UNIT 9: R. L. STEVENSON: EXTRACTS FROM *TRAVELS WITH A DONKEY IN THE CEVENNES*

UNIT STRUCTURE

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9.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- identify with the term 'outdoor literature'
- explain the extract from Stevenson's *Travels with a Donkey in the Cevennes*
- analyse the style and language of Stevenson
- discuss the major themes of the extract

9.2 INTRODUCTION

In this unit you will be reading an extract from Robert Louis Stevenson's *Travels with a Donkey in the Cevennes* (1879) which is titled as "A Camp

in the Dark." This work is considered to be one of the finest works of the literary genre known as outdoor literature. Stevenson's work is an engaging and humorous account of the twelve day journey he had undertaken alone, in the year 1878, through the sparsely populated rural areas of the Cevennes Mountains which is located in the southern part of France. As such it is autobiographical by nature.*Travels with a Donkey in the Cevennes* begins with a section titled *The Donkey, the Pack and the Pack- Saddle.* The author gives a description of how the author acquired the travel necessities in a place called La Monastier for the intended excursion through the Cevennes. However, it is only in the first part of the second section "A Camp in the Dark" where we see the progress of the traveller's journey.

It is a common literary practice in British writing to state the intentions of the author in the form of a preface, epilogue or a letter before the actual text. The same is seen in the case of Stevenson's *Travels with a Donkey to Cevennes.*The following is the letter written by R.L.Stevenson to his friend Sidney Colvin and it was attached as an introduction to the text *Travels with a Donkey*. The letter serves as a means of expressing the intention of writing the book after the journey. In the letter, Stevenson also adds that though the letter is addressed to his friend, "the letter is directed to all."

My Dear Sidney Colvin,

The journey which this little book is to describe was very agreeable and fortunate for me. After an uncouth beginning, I had the best of luck to the end. But we are all travellers in what John Bunyan calls the wilderness of this world - all, too, travellers with a donkey: and the best that we find in our travels is an honest friend. He is a fortunate voyager who finds many. We travel, indeed, to find them. They are the end and the reward of life. They keep us worthy of ourselves; and when we are alone, we are only nearer to the absent. Every book is, in an intimate sense, a circular letter to the friends of him who writes it. They alone take his meaning; they find private messages, assurances of love, and expressions of gratitude, dropped for them in every corner. The public is but a generous patron who defrays the postage. Yet though the letter is directed to all, we have an old and kindly custom of addressing it on the outside

to one. Of what shall a man be proud, if he is not proud of his friends? And so, my dear Sidney Colvin, it is with pride that I sign myself affectionately

yours,

R. L. S.



LET US KNOW

The term outdoor literature refers to a literary genre that involves the outdoors. It is somewhat similar to travel writing but deals only with activities done outdoors such as exploration of the landscape, hiking, mountaineering, etc. Under the term outdoor literature, one can include other sub-genres such as adventure literature, exploration literature or nature writing. Some of the best examples of outdoor literature include Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, Mark Twain's *Roughing It*, John Muir's *My First Summer in the Seirra*, etc.

9.3 R.L. STEVENSON: LIFE AND WORKS

Robert Louis Stevenson is one of the most significant literary figures of the nineteenth century whose considerably large number of works comprising novels, short stories and non-fiction have contributed to the body of English literature. Stevenson's works have earned the admiration of writers such as G.M.Hopkins, Arthur Conan Doyle, Marcel Proust, Rudyard Kipling among many others. He was born on 13th November 1850 in Edinburg, Scotland to Margaret Isabella and Thomas Stevenson who was a lighthouse engineer. The Stevenson family was renowned for their expertise and skill in the field of lighthouse designing. R.L. Stevenson was named after his paternal grandfather who was a known and respected figure in Scotland.

