



2015

The False Idea of Human Nature's Duality in *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*

Megan Sperger '18

Illinois Wesleyan University, msperger@iwu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/gateway>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Rhetoric and Composition Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sperger, Megan '18, "The False Idea of Human Nature's Duality in *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*" (2015). *Outstanding Gateway Papers*. 8.
<https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/gateway/8>

This Article is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Commons @ IWU with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this material in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/ or on the work itself. This material has been accepted for inclusion by faculty at Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@iwu.edu.

©Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

The False Idea of Human Nature's Duality in *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. The mention of these two people will evoke a specific thought in most people's minds: good and evil; light and dark; normal and deformed. However, the truth isn't nearly so simple. Humans are free, and therefore a mixture of good and evil; accordingly, both Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde are neither solely good nor evil. Due to the stifling sexual and social repression in Victorian society, Jekyll became convinced that he could somehow purge himself of the evil inside him by splitting his soul; this, however, had far graver consequences than he suspected. Due to his experiment, Jekyll caused a tragic amount of human suffering and even death, culminating in his own complete destruction. What he failed to understand and what I propose in this paper is that human nature can never be truly dual; all parts of a human's soul are intrinsically tied to each other, and attempts to split them result in psychological catastrophe.

To begin, one must examine the ideas of good and evil. The general populace would likely define evil as something morally bad, while good as something 'right,' or proper. Philosopher Lars Svendsen argues that evil can be seen as a theoretical concept, but it is better viewed as a practical problem.¹ For him, the larger issue is how to prevent evil rather than analyzing it and how it came about. Daryl Koehn chooses to look at evil with what she calls the "way of wisdom," saying that while the moralistic approach is generally used the most, it doesn't help us to understand evil.² Further, she argues that although vice and violence are viewed as evil through a moralistic lens, they are not in themselves evil:

¹ Svendsen, Lars. *A Philosophy of Evil*. Tran. Kerri A. Pierce. Oslo, Norway: Universitetsforlaget, 2001. Print. 29.

² Koehn, Daryl. *The Nature of Evil*. New York, N.Y.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. Print. 2.

These are merely symptoms of what the wisdom tradition insists is the true evil—human suffering caused by our lack of self-knowledge. We mistakenly identify the self with something it is not. The resulting false identity is not stable, and we are left at the mercy of external forces...Our lack of self-knowledge locks us into unsatisfying, quasi-mechanical patterns of behavior.

Although Svendsen's approach—an attempt to prevent evil—is admirable, it isn't as applicable to *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, the events having already occurred. For the purpose of this paper, I will largely follow Koehn's perspective: that evil is distress caused by a lack of knowing oneself. One will see in a short while that Koehn's idea is extremely relevant to the story of Jekyll and Hyde.

Something that greatly influences our view of evil in *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* is society's attitude towards evil. The Victorian era teemed with hypocrisy and repression. Peter Gay elaborates further:

...education...was often sabotaged, and sometimes doomed, by the obstructions that respectable nineteenth-century society deliberately placed in its way. Influential spokesmen for that society were intent on imposing postures of ignorance on its young. Many physicians, clergymen, and teachers, with the physicians setting the style, closed their eyes to the sexual facts about them and invented, or exaggerated, threats to physical and mental health attendant on sexual indulgence, threats that confused and frightened the public they had been trained to serve.³

Growing up, children knew nothing of sexuality, and what they did know from stolen glimpses and gossip was often misinformed. Sexual impulses were tucked away, unspoken and looked down upon. It wasn't just sexuality that was impacted; any sort of self-expression that didn't fit the constrictive mold of society was frowned upon. Children should not speak unless spoken to; they should be quiet and respectful, well-behaved, and properly dressed at all times. Jekyll says multiple times that he didn't dare to show the happy, exuberant side of himself outside his home, lest it interfere with his public standing. This amalgamation of years of repressed impulses created many psychological problems for him. In a way, Hyde represents the Jekyll of his

³ Gay, Peter. *Education of the Senses*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 1984. Print. 280.

