



2012

Reputation and Social Perfection: The Social Creation of Mr. Hyde

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Recommended Citation

Mack, Valerie '16, "Reputation and Social Perfection: The Social Creation of Mr. Hyde" (2012). *Outstanding Gateway Papers*. 2.

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Abstract of Reputation and Social Perfection: the Social Creation of Mr. Hyde

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This essay works to explain and generalize the values of the Victorian era and their suppressive quality, and then to apply this knowledge specifically to Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. It argues that Victorian values were harmful to the people they governed and forced Victorians to choose between the parts of themselves that would lead to success, like measured behavior, and those that contain basic human desires, such as sexual desires. Respectability and reputation, as well as the need for the appearance of social perfection, suppressed unwanted aspects of human nature.

The essay first describes the qualities of the Victorian values in question, then focuses on the specific effects they had on Dr. Jekyll. After describing the behaviors encouraged by these societal values and addressing the fragmented nature of Dr. Jekyll, it explains the behaviors of certain characters as well as the overall effect this has on Dr. Jekyll.

Arguing that it is specifically Victorian England that created such a man, the essay concludes that another setting or different values within Victorian England may not have caused the separation of one man into two parts that is seen with Dr. Jekyll. It also asserts that Stevenson warns that total separation of one person is not possible and trying to divide oneself causes more harm to the person than the negative characteristics would have.

Reputation and Social Perfection: the Social Creation of Mr. Hyde

The Victorian era was famed for its outstanding morals and social customs, and was often seen as being a period of peace and perfection for England. England's poster city, London, was said to be the pinnacle of excellence and a place of prosperity, where people behaved within the boundaries of the highest moral standards. In London, foreigners could see how wonderful it was to be a Victorian Englishman, and experience it in all its grandeur. Unfortunately, this perfection was a façade and often hid the reality of life in Victorian England, and "failed to take account of the realities of human nature."¹ The social code ignored and even shunned natural and essential components of people's personalities, even if they weren't harmful or violent. Because of this, undesirable aspects of people's personalities became suppressed and disreputable parts of the society they lived in were hidden. In *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), Robert Louis Stevenson uses Mr. Hyde to show that Victorian people and society are imperfect and have dualities that Victorian values deny, ultimately leading to the destruction of the repressed person or society.

During the Victorian era, the importance of being highly regarded by one's peers stemmed from attitudes associated with the word "respectable." To be respectable meant that one valued the ideas of "sobriety, thrift, cleanliness of person, [...] honesty, [...] and chastity."² The word spoke to the character of a person as well as to their status in the social and business world. These ideas left very little

¹ Altick, 177.

² Altick, 175.

room for any form of expression of desires because people could not do recreational things like go to a tavern or express physical attraction. Social morality was also associated with this idea, with “the essence of that morality [...] summed up in the single word ‘respectability’.”³ The label came not only with the guarantee that a person’s peers thought highly of him or her, but also with the certainty that this was a good, honest, and moral person—labels that every upper-class person was expected to hold. Because reputation meant so much in this time, it was important to maintain respectability and keep up appearances. As a result of this, people were reluctant to associate with someone of lower status, which consequently lowered this person’s credibility even further.

In his revealing tale, Stevenson portrays Utterson as an unusual character. He is strange in his acceptance of people during, and even after, their fall from respectability. As an upper-class and respectable lawyer, he often is the “last reputable acquaintance” and “last good influence” for these people (7).⁴ His odd or extraordinary behavior shows how people in Victorian London based their values on the idea of respectability. This trait is considered necessary to be an upstanding and moral person. Utterson’s choice to follow the values of the day strictly was not one he forced upon other people, but because he followed the rules he was seen as kind for his acceptance of fallen people, not disreputable.

³ Altick, 174

⁴ Stevenson, Robert Louis. *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Ed. Katherine Linehan. New York: Norton, 2003. Print. Page numbers of all subsequent references to this work will appear in parentheses following the quote.

Reputation, though, could be easily shattered by any wrongdoing that might change the perception of the person; Utterson ran considerable risk in associating with people of lower respectability. Additionally, respectable people with something to hide were sometimes blackmailed by people who knew their disreputable secrets. Often, lower-class people who knew of a reputable person's unacceptable deeds would hold this secret against them for money or favors. These bribes were generally granted in order for the respectable person's secrets to remain undisclosed.