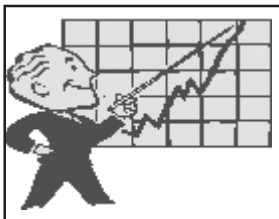
Stevenson developed a weak disposition since childhood because of his inability to tolerate cold and damp weather, especially during winters. As such, the family was constantly on the move to revive the young Stevenson's health. However, this streak of illness continued till adulthood and it drew him away

from the family's hopes of continuing in the field of lighthouse designing. He completed his higher education from Edinburgh University and later also qualified as a lawyer. By 1875, he began writing essays that he contributed to the *Cornhill Magazine*. During this time he had also collaborated with W. E. Henley to compose four plays which unfortunately were not much successful.

It is interesting to note that Stevenson's travels to the countryside of different countries were actually undertaken for health reasons, but these travels also allowed him to develop his skills as a writer. In much of his works, it is seen that travelling becomes the main motif that leads to the acquisition of new lessons and experiences. It was during one of these visits to France that he met Lady Fanny Osbourne in 1876. She was ten years older than him and was also married. Nevertheless, he fell in love with her and revealed his feelings in an essay titled "On Falling in Love" (1877). Although it seemed that there was no future for such a relationship but two years later, he received a telegram from Fanny from which he came to know about her divorce from her husband. Consequently, he went to California to meet and propose marriage to her and the couple married in the year 1880. During this period *An Inland Voyage* (1877) and *Travels with a Donkey to Cevennes* (1878) were published. Both these works were essentially based on Stevenson's travel experiences.

Later he began to publish miscellaneous stories, essays as well as travel pieces. He acquired immense success with the works of fiction that he wrote- *Treasure Island* (1883), *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), *Kidnapped* (1886) and *Master of Ballantrae* (1888). In the year 1888, he went on a trip to South Seas with his family. He settled there in an island called Samoa in Vailima where he acquired the epithet "Tusitala" or the "Story Teller". Stevenson found that his health considerably improved in the South Seas. He engaged in numerous literary projects, some of which were published posthumously. These included historical romance called *The Black Arrow* (1888), *Catriona* (1893), the sequel of the novel *Kidnapped*, *Island Nights' Entertainment* (1893), "The Beach of Falesa" (1893) in which he criticizes the imperial corruption in South Seas and *Songs of Travel* (1896), which serves as an ode to the life in Pacific and also the beauty of Scotland.

Stevenson had also written two comedies in collaboration with his stepson Lloyd Osbourne—*The Wrong Box* (1889) and *The Wrecker* (1892). His last work was the unfinished novel *Weir of Hermiston* (1896) which came out posthumously two years after his death. It was on December 3, 1894 that Stevenson died suddenly of brain haemorrhage. The natives of Samoa gave him a respectable burial in a spot near Mount Vaea which overlooked the sea.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. To whom does R. L. Stevenson address his letter in the beginning of his book?

Q2. What led Stevenson to undertake journeys to countryside?

Q3. Mention the names of a few novels by R. L. Stevenson.

9.4 EXPLANATION OF THE EXTRACT

The section titled "A Camp in the Dark" forms the first part of the section of Stevenson's *Travels with a Donkey to Cevennes*. The entire book has been written in the manner of journal entries where we come to know about the experiences of Stevenson as he embarked on his journey. It is afternoon of 24th September 1878, and the writer had finished entering the account of his previous day and repairing his traveller's backpack. He had earlier decided to always carry his travel equipment in a backpack instead of baskets which was the common practice among the rustic travellers. The writer intended to go to a place called Le Cheylard l'Eveque which was near the forest area of Mercoire. Cheylard was one of the places where Stevenson wished to stop and have a look around, during his outdoor sojourn. He was informed that a solo man hiking to Cheylard would take around one and a half hours to reach his destination but Stevenson believed that a man with a troublesome donkey would take four hours to reach the place.

On the way, as he hiked a hill from Lagogne, he found the natural ambience had changed from the one that he had left behind. The journey was

not easy as he had to face either rain or strong winds.The area known as Allier basin was filled with the sights of cultivated land and ploughing oxen. But as the journey progressed, he found himself surrounded by moorlands, rocks, and trees such as pines and birch. Some of these trees had turned autumn yellow and added to the luminous beauty of the landscape. The writer also noticed that the human habitation was sparse as he crossed the mountainous region.

