



Ghosts of the Self: Psychoanalytic Approaches to Fear and Desire in the Children's Poetry of R.L. Stevenson

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a psychoanalytic study of the uncanny in children's poetry, focusing on themes of fear and desire in three selected poems from Robert Louis Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verses*: "My Shadow," "The Land of Nod," and "The Unseen Playmate.". Drawing on the theories of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, the study explores how these poems reflect the child's inner world, marked by anxiety, desire, and identity formation. While children's poetry is often associated with imagination and play, these texts reveal deeper psychological layers. Freud's concept of the uncanny, when something familiar becomes strangely unsettling helps uncover repressed fears and unconscious tensions. Lacan's ideas of the Other, the mirror stage, and the Real provide insight into how these poems portray fragmented identity, loneliness, and the boundary between fantasy and reality. By examining how Stevenson's poems articulate unspoken wishes and anxieties, the study challenges the notion of childhood as a purely innocent phase. Instead, it positions these poems as complex reflections of the child's emotional and psychological development. Ultimately, the paper highlights how fear and desire shape the language of childhood and open a window into the child's evolving subjectivity.



Introduction

Published in 1885, *A Child's Garden of Verses* by Robert Louis Stevenson remains a cherished classic of children's literature. Through gentle rhythm and vivid imagery, this poetry collection explores the world as seen through a child's eyes, celebrating innocence, imagination, fantasy, and the simple joys of growing up. The collection contains 64 poems, and these poems channel themes such as imagination and fantasy, nature and the outdoors, childhood innocence and joy, daily life and routine, dreams and sleep, reflection, and youth. Children's poetry is often viewed as a space that employs playful rhythms, whimsical imagery, and comforting themes; however, beneath all of these lies a deeper and more complex meaning which is both emotional and psychological.

A psychoanalytical reading of Stevenson's poems uncovers uncanny feelings, revealing underlying and repressed emotions such as fear, desire, separation, and loneliness. These provoked feelings contrast with the traditional view of childhood as entirely innocent and carefree.

This paper examines three emblematic poems from Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verses* namely "My Shadow," "The Land of Nod," and "The Unseen Playmate,". These poems have been selected for study because of their relevant themes, symbols, and motifs. The analysis will be based on the theoretical framework of psychoanalytic theory, particularly the ideas of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. Freud's notion of the uncanny involves something familiar suddenly becoming strange or unsettling, and this sense of disquiet aligns with the emotional tone present in these poems. A Freudian analysis reveals that, between the lines, the poems channel inner conflict, repressed fears, and lingering past memories. In children's poetry, the uncanny often arises when a child encounters the unfamiliar: living shadows, dreams that merge with reality, and invisible companions who mirror hidden thoughts.

Jacques Lacan's concepts such as the mirror stage, the Other, and the Real support this interpretation by exploring how subjectivity is constructed through language and relational dynamics. The Lacanian lens reveals identity crises, alienation, and unfulfilled desires that may emotionally unsettle a child.

Through close re-readings of the poems' vivid imagery, rhythmic structures, and storytelling perspectives, this study explores how Stevenson's poetry taps into the psychological depth of childhood, capturing both its emotional complexities and comforts. By using a psychoanalytic lens for this reinterpretation, the paper



challenges the idealised image of childhood, proposing instead that children's poetry can reflect the intricate psychological life of the child. Stevenson's work blends theme of innocence with an intuitive awareness of the unknown. By exploring these aspects, we aim to demonstrate that children's poetry acts as a compelling vehicle for expressing the unspoken feelings and subconscious thoughts of young readers, offering a window into the challenges of growing up and the universal experience of grappling with the strange and unfamiliar.

Identity, Lack, and the Alienation in Childhood in "My Shadow"

In Stevenson's poem "My Shadow," the speaker talks about his own shadow with wonder and curiosity. He observes the shadow as a companion or a mysterious playmate, expressing both fascination and confusion over its behaviour. The poem explores the themes of childhood innocence and imagination, identity and self-awareness, the unexplained and mysterious, companionship and solitude.

