

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde: A Case of Deviant Sexual Expression

Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* explores the dark implications of the duality of human nature. The lawyer Mr. Utterson embarks on a frightening hunt to discover the mystery of the elusive Mr. Hyde. In a male-dominated London society, Utterson and the men around him lead lives characterized by instinctive silence and strict self-denial. The repressive atmosphere impedes their ability to confront the startling facts about Mr. Hyde and his inextricable connection with their friend, Dr. Jekyll. Despite everyone's resistance to accept the harsh realities of Mr. Hyde's identity, no one could deny the truth in the end. Mr. Hyde is, in fact, Dr. Jekyll's manifestation of suppressed homosexuality, the deep-seated tension that the other characters managed to control.

Stevenson reveals undertones of homosexuality among the characters in the way that he describes the men's friendships and interactions. The novel opens with Mr. Utterson on one of his weekly walks with friend Mr. Enfield. Witnesses of them on the town together claim that the two men rarely speak, jump with "obvious relief" at the sight of a friend, and seem to have nothing in common (6). These observations could be intimations of the men's sexual tension due to their mutually latent homosexuality. There is an awkward air to their friendship, as if they don't want to do anything in public that could accidentally expose their shared secret. The fact that these men, along with all of the other male characters, are bachelors with no apparent interest in women does not help their case.

The novel also contains other instances of suggestive male-male relations. Jekyll addresses his friends as "my dear Utterson" and "my dear Lanyon," when he writes them personal letters (47, 49). In explaining the depth of Jekyll's feelings for Utterson, Stevenson says that he "cherished for Mr Utterson a sincere and warm affection" (19). When Utterson pays

a visit to his old friend Dr. Lanyon, their initial greeting is somewhat exaggerated. As soon as he spots Utterson, Lanyon “[springs] up from his chair and welcome[s] him with both hands,” an act that is called “somewhat theatrical” (12). The two are said to be old friends who both have “thorough” respect for each other and “thoroughly” enjoy one another’s company (12).

Lanyon’s intimate welcome and the strong friendship he has with Utterson may imply a deeper relationship. In his essay “‘The End of History’: Identity and Dissolution in Apocalyptic Gothic”, George Haggerty studies the close connections of males often present in Gothic novels like *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. He describes the “physical and psychological bond” of these men as “emotional and erotic in ways that defy conventional descriptions of male friendship” (226).

The men keep their homosexual tendencies in check by constantly restraining themselves from behavior that may be overly indulgent or undisciplined. Self-imposed repression runs throughout the novel as an integral part of these men’s everyday lives. Stevenson introduces Utterson as a man who is “austere with himself” (5). He avoids the theater for years, despite his enjoyment of it, and postpones his reading of Lanyon’s urgent letter, although he feels “great curiosity” (19). Utterson is reluctant to speak and even more unlikely to smile. He takes pains to mask his emotions and lets his “rugged countenance” speak for itself, maintaining his image as archetypal male (5).

A culture of silence is central to the characters’ repressive lifestyle. Utterson and others are carefully tacit, preferring the torture of quiet to the risk of open speech, even when a pressing issue is at hand. After Enfield first tells the story of his experience with Mr. Hyde, he and Utterson vow never to mention the subject again. Utterson says he is “ashamed” of asking too many questions (10). The men behave as if conversation requires apology, because the very act of speaking to someone is an invasion of privacy. The characters struggle with self-expression,

because they fear exposing too much. As a result of their own anxieties, they practice awkward self-control when they interact with others.

Because of this culture's rigid internalization, Dr. Jekyll's coming out as Mr. Hyde is even more scandalous. Hence, Jekyll exerts great effort to keep his hideous secret to himself. Beyond the conventional privacy that male characters have in the novel, Jekyll creates a number of other personal barriers to separate himself from society and prevent the uncovering of his alter ego. As Jekyll begins to lose control of his identity, he gradually withdraws from the public. Jekyll avoids contact with the outside world, hiding within the refuge of his home and laboratory. When Utterson expresses concern at Jekyll's reclusive behavior, Jekyll responds with a muddled note:

I mean from henceforth to lead a life of extreme seclusion; you must not be surprised, nor must you doubt my friendship, if my door is often shut even to you. You must suffer me to go my own dark way. I have brought on myself a punishment and a danger that I cannot name. If I am the chief of sinners, I am the chief of sufferers also. I could not think that this earth contained a place for sufferings and terrors so unmanning; and you can do but one thing, Utterson, to lighten this destiny, and that is to respect my silence. (33)

A number of themes, relating to the desire for secrecy and the battle against overt homosexuality, prevail in Jekyll's letter. The note evokes images of light and dark. While light represents the public life of a respectable man of society, dark relates to the required covertness of homosexuality. Jekyll's deviances are so horrific that he "cannot name" them. Jekyll's most telling explanation of his troubles is that they are "unmanning," implying that his experiences are somehow emasculating. Jekyll's only wish is that Utterson continue to "respect his silence." To

avoid any chance of revelation, Jekyll will live in a state of decided isolation. He says his door will be “often shut,” which could describe both the literal door of his home and the figurative door to his inner self. Essentially, Jekyll intends to hide in every sense of the word.

