

R.L. Stevenson: A Master Craftsman of Striking Phrases and Quotable Quotes

Dr. Poorva Bhonde

Head, Dept. of English Sharadchandra Arts and Commerce College, Butibori.

ABSTRACT –Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894) is one of the greatest essayists of the Victorian era. His essays included in three collections : *Virginibus Puerisque, Familiar studies of Men and Books and Memories and Portraits* reflect his outlook on life and craftsmanship. His essays are cogent and perceptive renderings of diverse aspects of human situations. Being a conscious artist, his artistic expression often takes form of a striking phrase or a quotable quote.

Hence an effort has been made in the present paper to bring together and study the striking phrases or quotable quotes in his above mentioned collections of essays.

Key Words: R.L. Stevenson, essays, virginibus puerisque, craftsmanship, striking phrases, quotable quotes.

Date of Submission: 06-05-2019

Date of acceptance:21-05-2019

I. INTRODUCTION-

Art finds expression in many forms. The expression of an artist is nothing but his style. When an artist in words expresses himself in a particular manner, his manner of expression becomes his style. Thus the style is the expression of the writer's self. The style is 'mentis character'¹: the image of man. Artist's whole personality mind, heart and soul is mirrored in it.

Every artist in words has a style of his own. It is strongly coloured by the way he thinks and feels. Where there is style, there is the man behind it, with all the myriad facets of his personality. While studying the style one looks for the writer behind the writing, traces in it the influence of his background, his surroundings, his education and his literary tastes.

When it comes to the study of the artistic expression of such an artist as R.L. Stevenson, who is known for his painstaking efforts for attaining the perfection in style, the task becomes all the more challenging yet pleasurable.

In the essays of Stevenson are found almost all the ingredients that contribute to the making of a good prose style and the most discerning one is his ability to create a striking phrase or a quotable quote .

His habit of looking upon everything, even the most trivial scene as a material for literature fostered the spirit of the essayist in him. An essayist knows very well how to make use of small things. "The skill of the essayist lies in showing or rather in hinting, how the village path leads to Rome. Of this skill Stevenson was master".(Ridley, M.R., 1953, R.L. Stevenson, 53,54)

Stevenson's tireless experiments in diction and arrangement; his interest in the most commonplace spectacle and the simplest subject of conversation provided him new yet valuable material for literature. According to High Walker, Stevenson was 'a delightful companion and his is one of the easiest and the most graceful of styles in our literature'^{(Walker, Hugh, The Literature of Victorion era).}

The study of the essays in Stevenson's three popular collections of essays – at once reveal the most conspicuous features of his style- Simplicity, lucidity and clarity, artificiality, wit and humour, striking phrases, apt allusions and French influence, interesting comparisons and contrasts, affinity for nature and convincing conclusions. Present paper focuses on his craftsmanship in producing striking phrases and quotable quotes.

Striking Phrases

The crown and triumph of the artists is - "not to be true merely, but to be lovable; not simply to convince, but to enchant" (A Gossip on the Novel of Dumas, MP., p. 244). If 'to enchant' then be the avowed aim, Stevenson achieved it with great success in his essays known for his phrase-making instinct and quotable quotes.

In the words of Frank Swinnerton, "Stevenson, moreover, had the phrase-making instinct, which gives inordinate pleasure. Such a gift of phrase cannot be learned, as anyone may see by examining the work of merely initiative writers: it is a part of Stevenson's nature that he, at all times, almost instinctively crystallised into a figure some obvious half-truth about life, and love, and fate, and the gimcrack relics of old heroisms. All his work is filled with examples of the happy conjunction of words" (Swinnerton Frank, 1923, R.L.S. –A

Critical study,81)

Stevenson is the artist in words whose love of fine phrases is reflected in his essays. In his word-weaving experiments he cultivates his sense of touch and sight until he can combine the raw fibres in novel, bewitching patterns. His fine sense of sound, value, meaning and associations of individual words and a sense of harmony, proportion and effect in their combination help him to weave a garment that fits finely and transforms the mere truism into something noble and lofty.