Freud's concept of the uncanny, outlined in his 1919 essay, describes a feeling of unease that arises when something familiar becomes strangely unfamiliar or unsettling. In "My Shadow," the shadow serves as a part of the self, but also the "other." It's both intimate and disturbingly alien, always present but never fully understood. The poem's speaker, a child, describes the shadow as "very, very like me from the heels up to the head," highlighting its near-identical resemblance to the self. The shadow mirrors the child; however, it operates beyond their control or understanding.

"The funniest thing about him is the way he likes to grow—
Not at all like proper children, which is always very slow;
For he sometimes shoots up taller like an India-rubber ball,
And he sometimes gets so little that there's none of him at all." (Stevenson 97)

The shadow's erratic behaviour in growing "taller like an India-rubber ball" or shrinking until "there's none of him at all" further amplifies its uncanny nature. Unlike the growth of "proper children," the shadow transforms in a way that evokes a sense of the supernatural. Freud associates the uncanny with the return of repressed thoughts or primitive beliefs, such as animism, where inanimate objects seem to possess life. The speaker describes the incapacity of the shadow and its limitations. The shadow's cowardice is described as sticking "so close beside me" like a child clinging to a "nursie," which also



resonates with Freud's idea of the double as a projection of repressed aspects of the self. The speaker projects their own vulnerabilities, such as fear, dependency, or shame, onto the shadow, criticizing it for behaviours the child might unconsciously recognize in themselves. The shadow's absence, when it's usually an inseparable part of the self, produces a startling feeling of detachment, as if a piece of the self has been abandoned or is missing. This instance echoes Freud's concept of the uncanny, connected to anxieties about the self that is breaking apart or losing its identity—a powerful fear for a child exploring who they are.

Jacques Lacan's concepts of the Imaginary Order and the mirror stage offer a complementary perspective on "My Shadow." Lacan's mirror stage describes the moment when a child recognizes their reflection in a mirror, forming an idealized image of the self (the "Ideal-I") that is both empowering and alienating. The shadow acts as a kind of pre-mirror reflection, an external image of the self that the child tries to interpret. However, the shadow's instability (changing shape, vanishing) destabilizes this identity. The speaker's attempt to relate with the shadow, saying "he is very, very like me," mirrors the child's captivation with their own image in the mirror stage, where the self is both recognized and misrecognized. The shadow's unpredictable growth and disappearance challenge the stability of this idealized self-image, introducing a sense of lack or incompleteness that Lacan associates with desire.

The shadow's ability to "shoot up taller" or vanish entirely symbolizes the elusive nature of the idealized self, which the child desires to fully possess but cannot control. This dynamic is evident in the speaker's frustration when the shadow "can only make a fool of me in every sort of way," suggesting a sense of alienation as the shadow exposes the child's inability to master their own image. This hints at the tension between the Imaginary (wholeness of image) and the Real (what cannot be symbolized) in Lacan's structure.

In Lacanian terms, desire arises from the subject's recognition of a fundamental lack within themselves—a gap between the real self and the idealized image. The shadow's "lazy" or "cowardly" behaviour, as described by the speaker, may project the child's own unspoken desires to resist these norms, to stay in bed, to cling to comfort while simultaneously conforming to societal expectations of independence and bravery. The shadow also embodies the Lacanian concept of the "Other," a symbolic entity that represents external forces shaping the subject's identity. The shadow's independent actions, such as staying "at home" while the child ventures out, position it as an Other that resists the child's control, evoking both



fascination and anxiety. This tension reflects the child's entry into the Symbolic Order, where they must navigate the demands of social norms while grappling with their own desires.

Childhood Dream, Desire, and Estrangement in “The Land of Nod”

In “The Land of Nod,” the child speaker describes a mysterious, dreamlike setting they can only visit in dreams while sleeping. His journey is described as solitary and strange, filled with unfamiliar people and landscapes. Upon waking, the child leaves this land behind, unable to return until the next sleep. The poem explores the themes of dreams and the unconscious, solitude and the inner journey, imagination and escape, the unfamiliar and the uncanny, and the reflection of boundaries between reality and fantasy.