The need for the appearance of social perfection often caused people to cover up the things that would not have been deemed acceptable in society. Accordingly, people would go to any length to appease someone who was blackmailing them. Covering up unpleasant aspects of society included ignoring scandalous situations, avoiding public acknowledgment of disreputable sections of London, and avoiding conversations that delved below superficial topics. For instance, an upstanding Victorian would not speak of the sexual affair their neighbor was having nor would they make a trip to a tavern public knowledge. There was a general dislike for unpleasant topics, such as human fault or any personal subject that granted a glimpse into the undesirable parts of human nature. Arising from this dislike came the abhorrence of prying. To someone who does not wish to speak of these unacceptable topics, being asked about them would be uncomfortable and appear rude. Mr. Enfield, Utterson's upstanding relation, takes offense when Utterson asks about his encounter with Hyde. This event is not one that is welcomed in Victorian society because it shows a side of society that is undesirable, so Enfield is very

unwilling to divulge details about it. Uncovering the details of unacceptable circumstances pointed out the flaws in another person or situation by exposing one's flaws and making them a point of conversation; Victorian people tended to believe that what could not be seen and was not spoken of did not exist. Therefore, Enfield's dislike of questions shows how bad situations were simply ignored in order to maintain the façade of social perfection.

The term "moral insanity"⁵ was used to describe someone respectable who committed some unacceptable act. This insanity allowed for occasional infractions against the social code without permanent blame; moral insanity could be strategically used as a scapegoat. A respectable person could make a smooth reentry into upper-class society after a lapse in respectable behavior once they recovered from this mental disease—no one would question this diagnosis or speak of it after they were recovered, of course. Morally insane people were thought to have a medical condition that prevented them from seeing the wrongness of their actions. Therefore, upper-class Victorians occasionally had an acceptable excuse for their behavior if some secret, immoral act became publically known. The mere existence of this supposed disorder speaks to the ideals of the time. If one committed a small infraction of the social code, they would no doubt wish to retain their upstanding position in society, and moral insanity could be used to do this.

Critiquing the values of the time, Stevenson created characters in *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* that have a distinct distaste for any subjects that would involve them with the unpleasant aspects of the world, as well as creating

⁵ Rosner 28.

Utterson, who seeks out this information to contrast these other characters. Mr. Enfield, “the well-known man about town” (8) has a particularly blunt view on questioning strange events, stating “the more it looks like Queer Street, the less I ask” (11). In other words, should something look like a troubled situation, Enfield stays as far away from it as he can in order to avoid association with it. His good reputation is something he prides himself on and he will not do anything that could possibly damage it. Instead of finding a way to help a person who is in trouble, as Utterson does, Enfield prefers to not even know of the circumstances. While Utterson is curious about the odd circumstances surrounding Dr. Jekyll, Enfield prefers to not speak of it. This contrast between Utterson and Enfield serves to critique the idea that it is better to ignore such situations, because Utterson may have been able to help Jekyll if he had been able to uncover the situation sooner. Similarly, Lanyon finds himself incapable of describing the events that he witnesses and hears of from Dr. Jekyll. Although this may be partially out of horror, he clearly is unwilling to speak of it because he would be retelling a story of “moral turpitude,” which is something he absolutely does not want to be associated with (47).

Because of the risks of being affiliated with a potentially scandalous situation, it is desirable for Enfield and Lanyon to hide and ignore occurrences that don't conform to societal values. Ideas of social decency prevent them from becoming involved or from exposing the situation. Their actions become barriers to the truth and, in Lanyon's case, delay the discovery of Dr. Jekyll's secret. If he were willing to tell Utterson what he had seen, Utterson would have had the ability to seek out Jekyll immediately. Utterson would have also had the knowledge he needed to

approach the situation with caution and help set it right—and possibly save Jekyll from death. Both Enfield and Lanyon hinder the discovery of Jekyll's situation in order to avoid improper or difficult subjects.

