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Negotiating Self and Other: Atavism, Cultural Otherness, and Dual Identity in R.L. Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*

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Abstract

This paper examines R.L. Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* in relation to late-Victorian discourses of degeneration, atavism, and cultural otherness. Drawing upon contemporary medico-legal theories, particularly Cesare Lombroso's formulation of the atavistic criminal, the study investigates the ways in which Hyde is constructed both as a moral and racial 'other'. While the novella appears to reproduce the prevailing Victorian anxieties regarding criminality, primitivism, and racial difference, it simultaneously destabilizes the ideological assumptions that underlie such constructions. Through an analysis of Hyde's representation, the urban geography of London, and the divided identity of Jekyll/Hyde, the paper argues that the qualities attributed to the cultural 'other' are shown to be an indispensable part of English cultural selfhood itself. Stevenson thus exposes the instability of binary oppositions like civilized/savage, self/other, and rational/irrational. Ultimately, the novella suggests that attempts to externalize or suppress the darker dimensions of individual and collective identity are both ethically flawed and self-destructive. By foregrounding the interdependence of opposing elements, Stevenson advocates a more nuanced understanding of human subjectivity and cultural identity.

Keywords: dual identity, atavism, cultural otherness, criminality, degeneration

1. Introduction

R. L. Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) is set in the heart of late-nineteenth century London, the seat of the British Empire. Written at a historical juncture when the British society – strained by colonial insurgencies as well as internal political and social crises— was increasingly becoming aware of its darker impulses, Stevenson's novella, which deals with the exploration of the 'dark' side of the human consciousness, seems to speak back to its own cultural context. This paper reads the novella not only as a perceptive engagement with contemporary discourses of 'degeneration' and 'atavistic criminality' but also as a critique of the ways in which such discourses were mobilized to sustain Britain's myth of cultural superiority. My analysis focuses on the prejudiced representation of the racial 'other' in the text, since it is cultural 'otherness' which emerges as the most unsettling facet of the duality embodied by the fractured existence of Jekyll/Hyde. The text, as I will proceed to show, draws home the fact that

just as the vicious pleasure-seeking Edward Hyde is an organic constituent of the reputable, rationalistic, Dr. Jekyll's individuality, similarly that which is constructed as the cultural 'other' is an undeniable component of English cultural selfhood; any attempt to segregate the cultural/moral 'other', that is an inextricable constituent of the 'self', into an externalized, homogeneous entity will only be an instance of a myopic flaw.

Atavism and the Victorian Monster

"Monstrosity (and the fear it gives rise to) is historically conditioned rather than a psychological universal", observes Judith Halberstam (qtd. Mighall 130). In Stevenson's narrative, Mr. Hyde has been depicted as a figure of vile monstrosity, but the singular way in which his physiognomy is represented, seems to be deeply entrenched in the contemporary medico-legal discourses that served to determine the shape of the late-Victorian 'monster'.

One of the most eminent works of the period, which seems to cast a considerable degree of influence on the novella, is *The Criminal Man* (1878) by the Italian criminal anthropologist Cesare Lombroso. In his work, Lombroso explicates "the problem of the nature of the criminal" and brands the criminal as an "atavistic being who reproduces in his person the ferocious instincts of primitive humanity and inferior animals" (qtd. Arata 234). The atavistic criminal, according to him, not only replicates the signs of degeneracy in his psyche but also in his physiognomy. Lombroso's proposition not only depicts the degenerate criminal as an evolutionarily inferior being but also associates him with cultural primitivism. The portrayal of Mr. Hyde, whose savage laugh and troglodytic appearance repel Mr. Utterson, highlights the way in which the traits of the evolutionary anterior and civilizationally inferior seem to merge in the figure of the atavistic Hyde.

Racial Otherness and imperial Anxiety

While the resemblance between Lombroso's atavistic criminal and Stevenson's degenerate Hyde is overtly palpable, what is less evident is the way it seems to be in conformity with the racial prejudices harboured by the British society – and which may have been one of the reasons behind the English society's willing endorsement of Lombroso's enunciation. Associating atavistic criminality with ethnicity, Lombroso postulated that criminal degeneracy is primarily rampant among certain Oriental races – like the gypsies, the Africans, and certain tribes in India. Although the delineation of the vile Mr. Hyde as a racial 'other' appears to be indebted to Lombroso's theory of criminal atavism, such a representation also seems to hint at the way the British society attempted to disseminate the image of the ethnic 'other' – as a morally corrupt, irrational savage driven merely by animalistic impulses. Compliance with Lombroso's theory, thus, seemed to help imperial Britain to validate the myth of its moral superiority and cultural supremacy over its colonial subjects.

