

# “No Rest for the Wicked”: R.L. Stevenson’s “The Body Snatcher” and the Resisting Corpse of Victorian Resurrectionism

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**Abstract** The subversive semantic power of the revenant or reanimated corpse in Victorian literature serves as a crucial indicator of the era’s preoccupation with the body as a cultural domain. Deeply entwined with the uneasy relationship between the advancement of anatomical science and criminality, the body is marked as the site of fraught boundaries imbued with social order and its attendant anxieties. This paper explores the narrative strategies of Stevenson’s short story “The Body Snatcher” (1884) where resurrectionist motifs resist the enforcement of the condition of anonymity that was entailed by anatomical dissection and signal the impossibility of closure through the trope of return of the repressed sub specie of the dissected cadaver. This dual ‘resistance’ culminates in the symbolism of the revenant corpse’s movement, abandoned in its progress towards the future. Stevenson’s story reveals a hermeneutic complexity that intertwines the themes of contamination, ethical collusion, commodification of the dead body through the entanglement of medical practice and narrative opacity. This offers further insights into the Victorian resurrectionist imagination, in the light of that ‘aura’ of the corpse which the regulation of the 1834 New Poor Amendment Act failed to dispel.

**Keywords** Stevenson. The Body Snatcher. Grave robbing. Resurrectionism. Body. Corpse.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 “The Body Snatcher” and Victorian Resurrectionism. – 3 Resurrected Plots. – 4 The Body in Parts: Dissection, the Revenant Corpse and Social Boundaries. – 5 “Men of the World”: The Scottish Theme. – 6 The Impossible Containment.



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## 1 Introduction

The disturbing semantic power of the revenant or reanimated corpse in Victorian literature is rooted in the complex interplay between the advancement of anatomical science, capitalism, the exploitation of the poor and criminality. This is underscored by historical cases from the Burke and Hare murders to Jack the Ripper's and cultural myths of the *fin de siècle* like *Jekyll and Hyde* and *Dracula*. Scholars have widely analysed these themes in light of Victorian concern with the body as a cultural field, as a site of boundaries marked by social order and its attendant anxieties.

As Oliver Buckton observes, it was R.L. Stevenson who "sought to reanimate the corpse of Victorian realism through a revitalized use of Gothic and sensational motif" (Buckton 2000, 23). While mid- and late Victorian writers frequently employed resurrectionist tropes, few did so as effectively as Stevenson. Although he regarded his short story "The Body Snatcher" (written in 1881 and published at Christmas 1884) as a minor work or "crawler" among his "bogey tales" (Reid 2006, 102), the story features narrative strategies that engage with prominent Victorian themes. These include the concept of the 'other' body, the body as a site of social control, and as a symbol of the return of the repressed. The enduring popularity of "The Body Snatcher", which was adapted into a famous film starring Bela Lugosi and Boris Karloff in 1945, indicates persistent anxieties about dissection half a century after the Anatomy Act (1831-32) and attests to its hermeneutic depth within the apparent conventions of the supernatural tale.

Contrary to Douglas Gifford's somewhat reductive categorization of the story to "the most straightforward tales of supernatural tradition", "The Body Snatcher" shares in that exploration of moral ambivalence which he recognizes as "the most useful starting point for an understanding of most of Stevenson's fiction" (Gifford 2005, 62).

From a contemporary critical perspective, rather than a mere "crawler", a or a sensational tale offering the reader pleasurable chills, Stevenson's story reflects the Victorian understanding of "the complex power of the corpse to regenerate society" (Hotz 2009, 168) while simultaneously haunting the living, and reveals further insights in the Victorians' resurrectionist imagination and its unregenerated world, as I intend to argue referring to Victorian death studies and analysing the subtle narrative strategies deployed in the story.

## 2 "The Body Snatcher" and Victorian Resurrectionism

The narrative ingenuity of the story can be reappraised within the many implications of Victorian resurrectionism. This term evokes a specific historical context marked by the dire entanglement of

unscrupulous scientific advancement, moral debasement, and ruthless exploitation of the poor in what was probably the most horrific and abject form of the free market until the early nineteenth century: body snatching or grave robbing. Despite its notoriety, this context is crucial due to its explicit allusions in the text. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, medical education was largely conducted privately. Private medical schools, such as the one run by the infamous Robert Knox, had to resort to illicit means to secure fresh corpses, as legal supplies were limited to the official anatomy schools like the Royal College of Surgeons in London, and the Medical School of the University in Edinburgh, where the retrospective narrative of Stevenson's tale is set.