childhood. Due to so many years denying his impulses, Jekyll's inner child is far from emotionally mature, and that translates over to Hyde's disposition. Just like a spoiled child, Hyde is intent on getting exactly what he wants.⁴ Many of Hyde's actions also hint at childlike behavior. For example, when Hyde begins to sense how unwanted he is by Jekyll, he becomes angry and tries to upset his father figure by "scrawling in my own hand blasphemies on the pages of my books, burning the letters and destroying the portrait of my father..."⁵ But instead of dealing with his repressions in a sensible manner, instead of trying to educate his wild, passionate inner child, Jekyll splits him into an entirely new person and gives him complete freedom to do as he wishes. Hyde, unleashed for the first time, is essentially a gleeful child let out of his Victorian prison. Is it any wonder that he disregards morality and gives into any 'sinful' craving he may have?

This idea of Hyde as a child gives pause to the typical argument that Jekyll is good and Hyde is evil. Can an uneducated child be evil? Indeed, what does Hyde do that makes us view him as 'better' than Jekyll? The first time Jekyll transforms into Hyde, he says that "there was something strange in my sensations, something indescribably new and from its very novelty, incredibly sweet. I felt younger, lighter, happier in body."⁶ This certainly sounds more like the attributes of a child than a wizened, evil little man. Indeed, for the first several years of his existence, Hyde does nothing of major harm to anyone. He roams around committing petty crimes that a selfish child would indulge in, exercising his previously unused muscles and exulting in his freedom in a way that is (for the most part) harmless.

⁴ Koehn, Daryl. *The Nature of Evil*. New York, N.Y.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. Print. 97.

⁵ Stevenson, Robert Louis. *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts, Performance Adaptations, Criticism*. Ed. Katherine Linehan. First Edition ed. New York, N.Y.: W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2003. Print. 61.

⁶ Stevenson, Robert Louis. *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts, Performance Adaptations, Criticism*. Ed. Katherine Linehan. First Edition ed. New York, N.Y.: W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2003. Print. 50.

However, in his confession, Jekyll proclaims “I knew myself, at the first breath of this new life, to be more wicked, tenfold more wicked, sold a slave to my original evil.”⁷ Is this statement rooted in Jekyll’s faulty ideas born of repression, or is it true? From what I have concluded about Victorian society, it is a natural assumption that such repression could possibly lead to an identity crisis. When society is dictating a person’s entire life and a person is not allowed to truly pursue what they want or indulge in the slightest manner, it seems to follow that they will store up lots of internal conflict and guilt. This is almost certainly what happened to Jekyll. Here one can reference back to the quote by Daryl Koehn speaking about a lack of self-knowledge causing human suffering. Jekyll’s lack of self-knowledge due to growing up in the stifling Victorian era did indeed cause human suffering; Jekyll both suffered and caused much suffering through Hyde’s actions. From this, one can conclude that Jekyll is misguided in his confession. He was not originally evil: he was programmed from childhood in such a way that he grew up not knowing who he truly was, and this was what caused the evil, not his own self.

Other characters, too, are surprised by the realization that Hyde is not completely evil and savage. Dr. Lanyon, a friend of Utterson and Jekyll, made remarks that shed some more light on what Hyde truly is. He described meeting Hyde in his last letter to Utterson: “...there was something abnormal and misbegotten in the very essence of the creature that now faced me—something seizing, surprising and revolting...”⁸ He additionally stated that he harbored a “disgustful curiosity” towards the man. Lanyon was sickened but fascinated by Hyde and his freedom from the restrictions of society that everyone else bore. As an upstanding man,

⁷ Stevenson, Robert Louis. *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts, Performance Adaptations, Criticism*. Ed. Katherine Linehan. First Edition ed. New York, N.Y.: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2003. Print. 50.

⁸ Stevenson, Robert Louis. *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts, Performance Adaptations, Criticism*. Ed. Katherine Linehan. First Edition ed. New York, N.Y.: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2003. Print. 45.

similarly to Jekyll, Lanyon suffered from emotional repression, and seeing it manifested in Hyde was enticing.