The moral 'otherness' that the British society seeks to attribute exclusively to the racial 'other', however, emerges as an indispensable component of its own cultural selfhood. The ethnic 'otherness' of Hyde, indicated by the "dusky pallor" (Stevenson 47) of his skin tone, is further highlighted by his depiction of as a resident of Soho, the dismal part of nineteenth century London which was not only notorious for its proliferating sex-trade but was also a multicultural area whose "slatternly passengers"(Stevenson 17), together with the "women of different nationalities" (Stevenson 17) comprise

its "blackguardly surroundings" (Stevenson 17). While on one hand, such a description of Soho seems to a comment on the sexual promiscuity attributed to the ethnic 'other', it also exposes one of the most menacing truths about Victorian London – namely, prostitution. The ethnic 'otherization' of the harlots cannot hide the truth about the loose morality of those who facilitate their trade—that is, the so-called gentlemen of the English society. This is further indicated when it is during Mr. Enfield's return "from some place at the other end of the world, about three o'clock of a black winter morning" that he becomes witness to Hyde's trampling of "calmly over a child's body" and leaving "her screaming on the ground" (Stevenson 4). Although it is the Oriental "doomed Juggernaut" called Mr. Hyde who commits this hideous offence, but such an act can be potentially read as a metaphor for the heinous social malady plaguing Victorian London— namely, child prostitution (Stevenson 5). Moreover, the "ape-like fury" (Stevenson16) with which Hyde murders Sir Danvers Carew, seems to find a resonance when Mr. Enfield and the "cut-and –dry apothecary" are consumed by "a desire to kill" (Stevenson 5) Hyde after the latter is cornered for trampling the girl; they, however, restrain themselves only after realizing that such "killing … [is] out of the question" (Stevenson 5) in their 'civilized' English society. Interestingly enough, it is not the gruesome nature of Hyde's act that evokes this reaction in them, but rather his displeasing appearance. As Mr. Enfield remarks: "I never saw a man I so disliked…. He must be deformed somewhere; he gives a strong feeling of deformity, although I couldn't specify the point" (Stevenson 7). Thus Mr. Hyde seems to emerges as the embodiment of those bestial instincts that remain embedded within humanity as the vestiges of its evolutionary ancestry. Although the English gentlemen try to repress these instincts in themselves under the veneer of social propriety, they, nonetheless, cannot rid themselves of it.

London and the Geography of Duality

The moral duality permeating the Victorian gentlemen, furthermore, seems to find an externalized depiction in the cityscape of metropolitan London. Highlighting the appropriateness of the London setting, Saposnik opines: "Because its morality lies at the center of the Victorian world...London… [serves] as the *locus classicus* of Victorian behavior" (717). Much like its individuals, the city appears to be fraught with divisions which are mutually opposed, but which in their necessary union represent the social cosmos of London. Thus, the reputable Cavendish Square, the "citadel of medicine" (Stevenson 8) where the respectable Dr. Lanyon resides, co-exists with Hyde's murky Soho, which veiled by the hues of twilight appears to Utterson "like a district of some city in a nightmare" (Stevenson 17). Also, the broad London thoroughfares traversed by respectable gentlemen are juxtaposed with the by-street which has the back-door to Jekyll's house—this by-street of shops, where Mr. Enfield first encounters Mr. Hyde, with "its florid charms" and "air of coquetry" seems expose the menace of a thriving sex-trade (Stevenson 4). Duality seems to further proliferate as even houses are found to be divided into apartments occupied by "all sorts and conditions of men" including "shady lawyers" and "agents of shady lawyers" and "the agents of obscure enterprises" – however, Dr. Jekyll's house stands out as the only one in the entire square which is "occupied entire" and emits "a great air of wealth and comfort" (Stevenson 12). But the placing of Jekyll's house among dwellings that are subdivided and let to shady folks undoubtedly creates a degree of doubt about the respectability of the doctor which are only confirmed when the reverse side of his residence, where his laboratory is located, generates a "distasteful sense of strangeness" in Mr. Utterson (Stevenson 19). Thus the thriving metropolitan of London with its "great arteries" (Stevenson 21) seems to nurture the vices that it associates with the savage racial 'other' and the boundaries between the moral/cultural 'other' and the English 'self' becomes increasingly blurred as the foggy nocturnal city itself

seems to betray a bestial facet where Mr. Utterson, who has once been repelled by Hyde's "snarl[ing] aloud into a savage laugh" (Stevenson 11), suddenly becomes conscious of "the low growl of London" (Stevenson 10).