Since Henry VIII's time, the sole legal source for anatomical corpses had been the gallows, with the bodies of murderers handed over to the anatomists as post-mortem punishment. However, as executions declined, a black market for corpses emerged, driven by body snatchers or resurrection men. The most notorious of these were William Burke and William Hare, Irish migrants who murdered up to fifteen people from the slums of Edinburgh to supply fresh cadavers to the famous anatomist Robert Knox. The Anatomy Act of 1831-32 shifted the source of corpses from executed criminals to paupers who died in workhouses and hospitals, and who could not afford funerals. While such an illegal black market for corpses had been running for years in the country, dissection in the anatomical theatre loomed as the greatest fear after the workhouse, as "[w]hat had for generations been a feared and hated punishment for murder became one for poverty" (Richardson 2000, XV). Dissection thus became a means of disciplining and punishing working-class bodies (McNally 2011, 19), gaining an ominous prominence in Britain's disciplinary complex. Furthermore, the 1832 Anatomy Act, the 1834 New Poor Amendment Act, and the movements in favour of cremation sought to regulate the burial and mourning practices, which became ideologically charged in Victorian Britain. Despite these measures, the corpse's aura persisted in the popular imagination. Investigating the social implications of burial and mourning rituals in their fictional reverberations, Elizabeth Hotz identifies the "control of the corpse" as a significant Victorian "contest" (Hotz 2009, 1), explored by novelists like Elizabeth Gaskell, Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, and Bram Stoker. These writers dramatised the contrast between middle-class reformers seeking to sanitize funeral practices and the resisting traditions of the working classes and rural communities, revealing complex social dynamics and tensions.

The corpse, as a powerful signifier and a fundamental anthropological entity, holds an ambivalent power that affects the living, and exerts a fascinating horror which has always been a literary trope. Victorian fiction harnessed this power, using the corpse as a powerful

narrative object to catalyse emotional, individual and social strains. While Bram Stoker's *Dracula* is a prominent example, other works like Stevenson's *Strange Case*, "The Body Snatcher" and *The Wong Box*, as well as A.C. Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories, foregrounded the corpse as a "buried treasure" emerging from "the underbelly of *fin de siècle* progressivism" (Hotz 2009, 153).<sup>1</sup> These narratives explore a dark underside that erupted through tales of atavism and degeneration, the so-called monster fiction and the "fictions of loss" (Arata 1996).

*Dracula*, notably, emphasises the dead body as a symbol and trope that exposes Victorian and western society's fears and need to control female sexuality, while unsettling the boundary between the living and the dead. The vampire, as a living corpse, the contaminated dead body in *Dracula*, and especially the female corpse, becomes a locus for England's identitarian anxieties as the world's greatest imperial power threatened by fears of invasion and degeneration. The defensive violence of the coalized Western forces against the vampire, tightened in a "little band of men", constitutes a certain Victorian male, professional, homosocial order (Daly 2004, 36 and *passim*). In problematising the instability of that boundary between the living and the dead, undead, revenant or transformed, Stoker's masterpiece "cautions Victorians about the dangers of denying death" (Hotz 2009, 166). Similarly, Stevenson's *Strange Case* explores the liminality of identity through the perilous, morphing instability of the respectable gentleman's double life, shared with the atavistic criminal. As Hotz highlights, "despite enormous efforts to contain and confine" it, the corpse "remains, ultimately, restless in Victorian culture" (Hotz 2009, 153), a restlessness that Stevenson's "The Body Snatcher" brilliantly spotlights.

### 3 Resurrected Plots

The story begins at an inn in the North-West of England, in Debenham, where four men – the landlord, the local undertaker, the anonymous narrator and an ageing alcoholic named Fettes – are told that a famous London doctor has arrived. Fettes is visibly shocked by this news, prompting the narrator to persuade him to share his story. In his youth, Fettes had been a medical student working as an assistant to a renowned anatomist, Mister K. (an allusion to Robert Knox), procuring him corpses without qualms or questions. Knox's class assistant, Macfarlane, once silenced his concerns regarding the body of a possibly murdered young woman. Macfarlane seems to be controlled by one Mr Gray, whom he detests. When Gray's corpse is delivered

<sup>1</sup> Hotz only refers to *Dracula*, but the metaphor well fits the other texts.

to the school, Fettes realises Macfarlane had snatched it, and that he had to distribute its parts among the students. MacFarlane demands payment, making Fettes an indirect accomplice and argues his philosophy of survival, in which mankind is divided between lions and lambs. Later, after heavy drinking, the two set out at night to exume the body of a farmer's wife. In complete darkness after their lamp breaks, they dig up the body, place it in a sack and haul it onto a horse gig. During their journey, they are made increasingly uncomfortable by the sack bouncing between them, until they discover that the body is not the woman's one but that of the "dead and long-dissected Gray" (BS 84).<sup>2</sup> Terrified, they abandon the horse and the gig, leaving the deathly load to continue their unbridled journey in dire weather towards Edinburgh.