Stevenson's thoughts, wearing the garment of striking phrase become highly quotable. In the opinion of Hugh Walker, "some great writers produce a profound effect by their work as a whole, but are not readily quotable; others have the gift of condensing their meaning into a striking phrase. The conscious and deliberate literary artist will generally be found to belong to the latter class. Pope, for example, it is the most quotable writer in English after Shakespeare. Stevenson stands intermediate, on the whole he rather diffuses his meaning, and makes it an atmosphere enfolding everything; but at times his skill in words concentrates itself in a sentence or phrase or even a word." (Walker, Hugh, 1959, *The English Essays and Essayists*, 298)

Calling marriage a 'perilous remedy' Stevenson skillfully puts in a few words the condition of a married man: "In marriage, a man becomes slack and selfish and undergoes a fatty degeneration of his moral being" (*Virginibus Puerisque*, VP., p.23)

Suspecting that love is rather too violent a passion to make a good domestic sentiment, Stevenson writes aptly: "The Lion is the King of Beasts, but he is scarcely suitable for a domestic pet" (*Virginibus Puerisque-I*, VP., p.6)

And finally that apt conclusion, "For marriage is like life in this-that it is a field of battle and not a bed of roses" (*Virginibus Puerisque-I*, VP., p.15)

Who else but an optimistic Stevenson, can compress so much meaning in single sentence as in this: "Hope they say deserts us at no period of our existence" (*Virginibus Puerisque-I*, VP., p.15)

Showing the darker side of marriage effectively, he writes "To marry is to domesticate the Recording Angel. Once you are married, there is nothing left for you, not even suicide, but to be good". (*Virginibus Puerisque-II*, VP., p.20)

Stating clearly how it is vain to seek for consistency or expect clear and stable views with the advancement of age, Stevenson aptly describes the change in view, "In the course of time we grow to love things we hated and hate things we loved" (*Crabbed Age and Youth*, VP., p.54).

Stuffing entire zeal and energy in youth in a powerful, single sentence, Stevenson, observes: "Youth is the time to go flashing from one end of the world to the other, both in mind and body" (*Crabbed Age and Youth*, VP., p.57).

A child of today will be the youth of tomorrow and the old aged man of the future. Changes are inevitable: "The true wisdom is to be always seasonable and to change with a good grace in changing circumstances" (*Crabbed Age and Youth*, VP., p.60).

Supporting the endless flow of energy and enthusiasm in youth and condemning dullness in any age, he writes: "To equip a dull, respectable person with wings would be but to make a parody of an angel" (*Crabbed Age and Youth*, VP., p.61). Using yet another striking phrase he narrates how 'hope' never deserts human beings "Undying hope is co-ruler of the human bosom with infallible credulity" (*Crabbed Age and Youth*, VP., p.61). Stevenson aptly points out the disadvantages of overstudying. Showing the limitations of accustomed stores of knowledge he writes: "Books are good enough in their own way, but they are a mighty bloodless substitute for life" (*An Apology for Idlers*, VP., p.66).

An extremely busy person has to neglect so many interesting things in life. Putting this truth in the least possible words, writes he, "Perpetual devotion to what a man calls his business, is only to be sustained by perpetual neglect of many other things". (*An Apology for Idlers*, VP., p.71)

While offering precious piece of advice that 'if a person cannot be happy without remaining idle, idle he should remain; he states that nothing can be gained by making haste. On the contrary "He sows hurry and reaps indigestion" (*An Apology for Idlers*, VP., p.74) He criticises the industrious fellows for not giving themselves time to relax and for creating problems for those nearer him, he writes: "He poisons life at the well-head. It is better to be beggared out of hand by a space grace nephew, than daily hag-ridden by a peevish uncle." (*An Apology for Idlers*, VP., p.74) He broods over the very philosophical terms-Life and Death. The confusion experienced by him is expressed in apt words: "The Love of Life and the fear of Death are two famous phrases that grow harder to understand the more we think about them". (*Aes Triplex*, VP., p.96.)

