The Body: An Existentialist Instrument in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Kidnapped*

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The focus of this article is a philosophical analysis of Robert Louis Stevenson's novel Kidnapped (1886), that explores the collective and individual dichotomies that arise from socio-political and psychological conflicts. The alternation between growth and tolerance (rise), and degradation and psychological inhibition (fall) within the novel, reflects not only contrasting identities within communities, but also a circularity within which one's identity is explored and challenged.

The article explores the rise and fall of Scottish identity, as well as of masculine innocence, through an existentialist deconstruction of the text's protagonist, David Balfour. By engaging with the individual self, the paper considers the fall of socio-political propaganda as a necessity for the rise of freedom of thought and expression. The article focuses upon this dichotomy through the lens of the body as an instrument for understanding existentialist thought.

Thus, the article engages with the theme of rise and fall from the perspective of individual identity, as a means of reaching towards freedom of thought, and also as a reflection of collective identity and socio-political marginalization.

Keywords: existentialism, the body, social misrepresentation, duality, freedom through isolation

Introduction

When considering the antithetical concepts of rise and fall in relation to both the inner (individual) and social (collective) self, existentialism confronts psychological and moral transgressions within a social setting. Existentialism as a philosophical and literary movement, through themes like estrangement and duality, and the degradation and misrepresentation of singular and plural identities, captures the fall not only of one's role within the wider community, but also of collective traditions, expressivity and freedom. The rise and return to one's inner identity are expressed through an existentialist exploration of self-fragmentation and through the philosophical evocation of freedom. While social marginalization leads to a sense of alienation and existentialist angst, physical isolation becomes the means to explore and reach individual expression, thought and freedom. This paper will explore the rise and fall of individual identity through the encompassment of existentialist concepts within Scottish literature and culture. The research and analysis is conducted by a close engagement with Robert Louis Stevenson's novel, *Kidnapped* (1886). The dialogue between existentialism and the Scottish text has been chosen not only to convey the philosophical elements of Stevenson's themes and character representation, but also to demonstrate Scotland's cultural participation in wider European movements of thought. Furthermore, this article explores the liberation

(rise) of David Balfour's identity through the understanding of physical isolation and collective marginalization. If the fall of the protagonist's social status represents a means to achieve political enhancement, then, similarly, the degradation of his authority symbolized through physical imprisonment outlines the existentialist encounter with the inner self. This contributes to the development of the protagonist's socio-political individuality and freedom of mind when faced with the realization of collective oppression. Through the fall of his socio-political role and expectations, David Balfour liberates his identity and allows for spiritual and rational realization. Thus, through the existentialist concepts of estrangement, duality, fragmentation, angst, and freedom, Robert Louis Stevenson's novel reflects the fall and rise of both individual identity and collective ideology, capturing the importance of self-liberation for socio-political and cultural deconstruction, as well as for individual expressivity, honesty, morality and compassion.

Concepts and Terminology

The literary world is a reflection of human complexity and spiritual freedom beyond social masks and material limitations. When looking at identity through the lens of existentialism, concepts such as angst and estrangement are central in the exploration of both the individual's emotional and social dimensions. This article will engage with the philosophical concepts of the existentialist movement by drawing on Søren Kierkegaard's, Jean-Paul Sartre's, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's understandings of freedom of self. Angst and estrangement are defined as modes of alienation that form part of one's encounter with oneself beyond social and material dimensions (Crowell 2012, p.3-21). Within Scottish literature, the complexity of the individual self constitutes not only a thematic element, but also an instrument for the illustration of socio-political and cultural contexts. This article will explore dimensions of the protagonist of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Kidnapped* (1886) with reference to existentialist modes of thought. The text will be compared briefly to Lewis Grassic Gibbon's *Sunset Song* (1932) and Muriel Spark's *Memento Mori* (1959) with the purpose of comparing Stevenson's work with existential themes in other Scottish novels, but also due to the three texts' significance both within the Scottish and international literary landscapes. *Kidnapped's* main character, David Balfour, is forced to deconstruct his emotional and social identity with the purpose of transcending the political and cultural ideologies of the people around him. Nathan A. Scott (1978, p.224) writes: 'What, indeed, does it mean for a human being to be human? What is the distinctively *human* component in humankind? How does a man properly go about discovering and reverencing and preserving his humanity? What *is* "the human"?'. These questions represent the starting point for the research of this article with regard to analysis of the protagonist's identity. Scott (1978, p.224) claims that these issues 'constitute the great burden for reflection in our time. And what is innovative in existentialism, as a tradition of modern thought, is precisely the immediacy and straightforwardness with which it addresses this kind of issue'. By considering these questions when analyzing David Balfour, this article will examine the manner in which existentialist concepts are illustrated and, furthermore, how they constitute portals into the text's thematic concerns. The novel reflects the inner complexity of the protagonist, while also capturing the way his identity is influenced by socio-political issues and, thus, reveals the fact that thematic approaches within late nineteenth century Scottish literature mirror concepts defined by existentialism.