As previously mentioned, "The Body Snatcher" fictionalises one of the most macabre episodes in which the progress of scientific advancement and the ruthless pursuit of economic profit joined in British history, the infamous Burke and Hare case of 1829. Stevenson alludes to this scandal as a diegetic background to the plot when he refers to Knox as Mr "K—", the extramural "teacher of anatomy" whom he designates by this letter, as "his name was subsequently too well known" (BS 71). Stevenson set the story in a period when grave digging had officially ended, but, as Ruth Richardson highlights, "[t]he atmosphere of the burking era was still in living memory in Stevenson's day" (Richardson 2015, 413), because of the association of surgeons with the criminal activities of grave robbers and executioners in the popular imagination.

The historical reference to the infamous case and the specific Scottish tradition of anatomy studies is explicit, however, the story reveals how Stevenson also indirectly engages with what can be called the Victorian 'cult of death', and, framing Gothic tropes in a specific historical memory, revived it in his own way. While nineteenth century England saw progressive fetishisation (and commodification) of death, with mourning and funerals increasingly acquiring a middle and upper-middle-class status, and "a function of social display – a movement that can be seen as an attempt to embrace both social and individual loss" (Zigarovich 2020, 288), Stevenson, like Wilde in *Dorian Gray*, subverted the idea of the "beautiful death". He explored the unsettling liminality of the corpse, that "uncertain balance between solicitude towards the corpse and the fear of it" (Richardson 2000, XV) which had also led to the practice of watching the dead, before the Anatomy Act, for fear of the grave-robbers.

Stevenson's other "Pilochny tales", "Thrawn Janet", "The Merry Men" and "Markheim", also feature dead bodies undergoing

<sup>2</sup> Henceforth "The Body Snatcher" will be referred to as 'BS'.

alterations and transfigurations and signal the presence of evil. However, "The Body Snatcher" uniquely reverberates with the cultural meaning attached to post-mortem care and looks back to the first half of the century, when the predation of the poor and destitutes' corpses created a trauma in the collective imagination. As dissection had come to be perceived as the ultimate defacement and defilement after death, and, in Richardson's words, "not only the exposure of nakedness, the possibility of assault upon and disrespect towards the dead – but also the deliberate mutilation or destruction of identity, perhaps for eternity" (Richardson 2000, 28).

As an important text of late-Victorian fiction engaging with the cult of death and resurrectionism, "The Body Snatcher" can thus be reconsidered through four main thematic themes: dissection and the social order; the "Burking" of Scottish identity; the reversal of the aestheticization of the dead female body; and, most significantly, the relevance of the trope of the altered corpse to Stevenson's narrative strategies.

#### 4 The Body in Parts: Dissection, the Revenant Corpse and Social Boundaries

A survey of cultural genealogy and implications of modern anatomy reveals its connection with what has been defined as the Renaissance "culture of dissection" as "a culture of enquiry" (Sawday 1996, IX) that spread across the arts with the establishment of modern anatomy. This culture intertwined anatomy and aesthetics, which later evolved into a "divorce" between science and literature. Autopsy was conceived as the outcome of the desire to penetrate the mystery of the human body, and dissection further constructed the body as a cultural locus, an object of social and disciplinary control and power. The anatomist as scientist dealt with bodies that, even after death, were inscribed with the social order, marked by class and social inequality. In the literary imagination, they gradually became creators of their own monsters, or monstrous 'others', as in *Frankenstein* and *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.

Through the character of Fettes, the medical student in charge of 'distributing' bodily parts to his peers in Dr K.'s school, and through the supernatural restoration to wholeness of Gray's dissected body, "The Body Snatcher" engages with the occlusion of dismemberment in the official semantics of anatomical dissection, and the consequent obliteration of the question of anonymity that was entailed by the destruction and erasure of bodily integrity in dissection. Fettes' blunt definition of his duty as a man of science who acknowledges the authority of the master epitomises this process of displacement and repression of guilt: "He understood his duty, in short, to have

three branches: to take what was brought, to pay the price, and to avert the eye from any evidence of crime" (BS 73). As Fettes hands out the anatomical specimens to K.'s acolytes – significantly "members" to members –, he is charged with one essential process of that hideous 'corpse economy': the retrieval, distribution and commercialization of body parts as goods, hence commodities. In the narrative, his sense of guilt and discomfort is countered by the more unscrupulous Macfarlane, who cautions him against moral qualms and urges him to protect their position: "The more things are wrong the more we must act as if all were right":