Finally he proclaims - 'that we do not properly speaking, love life at all, but living' (*Aes Triplex*, VP., p.97).

Even if Death, the inevitable, is ready to pounce upon a courageous man, he is not terrorised. Rather he believes in 'living' each moment happily. Who else can convey this deeply felt truth than Stevenson, who himself had suffered the pangs of death many times? Appealing to all not to be afraid of death, he writes: "Who would find heart enough to begin to live, if he dallied with the consideration of death?" (*Aes Triplex*, VP., p.101)

Stating that there is always a new horizon for onward looking men, writes Stevenson : "An aspiration is a joy for ever, a possession as solid as a landed estate, a fortune which we can never exhaust and which gives us year by year a revenue of pleasurable activity". (El Dorado, VP., p.103) Nothing is perfectly attainable on the earth. Everything is in state of flux. Yet the inevitability of death is certain: "There is only one wish realisable on the earth; only one thing that can be perfectly attained: Death. And from a variety of circumstances we have no one to tell us whether it be worth attaining" (El. Dorado, VP., p.106) The true success lies in labouring for something and not in achieving it. For - "To travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive and the true success is to labour" (El. Dorado, VP., P.106)

Praising the English Admirals for their unmatched bravery and courage Stevenson describes the, terrifying conditions of their sea-fights. Describing their love for wars, Stevenson writes that 'they courted war like a mistress'. (The English Admirals, VP., p.113)

The mistake that is often committed is to find motive behind every action. According to Stevenson, "It is at best but a pettifogging, pick thank business to decompose actions into little personal motives. At least, in case of heroism one should not explain the motive. People usually do things and suffer martyrdoms, because they have an inclination that way. "The artist is not the man who fixes his eye on posterity, but the one who loves the practice of his art" (The English Admirals, VP., p.120)

Showing deep understanding of child psychology and advising the parents not to compel them to live always in the real world, Stevenson uses apt expressions.

"One thing, at least, comes very clearly out of these considerations: that whatever we are to expect at the hands of children, it should not be any peddling exactitude about matters of fact" (Child's Play, VP., p.144)

Finally comes that oft-quoted, appeal to parents:

"O conscientious parent! Let them doze among their playthings yet a little ! for who knows what a rough, warfaring existence lies before them in the future ? (Child's play, VP., p. 146).

Describing the richness of experience a traveller enjoys during a walking tour, he says that for a man on walking tour, "Pleasure leads on to pleasure in an endless chain" (Walking Tours, VP. p. 147) One does not always have to go out to seek joy and happiness. Sometimes contemplation also gives an equal joy and satisfaction points out. "After all, it is not they who carry flags, but they who look upon it from a private chamber, who have the fun of the procession." (Walking Tours, VP. p.156)

When the heaven withdraws its 'leading luminary' the darkness reigns supreme. Old gas lamps used to take place of the sun, though their brightness did not match the heavenly source of light. He appreciates the 'old mild lustre' of the lamps and beautifully explains the mechanical nature of the job of a 'sedate electrician' who wields all the lights of the city in a back office. (A Plea for Gas Lamps, VP.P. 165)

Stevenson puts forth his philosophical views aphoristically : "The parable of talent is the brief epitome of youth. To believe in immortality is one thing, but it is first needful to believe in life" (Some college Memories, MP., p.42)

According to Stevenson, the ground of all youths suffering, solitude, hysteria and haunting of the grave, is nothing else than naked, ignorant selfishness. So he preaches: "In every part and corner of our life to lose oneself is to be gainer' to forget oneself is to be happy" (Some College Memories, MP., p.48)

He strived hard to imitate the great masters English prose to master the art of writing. He admits: " I have thus played the sedulous ape to Hazlitt, to Lamb, to Wordsworth to Sir Thomas Browne, to Defoe, to Howthorne, to Montaigne, to Baudelaire and to Obermann" (The college Magazine, MP., p.59)