There were no proper or direct roads to Cheylard and so travellers had to completely rely on their instincts or ask people for directions. It was already four in the evening and he reached Sagnerousse which meant that Cheylard was nearby. Stevenson rejoiced knowing that he had finally reached his destination. But as he emerged from the woods, he found that it was not Cheylard. In fact, it was growing dark and he heard the sound of cattle bells. Amidst the mist and bleakness of the evening, he saw some shadows which he realized were those of children. The children were silently following each other. He noticed that the children walked on, holding their hands and prancing about, but their silence seemed very eerie and unearthly to Stevenson due to the ambience of the marshy area. He, too, remained silent and pricked the donkey Modestine to make it move forward. Modestine, however, slowed down her pace and engaged herself in eating the grass. The writer found himself moving in circles as he came back to the same spot even when he moved ahead in the field. As he struggled to find the right direction to Cheylard, he noticed that two little girls from the group of children were still there, observing him. He decided to ask an old man whom he saw outside a house. But no sooner did he attempt to approach the man, the latter went inside and closed the door. He decided to ask another man but the question was misunderstood and Stevenson again found himself taking a wrong direction. The two girls who were still observing him giggled mischievously. One girl cheekily showed him her tongue while the other suggested that he should follow the cows.

Ignoring the children, Stevenson moved through the marshland and came across a well marked road. Night had set in and it was dark all around and lightly drizzling. As Stevenson and Modestine moved ahead, the former

spotted light. He saw three houses near a wood of birches. It was the small hamlet of Fouzilhic. Fortunately, he met a jolly old man who came out in the rain to show him the path that led to Cheylard. The old man refused to accept any money and bid him farewell. Stevenson felt more positive for having finally found the correct route. But soon it became too dark to move ahead. The sky was covered with clouds and so there was no source of light to guide him through the way which he believed was treacherous. It seemed as if he lost his way again as Modestine moved clumsily around the rocks that lay ahead of them. For a moment, he thought about returning to Fouzilhic and requesting the old man to guide him a little more ahead. The traveller then realized that he had lost track of the road he was following and decided to move ahead as he saw some more windows. It was another hamlet called Fouzilhac. Although the names of these two hamlets were very similar, Stevenson found that the behaviour of the inhabitants of this place was somewhat different from the former. He tied up Modestine to a gate and knocked on the door of the first house in which a woman lived alone. She refused to open the door to a stranger and cried out that she was lame. She told Stevenson to try asking at the next door. At the next house, the door was opened by a man with a dubious smile. There were also two women and a girl in the house. Unlike the old man in Fouzilhic, this man was hardly helpful. When Stevenson explained his position, the man agreed that it was quite dark outside and he needed lanterns. Stevenson offered to pay him anything in order to get to Cheylard but he refused. He told the weary traveller that he could hand him lanterns but will not leave the house at night. It seemed that the man was afraid of the notorious mythical beast of Gevaudan which carried away people and devoured them. Stevenson openly expressed his irritation when the man went on asking him impudently about the reasons for his presence in the village. Further Stevenson realised that he was probably the father of the rude girl he met before who told him to follow the cows. Instead of offering any assistance, the man mocked the traveller for his inability to find Cheylard since daytime. The writer left furiously stating that the girl was a mischievous prankster and the man a coward.