Hours passed; the class began to arrive; the members of the unhappy Gray were dealt out to one and to another and received without remark; Richardson was made happy with the head; and before the hour of freedom rang Fettes trembled with exultation to perceive how far they had already gone towards safety. For two days he continued to watch, with increasing joy, the dreadful process of disguise. (BS 86)

The passage displays striking use of gruesome humour in the ironic polysemy of "members" as both fellow anatomists and bodily limbs, and of "watch" as reminiscent of the funeral wake and protection of the dead. The troubling question of anonymity is underscored in the twist of the plot where the dead lower-class female body of the farmer's wife is mysteriously replaced by Gray's middle-class male corpse, which had previously been dissected. Not only does the narrative turn resonate with Stevenson's fascination with the theme of the double, but it also alludes to a biographical/historical background. The original for Jane Galbraith was Mary Patterson, a local prostitute well-known for her beauty who had died of alcoholism and who was recognized by the students who received the corpse (Mighall 2002, 170). Significantly, the female subject of the story is thus doubly punished: for her lower social status in the fiction, and for moral and social reasons in the historical allusion (the alcoholic prostitute). What is more, through a kind of macabre looping effect, the female corpse also paradoxically resists that enforced anonymity of the body entailed by grave robbing and dissection, as its replacement by Gray's dismembered but restored corpse, closed in the sack and hauled on the gig, seems to ironically suggest.

Stevenson thus inserts the supernatural element through a ghostly and provoking reversal of identity that is a variation on the trope of the reanimated corpse, which in its turn dramatizes the erasure of dissection. Moreover, with the transformation of the supposedly female corpse into a male body, recognized "by a dozen unquestionable marks" that bear innuendos to Fettes having "jested with" her (BS 74), the gender reversal of the contentious corpse not only evokes

Poe's famous "most poetic topic", but also signals a radical subversion of the possibility for a destitute woman to reach the celebrated ideal of the Victorian beautiful death, and, with that, its inherent desirable model of femininity. Although the only female dead body of the story receives a cursory mention, it could be interpreted far more extensively. The degree of intimacy that Fettes had enjoyed with the woman is both clearly hinted and suggestive of its uncanny connotation as a supplement or counterpart to that homoerotic connotation that Oliver Buckton attributes to the male corpse in Stevenson's and in *fin de siècle* fiction (Buckton 2000, 24-5).

In the case of this story, the homoerotic male body would be Gray's, with whom MacFarlane seems to entertain a relationship of disturbing and tense proximity. Jane Galbraith, transformed from a body-object of desire into a defaced body of fear, is thus joined in a perverse contiguity to Gray, as both fall prey to the logic of corpse economy: "Mr Gray is the continuation of Miss Galbraith; you can't begin and then stop; if you begin, you must keep on beginning; that's the truth. No rest for the wicked" (BS 85). A metonymic logic clearly emerges in this statement, in which gender is apparently interchangeable, but, more importantly, where the perpetrator can become just another victim, as well as a Gothic harbinger of guilt and retribution. In the arena of survival of that economy, only Macfarlane can keep thriving professionally, while Fettes never truly recovers from the shock of the contaminating corpse. Their physical and aesthetic ageing is revealing of their different social parables, and the supernatural affects the two characters in two opposite ways, and is psychologically relevant (Arata 2010, 62).

It has been argued, notably by Robert Mighall (2002, XV), that "The Body Snatcher" prefigures the preoccupations that Stevenson would later develop in *The Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde* by weaving together medicine and science, anatomy and anthropology, folklore and the supernatural, national politics and imperial anxieties. Significantly, the story displays "a pattern of suppressed guilt, of a double life of daylight respectability and nocturnal transgression, of the 'ghost' of old crimes overtaking their perpetrators, contained here within a fairly conventional supernatural tale" (Mighall 2002, XVII). The "doubleness of life" that is shared by Fettes and Macfarlane (Gray 2004, 52) and the social diagnosis and critique embedded in the story anticipates the kind of exploration of social and class duplicity of *Jekyll and Hyde*, as the instability of Gray's corporeality, when alive, already reveals the concern with the representation of a porous area between the criminal and atavist and the bourgeois respectability of the gentlemen irresistibly attracted to the 'double life'. Mr Gray is described as "a small man, very pale and dark, with cold black eyes. The cut of his features gave a promise of intellect and refinement which was but feebly realized in his manners;



for he proved, upon a nearer acquaintance, coarse, vulgar and stupid" (BS 75). Gray looks like a criminal and yet could be a gentleman; he looks like a gentleman and yet acts like a criminal, and this outward social ambivalence anticipates the social and moral instability of the Jekyll-Hyde duality. What is most relevant is that his duplicity, signalled by his physical ambiguity, finds in dissection the punishment reserved either to criminals or the poor. But since Gray is not destitute, his dissected body is not anonymous: the semantics of the snatched body in the story thus reverses the question of anonymity into a disturbingly uncanny identity that vindicates the exploitation and commodification of the lower classes perpetrated by grave robbers on this morally compromised man.