By focusing upon the protagonist, the article will look at the type of existentialist elements that appear and develop within the novel. From existentialism itself, it will examine five concepts (estrangement, angst, freedom, and the contrast between the individual in solitude and amongst others), as well as their representation within the text. The article will focus upon the concept of estrangement as the sense of 'alienation from the world' (Cooper 2012, p.32). David E. Cooper (2012, p.32) writes: 'It is only when we are relating to the world in an unsatisfactory way […] that the world is experienced as alien'. In contrast, this article's analysis of the character's existentialist angst will be based upon the tension between the protagonist's inner and social identities, and between his pursuit of freedom and his psychological imprisonment. When looking at the concept of angst, Cooper (2012, p.41) adds: 'For the mood of *Angst* […] it is at once an intimation of our individual freedom and an explanation of why we typically behave as if we are not free'. The article will explore the protagonist's existentialist freedom as a pursuit of individuality beyond social limitations and ideologies.

The existentialist contrast between the protagonist's identity in isolation and within the community will be examined based upon the emotional and intellectual changes that occur when shifting from one space to the other. This research will similarly consider the interdependent relationship between freedom and boundaries within the text. The approach to these issues will be based upon Cooper's statement (2012, p.46): 'for me to have a proper appreciation of my own freedom as a rational being, I must recognize a like freedom in others'. The key existentialist idea of the 'Other' will be outlined in the article as referring to the outer world, as well as in reference to developments of the character's inner identity. Cooper (2012, p.46) adds that 'in order to live authentically – in full awareness, that is, of my freedom – I must honor the freedom of others and work with them to foster a communion of human beings living in recognition of their reciprocal freedom'. Based upon these definitions and clarifications, this article will deconstruct the five aforementioned existentialist concepts in relation to the protagonist within Robert Louis Stevenson's text. Consequently, it will examine the presence of existentialist themes in the novel with the purpose of demonstrating the complexity of the individual character, as well as of the socio-political and cultural landscape in which he developed and, thus, reflected the changing movements of thought concerning the human condition within Scottish literature.

Article

The body represents the means to connect the individual with the outer world, as well as to separate oneself from others. While physical identity can represent both social status and economic wealth, one's psychological features can be subordinate to collective and political ideology. The reflection of the inner self within the outer world is conveyed within existentialism in terms of bodily, as well as mental freedom. In *Kidnapped*, David Balfour's body and physical situation reflect his identity and inner conflicts, which, this article argues, can be examined according to existentialist themes. By looking at his identity through physical imprisonment or isolation, the young character can be understood in terms of both his estrangement from the community and the angst determined by society's values and expectations. Consequently, an act of killing illustrates detachment through an imprisonment away not only from others, but also from the protagonist's own socio-political limitations.

Indeed, ending another's life allows Balfour to engage with his own identity, while also understanding human equality and the necessity for survival. The novel also captures physical exhaustion, on the one hand, as the mirror of one's negative characteristics and, on the other, as the connection between different characters. Similarly, the act of sleeping emphasizes not only the protagonist's engagement with the self, but also the aesthetic quality of the novel.

When reflecting upon the body in relation to existentialist thought, Merleau-Ponty (1962, p.150) writes: 'But I am not in front of my body, I am in it, or rather I am it. […] The body is to be compared, not to a physical object, but rather to a work of art'. Within Stevenson's novel, the body becomes the instrument for self-liberation, as well as the bridge between the characters, the literary art, and the reader's reflection upon identity. As opposed to the characters in Muriel Spark's *Memento Mori* (1959) whose bodies symbolize the passing of time and, implicitly, the distance between different generations within society, Stevenson's protagonist engages with his body for the purpose of self-discovery.