Jekyll, Hyde, and the Failure of Separation

This duality of existence, which finds a macrocosmic reflection in the great body of urban London, emerges as an inescapable truth that is manifested by the fractured existence of Jekyll/Hyde. Morally opposed yet mortally connected, Hyde is the indispensable part of Dr. Jekyll's selfhood that he has long repressed under societal pressures, but nonetheless has never denied. Jekyll is "in no sense a hypocrite" (Stevenson 43) as he not only acknowledges that he bears within himself "the thorough and primitive duality of man "but also confesses that the "two natures that contend in … [his] field of consciousness" are "radically" or fundamentally integral to his individuality (Stevenson 42). Dr. Jekyll confesses:

> I was no more myself when I laid aside restraint and plunged in shame, than when I laboured, in the eye of the day, at the furtherance of knowledge or the relief of sorrow or suffering. (Stevenson 43)

Unlike his social peers who prefer to continue with a life of "profound duplicity" (Stevenson 42) by clandestinely indulging in disgraceful pleasures under the restraints of a rigid value-system Victorian which completely underestimates the irrational urges in man, Dr. Jekyll seems to evince a certain degree of ethical honesty by attempting to explore his self in its entirety and, instead of suppressing, trying to give an embodied expression to his irrational, impulsive, pleasure-seeking alter-ego. Thus Dr. Jekyll concocts a potion which potentially gives a separate form and countenance to the "lower elements" in his soul, thereby materializing Edward Hyde as the embodiment of Jekyll's "original evil" (Stevenson 44). Although "evil…had left on that body an imprint of deformity and decay", Jekyll welcomes this incarnation without any sense of repugnance as he realizes: "this, too, was [him]self. It seemed natural and human" (Stevenson 44). However, Dr. Jekyll's myopic flaw seems to lie in his inability to realize that these two apparently incompatible parts of his being cannot be separated and that the "pure evil" (Stevenson 46) incarnated by Mr. Hyde can never be turned into an extraneous entity that is completely separable from the "incongruous compound" known as Henry Jekyll (Stevenson 45).

Although Jekyll finds release in the anti-social, "undignified" (Stevenson 46) pleasures indulged in by Hyde, he refuses to take any ethical responsibility of these acts as he always reasons with himself: "It was Hyde, after all, and Hyde alone, that was guilty. Jekyll was no worse; he woke up again to his good qualities seemingly unimpaired" (Stevenson 46). However "seemingly" (Stevenson 46) seems to be the operative word here as, in due course the pleasures enjoyed by Jekyll " turn toward the monstrous" (Stevenson 46) in the hands of Hyde, and prolonged engagement in such "vicarious depravity" (Stevenson 46) poses a threat to his compounded personality— Jekyll fears that "the balance of … [his] nature might be completely overthrown," , his "power of voluntary change" might be "forfeited" thereby making the ‘’ character of Edward Hyde become irrevocably" his own (Stevenson 48). Dr. Jekyll's fears indeed prove to be true as he finally meets his end irreversibly trapped in the body of Mr. Hyde – the "inherently malign and villainous" moral twin whose increasingly gruesome acts soon preclude the sympathies of Jekyll (Stevenson 46).

Dr. Jekyll's tragedy stems from the fact that he fails to understand that it is the necessary functioning of the moral 'other' in harmony with the moral 'self' which lays the foundation of his unique subjectivity. He misguidedly directs his efforts trying to dissociate a part of his integrated self and amplify it into a unified, independent entity in the form of Hyde—the "impenetrable mantle" of whose persona will enable him to indulge in his reckless pleasures (Stevenson 46). However, since Dr. Jekyll's persona is based on the co-existence and co-working of its apparently incongruous elements, any attempt to distill, externalize and exert any one of the facets must inevitably lead to destruction of his compounded selfhood. Indeed, Dr. Jekyll's scientific endeavor to transcend the metaphysical foundations of human existence ultimately exposes him to the plight of a "self-destroyer" (Stevenson 33).

Evincing an almost myopic folly, Dr. Jekyll fails to fathom the inextricable bond ties the two entities whose separation he aspires to achieve. Each of the successive narratives in the text, however, strengthens the fact that despite all attempts of segregation, the apparently incongruent personae of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde are inextricably bound. This is highlighted by the fact that in spite of inhabiting two separate mortal frames, Jekyll and Hyde "had memory in common… [while] all other faculties were most unequally shared between them" (Stevenson 48). Moreover, Hyde is to be capable of emulating Jekyll's handwriting and even his autograph, which is supposed to be unique to an individual. In spite of being morally divergent individuals, the seemingly impulsive Hyde is seen exercising a notable degree of self-control and logical reasoning under the threat of public exposure as he—

> [M]astered his fury with the great effort of will; composed his two important letters, one to Lanyon and one to Poole; and that he might receive actual evidence of their being posted, sent them out with directions that they should be registered". (Stevenson 52).