## 5 "Men of the World": The Scottish Theme

"The Body Snatcher" has also been examined in relation to Stevenson's Scottish background. Along with "Thrawn Janet" and "The Merry Men", it expresses the "association between the *national* and the *uncanny or supernatural*" which has been identified as "a thematic core" of the Scottish Gothic (Duncan 2012, 123). This association is mediated by a significant temporal distance between the time of the story and that of narration. It is remarkable that Scottish subjects were first considered by Stevenson "by way of the Gothic" (Arata 2010, 59). "The Body Snatcher", in its reviving the national trauma of resurrectionism and its use of the supernatural to dramatise the loss of integrity of the self, responds to that dramatic identitarian rift which is the dominant trait of Scottish Gothic, considered "as an aesthetics of disjuncture, looking both inward to the nation's own fragmented status as well as outward, offering a way of reflecting on identity that moves beyond essentialist binary forms of self-representation" (Davison, Germanà 2017, 7).

Caroline McCracken's argues that Gray's corpse, Fettes himself, as well as the anglicised doctor Macfarlane, represent the buried otherness of Scottish national identity. McCracken points out how "[t]his social obsession with the corpse in inappropriate circulation was peculiar to Scotland" and persisted in the late Victorian period, in a context where the two bodies politic of England and Scotland, joined in one parliament, had given way to the distinction between the former's body politic proper and the latter's 'body natural' (McCracken 2006, 134). The allusion to the Burke and Hare case - the two were Irish, and thus analogously 'other' - suggests Robert Knox as a rampant middle-class Scotsman who never acknowledged his connection to the two murderers. The Scottish theme is thus connoted by the overt allusion to the unscrupulous social advancement of a man of science who had promoted an abominable development of the corpse market,

through which social and professional success had been made possible by the trading of abject body parts, an ultimate form of embodied but commodified otherness. Both Fettes and Macfarlane, however, have occluded their identities, one in failure, the other through professional and social success (McCracken 2006, 141). Moreover, the supernatural return of the dismembered corpse, which clearly signals the return of the national repressed, is evoked in the context of rural England at a time of great national progress, and therefore marks the unremitting anxiety about an unerasable past of guilty complicity, bound to haunt the present.

Stevenson's story masterfully disguises the reverse colonization trope by dislocating Scottish identities through an elliptical exploration of class and moral duplicity, and the unstable threshold that separates the living from revenant embodiments of guilt.

## 6 The Impossible Containment

The most accomplished literary quality of "The Body Snatcher" is its narrative structure and imagery, which foreground the impossible containment of its textual content, prompting further reflection in light of Victorian death culture. The story conventionally opens with an audience formed by a small group of characters representing different social layers of British society: the landlord, the local undertaker, a middle-aged Scottish alcoholic doctor named Fettes, and the anonymous narrator. This all-male group recalls the one aboard the *Nellie* in the opening page of *Heart of Darkness*. In lieu of the "bond of the sea", in "The Body Snatcher" the emphasis is on the soil and the existence of a ground, conveyed by the figures of the undertaker and the landlord, to which all are directly or indirectly tied. The nameless narrator forcefully tells the story he has extorted from the reluctant Fettes, whom he defines as a an "old drunken Scotsman", who "by a mere continuance of living had grown to be an adopted townsman" (BS 67). On closer scrutiny, the narrator is not a neutral, anodyne presence: rather, though "seemingly benign", he "dissects Fettes's character before disappearing from the scene of the crime" (Yan 2019, 471), akin to an obscure Ancient Mariner who enjoys telling a story of crime without atonement. Referring to himself as "myself", he is ultimately implicated in this contaminating experience of the "abhorred task" (BS 82), as he "worms out" his story with an almost sadistic pleasure from the reluctant Fettes.

The impossible narrative closure signalled by the uncontainable corpse is proleptically announced from the start when Fettes, upon seeing MacFarlane, startles as if "rising from the dead", so that the idea of the revenant dead body, as Robert Mighall noted, "provide literal and metaphorical frames" (Mighall 2002, XIV). The fast motion

of the gig in the last scene is anticipated by Macfarlane's terrified escape<sup>3</sup> after his unexpected encounter with the man who has nailed him against his own criminal past after so many years:

as he was passing Fettes clutched him by the arm, and these words came in a whisper, and yet painfully distinct, 'Have you seen it again?'