The dream world of the Land of Nod serves as a quintessential landscape, where the comforting familiarity of sleep gives way to the unsettling and solitary realm of “strangest things” and “many frightening things.” The poem's speaker describes their nightly journey “abroad / Afar into the Land of Nod,” a place that is both an extension of the self (accessed through sleep) and an alien landscape. This duality evokes the uncanny by transforming a familiar act of sleeping into a journey to an unfamiliar, strange domain. The “frightening things” that linger “till morning” further intensify Freud's notion of the uncanny effect, as they represent the intrusion of the unconscious into the child's otherwise safe and familiar world of sleep. This dream world serves as a confrontation with repressed anxieties or desires that come from the unknown or uncontrollable aspects of the self. In the last stanza, the speaker says:

“But just I think I'm going to drop—
My chair, my bed, must hear me stop;
The Land of Nod is just behind—
Oh, dear, my eyes are closing blind!” (Stevenson 95)

The child's admission that they are “going to drop” as their “eyes are closing blind” evokes a sense of helpless surrender, emphasizing the uncanny nature of sleep as a state where agency is lost and the self goes into the unknown. This involuntary transition blurs the line between safety and vulnerability, reinforcing the eerie tension of the dream world, where familiar sensations give way to strange and uncharted experiences. In this moment, Stevenson subtly captures the psychic disquiet of entering a realm governed not by reason, but by the unconscious. The child's nightly journey into this shadowy domain mirrors the psychoanalytic passage into the unconscious, where repressed fears and desires surface in



disguised, often disturbing forms. The child's inability to resist the pull of the Land of Nod reflects a deeper anxiety about the boundaries between the conscious self and the unconscious, where the familiar act of falling asleep becomes a gateway to a strange and potentially threatening realm. Stevenson presents the dream world not as pure escape or fantasy, but as a liminal space of both the intimate and alien, where the boundaries of self and world blur.

In Lacanian theory, the imaginary order is associated with the child's early sense of self, formed through identification with images (such as the mirror stage) that are both unifying and alienating. The Land of Nod can be seen as a manifestation of the imaginary, a dream space where the child constructs his own fantastical version of reality that is both alluring and elusive. The dream world in the poem, marked by "streams," "mountain-sides," and "strangest things," evokes the fluid and shifting landscape of the Imaginary, where the self loses its fixed boundaries and merges with a space of boundless transformation. This surreal terrain, rich with "things to eat and things to see," suggests a realm of wish fulfilment, where desires materialize freely, only to be replaced by new ones. Stevenson portrays the dream as a site of both indulgence and instability, where the child navigates a constantly renewing cycle of longing and gratification. Lacan posits that desire stems from a fundamental lack within the subject, a gap between the real self and the idealized image they seek to embody.

In the poem, the child's nightly journey to the Land of Nod represents a pursuit of this idealized, unattainable wholeness. However, the presence of "frightening things" introduces a sense of lack, as the dream world cannot fully satisfy the child's desires. These frightening elements symbolize the limits of the imaginary, where the promise of completeness is disrupted by the intrusion of the Real, the chaotic, unrepresentable aspects of existence that resist symbolization. The speaker's cyclical movement between the waking world and the dream world can be seen right from the beginning of the poem:

"From breakfast on through all the day
At home among my friends I stay,
But every night I go abroad
Afar into the Land of Nod." (Stevenson 95)

This movement or transformation reflects the Lacanian tension between the imaginary and the symbolic orders. The waking world represents the symbolic order, where the child is grounded in social structures and relationships ("my friends", "my chair, my bed"). In contrast, the Land of Nod is a space of the



imaginary, where the child is “all alone” and free to explore their desires but also vulnerable to the anxieties and threats that can arise from this freedom. The final stanza’s depiction of the child succumbing to sleep, “Oh, dear, my eyes are closing blind,” captures the moment of transition into the imaginary, where the self is both liberated and alienated, caught in the pull of desire for a wholeness that remains out of reach.