The construction of the character's imprisonment upon oppositions (body and mind, inner and social identity, angst and the desire for freedom) emphasizes, on the one hand, the relationship between one's material and emotional existence and, on the other, the desire to understand and overcome this contrast through self-exploration within a confined space. One of the means through which the novel uses the body to reveal the concept of angst is Balfour's physical imprisonment on board the *Covenant*. The protagonist's corporeal vulnerability illustrates the contrast between pain and fear, while also acting as a portal towards a self-understanding developed through an alienation from collective ideology and socio-political oppression. Through his declaration: 'so sick and hurt was I in body, and my mind so much confounded' (Stevenson 2001, p.45), Balfour not only confesses his physical isolation, but also emphasizes the nature of the confined, injured body as a trigger for mental imprisonment. Physical captivity reflects the young man's anxiety resulting from his existential alienation from the community and from the familiarity and comfort of his everyday life. When looking at the importance of the familiar in Stevenson's work, Liz Farr (2006, p.42) writes:

> Familiarity is crucial to this psychological model of life-writing, because […] he is less interested in the public records of a man's achievements than to conduct more intimate encounters.

However, Balfour's physical discomforts and loss of physical freedom become his guide towards his inner self and towards the understanding of the necessity to project this identity in the outer world. Søren Kierkegaard (1941, p.313) writes: 'Existence involves a tremendous contradiction. […] All existential problems are passionate problems, for when existence is interpenetrated with reflection it generates passion'. Balfour claims: 'With the clear perception of my plight, there fell upon me a blackness of despair, a horror of remorse at my own folly, and a passion of anger at my uncle, that once more bereft me of my senses' (Stevenson 2001, p.2). The reflection upon his inner fragmentation, anxiety and fear marks the foundation of the character's self-understanding and existentialist development through the acceptance of his errors and his desire to overcome them. Similar to Kierkegaard's statement, Balfour's journey requires contradiction and imprisonment before he can reach awareness and freedom from social expectations and material values. Thus, by becoming physically and existentially

imprisoned, Stevenson's protagonist is socially isolated and, consequently, forced to explore and accept his inexperience, as well as the consequences of his emotional naivety. In addition, the character is morally dependent upon the experience of angst in order to escape his previously imprisoned condition that has been moulded by other characters' expectations regarding Balfour's emotional identity and ethical values. The relationship between the young man and Mr Campbell reveals the minister's influence upon the protagonist's socio-political perspectives with regard to the Jacobite community, yet this viewpoint is altered through Balfour's friendship with Alan Breck.

If fear and anxiety are necessary existential elements for the protagonist's self-development and inner exploration, then, similarly, freedom represents Balfour's spiritual and social means to reveal his identity to the outer world. This liberation is achieved through the killing of his kidnappers. Consequently, in Stevenson's novel, the character's pursuit of freedom depends upon estrangement from others. When reflecting upon the identity of the Other, Jean-Paul Sartre (1957, p.271) writes that 'the death of my possibilities causes me to experience the Other's freedom. This death is realized only at the heart of that freedom; I am inaccessible to myself and yet myself, thrown, abandoned at the heart of the Other's freedom'. For Balfour, the understanding of the contrast between his physical imprisonment and the possibility to escape this condition leads him to the exploration of alienation as the means to achieve freedom. Sartre (1957, p.355) adds that 'the *body which is suffered* serves as a nucleus, as matter for the alienating means which surpass it. The body is this *Illness* which escapes me toward new characteristics which I establish as limits and empty schemata of organization'. In *Kidnapped,* the captive body is, on the one hand, the representation of Balfour's spiritual imprisonment and, on the other, the instrument with which his freedom and mental independence are achieved. Similarly, by choosing to kill others for his own wellbeing, the protagonist understands the complexity of moral existence and the equality of human life beyond the desire for revenge. He confesses: 'I […] might have shot him, too, only at the touch of him (and him alive) my whole flesh misgave me, and I could no more pull the trigger than I could have flown.' (Stevenson 2001, p.67) This statement conveys not only the body as a reflection of the character's psychological hesitation, but also outlines Balfour's dependence upon others and his consideration of the importance of an ethical life (which reflects existential freedom) over a decadent, physical liberation. In contrast, the allusion to existentialist thought as a literary technique within the scene is further demonstrated through the protagonist's choice to survive and escape captivity. When threatened with death himself, Balfour claims: 'either my courage came again, or I grew so much afraid as came to the same thing.' (Stevenson 2001, p.8) This statement illustrates the man's ultimate choice to survive when faced with death and his reconsideration of physical and mental liberation in connection to mortality, while also capturing his estrangement from others in order to remain alive. The freedom of the body becomes the means through which the character acknowledges the value and equality of human beings, but also the desire and need to survive above self-sacrifice. Consequently, Balfour's existentialist pursuit of freedom allows him to examine the contrast between moral values of equality and the wish to survive, as well as to understand the reflection of his inner identity and emotions through the body.