Enfield's statement shows that both he and the doctor despised Hyde after the incident with a child: "I had taken a loathing to the gentleman at first sight...every time he [the doctor] looked at my prisoner, I saw that Sawbone turn sick and white with the desire to kill him. I knew what was in his mind, just as he knew what was in mine..."⁹ When speaking to himself, Utterson reflects that if he had ever seen Satan's signature on the face of a human, it was on Hyde's.¹⁰ When going to visit Hyde, Utterson even notes that his maid has a face that he perceives as evil.¹¹ So after assuming that Hyde is brutish and base, the lawyer is quite surprised when he bursts into Jekyll's apartment and finds

...the cabinet...in the quiet lamplight, a good fire glowing and chattering on the hearth, the kettle singing its thin strain, a drawer or two open, papers neatly set forth on the business table, and nearer the fire, the things laid out for tea: the quietest room, you would have said, and, but for the glazed presses full of chemicals, the most commonplace that night in London.¹²

Hyde's apartment is clean and organized and respectable, the complete opposite of what Utterson expected. In fact, Hyde is not the one who causes destruction in this scenario; Poole, Jekyll's servant, and Utterson break the door in with blunt force using an axe. It is interesting in this novella that the murderer is the one who disposes of himself in a quiet, discreet way while the protagonist causes violence. By causing the 'good guy,' Utterson, to commit an act of

⁹ Stevenson, Robert Louis. *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts, Performance Adaptations, Criticism*. Ed. Katherine Linehan. First Edition ed. New York, N.Y.: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2003. Print. 9.

¹⁰ Stevenson, Robert Louis. *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts, Performance Adaptations, Criticism*. Ed. Katherine Linehan. First Edition ed. New York, N.Y.: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2003. Print. 17.

¹¹ Stevenson, Robert Louis. *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts, Performance Adaptations, Criticism*. Ed. Katherine Linehan. First Edition ed. New York, N.Y.: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2003. Print. 23.

¹² Stevenson, Robert Louis. *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts, Performance Adaptations, Criticism*. Ed. Katherine Linehan. First Edition ed. New York, N.Y.: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2003. Print. 39.

violence—something typically viewed as bad—Stevenson is furthering the idea that people cannot be strictly good or strictly evil.

Indeed, there can be no beating around the bush: Hyde, put quite simply, lacks duality. He is prone to violent and destructive impulses that he often acts upon, but he is far from being the savage brute that the other characters call him; brutes don't have tasteful apartments. In truth Hyde, though a part of Jekyll, is just like any human in that he is a mixture of good and bad. Lars Svendsen points out that "...we're free. This is why we cannot be unambiguously good or evil... We're good and evil not simply because we sometimes choose good and other times evil, but because both are essential components of our nature."¹³ It simply wasn't possible for Hyde to be solely good or solely evil. As a human—albeit a manifestation of Jekyll's year-old repressions—Hyde cannot possess dual nature.

There is another relationship in the story that gives us a bit more insight on Jekyll and Hyde's connection. It closely parallels that of the titular characters: Mr. Utterson and Mr. Enfield. They are the very first characters that are introduced in the story, and one soon finds out they are very different from each other. Utterson is a studious lawyer of serious countenance, well respected and admired in the community. Very much like Jekyll, Utterson suffers from life-long repression and the stress of striving to be a model Victorian citizen: he is austere, very careful with his words and behavior, and hasn't gone to the theater (though he enjoys it) in twenty years. Any remaining doubt about his repressed emotional state is put to rest when one reads how he wondered "almost with envy" at other people's indulgences.¹⁴ Enfield, on the other hand, has no such qualms about always being a perfect, respectable citizen. He is a "well-

¹³ Svendsen, Lars. *A Philosophy of Evil*. Tran. Kerri A. Pierce. Oslo, Norway: Universitetsforlaget, 2001. Print. 82.

