical decay also pointing to his weak morality (Stevenson 14). He is named after the English economist Thomas Robert Malthus (1766-1834). In his *Essay on Population* (1798) he says that for the society to survive, nature has

“natural checks” of population that is disasters, such as war, famine, pestilence, human misery and vice. He further advocates birth-control for the elimination of poverty. On the other hand, the “natural check” Stevenson’s character proposes is that each night one member be appointed to murder another one.

Silas Q. Scuddamore is introduced as a seemingly “young American of a simple and harmless disposition” (Stevenson 24). However, appearances are once again misleading. With the aid and directions of Dr. Noel, he puts the corpse into the Saratoga trunk. As a reminder of his involvement in the crime, the trunk and the corpse in it become a burden of which he can rid himself only after a long time. The fact that Silas should finally return to America in order to become a politician demonstrates the corruption not only in British society but also on the other side of the Atlantic.

Dr. Noel, too, emerges as a flawed character in the story. He is “an old English physician of rather doubtful reputation,” and therefore lives in the shady Latin Quarter in Paris (Stevenson 25). He summarises his philosophy of life thus: “good and ill are a chimera; there is naught in life except destiny, and however you may be circumstanced there is one at your side who will help you to the last” (Stevenson 33). What he means is that there is no good or bad, right or wrong but fate only. After hearing this, we are not surprised to see that Dr. Noel, whose name ironically refers to the birth of Christ, is associated with the death of the Colonel’s brother. Moreover, like Judas he delivers his oldest friend and “old accomplice,” into the hands of the Prince “for judgement” and even buries the President with his own hands (Stevenson 56). This betrayal once again evokes the story of Cain and Abel.

None of the characters thus proves free from guilt, all participate, to a varying extent, in the evil. However, Stevenson, unable to acknowledge the corruption of the Victorian society, projects it onto the “other”: the Prince is from Bohemia, Dr. Noel inhabits the Latin quarters, Silas is an American, Madame Zéphyrine is both French and female, and Lieutenant Brackenbury Rich comes from India.

Finally, there remains to explain why Stevenson chose to name his collection of stories – and among them “The Suicide Club” – after the *Arabian Nights*. The connection between these two works can be explained with the fact that, despite their origins in different times and places, they both depict a world characterised by the absence of order, stability and clear-cut distinctions. In the original *Arabian Nights*, the characters are subjected to an endless series of great alterations in their lives. Most characters must fight with evil forces, face treachery and at the end death. It is also a world of shape-shifting creatures, genies that have no stable identities – like Aladdin, in fact – and cut across the divide between the rational and supernatural. All these are particularly un-English and are associated with the absolute “other” that symbolises evil and is connected with chaos. Such chaos, confusion and the absence of lines of demarcation also characterise, as argued above,

Stevenson’s story “The Suicide Club.” But unlike the *Arabian Nights*, it lacks an acceptance of such randomness alongside with humour, warmth, sex and a happy ending.

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Opening Speech

PROF. KEMAL ALEMDAROĞLU

Rector

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Ladies and Gentlemen:

Welcome to the 23rd All-Turkey English Literature Conference on "Evil in English Literature." This year, our university is hosting the 23rd All-Turkey English Literature Conference. I am delighted to welcome you at this venue, the Baltalimanı Guest House, on this beautiful spot of the Bosphorus.

Istanbul University, with its 11 campuses, 17 faculties, 11 graduate schools, 13 institutes, 30 research and application centers, 5000 academics, 10,000 administrative staff and 60,000 students, is the oldest and strongest university in Turkey. Our university has demonstrated throughout history that it is the seat of modernity and development.

Istanbul University was founded in 1863 under the name of Istanbul Darülfünun. When the Turkish Republic was founded, Istanbul University was the only university in Turkey. The institution was renamed as Istanbul University in accordance with Atatürk's reform in 1933 and it was restructured to meet the contemporary conditions in Turkey. It acted as a starting point in the development of higher education in Turkey. The academics and the students who shared the privilege of being members of Istanbul University initiated the establishment of other universities in Turkey. Thus, the light of wisdom has been shared throughout the country. This shows that Istanbul University had a great influence on the process of enlightenment in Turkey.

Foreign academics were welcomed in the early years of Istanbul University as academic staff and they started a new era in the history of Istanbul University. Among these, I must cite the names of Prof. Leo Spitzer and Prof. Eric Auerbach who are world famous figures in the fields of literature and philosophy. They taught in the Department of Romance Languages and Literature, which later constituted the Departments of French and English Language and Literature. The organizers of this conference, the Department of English Language and Literature, relying on this strong background, contributed greatly to the field of literature.

I also extend my warm appreciation to those who organized this conference. I hope you enjoy the next three days in this pleasant venue and that you have a rewarding and enjoyable conference.