The great, rich London doctor cried out aloud with a sharp, throttling cry; he dashed his questioner across the open space, and, with his hands over his head, fled out of the door like a detected thief. Before it had occurred to one of us to make a movement the fly was already rattling towards the station. The scene was over like a dream; but the dream had left proofs and traces of its passage. (BS 70)

Stevenson explored and deployed narrative complexities in his works, notably in *Jekyll and Hyde*, with an eye to a scientific perspective, and exploited them to dramatize not only the narrative process itself, as in the best mid- and late Victorian fiction, but also as a device that reveals an incomplete or unattainable closure, its residue, the irrational and, ultimately, otherness. The centrality of the dead body is a recurrent motif in his output: while in "The Body Snatcher" it has even been read in light of the influence that Robert Knox's writings had on philosophical anatomy, to consider that "entanglement of anatomising and narrative experimentation during the nineteenth century" (Yan 2019, 461), in his output it has been more extensively explored in relation to the secrecy of homoeroticism (Buckton 2000). The legacy of anatomy, originally conceived as a branch of philosophy by the connotation of 'natural', is signalled by the epithet Fettes chooses for Macfarlane and his master Mr K. as "philosophers", so that the overtones connoting the higher aims behind the anatomists' activity sound ironically brutal. The nexus between (philosophical) anatomy and narrative experimentation can be further illuminated by an essay published two years before the short story, "A Gossip on Romance", where Stevenson discusses the way in which the "plastic part of literature" should be written with the aim of rendering the passion and vitality of true experience ("Drama is the poetry of conduct, romance the poetry of circumstance", Stevenson 2006, 142; 140), and employs a medical, even surgical vocabulary: "one thing to remark and to dissect, with the most cutting logic, the complications of life, and of the human spirit; it is quite another to give them body and blood in the

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**3** Macfarlane keeps "a gig and a strong trotting-horse", therefore the vehicle is directly associated with his moral unscrupulousness and constant flight from ethical responsibilities.

story of Ajax or Hamlet" (Stevenson 2006, 141). In seeing the risk of delving too deep into such existential complications, Stevenson seemed to suggest that both the anatomist and the writer endanger the human subject (Yan 2019, 470). Thus, literary art, narrative and the mystery of embodied life appeared to be entangled in his aesthetic and literary project. This is also apparent in "The Body Snatcher" as the narrator also seems to be consciously exploiting the enduring anxiety about resurrectionism that had not subsided in Stevenson's time. What is more, the story reveals a degree of narrative complexity and aggressiveness in the anonymous narrator's macabre phrasing that he is "worming out" a story from the stupefied Fettes. The graphic metaphor of the narrator extracting the story like an agent thriving from decomposition clearly implicates the anonymous teller of the tale in the economy of dissection and the semantics of resurrectionism and generates a self-referential narrative level in the story. As Rae Yan remarks with a macabre image, such an implication turns the narrator into a "parasitic entity burrowing through Fettes' body" (Yan 2019, 472). In other words, in spinning a troubling yarn about the disruption of bodily integrity, the anonymous narrator also undermines the textual integrity and simplicity that could be expected from a popular "crawler", so that "The Body Snatcher" ranks with Stevenson's main works in the concern to discard the realist and naturalist fictional mode, or, in Nathalie Jaëck's suggestive phrasing, "to dismember, to scatter, the text" (Jaëck 2006, 49). Furthermore, the anonymous narrator, only apparently marginal to the rhetorical economy of the tale and feeding on an unearthed macabre past which keeps resurfacing in the transmission of yarns over time, seems to respond to Elizabeth Bronfen's conception of storytellers who "are like revenants, in that the liminal realm between life and death inspires and produces fictions" (Stevenson 2006, 143).

The relevance of the corpse to Stevenson's poetics was a central concern of his mature years, which he elaborated through an array of gothic tropes that respond to contemporary anxieties. In the attempt "to find a body, a vehicle, for that strong sense of man's double being", as he wrote in 1888 in "A Chapter on Dreams", referring to the genesis of *Strange Case* (Stevenson 2008, 161), Stevenson had "tried one body after another in vain", focusing on the motif of the vanishing, transfigured or replaced corpse in several other fictions. Among them feature "Thrawn Janet" and "Markheim", together with the comic novel *The Wong Box* (1889), co-authored with Lloyd Osbourne, and *Strange Case*, where the most important dead body of all, Hyde's, is prefigured by Jekyll in his testament letter. The male corpse has been identified by Buckton (2000) as a narrative catalyst and a symbolic receptacle of a disturbing homoerotic intimacy between men, which leads to attempts at its physical containment in boxes and cases, and imbues the whole narrative with secrecy. In "The Body Snatcher" the

relationship between Macfarlane and Gray, whose corpse is the centrepiece of the narrative suspense, is shady, to say the least: Gray, who despite his outward looks is "coarse, vulgar" and who exerts "however a very remarkable control over Macfarlane", takes "a fancy" to Fettes, and is defined by the narrator as a "loathsome rogue" and an "experienced man" (BS 75). All of which may clearly point to a possible homoerotic intimacy complicating the illegal transactions in the dissecting trade.