¹⁴ Stevenson, Robert Louis. *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts, Performance Adaptations, Criticism*. Ed. Katherine Linehan. First Edition ed. New York, N.Y.: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2003. Print. 7.

known man about town,” who admits himself to Utterson that he was “coming home from some place at the end of the world, about three o’clock on a black winter morning,”¹⁵ when he spotted Hyde for the first time. Skulking back home from a suspicious place in the dead of night is not something that a respectable, upstanding citizen like Utterson would ever be caught doing. But despite their extreme differences, the two consider their Sunday walks to be one of the most cherished times of their week. The novella reads:

It was reported by those who encountered them in their Sunday walks, that they said nothing, looked singularly dull, and would hail with obvious relief the appearance of a friend. For all that, the two men put the greatest store by these excursions, counted them the chief jewel of each week, and not only set aside occasions, of pleasure, but even resisted the calls of business, that they might enjoy them uninterrupted.¹⁶

Why were their reportedly boring walks so important to these familiar-sounding characters? As a well respected but emotionally stifled man and his somewhat shady counterpart, Utterson and Enfield have a relationship nearly parallel to that of Jekyll and Hyde. Separately, they are incomplete; Utterson controls and smothers his true self, and Enfield indulges in worldly pleasures to an unhealthy extent. Enfield shares gossip stories (such as the one of the trampled child) with his friend, who listens to them eagerly. One could say that Utterson lives vicariously through his friend, very much like Jekyll lives out his fantasies through Hyde. Therefore, it is apparent that “Only when Utterson sets aside his professional duties and Enfield resists indulging his pleasures do they come together to form something like a whole human being.”¹⁷ This idea illuminates Enfield and Utterson’s relationship very much. They cannot live without the other,

¹⁵ Stevenson, Robert Louis. *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts, Performance Adaptations, Criticism*. Ed. Katherine Linehan. First Edition ed. New York, N.Y.: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2003. Print. 9.

¹⁶ Stevenson, Robert Louis. *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts, Performance Adaptations, Criticism*. Ed. Katherine Linehan. First Edition ed. New York, N.Y.: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2003. Print. 8.

¹⁷ Koehn, Daryl. *The Nature of Evil*. New York, N.Y.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. Print. 101.

and their time together is so incredibly important that they turned down festivities and business affairs, something very important to an upstanding Victorian citizen, just to spend time together.

From this, one can see that Stevenson has chosen to introduce us to the idea of an unhealthily balanced human relationship before one even hears mention of the names Jekyll and Hyde. Utterson and Enfield, just like Jekyll and Hyde, can never have a truly healthy relationship. Until Utterson is able to face his inner desires without automatically shutting them down, he can never truly be a whole person; similarly, until Enfield learns self-control and stops relying on Utterson to boost his reputation, he will not grow out of his immature behaviors and become a productive member of society. They rely on the other and are stunted in their personal growth

Utterson and Enfield's connection makes it all the more clear why the men they resemble fell prey to a messy end. Before I examine the reason for Jekyll and Hyde's downfall, it is pertinent to observe Jekyll's beliefs about the duality of human nature. He was a firm believer that human beings could be split evenly down the middle, as expressed at the beginning of his confessional letter:

...I learned to recognize the thorough and primitive duality of man; I saw that, of the two natures that contended in the field of my consciousness, even if I could rightly be said to be either, it was only because I was radically both...If each, I told myself, could but be housed in separate identities, life would be relieved of all that was unbearable; the unjust might go his way, delivered from the aspirations and remorse of his more upright twin; and the just could walk steadfastly and securely on his upward path, doing the good things in which he found his pleasure, and no longer exposed to disgrace and penitence by the hands of this extraneous evil.¹⁸

As one reading the novella knows, Jekyll was sadly mistaken; this belief led to his demise. For a few brief months Hyde, the 'unjust,' did indeed go his way in the middle of the

¹⁸ Stevenson, Robert Louis. *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts, Performance Adaptations, Criticism*. Ed. Katherine Linehan. First Edition ed. New York, N.Y.: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2003. Print. 49.

night, while Jekyll walked ‘steadfastly and securely’ during the day. However, Jekyll, believing that Hyde was his evil half, did not know that Hyde was in fact his repressed inner child. As Hyde ‘grew up’ and became stronger, living out all of Jekyll’s repressed desires from the past, he began to overtake Jekyll without his permission. Jekyll began to try even harder to push him away, but this only served to fuel Hyde’s rampages. Having tasted freedom, his inner self refused to be smothered.