Jekyll uses his home as his trusted shield from the outside world, concealing himself in his private laboratory and turning all visitors away at the door. Jekyll’s obsession with seclusion comes to dominate his life. His unhealthy behavior culminates in the “incident at the window,” when Utterson and Enfield spot a dreary-looking Jekyll gazing out of an upstairs window of his home. The very sight of his old friends fills Jekyll with such paralyzing terror that he cannot bear to remain in the window beyond a terse greeting to the men below. Jekyll’s paranoia is indicative of a problem beyond fixing, a fact which grows more and more evident to Utterson and the other characters. His devious actions suggest a secret both shameful and dangerous. As Judith Halberstam puts it: “Jekyll/Hyde’s desire to stay in hiding, his appearance as if masked, announces an essential connection between secrecy and sexuality, conspiracy and perverse activity” (79).

Once Hyde’s identity begins to take over, Jekyll takes his hiding to extremes and indefinitely plants himself within his laboratory. His butler Poole says he is “shut up again in his cabinet,” an ultimate hiding spot. Utterson and Poole must break down the locked door of the laboratory, Jekyll’s last fortification, to expose his secret for what it truly is: the homosexual manifestation of Mr. Hyde. All along, Utterson and his associates had missed the key regarding Jekyll’s mysterious problem; he had not been concealing a singular fault or transgression, but an element of his very identity. The riddle of Jekyll and Hyde had been all the more confusing, because “Utterson assume[d]...that Jekyll [was] hiding a particular behavior or behaviors,

something that [could] be expunged by rewriting history. But Jekyll [knew] that what he [was] dealing with [was] not a behavior as much as a feature of identity” (Haggerty 241).

The decisive unveiling in the laboratory not only exposed Jekyll as Hyde, but also as a homosexual, for Hyde’s descriptions throughout the novel characterize him as such. Characters who have encountered Hyde struggle to explain his appearance. Enfield makes the initial attempt to do so:

He is not easy to describe. There is something downright wrong with his appearance; something displeasing, something downright detestable. I never saw a man I so disliked, and yet I scarce know why. He must be deformed somewhere; he gives a strong feeling of deformity, although I couldn’t specify the point. (10)

Enfield’s words, or strain to find words, illustrate the “disconcerting effect” that Hyde’s appearance has on those who see him (Williams 412). Something about Hyde is unpleasant or inappropriate, but characters cannot seem to identify an exact problem. Williams calls Hyde an “obstacle to expression,” a sort of anomaly to the common people in society (412). Hyde’s indescribable features prevent him from being categorized; he may be called, in fact, nothing more than “other,” a label often associated with homosexuality.

Some of Hyde’s physical characteristics are effeminate, also related to stereotypical descriptions of a homosexual male. Doane and Hodges observe that a few of Hyde’s most prominent traits are “congruent with cultural descriptions of femininity” (69). They note that Hyde is “small in stature, has a quick light step with a swing, and weeps like a woman” (69). When he speaks to Utterson, Hyde behaves with a “mixture of timidity and boldness” (16). His voice is “husky, whispering and somewhat broken” (16). Feminine weakness marks Hyde’s

demeanor. Furthermore, Utterson's description of Hyde's home characterizes Hyde as a tidy housewife. His small dwelling consists of only a couple of rooms "furnished with luxury and good taste" (24). A wine closet, elegant silver, fine art, and aesthetic carpets are defining features; Hyde's place sound more like the home of a woman with an interest in interior decorating than of a violent mystery man.

Besides possessing qualities that are decidedly feminine, Hyde also comes across as rather animal-like. Hyde is "ape-like" with mannerisms strikingly similar to other creatures (22). When Utterson approaches Hyde in the street, Hyde "[shrinks] back with a hissing intake of breath" (14). This image sounds more like an animal caught off guard by a predator in the wild than a man simply startled by another human being. Hyde ends his encounter with Utterson by "snarl[ing] aloud into a savage laugh," the words "snarling" and "savage" again suggesting that Hyde is something other than human. Poole describes Hyde making sounds "like a rat" and moving about "like a monkey" (41, 42). In his closing statement, Jekyll himself refers to Hyde as one who "had long been caged" and "came out roaring" (64).

