

Hyde the Sinful: Religion and Abjection in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*

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The duality of man presented in Robert Louis Stevenson's novella *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* is without a doubt what it is most notorious for. Its universality combined with the mainly unspecified sins that Hyde indulges in means that it lends itself well to a wide variety of interpretations, like readings drawing on queer theory, psychoanalysis, or philosophy, just to name a few (Lutz xxi). However, considering that religion was arguably the “dominant issue” of the Victorian era, there is little literary criticism in this area (Mason). Most of the interpretations that focus on this aspect were made by preachers in the late 19th century who claimed it was a Christian cautionary tale about the disastrous outcome of indulging in sin (Lutz xiv). The novella has clearly been influenced by Christian beliefs, as it is awash with biblical references (Kreitzer 130-33). The duality that lies at its core is a deeply Christian one, that, as I will argue, is challenged in the novella. I will do this by drawing upon Kristeva's theory of the abject and analyzing how this Christian dichotomy is presented in the text.

As Larry Kreitzer has argued, the duality presented in the novella bears a striking resemblance to one from the Bible (127). In “Epistle to the Galatians,” Paul presents this division: “This I say then, Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other” (Gal. 5.16-17). This outlines a separation of vice and virtue essential to Christianity as well as the constant struggle between these two forces in any given individual. Paul also lists the characteristics of each concept, assigning, among other things, love, goodness, meekness, and temperance to the spirit and wrath, fornication, envy, and murder to the flesh (Gal. 5.19-23). Worth noting is the inclusion of meekness and temperance, meaning abstaining from vices by resisting “the lust of the flesh.” Essentially, the flesh is characterized by carnal desires and sins, while the spirit is characterized by what is worthy of salvation and the absence of sinfulness. Therefore, the ideal dynamic of the two is, according to Paul, the dominance of the spirit over the flesh.

As the absence of sinfulness is a vital part of the spirit, Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection is very useful in terms of dissecting this dichotomy. In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* Kristeva

defines the abject as “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect, borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4). At its core, the abject is what is excluded to maintain a sense of order and identity. Therefore, the act of abjecting is creating an identity by defining something by what it is not (Redfern 38). Consequently, the abject exists in the space between subject and object as what the subject has cast off in order to create a stable sense of self (Kristeva 1, 3). Confrontation with the abject will prompt fear and repulsion because it highlights the fragility of the order created by its exclusion (Kristeva 4). Additionally, this theory draws upon psychoanalytic theories as well as semiotics, which I will not be addressing as it falls beyond the scope of this article.

To apply this theory to the Christian binary of the flesh and the spirit is quite straightforward. As I claimed, the spirit is defined in opposition to the flesh, meaning it is defined, at least in part, by the abjection of what is sinful. As Kreitzer argues, this mechanism appears in other canonical Christian texts (127). Additionally, it is an integral part of the most essential Christian ritual, baptism, as it was performed in the era Stevenson wrote his novella. To be baptized you or your guardian would have to, among other things, renounce the devil and “the carnal desires of the flesh,” in order to be cleansed and become worthy of salvation (Melnyk 79-80). This illustrates how abjection of the flesh to create what is pious is an essential part of this dichotomy.

Having laid this important groundwork, it is finally time to look at how this binary appears in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. The novella is told mainly by a third-person narrator limited to Utterson’s point of view, who is, according to himself, a reputable Victorian gentleman. He reads the Bible every Sunday and is very skilled at controlling his sinful impulses (Stevenson 887, 91). Utterson definitely sees the two titular characters through the lens of the aforementioned binary. This is evident for example after Carew is murdered and Hyde disappears when the narrator claims that “Now that the evil influence had been withdrawn” Jekyll becomes even more pious than he was before as: “he was now no less distinguished for religion” (Stevenson 904). In other words, Hyde is viewed as a corrupting force that Jekyll must abject to be virtuous. This binary thinking is also obvious when Dr. Lanyon tells Utterson that he thinks Jekyll “began to go wrong, wrong in mind” a long time ago and Utterson brushes it off as a mere scientific dispute of no real significance (Stevenson 892-93). This illustrates how he is unable to nuance his view of Jekyll, having placed him firmly within the category of good Christian men. This is a belief the reader never sees him explicitly abandon since he, throughout the entire novella and even in his last appearance, claims that Jekyll must be a victim of Hyde’s crimes (Stevenson 914).

