Robert Louis Stevenson

The Body-Snatcher

Pam Lock
Robert Lewis Balfour Stevenson [from about 1868: Robert Louis Balfour; from about 1873: Robert Louis]. Known to his friends as Louis.

Born 13 November 1850 at 8 Howard Place, Edinburgh

Died 3 December 1894 of a cerebral hemorrhage at his house Vailima on Samoa

Further information:
Claire Harman and G.K. Chesterton have written excellent biographies of Stevenson. The collected letters (Booth & Mehew) are well worth reading.
The Body-Snatcher

Published in *Pall Mall* magazine, 1884

Inspired by the famous Burke and Hare case

What was Stevenson’s view of the story?

What was the public reception to this Christmas story?
Quotations for discussion

Frame narrative:

‘Every night in the year, four of us sat in the small parlour of the George at Debenham – the undertaker, and the landlord, and Fettes, and myself.’ (p. 183)

‘“Money!” cried Fettes; “money from you! The money that I had from you is lying where I cast it in the rain”’(P. 186)

‘“I heard your name; I feared it might be you; I wished to know if, afterall, there were a God; I know now that there is none. Begone!”’ (p. 186)

‘It is no great boast, but I believe I was a better hand at worming out a story than either of my fellows at the George; and perhaps there is now no other man alive who could narrate to you the following foul and unnatural events.’ (p. 188)
Quotations for discussion

Second narrative:

‘They bring the boy, and we pay the price’ (p. 190)

“Toddy Macfarlane I call him.” (p.193)

‘ “Why man, do you know what this life is? There are two squads of us – the lions and the lambs. If you’re a lamb, you’ll come to lie upon these tables like Gray or Jane Galbraith; if you’re a lion, you’ll live and drive a horst like me, like K-, like all the world with any wit or courage”’ (p. 196-7)

‘A wild yell rang up into the night; each leaped from his own side into the roadway; the lamp fell, broke, and was extinguished; and the horse, terrified by this unusual commotion, bounded and went off toward Edinburgh at a gallop, bearing along with it, sole occupant of the gig, the body of the dead and long-dissected Gray’
Quotations for discussion

Second narrative continued:

‘furnished with a formidable bottle’ p. 199’

‘Supernatural occurrences, also, are more than manifestations of a metaphysical power: they are associated in scientific and quasi-religious terms, with the forces and energies of a mysterious natural dimension beyond the crude limits of rationality and empiricism, exceeding the reductive and deterministic gaze of materialistic science. These forces, seen as both unhuman and inhuman are also in-human, embedded in the natural world and the human mind.’

Adaptations - film

Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Body Snatcher*
- released 1945
- starred Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi
- adapted and produced by Val Lewton
- directed by Robert Wise
Talking points:
• How does the frame narrative work with the story-within-a-story?
• How reliable is the narrator?
• Moral and Morality
• Homosociality
• Is it a ghost story?
• What aspects of the story are gothic?
• What anxieties does it reveal?
• How satisfactory is the end?