Praising an old Scotch Gardener for his old fashioned and Catholic tastes, he writes : "Indeed, he was a man keenly alive to the beauty of all that was bygone" (An old Scotch Gardener, MP., p.80)

Defining literature in albeit different manner, he says : "Literature in many of its branches is not other than the shadow of good talk." (Talk and Talkers, MP., p.145)

While untangling the complex web of life Stevenson makes an interesting analysis of human relationships

"The spice of life is battle; the friendliest relations are still a kind of contest; and if we would not forego all that is valuable in our lot, we must continually face some other person, eye to eye, and wrestle a fall whether in love or enmity" (Talk and Talkers, MP., p. 146)

Stevenson's idea about the nature of natural talk is highly quotable: "Natural talk, like ploughing should turn up a large surface of life, rather than dig mines into geological strata" (Talk and talkers,, MP., p. 150). How old people converse is brought out by Stevenson with striking phrases in aphoristic manner to make them quotable. "The old appear in conversation in two characters; the critically silent and the garrulous anecdotic" (Talk and Talkers, MP., p.176)

Admiring the works of ' Skelt' and giving him a due credit for making his childhood colourful, he says : "The world was plain enough before I knew him, a poor penny world, but soon it was all coloured with romance.: (A Penny Plain and Two pence Coloured, MP., p.225)

He points out the subtle difference between drama and poetry by saying: "Drama is the poetry of

conduct, romance the poetry of circumstance. The pleasure that we take in life is of two sorts- the active and passive" (A Gossip on Romance, MP., p. 249) He lights up an interesting side of life in his attempt to define it : "The life of man is not the subject of novels, but the inexhaustible magazine from which subjects are to be selected." (A Humble Remonstrance, MP., p.285). Comparing writing novels to painting and showing the difference between novel and drama, Stevenson writes. "Continuous narration is the flat board on to which the novelist throws everything. (Victor Hugo's Romances FSMB, p.35).

In praise of Walt Whitman, Stevenson uses striking expressions indicating, what the readers feel :

"We fall upon Whitman, after the works of so many men who write better, with a sense of old relief from strain, with a sense of touching nature, as when one passes out of the flaring, noisy thoroughfares of a great city into what he himself has called, with unexcelled imaginative justice of language, "The huge and thoughtful night" (Walt Whitman, FSMB, p.83).

Stevenson's phrase making instinct and craftsmanship contributed significantly to his great popularity as the essayist.

II. CONCLUSION :

Stevenson's fondness for apt phrases to describe emotions is seen everywhere in his writings. It is true that with conscious effort he tried to master the skill by imitating the masters of English prose. But when he began to write, he began also to observe consciously, and to reproduce his sensations with a photographic accuracy. In the words of Frank Swinnerton "It would be hard to stop quoting Stevenson if one wished to record apt phrases, for apt phrases are as common with Stevenson as leaves on a tree." (Swinnerton, Frank, 1923, R.L.S.-A Critical Study, 66,67)

REFERENCE :-

- [1]. Stevenson R.L. *Virginibus Puerisque and other Papers*, London, Macmillan and co.Ltd. 1963.
- [2]. Stevenson R.L. *Virginibus Puerisque and Familiar Studies of Men and Books* J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd. London, 1948.
- [3]. Stevenson R.L. *Memories and Portraits* New York, Charles Scribener's Sons, 1908.
- [4]. Ridley, M.R., *R.L.Stevenson*, Oxford University Press ,1953,
- [5]. Swinnerton, Frank, *R.L.Stevenson .-A Critical Study*, New York, George H. Doran Company, 1923.
- [6]. Walker, Hugh, *The English Essays and Essayists* Delhi, S. Chand and Co. published by arrangement with messers J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd. London, 1959.

Dr. Poorva Bhonde" *R.L. Stevenson : A Master Craftsman of Striking Phrases and Quotable Quotes*" *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention (IJHSSI)*, vol. 08, no. 5, 2019, pp.01-04