As he took to the road again, the writer found that the lanterns had made his surroundings even darker than before and he felt isolated from the world around him. The rain had stopped and he finished drying his trousers and coat. He finally decided of camping out in the dark with Modestine. He searched around for a suitable place in the woods to spend the night. At last he found a spot where the tall trees formed an arch, a place suited for a traveller camping out in the dark. He tied the donkey to a stout branch and gave it half of the black bread as dinner. Stevenson took off his wet boots and laid his sleeping bag on the ground. The bag served as his pillow and he made lay himself cosily. For supper he had a Bologna sausage and a piece of chocolate cake—the only food that he was carrying. He quenched his thirst with the brandy he was carrying and ended by smoking a cigarette which he considered to be the best smoking experienced after a tiresome day. As he laid his head on the ground, he wondered if he would fall asleep in such an environment. But no sooner he close his eyes, he fell fast asleep from the day's exhaustion. The sound of the wind blowing around was like a lullaby to him. During the course of the night, he woke up twice and the third time when he woke up, he saw the sky filled with a blue coloured hue. He realized very soon it would be dawn. The things around him were more visible now. He saw Modestine still tied to the birch tree, sitting patiently and spotted the rock whose edges troubled him in the night. He closed his eyes and then realized that in spite of all the difficulties that he had to face the previous day, he felt unusually light and content.

With these thoughts, the writer again got ready to see in which part of the world he had spent his previous night. He found the ambience very beautiful with different layers of trees forming the woods and at a distance he observed a picturesque valley and hills. At this point, the writer muses that throughout his life he sought a journey or a voyage to remember in the manner of great explorers or mythical heroes like Ulysses, but he had never expected that a fraction of his daydreams would materialize in an unknown place with natural beauty like Gevaudan. The surroundings were as strange to him as it would be

to the first man on earth. Nevertheless he marvelled at the beauty of nature which was further enhanced by the season of autumn. By the time, he packed everything, the sun which was hidden behind the clouds sent a golden hue over him. It was still bitter cold and the wind pricked his skin. So he buttoned up his coat and proceeded on his journey with a pleasant mind. Per chance, he turned a corner and found himself in Fouzilhic again where he saw the merry old man once more. The old man's expression was one of horrified surprise to see that the traveller was still loitering in Fouzilhic. The writer told him about his experience in Fouzilhac and the old man was angered when he heard about the behaviour of the man who refused to help a lost traveller. The old man apologetically told Stevenson that this time there would be no mistake and he personally accompanied him for half a mile in spite of suffering from rheumatism. Soon, the writer found himself standing at the threshold of Cheylard, the destination he had been seeking for so long.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q4. How is the book *Travels with a Donkey to Cevennes* written?

Q5. Who is Modestine?

Q6. To which place was the writer travelling?

9.5 MAJOR THEMES

R.L. Stevenson's *Travels with a Donkey to Cevennes* is a classic example of the literary genre called outdoor literature and the themes and motifs that he uses in this prose piece is in keeping with the genre. Stevenson has shown how as a traveller he had to face certain obstacles during his journey especially because he was travelling alone. However, he has added elements of humour to keep the narrative light without denigrating the image of the places that he had visited. The obstacles that the traveller-writer had to face are also closely related to the economic and educational status of the people. For

example, the people depicted in the narrative belong to the peasantry. It is true that they live close to nature but it is also equally true that they are somewhat cut-off from the outside world on account of bad roads. As such they remain wary of travellers and are frightened by the superstitious myth of the beast of Gevaudan.

Another theme that is seen in the narrative is the indomitable human spirit in the face of hurdles in life. While undertaking the journey, the writer lost his way several times and it became more difficult because of the unruly donkey that accompanied him. The donkey Modestine, at times, refused to move and slowed down the pace of the traveller. Stevenson was also frustrated, at times, due to the problems of communication with the peasants. In spite of these troubles, he learnt to remain optimistic and spent the night out camping in the darkness. The next morning when he woke up, he was awe-struck by the beauty of nature that he saw around him.He felt grateful for having undergone this experience and proceeded with a pleasant frame of mind. Stevenson met the helpful old man from Fouzilhic once again who took pity on the lost wayfarer and decided to personally take him to Cheylard.

9.6 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

The language used by R.L.Stevenson is conversational in tone. You have already read that the text was written in the manner of a journal and is autobiographical since it is based on the real experiences of the author during his journey through the Cevennes mountains. As such the style of writing adds to the realism of the text. The difficulties and hardships that a traveller faces, especially one who intends to go for outdoor recreational activities like hiking, has been expressed in a realistic way. The experiences of the writer/traveller keeps the reader engaged and one could sympathise with the narrator for all the obstacles he had to face on his way to Cheylard.