More specifically, the transfigured or reanimated corpse has been analysed by Oliver Buckton as central to Stevenson's narrative poetics, notably in connection to that 'narrative desire' which Peter Brooks diagnosed as "ultimately, inexorably, desire for the end" (Brooks 1992, 52). An end which precludes closure, as Stevenson's narrative strategies make a dramatic use of the 'animation' of the body - wounded, sick, displaced or dead - and complicate the equation of burial with the satisfactory ending of the story. Stevenson's use of the morphing (dead) body then, his "fascination with bodily proliferation" should be read in the context of his narrative experimentation, in which "his transgression of the taboo of individual integrity" reflects the "transgression of the contemporary naturalist taboo of textual integrity" (Jaëck 2006, 48).<sup>4</sup>

The transformed corpse and its agency appear as the "reanimated corpse", a key element in Stevenson's 1889 comic novel *The Wrong Box*, and recur in other adventure novels such as *Treasure Island* (1883), *The Master of Ballantrae* (1889), and *The Ebb-Tide* (1893-94) (Buckton 2000, 23).<sup>5</sup> The cadaver also becomes a narrative 'object of desire' as early as 1882, in the short story "The Suicide Club", part of *New Arabian Nights* (Buckton 2000, 44), where a dead body is hidden in a trunk that functions as a metonymical container for it and suggests a secret and repulsive homoeroticism. While *The Wrong Box* amplifies the morbid humor and illicit desire that connote the corpse of the "The Suicide Club", the agency of the dead body takes on darker tones in the adventure romances and South Sea tales, "in which evil - in its most extreme case, demonic possession - is associated with the reanimation of an abject, colonized body." (Buckton 2000, 57).

<sup>4</sup> Jaëck focuses primarily her analysis on *Treasure Island*, *Strange Case* and *The Master of Ballantrae* but, like Buckton, does not mention "The Body Snatcher".

<sup>5</sup> In *Treasure Island* Jim Hawkins thinks Israel Hand is dead, but his body 'revives' and he attacks Jim, before actually dying in the sea. In *The Master of Ballantrae* James Drury is brought back to life after being buried alive and the sight of his body leads to his brother Henry dying from the shock; in *Kidnapped*, the protagonist David Balfour returns to life twice after being led into peril and then presumed dead. In *The Ebb-Tide*, Stevenson's last novel, the bodies of the deceased natives died of smallpox are symbolically exhumed in various moments of the story. It is noteworthy that neither Jaëck nor Buckton in their studies focused on the narrative implications of the corpse mention "The Body Snatcher".

"The Body Snatcher" is crucial in developing this motif. The supernaturally transformed corpse complicates the goal of such narrative desire, proclaims the impossibility of closure and dramatises the narrative process, its strategies of containment, and the residue that inevitably returns. This return of the repressed symbolized by the dead body of the 'other' can be best appreciated within Stevenson's exploration of the limits of representation, a hallmark of his work. As a "writer of boundaries" (Ambrosini, Drury 2006), in this seemingly conventional tale, Stevenson revisits a dark chapter of British history, using the spatial progress of the return to Edinburgh in the final image to highlight historical, geographical, and moral displacement.

In Stevenson's valorisation of the romance, it is not only the narrative structure that evades closure, but the main narrative object of the story, namely the dead and dissected body, a body marked and defiled.

The disturbing intimacy enforced by this corpse disrupts narrative closure, and becomes a complex literary object, underscoring Peter Brooks' notion of the significant bond between the marking of the body and its entering the space of the text:

signing or marking the body signifies its passage into writing, its becoming a literary body, and generally also a narrative body, in that the inscription of the sign depends on and produces a story. The signing of the body is an allegory of the body become a subject for literary narrative – a body entered into writing. (Brooks 1993, 3)

Stevenson's work often featured marked bodies, reflecting the *fin de siècle* idea of bodily 'stigmata', explored by Stephen Arata, who noted that "the degenerate subject was itself a text to be read" (Arata 1996, 19). Hyde's 'unspeakable' deformity, for instance, epitomises other previous forms of bodily alteration or abjection in Stevenson's work, such as Long John Silver's maimed leg in *Treasure Island* and Olalla's female vampire biting the narrator's arm, just to mention two passing examples. In "The Body Snatcher" Gray's body evades knowledge: the body of a murdered villain, guilty of unspecified crimes, bound in illicit proximity to Macfarlane and hence incriminating him, since what happened to it remains obscure, and suggests an ominous poetic justice. The supernatural turn is also strongly suggestive of a Christian (and Calvinist) return of the burden of guilt, of the sins committed by Fettes and Macfarlane which return to haunt and grieve the sinners, as Stephen Arata remarks (2010, 63). After being uncannily substituted to the unmarked farmer's wife's body,<sup>6</sup> Gray's dissected corpse is eventually left alone on the gig to wander off into the dark