The Land of Nod also evokes the Lacanian concept of the Other, an external force that shapes the subject’s identity and desires. The dream world, with its strange and frightening elements, functions as an Other that makes the child both curious and intimidated. The gentle, almost trance-like motion of the “strangest things” that “come and go” in the Land of Nod evokes the fleeting and unstable quality of the dream world. This slow rhythm mirrors the elusiveness of the Lacanian Other, a symbolic force that seems to offer meaning, completeness, or recognition, yet always remains just out of reach. For the child, these shifting dream figures may represent both fascination and discomfort, embodying desires that cannot be fully grasped or understood. This tension reflects a deeper psychological conflict: the desire to assert independence and explore one’s inner world, countered by a simultaneous fear of being overwhelmed or fragmented by it. In this way, Stevenson captures the child’s evolving relationship with selfhood, which is a fragile balance between imagination and identity, freedom and fear.

Childhood Solitude and the Psychic Return of Repressed Desire in “The Unseen Playmate”

In “The Unseen Playmate,” Stevenson presents an imaginative scenario in which a child, though alone in the physical world, is never truly lonely. Instead, the child is accompanied by an invisible and mysterious companion. The speaker has constructed this character entirely inside his head. This invisible companion is always present and always joins the speaker in their play. Just like most of the poems from *A Child’s Garden of Verses*, this poem also captures the themes of imagination and the inner world, solitude and invisible companionship, the boundary between reality and fantasy, childhood innocence, and creativity relating to the concepts given by Freud and Lacan.

The invisible companionship in the poem “The Unseen Playmate” is described as a “little playmate” who exists somewhere the speaker is not really sure about. This embodies the uncanny by blending the comforting familiarity of a friend with the eerie intangibility of an unseen presence. The playmate comes from a magical “land of stars so fair” and can be heard “softly calling,” which makes it feel almost alive, like it has its own voice and power. This gives the imaginary friend an animistic quality, where something



made up seems real and active. This quality reflects the child's blurred boundary between fantasy and reality, a hallmark of early developmental thinking. This connects to Freud's idea of the uncanny, where things that should be harmless or imaginary start to feel strangely real or unsettling. For the child, the playmate brings comfort, but also a quiet feeling of mystery or unease because it doesn't follow the rules of the real world. It embodies a form of familiar strangeness that reveals the child's deeper psychological entanglement with the unknown forces of the unconscious. It's something they can feel but not fully understand.

“Though no one else can see him,
Yet I know he's always near;
He will never, never leave me,
Never give my heart a fear.” (Stevenson 83)

The child's assertion that “no one else can see him” and his assurance that the playmate is someone he can always rely on and who will never leave his side suggest a private, almost secretive connection, which may reflect the return of repressed emotions, such as loneliness or a need for companionship. Freud links the uncanny to the idea of the double—a figure that reflects the self, but in doing so, creates a sense of discomfort or fear because it challenges the stability of one's identity. The playmate's two-sided nature, being friendly and loyal (“always kind and true”) but also invisible and secretive (“hidden from the rest”), makes it feel both comforting and a little strange, which adds to the uncanny feeling.

The playmate, with its idealized traits (“hands as soft as velvet” and “eyes of shining blue”), functions as a double, embodying the child's idealized vision of a perfect friend while simultaneously highlighting the absence of such a companion in reality. This creates a tension between the comfort of the imagined presence and the unsettling realization that it exists only in the child's mind. The playmate is described as “always near” and never giving “my heart a fear,” which shows that the speaker considers him reliable by stressing the playmate's loyalty and comforting presence. However, the feeling of the uncanny persists because the playmate can't be seen and lives in a vague, unknown place (“somewhere, I know not where”), and this mysterious absence evokes a fear of loss or fragmentation, losing a clear sense of self. For a child who is still figuring out who they are, the playmate's mysterious and shifting presence might reflect deeper worries about whether people, or even their own identity, can truly be trusted or understood. The playmate offers comfort but also reminds the child that it's not real, which can be unsettling at times.