We see that Stevenson has made use of the French language in order to heighten the authenticity of the narrative. For example, when he briefly stopped at Fouzilhac in order to ask for directions, the man spoke to him in French.

Instead of using the English equivalent of the sentences spoken, the writer has included the French sentences. We also see elements of dark humour in the text when the writer asserts: "The Beast of Gevaudan ate about a hundred children of this district. I began to think of him with sympathy." This is expressed after his experience with the two mischievous girls in the area near the marshlands. Further, he decides to return back the impudent behaviour he received at the hands of the peasants by calling the man a coward and the girl a "*FARCEUSE"* which means a notorious prankster. Humour is also present in the writer's description of his donkey that is named Modestine. Modestine acquires a personality of its own and becomes an interesting prop in the narrative. Stevenson adds to the humour by referring to the donkey as "*my lady friend*", "*my lady in the dark*" etc.

Further, Stevenson has described the beauty of the landscape of Southern France in detail. The narrative also offers an elaborate description of natural ambience in the district of Gevaudan. He makes use of highly imaginative imageries in his description of nature such as

> "*Moor, heathery marsh, tracts of rock and pines, woods of birch all jewelled with the autumn yellow….*"

and

> "*Overhead the sky was full of strings and shreds of vapour, flying, vanishing, reappearing, and turning about an axis like tumblers, as the wind hounded them through heaven.*"

It has also been observed that Stevenson has been quite inventive in the way he converts nouns into verbs or verbs into adverbs or uses compound words. The writer uses this literary device to highlight special attributes related to the place or to express any strong emotion.This is exemplified in his usage of words such as *meadowy*, *shiveringly*, *cloud mountains,* etc. Words from Old English vocabulary,such as *marish,*are also seen in the essay.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q7. What were the difficulties the writer had faced during his journey?

Q8. Mention any one reason why Stevenson used French language in the text?



9.7 LET US SUM UP

After reading this unit, you have come to know about the life and works of Robert Louis Stevenson. At the same time, the reading of the essay has introduced you to a new genre in literature called outdoor literature. This non-fictional prose piece is autobiographical by nature and so has been realistic in terms of its representation of the experiences of the author in the district of Gevaudan in Southern France. The glossary which has been added will benefit in the development of your vocabulary.



9.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q1: Sidney Colvin.

Ans to Q2: Stevenson's travels to the countryside of different countries were actually undertaken for health reasons.

Ans to Q3: *Treasure Island* (1883), *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), *Kidnapped* (1886) and *Master of Ballantrae* (1888).

Ans to Q4: The entire book has been written in the manner of journal entries.

Ans to Q5: Modestine is the name of the donkey.

Ans to Q6: Cheylard.

Ans to Q7: While undertaking the journey, the writer lost his way several times and it became more difficult because of the unruly donkey that

accompanied him. The donkey Modestine, at times, refused to move and slowed down the pace of the traveller. Stevenson was also frustrated, at times, due to the problems of communication with the peasants.

Ans to Q8: Stevenson has made use of the French language in order to heighten the authenticity of the narrative



9.9 FURTHER READING

1. Birch, Dinah. (2009). *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, Seventh Edition. Oxford : OUP.

2. Humberstone, Barbara et. al. (2015). *Routledge International Handbook of Outdoor Studies.* London : Routledge.

3. Stevenson, R.L. (2011 rpt.). *Travels with a Donkey in the Cevennes*. Texas : Jones Press.



9.10 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1. What do you understand by the term outdoor literature? Give examples.

Q2. Write a summary of the section "A Camp in The Dark" from R.L. Stevenson's book *Travels with a Donkey in the Cevennes.*

Q3. Write short notes on the following

a. The style and language of R.L. Stevenson

b. Themes of the section titled "A Camp in the Dark".

Q4. Narrate the incidents experienced by the author on his way to Cheylard.

Q5. Give an account of the factors that led the author to set up his camp out in the dark.

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