Hyde is a rather uncomplicated example of the abject. Hyde is clearly viewed as abject by Utterson, as his reaction during their first encounter is described as: “hitherto unknown disgust,

loathing and fear” and he exclaims: “God bless me, the man hardly seems human!” (Stevenson 895). This feeling of repulsion is shared by many other characters who describe his “ape-like rage” and refer to him as “it” (Stevenson 898, 911). This shows that he is so disturbing to the order of Victorian society that he must be abjected from the entire human species to reestablish a sense of order.

The reason he is perceived as abject by the surrounding society is that he highlights the fragility of the strict moral standards that characterized Victorian society. These moral standards were inextricably linked to Christian ideals like temperance and sexual purity and additionally, Victorians were also expected to attend church regularly to demonstrate their devoutness (Houghton 147). Hyde embodies the exact opposite of these ideals. Hyde is created to be nothing but a man that acts on his sinful impulses and does so e.g. by committing murder in blind rage (Stevenson 920, 25). These impulses are the exact vices that Paul mentioned in “Epistle to the Galatians,” in this case specifically murder and wrath. Therefore, what makes Hyde so abject is that he is essentially a personification of the flesh.

The central role of this dichotomy in the novella resulted in it being the focus of a lot of religious debate. It was argued from pulpits by e.g. the Rev. Dr. Nicholson that the novella is a piece of “good theology” because it was interpreted as being about how “if they would surrender their higher natures to their lower natures ... return was impossible” (“The Rev. Dr. Nicholson” 103). This implies that Jekyll’s fate serves as a cautionary tale, warning its readers of the moral dangers of what happens when you fail to repress “the lust of the flesh.” However, this general point has been frequently challenged by literary critics in many different types of readings. In his analysis of the role of the scientist in Gothic fiction Glennis Byron argues that “the repressive forces of society” bear at the very least part of the responsibility for Jekyll’s tragic end (191).

In the novella, repression and its effects are most clearly explored in Jekyll’s explanation in the very last chapter. It is explained that Jekyll has split himself into two halves where one is the personification of the Christian concept of the flesh while the other passes as pious. Eventually, he starts fearing that Hyde will take over and decides that repressing that side of himself is the most sustainable solution. However, every time Jekyll tries to abject Hyde, he comes back stronger. For example, when he wakes up as Hyde one morning not having taken the potion, he swears he will never take the potion and change into Hyde again, so he does not lose control over him again. However, this plan fails and results in Hyde committing murder, because as he says “My devil had been long caged, he came out roaring” (Stevenson 924-25). This seems to suggest, contrary to the Rev. Dr. Nicholson’s interpretation, that abjection of the flesh is not a sustainable solution. Rather it points to, as Byron argues, that “repression produces the monster” (192). It also seems to suggest

that this binary is unsustainable, as it polarizes his being, the two halves becoming increasingly extreme until they can no longer coexist.

The pronouns used throughout Jekyll's confession are also interesting in regard to this duality. He claims from the start that there is a clear line separating him from Hyde as "man is not truly one, but truly two" (Stevenson 920). However, this line blurs when he talks about Hyde's actions using the first-person singular, writing "I mauled the unresisting body" (Stevenson 925). Later, after recounting the murder Hyde committed, he feels compelled to separate him entirely from his species: "He, I say - I cannot say I. That child of Hell had nothing human" (Stevenson 928). As Jekyll is confronted with actions committed with his own physical vessel, his identity as a reputable man is so threatened that he deems Hyde inhuman in an attempt to stabilize his identity. However, even on the level of the pronouns he uses, this binary falls apart. Two paragraphs later Jekyll writes: "if I slept, or even dozed for a moment, it was always as Hyde that I awakened" (Stevenson 928). That he writes that he awakened as Hyde, and not that Hyde awakened, is contradictory to what he just stated. This undermines the dualistic perception of him, as the line between the two sides starts to disintegrate.

Additionally, Jekyll is later referred to in the third-person singular in his own confession: "With Jekyll it was a thing of vital instinct. He had now seen the full deformity of that creature that shared with him some of the phenomena of consciousness" (Stevenson 929). This marks a breakdown in the borders Jekyll constructed to create his identity. Despite Jekyll's best efforts to abject Hyde, he is unable to. He is so profoundly disturbed by this inextricable link to the abject that his constructed identity starts falling apart at the seams, to the degree that he starts referring to himself in the third person. He cannot abject Hyde fully and therefore he cannot fully be Jekyll.