The implications of Hyde as animal-like are both violent and sexual. Halberstam claims that "the ape-like Hyde combines perversion with a lust for murder, he allies sex with violence, and he produces within his own person a form and shape for deviant sexuality" (80). Hyde is not only Jekyll's manifest homosexuality, but is also representative of a rapacious sexual appetite. Hyde's sexual desire is rampant, because of its long suppression. He satisfies his cravings through late night adventures on the London streets, which may likely entail deviant trysts not to be detailed. The only people that Hyde is known to have encountered are the young girl and old man whom he murders. The relationship between sex and violence is most evident in these two counts of brutal murder. This dynamic can be read in two ways. One interpretation is that Hyde

killed these two people in an effort to eliminate any witnesses of his perverse late night activities. Another view is that Hyde's insatiable sexual appetite frustrates him to act out with violence, the other raw longing of the flesh.

In light of either explanation of Hyde's violence, the two murder scenes employ sexual language. In the first murder, Hyde and the young girl collide into each other "naturally enough," and Hyde kills her by trampling over her small body (7). In this incident, Hyde uses no weapon but his own body. He also leaves her "screaming on the ground" (7). Although this scene is not literally sexual, the union of the two bodies and the girl's screaming give the impression of a sexual encounter ending in orgasm. In the Carew Murder Case, Hyde uses a "heavy cane" to beat his victim (21). He then stomps the man underfoot, until his "body jump[s] upon the roadway" (22). A piece of Hyde's cane remains at the scene of the crime. Once again, the sexual nature of this event is not literal. However, the cane is a rather phallic symbol, and the jumping of the victim's body once more recalls the idea of reaching sexual climax. Finally, a part of Hyde's cane marks the scene, as a man's semen is left behind after a sexual encounter.

In addition to the use of language that is sexually descriptive, the recurring setting of a bed sexualizes Hyde's existence. Utterson is the first to see bedroom images. In his tortured sleep on the night that he began his crusade to reveal Hyde:

He would see a room in a rich house, where his friend (Jekyll) lay asleep, dreaming and smiling at his dreams; and then the door of that room would be opened, the curtains of the bed plucked apart, the sleeper recalled, and lo! There would stand by his side a figure to whom power was given, and even at that dead hour, he would rise and do its bidding. (13)

The bedroom setting is sexual in itself, but more important is Jekyll's zombie-like obedience to his aberrant sexual desires. Jekyll's act of "smiling at his dreams" may suggest dreams of a sexual nature, or at least dreams that give him more pleasure than his restrained lifestyle does. The figure's entrance seems to be outside Jekyll's control. Jekyll is also quick to acquiesce, which show how Hyde's persona begins to dominate.

Jekyll relays the other noteworthy bedroom scene, in which he awakes in the body of Hyde for the first time. As Jekyll comes out of a "comfortable morning doze," the oddly large dimensions of the room and the disturbing appearance of his own hand allow Jekyll to ascertain that he is not himself (61). Haggerty remarks that "the confusion of not knowing where he is upon waking, and the even more pronounced sense that he is not who he thinks he is...all this reads like the account of one finding himself in a strange bed after a night of sexual transgression" (243). Rather than waking up with his partner in misguided sexual behavior, Jekyll wakes up as his other self, Hyde, the perpetrator of the misguided sexual behavior. Haggerty notes how "powerfully attracted" Jekyll is to his other identity, Hyde (243). The fact that Jekyll makes his unintentional transformation in bed and the presence of Hyde's "erotically coded hand" make this scene starkly sexual.

Further incidents of Hyde's newfound autonomy lead Jekyll deeper into the world of clandestine homosexuality, complicating his efforts to keep his double life a secret. In his statement, Jekyll recalls how he "concealed his pleasures," though gripped by "the temptation of a discovery so singular and profound" (55, 57). Jekyll recognizes the immorality of his actions, but claims to feel "something strange in my sensations, something indescribably new and, from its very novelty, incredibly sweet" (57). Jekyll knows his behavior is "undignified" and "monstrous," but he becomes a slave to this "unknown but not an innocent freedom" (60, 57).

Hyde lives a life of unbounded enjoyment, “drinking pleasure with bestial avidity” (60). All of Jekyll’s descriptions relate Hyde’s identity to matters of the flesh, particularly stealthy, deviant sexuality. When Jekyll begins to realize the raging power of Hyde, he makes one last attempt to return to his former life. Jekyll goes back to the “self-denying toils of professional life,” only to discover that he does not have the self-control to stick to the “dryness of a life of study” (64, 59).

Jekyll lacked the unrelenting self-control of Utterson and the other men, forever floundering in dull lives of restraint. The case of Jekyll and Hyde proved that it is impossible to be a member of both worlds; one cannot live the austere life of a respected man by day and the forbidden life of a rampant homosexual at night. Jekyll succeeded in preserving the confidentiality of his double life for some time, but eventually Hyde became too powerful to control. In the end, Hyde had to be destroyed, and, rid of the homosexual threat, London society returned to quaint suppression.

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