This leads us to the realization that the duality of human nature simply isn’t possible. If Jekyll’s theory of human duality was correct, there would not have been any complications in the novella. Jekyll would have split from Hyde without a fuss and would have been in full control of whether he wanted to transform or not. Jekyll would have been purely good, and Hyde would have been purely evil. However, Jekyll continued to struggle with temptation and morally ‘bad’ desires to do sinful activities, while Hyde proved himself to be more complex and sophisticated than a completely evil beast. This shows us that human nature is simply too multifaceted to be divided into two stark categories of ‘good’ and ‘evil,’ and furthermore, the attempt to split the soul results in psychological catastrophe. Jekyll’s repressions, once divided from his original self, could not be contained; they exploded out of control and began to terrorize him and control his entire life. Consequently, Jekyll was consumed with a poisonous cocktail of fear, guilt, and the overwhelmingly powerful urge to change into Hyde and indulge again and again—which, of course, he fell susceptible to, continuing the vicious cycle of remorse, abstinence, temptation, and transformation. “...I began to be tortured with throes and longings, as of Hyde struggling

after freedom; and at last, in an hour of moral weakness, I once again compounded and swallowed the transforming drought.”¹⁹

He explained his abject terror in his last letter to Utterson:

At all hours of the day and night, I would be taken with the premonitory shudder; above all, if I slept, or even dozed for a moment in my chair, it was always as Hyde that I awakened. Under the strain of this continually impending doom and by the sleeplessness to which I now condemned myself, ay, even beyond what I had thought possible to man, I became, in my own person, a creature eaten up and emptied by fever, languidly weak both in body and mind, and solely occupied by one thought: the horror of my other self.²⁰

Jekyll’s past repressions, once split from him and left to roam freely, completely took over and began to destroy him. The disastrous consequences of Hyde’s physical existence (the murder, Jekyll’s downfall and death) prove that splitting your soul into good and evil portions cannot be done without a price. Had Jekyll never attempted to split his soul, the so-called monstrous Hyde would never have been created or overtaken him; had he faced his demons, he would have lived. However, one can conclude that the blame does not fall squarely on Jekyll’s shoulders. Koehn enlightened us before with the thought that the true evil is human suffering caused by not truly knowing oneself.²¹ Thus, it seems that Victorian society itself was partially to blame for the evil that occurs in *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Success and good social standing in the Victorian era required immense repression, which subsequently caused an enormous lack of self-knowledge in people such as Jekyll. The doctor was simply a product of the society he grew up in. As it is, Jekyll completely failed to grasp that human nature simply cannot be split. It is not dual; good and evil are thorny concepts that twist and inextricably

¹⁹ Stevenson, Robert Louis. *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts, Performance Adaptations, Criticism*. Ed. Katherine Linehan. First Edition ed. New York, N.Y.: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2003. Print. 56.

²⁰ Stevenson, Robert Louis. *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts, Performance Adaptations, Criticism*. Ed. Katherine Linehan. First Edition ed. New York, N.Y.: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2003. Print. 60.

²¹ Koehn, Daryl. *The Nature of Evil*. New York, N.Y.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. Print. 2.

intertwine, and his self-attempted splicing of his soul was the true cause of Dr. Jekyll's ultimate destruction.

Works Cited

Gay, Peter. *Education of the Senses*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 1984. Print.

Koehn, Daryl. *The Nature of Evil*. New York, N.Y.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. Print.

Stevenson, Robert Louis. *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts, Performance Adaptations, Criticism*. Ed. Katherine Linehan. First Edition ed. New York, N.Y.: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2003. Print.

Svendsen, Lars. *A Philosophy of Evil*. Tran. Kerri A. Pierce. Oslo, Norway: Universitetsforlaget, 2001. Print.