In addition to covering up undesirable qualities pertaining to people, places were often cleansed of any negative appearances. London was supposed to be the hub of Victorian England, an upstanding place full of modern, respectable people. High-class people were no longer able to go places that they used to go to because standards had changed and some recreational activities encouraged behaviors that, in the Victorian era, were off-limits; respectable men and women could not be seen in low class areas or places like taverns and brothels because they weren't supposed to drink, gamble, or acknowledge sexual desires. As with any city there was an "underworld" with which "crime [was] obviously associated,"⁶ which was incompatible with fashionable London. Although these places were the grounds of the disreputable, they were visited by the respectable upper class in secret. In an attempt to hide these visits and to keep up appearances, Victorian people tried to pretend these places did not exist. Due to the nature of Victorian values, once frequented places like taverns were supposed to be "off limits to respectable bourgeois men."⁷ In order to make London seem like a perfect city, it was necessary to ignore the disagreeable sections of London and hide the details of city crime from bourgeois people and foreigners.

Although Victorian London was supposed to be a socially perfect place, it can be seen in this story that there are certain places that are darkened and unfavorable.

⁶ Sigsworth, 22.

⁷ Tosh, 125.

Stevenson fashioned a depiction of London that imitates the imperfections of humans and their dualities by connecting these unfavorable places with the more stylish sections of the city. There are locations, such as Hyde's apartment in SoHo, that are "squalid" but very near to "fashionable" London (16 n. 7). Even though the people of Victorian society would prefer for these places to be hidden, they are nonetheless closely situated to the popular areas; therefore, the two sides of London cannot be easily separated, nor can the bad be fully concealed from view. As with social situations and people, anything disreputable, like crime or even simply personal desires, is concealed to create a more perfect image. This concealment of both situations and places allows the truly bad in society to continue because all effort is focused on hiding it rather than changing it. Rather than acknowledge the existence of lower-status areas and work on improving them, the Victorian bourgeois chose to leave them alone.

The mimicry of human nature continues in the contrast between Dr. Jekyll's house and the lab with which it is associated. Even though the two locations are physically connected in one building, the dual nature of the whole can be seen. Whereas the lab is "sinister" and shows signs of extreme "negligence" (8), the upscale house has an "air of wealth and comfort" (18). This single structure contains two entirely separate qualities, much as a person may have two or more separate personas. Because the physical connection between the house and the lab cannot be seen from either side and the two differ so greatly in appearance, the lab is not associated with the house. Additionally, the two sides of the building face different streets, so it is easy for their association to be overlooked. The separation allows the

morally questionable science to continue because Jekyll disassociates himself from it. The lab, and therefore the science, has become the domain of Hyde. He very rarely enters the house itself, preferring the dark and menacing lab. Just as the lab is largely ignored by passersby, Victorian people try to ignore Hyde's actions and character traits because they go against their social beliefs.

The house, quite distinct from the lab, is an embodiment of Dr. Jekyll. Whereas the lab and Hyde repulse people, both Jekyll and his home have a feeling of warmth that draws people in. That Jekyll spends much of his time in the seemingly disreputable lab mimics the frequent visits of the upper class to low-class areas. This extreme separation, though it seems to allow both sides a happy amount of freedom, is what ultimately condemns Jekyll to lose control over his situation. Because he becomes so far separated from Hyde, Jekyll is no longer able to control his other half. Stevenson critiques the Victorian practice of selecting only those qualities in people and places that are deemed respectable and repressing all others, because it divides one person into two separate personalities.

This duality, wherein a person contains good and bad qualities, was frowned upon in Victorian England. People expected others to adhere to the societal standards and help contribute to social perfection; in order to keep up appearances, many people had to hide distasteful aspects of their personalities until they suppressed their basic human nature. Despite the façade Victorian people put on, people are not perfect beings with only positive aspects to their personalities. The extreme concern for preserving reputation led to deceit and concealment of people's personalities and unpleasant situations. Dr. Jekyll feels he cannot expose all of his

desires, and he tries at first to hide them and then to express them in the form of Hyde. Jekyll's contribution to what was seen as societal good (by repressing his desires) led to more harm than it prevented in the creation of Hyde. Enfield is simply unwilling to reveal his encounter with Mr. Hyde to Utterson, but this unwillingness to talk about Hyde does not stop his existence or his misdeeds. Even Utterson makes the decision to keep secret a letter from Jekyll in an attempt to "save his credit" by not revealing his association with Hyde (41). The importance of appearing respectable and reputable is so great that Utterson— who cares more about his friend's reputation than his own—wishes to keep facts about Jekyll's situation to himself in order to help Jekyll seem socially moral rather than use it to understand the situation.