By contrast, the respectable Dr. Jekyll is discovered sitting in Regent's Park with the "animal within… [him] licking the chops of memory'' (Stevenson 51) of Mr. Hyde's gruesome indulgences. Moreover, during the final days of Jekyll's life, which he spends closeted in his laboratory being irrevocably trapped in Hyde's corporeal form, his butler Poole claims to have heard the recluse (which he firmly believes to be someone other than his master) uttering desperate cries to Heaven— Poole informs: "who is in there instead of him [Jekyll], and why it stays there, is a thing that cries to Heaven…" (Stevenson 29). Finally, the suicide that ensues, also seems to be a dual effort: though the hand that administers the poison is Edward Hyde's, it is Henry Jekyll who forces the action. Never before have they been so much one as when the narcissistic Hyde, "whose love of life is wonderful "(Stevenson 54), ensures the death wish of Dr. Jekyll.

Thus, the text seems to draw home the inescapable conclusion that man must learn to dwell in uncomfortable but necessary harmony with its multiple selves without attempting to establish a hierarchical binary of 'self'/'other' between these constituent components of his integrated individuality. The human personality is unique in its identity because of its heterogeneous nature and its so-called imperfections. This idea finds a remarkable resonance in the unique nature of the salt that Dr. Jekyll uses in his experiment—the salt owes its potency and uniqueness to its very impurity, which can never be replicated. Similarly, it is necessary to reconcile with the multiplicity of the self and establish a 'dialogue' between the disparate and seemingly contrasting aspects of one's consciousness, as giving in completely to any particular element will only lead to disaster. The actions of Hyde, the apparent moral 'other' in

Jekyll, only assumes a monstrous anti-social dimension as it is purely guided by impulses, instincts and is completely shorn of logical and moral temperance. As an essential life force, Hyde's proper role is to act in harmony with the other parts of man's being, and not as a singular unified entity. This ideal is expressed in Stevenson's essay, "Lay Morals":

> [The soul] demands that we should not live alternatively with our opposing tendencies in a continual see-saw of passion and disgust, but seeks some path on which tendencies shall no longer oppose, but serve each other to common end…The soul demands unity of purpose, not dismemberment of man; it seeks to roll up all its strength and sweetness, all his passion and wisdom, into one, and make him a perfect man exulting in perfection. (qtd. Saposnik 728)

However, one of the redeeming features of Dr. Jekyll is that he at least recognizes and tries to accommodate the urges of his darker alter ego. However, his society seems to lack such ethical courage to acknowledge the truth about the sinister 'other' that dwells in its 'self'. The late-nineteenth century English society –with its celebration of the Enlightenment values of rationality, order and social progress, which it posited as the hallmarks of its modernity and civilizational superiority— devalued and tried to repress the impulsive, irrational animalistic traits inherent in its members and associated them with the morally and culturally inferior racial 'other'. Thus, throughout the text, largely peopled by middle-class professional men, Hyde is described in terms of metaphors— "child of hell" (Stevenson 52), "devilish" (Stevenson 52), "ape-like" (Stevenson 16)— as he is metaphor for the uncontrolled appetites, impulses, carnal desires that are rejected as 'excesses' by the Victorian culture. However, Hyde is merely the embodiment of the irrational, animalistic impulses that lie dormant in all human beings – vestiges of an evolutionary lineage that can only be suppressed but can never be obliterated by civilization. The seemingly 'atavistic' 'excesses' incarnated by the racial 'other' Hyde are presently exposed to be an undeniable constituent of the dark underbelly of the English cultural 'self' when it is revealed that Jekyll(ian) respectability and Hyde(an) corruption exist simultaneously in the same body – thereby throwing into question the very idea of a stable, unified identity.

Conclusion

Stevenson's novella ultimately challenges the Victorian desire to stabilize identity through rigid boundaries such as civilized/savage, self/other, and rational/irrational. By revealing Hyde as an inextricable component of Jekyll rather than an external aberration, the text exposes the instability of both individual and cultural identities. Stevenson seems to be indicating that civilization is merely a thin veneer of custom through which the inherent impulses of man can erupt at any moment. This idea also finds an echo in his essay "Pulvis Et Umbra" where he almost ruefully articulates: "[N]owadays the pride of man denies in vain his kinship with the original dust" (qtd. in Saposnik 728). The text, finally, suggests that ethical self-understanding depends not upon the exclusion of alterity but upon an acknowledgement of its constitutive presence within the self.

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