Despite his freedom from the ideological influence of others on board the *Covenant,* the protagonist experiences another existentialist dimension, estrangement, through his physical

isolation on the island. If the storm that separates him from the rest of the crew symbolizes the alienation of the individual from the community then, similarly, the island becomes the setting for self-exploration beyond socio-political influence. Balfour's declaration: 'if hope had not buoyed me up, I must have cast myself down and given up. […] I came to the bay at last, more dead than alive' (Stevenson 2001, p.89) not only illustrates his desire to live, but also marks a pivotal point in the protagonist's encounter with his physical and emotional boundaries, as well as with his identity beyond a familiar setting. However, the estrangement through the body does not reflect the young man's ability or desire to psychologically separate himself from society. This aspect is emphasized through the character's statement: 'I had become in no way used to the horrid solitude […], but still looked round me on all sides (like a man hunted), between fear and hope that I might see some human creature coming.' (Stevenson 2001, p.91) Indeed, the comparison 'like a man hunted' suggests Balfour's identity imprisoned by the past, by others' influence and their ideological domination over the protagonist's liberated reason. In addition, the adjective 'hunted' emphasizes his inability to escape social ideologies and, consequently, to explore his self in isolation. Contrastingly, by stating that the possibility of an encounter with another 'human creature' generates both 'fear and hope', the protagonist reveals his pursuit of existentialist estrangement, as well as his desire to simultaneously maintain his place within the community. Being afraid marks the beginning of the young man's self-exploration and development beyond the outer, familiar world. When considering the human condition, Albert Camus (2005, p.67) writes: 'I am choosing solely men who aim only to expend themselves […]. I want to speak only of a world in which thoughts like lives are devoid of future. Everything that makes man work and get excited utilizes hope'. Thus, one of the existentialist dimensions of Balfour's character is mirrored, on the one hand, through his physical estrangement on the island and, on the other, through his pursuit of choice as a result of this experience.

As opposed to the protagonist who is forced into physical isolation by family deceit, the character of the chieftain Cluny encounters physical isolation due to political shifts of power. Despite his physical isolation, the leader sustains both his connection with the community and his authority amongst its members. This aspect is illustrated in Balfour's observation: 'When he was angered, which was often enough, he gave his commands and breathed threats of punishment like any king; and his gillies trembled and crouched away from him like children before a hasty father.' (Stevenson 2001, p.153) Unlike the protagonist's estrangement, Cluny's physical alienation from others is a result of socio-political oppression that reinforces his authority as chieftain and his inner strength. What is more, by continuing to seek his council, the members of his clan demonstrate their loyalty not to political power and deceit, but to patriotism and truth. When discussing the contrast between truth and ignorance captured by Nietzsche, Christa Davis Acampora and Keith Ansell Pearson (2011, p.55) write: 'Pursuit of untruth provides a measure of perceptible freedom, a sense of bravery, a touch of lightness that makes it possible to be joyful, to take delight in life'. Contrastingly, Cluny represents social integrity through his commitment to both his community and to the values of justice and equality. Furthermore, the contrast between the clan leader and Balfour underlines the opposition between an identity based upon existentialist and moral freedom and one encountering a liberation of reason and action through existential alienation from social influence. Therefore, the two male characters explore the continuity of the self in search of

freedom through isolation (David Balfour) and the human who maintains an estrangement in order not to compromise his moral and spiritual values and identity (the chieftain Cluny).

Another means through which the body becomes an existentialist instrument is the examination of the protagonist's identity through fatigue and illness. Having explored his identity through estrangement and liberation, Balfour begins his journey back to society by experiencing angst and the desire for moral freedom. He claims that 'without […] the consequent sense of liberty and lightness, I could not have walked at all. […] and there was nothing in […] our affairs to hearten me for much exertion, […] and with divided hearts among the travellers.' (Stevenson 2001, p.159) The protagonist acknowledges the importance of physical freedom for both physical and psychological strength, while also recognizing the value of a community constructed upon morality instead of the inner fragmentation ('divided hearts') generated by a lack of social equality. Additionally, the construction 'divided hearts' emphasizes both the character's attachment to his friendship with Alan Breck and the angst generated by previous ideological division. Similarly, this opposition illustrates the complexity within each individual character and, implicitly, the aesthetic development of the two men's existentialist relationship in a natural setting, encountering self-liberation in the remote Scottish landscape.