Furthermore, this implies that not only do Jekyll and Hyde somehow share a physical vessel but there is also some shared consciousness between the two. Jekyll must have some share in Hyde's experiences, if he recounts them in the first person. This consciousness must be greater than the sum of its parts since this Jekyll/Hyde composite refers to both Hyde and Jekyll in the third person. This implies the divide between the two is not as stable as Jekyll claimed, and therefore also challenges the dualistic view that is presented in the majority of the novella.

While the text is mainly narrated from Utterson's point of view in the third person, the final two chapters deviate from this form. The two chapters have an epistolary format and are written in the first person, the first by Lanyon and the final by Jekyll. This distinct break in form mirrors the break with the view of Jekyll and Hyde as separate individuals, as it is revealed that they somehow share a physical vessel. One might argue that this revelation supports the interpretation of the novella as a Christian cautionary tale. As it is revealed that the spirit and the flesh struggle

within a single individual, the parallel to “Epistle to the Galatians” is strengthened. On the other hand, one might argue that this is just one of the many ways in which the Christian dichotomy is undermined in the novella. As I have argued, Utterson’s clear distinction between Jekyll and Hyde is challenged, e.g., by the pronouns used in Jekyll’s chapter. The shift from a clear duality to ambiguity coincides with a change in point of view, which indicates that there are truths that lie beyond Utterson’s dualistic view of people. As the full explanation is told by abandoning his point of view, one might even go as far as to say that this dualistic view of man is exposed as insufficient.

One other way the Christian duality is challenged is that while Hyde is clearly a personification of the flesh, Jekyll is hardly a personification of the spirit. While Utterson holds him in high esteem, Jekyll’s propriety is exposed as nothing but a façade. In the final chapter, Jekyll states that in his youth his worst fault “was a certain impatient gaiety of disposition, such as has made the happiness of many, but such as I found hard to reconcile with my imperious desire to carry my head high ... Hence it came about that I concealed my pleasures” (Stevenson 919). This illustrates that Jekyll never lived up to the Christian ideals, as Utterson thought he did, he just hid his sinful behavior. Therefore, in Jekyll’s explanation his veneer of respectability is peeled away and the understanding of Jekyll and Hyde that Utterson has presented is undermined. By extension, it challenges the Christian dichotomy of the flesh and spirit by exposing that which was supposed to be unquestionably good as unsettlingly ambiguous.

Kristeva describes the abject as that which is “of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me.” Later she adds that death is the utmost abject because it “is a border that has encroached upon everything. It no longer I who expel, ‘I’ is expelled. The border has become an object. How can I be without border?” (Kristeva 2, 4). While Hyde is clearly abject, there is something in this novella that fits this description even better. The Jekyll/Hyde composite is the epitome of the abject. He is defined by ambiguity, as he transgresses the clear distinctions that have been drawn between the two eponymous characters. The only other character who witnesses this ambiguity in the text is Lanyon, who succumbs to shock as a result of this (Stevenson 919). Even to Lanyon, who has a more nuanced view of Jekyll than Utterson, this is so profoundly disturbing that it annihilates him.

One could argue that this is also why the reader never sees Utterson come to terms with this realization. He simply cannot. He cannot abandon this binary understanding that is integral to not only his understanding of his friend but also to his identity as a reputable man. Furthermore, it undermines the idea of a clear distinction between sinful and pious, which is as integral to his moral standards as those of the rest of Victorian society. Even more abject than that which violates the

moral standards, is the disintegration of the line between what has been deemed moral and immoral. How can he be without that border?

In conclusion, the Christian dichotomy of the flesh and the spirit is undermined in Stevenson's novella. By presenting multiple fruitless attempts at abjection of the personification of the flesh, abjection of part of the self is exposed as an unsustainable solution that leads to self-destruction. In the final chapters, the binary is replaced with an unsettling ambiguity, undermining the narrator's dualistic presentation of the two titular characters. By combining this shift towards the ambiguous with a change in point of view, it is implied that there are truths that can only be acknowledged by leaving this dualistic worldview behind. All in all, it is an indictment of the morals guiding Victorian society, as they are portrayed as simplistic and destructive.

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