

Gothic Elements in 'The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde'

The relationship between scientific discourse and the Victorian Gothic is greatly emphasised when reading Robert Louis Stevenson's 1886 novella *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. The work is now associated with the mental condition of a 'split personality', where two personalities of differing character reside in one person. However, the text was written before the science of psychology was firmly established, and the novella itself appears to be influenced by a variety of scientific theories predominant in the late-Victorian era.

Atavism

Cesare Lombroso's theory of atavism (discussed in greater detail in 'The Victorian Gothic' essay on this website) appears to have greatly influenced Stevenson's novella. The unsettling, dwarfish appearance of Edward Hyde and the violent behaviour he exhibits are clear atavistic traits. [1]The Italian Criminologist Cesare Lombroso[Public Domain], via Wikimedia Commons *Jekyll and Hyde* is not the only text in which Stevenson manipulates Gothic tropes. In his short story 'Olalla', elements of atavism and heredity curses are woven into the story to create terror; the central protagonist becomes the victim of a bestial attack committed by the atavistic mother of the family with whom he is lodging.

Doubling

The Gothic element of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* is represented via the theme of doubling. This is revealed to the reader by the horrifying transformation of Dr Henry Jekyll into the atavistic murderer Edward Hyde. The transformation is generated by the fear of regression, as both men are revealed to be the same person. Stevenson's depiction of the respectable gentleman Dr Jekyll as capable of the terrible behaviour exhibited by Mr Hyde, is evidence of his manipulation of Victorian anxieties and social fears. It shattered the veneer of class-conditioned respectability that covered and controlled the lives of respectable members of the population. As the text demonstrates, it is not only the impoverished, working classes living in the slum areas of the city that are capable of committing crimes; criminals are also found in educated, wealthy, and seemingly respectable echelons of society.

The theme of doubling is symbolised throughout the text. The city of London is split in two. The one side where Dr Jekyll, Mr Utterson and their contemporaries live and work is represented as smart, wealthy and educated area, identified as such in Utterson's referral to Cavendish square - the home of Dr Lanyon - as 'that citadel of medicine.' In contrast, the other side of London is represented by the district of Soho, a slum area of the city that symbolises an atavistic playground, where immoral behaviour is expected and therefore much less noticeable. Mr Hyde has a house in this district, assumedly so his detestable appearance and violent behaviour go unquestioned and unnoticed. [2]Illustration for *Jekyll and Hyde* showing DoublingBy Chicago: National Prtg. & Engr. Co. [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

Dr Jekyll's home also represents the Gothic in its double aspects. The house provides a contrasting space,

used both for Dr Jekyll's domestic purposes and his scientific experiments. The laboratory at the end of the garden provides a convenient way of concealing his dubious experiments, and the side door onto the back-alley enables an appropriate means by which Hyde can come and go, without disturbing the household or being associated with Dr Jekyll.

Stevenson's skilful manipulation of Victorian anxieties is evident in the book's success. As testament to the book's popularity, there appeared in 1887 a stage version of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, adapted by T.R Sullivan and Richard Mansfield. Mansfield was cast as the double-lead role, playing both Jekyll and Hyde. The adaptation was staged in London during the spate of unsolved murders committed by the infamous Jack the Ripper in the Whitechapel district. There were multiple theories circulating as to the identity of the murderer, with many suggesting he was highly educated or of royal birth. This fear parallels the shattered social veneer Stevenson presented in his novella through the revelation that the respectable Dr Jekyll is also the immoral murderer Mr Hyde.

[3]Richard Mansfield depicted in double exposure as Jekyll and Hyde. Similar photographic trickery was used in the promotion of Spiritualism. Photo by Henry Van der Weyde [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons Stevenson's text had resonating influence even in its stage form. Such was the terror felt by the public that Mansfield's ten-week performance at the Lyceum Theatre was shut down; his transformation into Mr Hyde was so convincing that his name was mentioned in the newspapers as a potential suspect.

The Use of the Gothic Genre in the Late-Victorian Period

Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* is one of many texts in the late-Victorian period that uses the Gothic genre to display Victorian cultural fears.

Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) employs the theory of atavism to render the central protagonist, Count Dracula himself, all the more terrifying. Like Hyde, the Count is a version of the degenerate. He was once a Transylvanian aristocrat, but the story portrays him in a state of regression killing others and feeding off their blood. The vampire is an embodiment of otherness, and, in Stoker's tale, Dracula becomes the site of Gothic horror, where late-Victorian cultural anxieties are manifested. The degenerate otherness of the Count also reveals a fear of decline and its link to imperial anxieties.

Regression and the fear of imperial decline is seen in H.G Wells's 1895 text *The Time Machine*. The novel is narrated by the unnamed Time Traveller, who ends up in the year 802,701. The text expresses a fear over the future and an anxiety over the identity and purpose of human beings. The race of humans the Time Traveller encounters, the Eloi, have degenerated. They have lost the intelligence and scientific endeavour held by the Time Traveller and the human race in general; in the year the Time Traveller finds them, the Eloi are merely a food source for the sinister Morlocks, pale, blind cannibals who have evolved to adapt to their underground environment.

Go to the library section to find:

- Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* [4].

- *The Merry Men and Other Tales* [5] is Stevenson's collection of short-stories that contain elements of the supernatural, atavism, and Gothic horror.
- *On The Origin of Species* [6] Darwin's hugely influential text which perpetuated fears of regression.
- Read the introduction to Victorian Gothic fiction here. [7]

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