This dishonesty does not only effect the telling of events, though. Jekyll was forced to conceal parts of his identity until he was able to release them through Hyde. He hid his "pleasures" with a considerable amount of "shame" because they would not be deemed acceptable by society (48). Dr. Jekyll is not a bad man; he simply was forced to hide parts of himself until he had a "dramatic transformation typical of the morally insane."⁸ The suppression of his darker desires condemns them to grow and distort into much more vile needs, eventually giving rise to Hyde. The values imposed upon people in the Victorian era were "self-satisfying," in that they allowed a person to climb the social ladder and find success, but also "self-denying" in that they did not allow expression of the true self if one wanted to be

⁸ Rosner, 6

accepted within the higher class.⁹ Dr. Jekyll's pursuit of only one side of his personality leads to this suppression because he denies himself the release of his desires in order to become the upstanding doctor that he is. Hyde, who appears to be "violent" and "vile," displays the qualities that exist in smaller, less extreme amounts within Jekyll before he hides them away (28).

Since Victorian morals denied the duality of human nature, Dr. Jekyll is forced to hide his dualities. When he becomes Mr. Hyde, he essentially puts on a mask that allows him to act upon the desires that have been buried within him; Hyde becomes Jekyll's release. Jekyll asserts that while many men use assassins as a "shelter" for their reputations, he is able to become his own assassin and fulfill his own wishes without exposing himself to ridicule (52). When he is Hyde, Jekyll can act upon the dark and unacceptable parts of himself that he must usually hide in order to be a part of upstanding society. Because he does not have to fear for his reputation, Jekyll can express his suppressed personality as Hyde. The values of the Victorian era forced Dr. Jekyll to put on this mask in order to fully express his personality.

Jekyll felt an "inescapable sense of division" that caused him to seek out a separation of his two selves.¹⁰ This idea that he could physically fragment himself drives his amoral scientific actions, and creates Hyde. This separation made manifest the "ever present but submerged" second half of Henry Jekyll that he tried so desperately to hide.¹¹ In Hyde, we see a direct violation of Victorian norms that,

⁹ Altick, 177.

¹⁰ Saposnik 716.

¹¹ Saposnik 717.

in small amounts in one person, would be otherwise largely harmless. The concentration of Jekyll's unacceptable desires in one separate being left him half of a man and ultimately led to his ruin, because Jekyll without Hyde is not truly Jekyll; he is a physical manifestation of one side of Jekyll, therefore Hyde is a piece of Jekyll. This tale demonstrates that all people must live with their many selves in peace, as difficult as that may be. The Victorian values Dr. Jekyll commits himself to prevent this coexistence and forces him to attempt to suppress his own personality. He falsely believes that he can remove Hyde from himself, but without Hyde, Jekyll cannot exist. This is the reason Hyde is so feared by Victorians; he is a necessary piece of any person's psyche, but it is the piece they try to hide.

Victorian values left no acceptable outlet for the undesirable feelings that people had; Victorian people were unable to talk about personal problems or their physical attraction to another person. While it is normal for a person to have dualities within their personality, or desires or urges that are incompatible with their position in society, having no way to release these feelings can cause them to multiply and become more extreme, just as sexual desire may become sexual violence when it is suppressed in order to fulfill social standards. *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* illustrates one of the most famous and important dualities because of the clear line between the two sides of one man. Because he cannot endure the suppression, Jekyll is forced into secretive behaviors that quickly escalate beyond his control. Appearing respectable in the Victorian era was the only way to have the good standing in society that he desired, so he chose to express only the parts of himself that were deemed acceptable. Although he may have been able

to safely reveal his full personality in another place or time, living in the Victorian age forces him to lead his double life, and causes the destruction of Dr. Jekyll and the creation of Mr. Hyde.

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The assignment:

Paper

You will write one long research paper for this course. Topics will be handed out on the first day of class. These are broad to allow you room to develop your own ideas about your topic and to take your paper in the direction you feel you'd like to go. The purpose of the paper is to introduce you to academic research methods which culminate in the production of a well-written research paper of typical length; but you will also gain specific insight into the world of Gothic fiction with this assignment.