When analyzing Kierkegaard's existentialist ideas, Louis Mackey (1972, p.5) writes: 'He defines what he calls the "aesthetic", as a dimension of existence […]. If we could discover what human nature is, then we could catch ourselves in our immediacy, and we would understand what Kierkegaard means by aesthetic.' The elements that deconstruct the connection between the two male characters according to existentialism are illustrated not only through their emotional sympathy, but also through their reactions towards each other in extreme physical situations. Consequently, in *Kidnapped,* the body reflects the human condition stripped of social conventions and determined instead by discomfort and lack of familiarity through pain and tiredness. If the aesthetic nature of the protagonist's identity is drawn upon his inner struggle in a natural background, then, similarly, the recognition of his negative emotions outlines the relationship between the self and the world. Indeed, this relationship is illustrated not as harmonious or romanticized, but as developed upon compromise, anxiety, forgiveness and remorse. Therefore, physical exhaustion represents another dimension of David Balfour's identity through its exploration of extreme inner emotions triggered by corporeal discomfort which, in return, causes a clash between the protagonist's and Alan Breck's psyche. However, through the obtained existential freedom, Balfour revaluates his social role and his interdependent relationship with Breck beyond their flaws and psychological impediments. By emphasizing the intricacy of this friendship, the novel uses the concepts of quarrel and friendship with the purpose of emphasizing the existentialist contrast between the self in isolation and the self within the outer world. These conditions of interaction provide, similar to the condition of corporeal discomfort, an existential alienation from the familiar and from collective ideology, allowing the protagonist to liberate his identity without social inhibition, as well as with uninfluenced contemplation and physical transgression.

Apart from connecting the inner self with the outer community, the body represents the means to capture the balance between reality and the protagonist's subconscious reflections. This balance is illustrated through the importance of sleep throughout the novel. If the feeling

of tiredness acts as a trigger of negative emotions such as anger, then, similarly, the act of sleeping becomes the frontier between the escape from physical pain and the vulnerability of the character and his freedom. Balfour's claim: 'The last time I woke I seemed to come back from farther away' (Stevenson 2001, p.146) implies his alienation not only from others, but also from his own lucidity in order to discover his identity through existential reflection. He adds: 'My head was nearly turned with fear and shame; and at what I saw, when I looked out around me on the moor, my heart was like dying in my body' (Stevenson 2001, p.18). Contrastingly, the act of awakening from sleep outlines the return to socio-political danger. What is more, the opposition between the safety of sleep and the angst of reality further reinforces the fragmentation of the protagonist's identity through others' desires for authority and power. For David Balfour, sleep becomes both an act of detachment from himself and a return to his desires and unconfessed emotions. Consequently, the act of unconscious reflection emphasizes an exploration of the protagonist's existentialist dimension through the self engaged in the act of sleeping, as well as through the distinction from the fear and torment of reality.

By studying the relationship between Stevenson's works and his beliefs regarding the purpose of writing, Glenda Norquay (2007, p.75) states:

> The transformative experiences offered by the romance genre and the habits of different reading stages […] led him further into exploration of perhaps the most problematic literary issue of all for him: what constitutes and what is the value of reading pleasure.

The use of sleep within the novel creates a familiarity between the protagonist and the reader both through the depiction of similar experiences and through its ability to engage the reader in different worlds and, thus, bring him closer to his inner self. Thus, the act of sleeping becomes an instrument for self-understanding and exploration of the depths of one's spirit and mind. In addition, the protagonist's condition mirrors his philosophical quest, while also echoing the reader's exploration of the literary microcosm of existential freedom.

In conclusion, the body is the existentialist instrument through which David Balfour discovers his identity and, simultaneously, understands the influence of the wider community upon its integrity and freedom. Unlike Long Rob of the Mill in Lewis Grassic Gibbon's *Sunset Song* (1932), who separates himself from others through his values and morality, the young protagonist in Stevenson's novel uses physicality to understand his spiritual identity beyond expectations and outer ideologies. Indeed, the fragmented self represents a recurrent theme in Stevenson's works. When considering the *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), Harriet Hustis (2009) writes: 'the narrative logic and impetus of the text seem to promote separation, delineation, and, ultimately, distinction – an either/or dynamic'. Similarly, Balfour's alienation from others, as well as from himself, reflects the existentialist angst and estrangement generated by self-deceit and untruth. Additionally, James Wilson (1983, p.90) claims that Stevenson's 'Travel writing […] allowed him to explore both inner and outer worlds of experience'. If *Kidnapped* outlines a journey of existentialist self-discovery, by exploring his inner self beyond the outer community, the protagonist discovers his existential freedom through his humanity beyond anger and anxiety, and through the pursuit of an uncompromised identity constructed upon aesthetic and emotional significance and truth.

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