In Lacanian theory, the imaginary order is associated with the child's early formation of identity, often through identification with an idealized image, as in the mirror stage. The unseen playmate can be seen as a product of the imaginary, a figure that the child constructs to embody an idealized companion. The playmate is described with vivid, almost ethereal imagery ("hands as soft as velvet" and "eyes of shining blue"). This invisible character represents an idealized self or object of desire, offering the child a sense of wholeness and completeness. This implies a connection that counters feelings of isolation. But because the playmate can't be seen or touched, it creates a feeling of something missing, what Lacan calls lack, which is at the heart of desire. The child longs for this perfect companion but can never truly have or become one with it.

"Sometimes, when the sun is low,
And the winds so gently blow,
I can hear him softly calling,
Calling only me to play;
And when I listen closely,
I can almost see his way." (Stevenson 83)

The above lines describe a child's longing for the playmate's company. He pictures his presence by listening closely, which reflects this desire for an unattainable wholeness. The fact that only the child can see the playmate, while others cannot, highlights the idea of Lacanian lack, the feeling that something is always missing. The child feels a bond with the playmate, but because the companion isn't real or shared with others, the child's desire for connection is both satisfied and left incomplete. The act of listening for the playmate's "softly calling" voice suggests a yearning to bridge this gap, yet the inability to fully see or grasp the companion highlights how desire is constantly postponed, always directed toward something unattainable.

The imagined companion reflects the formation of the ego during the Mirror Stage, when the child first constructs a coherent image of the self, often idealized or projected onto others. The unseen playmate can also be seen as representing Lacan's idea of the Other, a figure outside the self that influences how a person sees themselves and what they long for. In the poem, the playmate is described as being "always near" and "true and faithful," acting as a kind and constant presence that gives the child a feeling of being loved and understood. However, its invisibility and location in a vague "land of stars" position it as an enigmatic Other, beyond the child's control or full understanding. This situation shows the child's inner



conflict as they try to find their place in the world of rules, relationships, and expectations, the symbolic order. The playmate calls “only me to play,” which gives the child a feeling of specialness and helps build their identity. But because the playmate isn’t real or solid, it also brings a sense of distance and disconnection, reflecting the imaginary realm, where what is most desired can never be fully reached or held. “*The Unseen Playmate*” is a meditation on the emotional architecture of the self, the formation of identity, and the haunting presence of desires that language and reason cannot contain.

Conclusion

The exploration of Robert Louis Stevenson’s three relevant poems from his poetry collection *A Child’s Garden of Verses* through the psychoanalytic lens has proved to be complementary to the study. This paper argued that children’s poetry can be quite intense, employing Freud’s theories of the unconscious, repression, and the uncanny, as well as Lacan’s concepts of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and lack. The selected poems uncover the child’s secretive world and inner psyche as fraught with estrangement, ambivalence, and desire.

The poems portray the deeper significance of the child’s identity, posing an important question about who they really are. The child’s shadow, dreamland, and invisible companion are not merely products of innocent imagination, but are psychic figures that channel unconscious fears, internal conflicts, and the incomplete formation of identity. In “*My Shadow*”, the uncanny double reveals the delicate boundary between self and other, while Lacan’s mirror stage illuminates the child’s unstable relationship with their own reflection or identity. The transformation of the dream into a solitary exploration of longing, exposing the child’s sense of isolation and the inability of language and relationships to satisfy unconscious desire, can be seen in “*The Land of Nod*”. The invisible companion, as an uncanny double and Lacanian Other in “*The Unseen Playmate*”, channels the repressed anxieties about loneliness and the unattainable wholeness of the self.

The Freudian and Lacanian reinterpretation of these poems shows the unconscious drives, uncanny affect, and a struggle to navigate the self while caught up in the midst of fragmentation, loneliness, and incompleteness. These poems are not just talking about wholesome joy and fun, but they are also representing the dichotomy of the inner or darker side of the child’s psychology. Stevenson’s verse offers a literary space where the child’s unspoken fears and hidden desires are not erased but subtly woven into the text, reflecting a realm that acknowledges and validates the child’s emotions. The analysis encourages



readers to rethink the divisions between adult and child, conscious and unconscious, revealing the profound and haunting depths hidden within even the simplest of rhymes.

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