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<sup>6</sup> Whereas the sexually compromised Jane Galbraith's corpse had been recognized "by a dozen unquestionable marks".

of the night, in the rain, heading aimlessly towards the future. This transformed and revenant dead body of "The Body Snatcher" indirectly prefigures another 'wrong' traveling corpse commodified for its monetary value, and ultimately "lost" by the protagonists, the one in *The Wrong Box*, the 'financial' popular novel, which is transported by a train, the interrupted journey of which emphasizes the instability of identity, placed at the core of an intricate web of financial greed.

The instability of the corpse also significantly connects "The Body Snatcher" to "Markheim", where the protagonist notices how his features strangely change, as if in a macabre mirroring, in the light of the candle that is still illuminating the body of the killed dealer. He eventually faces the visitor, the demonic *arrivant* - another clear analogy with the unexpected and destabilizing arrival of Macfarlane - telling the maid to call the police. This potentially disrupting mutability of the corpse should also be read, I would argue, in the light of evolving nineteenth-century attitudes to the funeral wake, with Stevenson probably acknowledging the popular custom of never abandoning the corpse for fear both of both its vulnerability and its power.

The vanishing and transformed corpse in "The Body Snatcher", thus, denies narrative closure, disrupts realist assumptions, and casts the lurid light of the gothic graveyard scenes on early Victorian utilitarian ideology, reviving the association between scientific advancement and the illicit trading of bodies dehumanized by dissection. This resonates with contemporary concerns about the control of the body and the contaminating power of the corpse which called for the occlusion and removal of death, that Philippe Ariès analysed in his concept of "the forbidden death" (Ariès 1975, ch. IV).

The resurrectionist theme and the revenant corpse as its key narrative object dramatise the resistance to anonymity enforced by dissection and signal the impossibility of atonement through the return of the repressed *sub specie* of the dissected cadaver. This dual 'resistance' contributes to the story's symbolic spatial movement, with the abandoned revenant corpse progressing astray towards the future "in such a world of wet and darkness", symbolically deferring burial and closure, suggesting a posthumous continuity in Fettes' anguished question to MacFarlane "Have you seen it again?" (BS 70). This is the key image of the story: the idea that the troubling, revenant "dead and dissected body" progresses in darkness towards the Scottish capital is immensely suggestive, bearing an intertextual allusion to that paramount uncontainable 'other' body in British literature that is Frankenstein's.<sup>7</sup> Made of dissected parts of anonymised destitute human beings, the Creature too is uncontainable within those

<sup>7</sup> As originally pointed by Spivak 1985, 258.

narrative frames which represent the boundaries of civilization, self-exiled towards the unexplored furthestmost borders of western civilization, "the most northern extremity of the globe" as the living abject that cannot survive in society, "lost in darkness and distance" (Shelley 1992, 214-15). If the narrative in *Strange Case* suggested "a disruption - enacted in terms of class and urban geography" (Mighall 1999, 151), "The Body Snatcher" underscores the restlessness of the displaced history of resurrectionism in the conjunction of the 'other' body as the recipient of the return of the repressed, with the geographical displacement between Scotland and England, and its reverse route. Victorian death cults attempted to preserve and ideally reanimate the corpse in a "controlled manner" (Zigarovich 2020, 288), but Stevenson's story reactivates the fear of the corpse as endowed with moral agency, conferring to it that "unruly animation that the strategies of narrative plot manifestly fail to contain", central to *The Wrong Box* (Buckton 2000, 38).<sup>8</sup> As in *Frankenstein* "the taint of monsterism, as the product of the unarrestable metonymic movement of desire through the narrative signifying chain, may ultimately come to rest with the reader of the text" (Brooks 1993, 214), Stevenson's story promised 'unquiet slumbers' tainted by the memory of grave digging to the Victorian reader who was merely expecting a 'crawler'.

By revisiting the historical reality and the enduring cultural anxiety of dissection, "The Body Snatcher" dramatises the threat of the disintegration of identity, that had not nor could be secured, in an era of rapid scientific and economic progress, which sometimes must have appeared as uncontrollable as the unbridled motion of the gig in the final scene.

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<sup>8</sup> Buckton does not relate the story to the novel, but I would argue that the analogy is striking, with the due narrative proportions.



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