

Jekyll and Hyde: The Psychology of Dissociation

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In Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Robert Louis Stevenson created not only a haunting representation of consciousness but a way to define what psychology and literature had both come to view as distinctly modern and deeply disturbing. Writing of Baudelaire's response to modernity, Peter Nicholls argues that 'The greatest fear is now provoked by the spectre of the Double, by the appearance of an other who somehow mirrors oneself',^[1] and he quotes Baudelaire, 'Who amongst us is not a *homo duplex*? I speak of those whose mind since childhood has been *touched with pensiveness*; always double, action and intention, dream and reality; always one hindering the other, one usurping the place of the other.'^[2] If for Baudelaire, Poe, and Dostoevsky, this doubleness was, in Nicholls's words, a 'tortured disunity ... the tragic condition of the modern poet',^[3] for nineteenth- and early twentieth-century psychology it was one form of hysteria, a pathology of consciousness. Lecturing at Harvard in 1906, Pierre Janet, a leading theorist of dissociation at the turn of the century, reviewed major early researchers including Charcot, Breuer, Freud, and Prince, and claimed that 'what has been most characteristic in France for a score of years in the study of nervous diseases is the development of pathological psychology', and that to understand them, it is with 'Hysteria ... that one should begin'.^[4] And for Janet, hysteria included 'total modifications of the personality divided into two successive or simultaneous persons, which is again the dissociation of consciousness in the hysteric'.^[5] Janet's theory of dissociated consciousness, I believe, provides the most compelling conceptual framework for understanding Stevenson's representation of duality.

In 1886, the same year that Stevenson published *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Frederic W. H. Myers described a case of what he called 'multiplex personality', an example of the 'pitch to which the dissociation of memories, faculties, sensibilities may be carried, without resulting in mere insane chaos, mere demented oblivion'.^[6] Louis V. alternated between a 'quiet,

well-behaved, and obedient' child and one who 'became violent, greedy, and quarrelsome' after a traumatic experience. According to Myers, at any time, depending on whether his right or left brain is ascendant, Louis V. 'is only half himself', and he refers to his 'normal period of childhood, before his *Wesen* was thus cloven in twain'.^[7] This image of a cloven *Wesen* [being], once joined, is similar to cases studied by Janet and clearly resembles Jekyll and Hyde though, unlike most, Stevenson's characters are co-conscious. Significantly, however, many cases reveal overt and consistent differences of personality as extreme as those of Jekyll and Hyde. Myers read *Jekyll and Hyde* and corresponded with Stevenson, who denied having heard of actual cases of double personality before he wrote the novel. He would, however, have known literary versions, and he had already depicted duality in *Deacon Brodie, or The Double Life* (1880) and 'Markheim' (1886). Moreover, as Karl Miller states, 'the modern double' goes back to the eighteenth century and, during the 1880s and 1890s, 'underwent a revival'.^[8]

Why then, given the widespread interest in and study of duality in both psychology and literature, was Stevenson's novel immediately fascinating and morally shocking? And why has it remained so? For despite their frequency in late Victorian literature, duality and multiplicity can become deeply frightening when taken beyond the abstract to the bodily—associated in popular culture with addiction, sexual depravity and serial killers.^[9] By embodying Hyde as a dissociated personality, giving him literally a different size, age, appearance and expression, Stevenson made him that 'monstrous' possibility—that we could all be someone quite 'other' and that we cannot rely on the control of the will. More significantly, by making the 'other' pure evil, he defined, for more than a century, an assumption that divisions in human consciousness are inevitably moral: the self and that spectre who evokes fear. Though Jekyll claims that moral division only as his own individual case, it has framed critical discussion of two key questions raised by the text: who or what is Hyde? And what is the nature of his 'pure evil'? If we accept the literally separate, 'other' personality of Hyde depicted by his bodily difference, his relation to Jekyll can be more clearly understood.

In a letter to John Paul Bocock, Stevenson said that Hyde was 'the beast' who 'is the essence of cruelty and malice, and selfishness and cowardice: and these are the diabolical in man'; the harm, he added, 'was in Jekyll, because he was a hypocrite—not because he was fond of women; he says so himself'.^[10] The depth of Hyde's evil, as represented in the novel, is that he is not a mixture of good and evil but is an unmixed essence, unlike all other humanity in which varying degrees of good and evil join. Thus he is described repeatedly as not human, or as inhuman, and Jekyll disavows any responsibility for what Hyde does while acknowledging his awareness of, and release in, experiencing it. The insistence on absolute otherness thus has its base in this fundamental distinction of 'human' and 'inhuman', notwithstanding Hyde's undeniable participation, from youth, in Jekyll's pleasures and desires. And though frequently read as sexual,

these desires are never defined in the text itself. Yet despite Stevenson's attribution of evil to Jekyll's hypocrisy and despite the lack of any evidence of infant sexual expression or fantasy in either, Hyde has predominantly been read through Freud.^[11] Because the language of the text itself is filled with images of an ape-like figure, a devil, a habitué of Soho and vile pleasures, a monster, a double, all these readings can be used to account for him, and his evil nature has been read through Freud's theory of repressed desire, impossible for a Victorian gentleman to acknowledge or act out. Jekyll's claim that he was given, at an early age, to 'a certain impatient gaiety of disposition', and at night 'laid aside restraint and plunged into shame', has been read as demonstrating a sexual origin to his developed evil behavior, in part because of suggestive earlier versions. In the 'Notebook Draft' he used stronger and more violent language: 'From a very early age, however, I became. . . (/in secret) the slave of disgraceful pleasures'; in the 'Printer's Copy' this is altered to 'the slave of certain appetites'.^[12] According to Robert Mighall, 'Earlier drafts of the text certainly reveal a more explicit sexual content.'^[13] But although these drafts can be read as sexual, they are not definitively so; children can also be prone to selfishness and malice and cruelty and cowardice of other kinds, even brutality and killing. My point is that the suggestiveness of the text is indeterminate, not directed exclusively or primarily to sexuality in itself.

Popular films and the musical, in order to sustain the image of sexual repression, remove Utterson—a voice of reasoned balance (if a life of extreme self-denial)—and add fiancées, prostitutes, love relations and sexual sadism, while making Jekyll young and good-looking, that is, writing a different story in which sexual repression is apparent. While these readings and cultural representations are revealing, both 'Dr. Lanyon's Narrative' and 'Henry Jekyll's Full Statement of the Case' offer psychological accounts that more aptly explain both Jekyll/Hyde and Hyde's separate identity. Stevenson's well-known insistence that Hyde is 'no mere voluptuary' has been dismissed or overridden on many grounds, yet as Katherine Linehan and others have emphasised, there are no women in the text.^[14] What the text depicts is violence, narcissism and the hypocritical denial/acceptance of them. If we read Hyde through the psychological lens of hysteria as defined by early psychologists other than Freud—including Pierre Janet, William James and Morton Prince—we can recognise the structure of personality and consciousness in Stevenson's text. When I use the terms 'hysteria', and 'dissociation', I refer to these terms as they were accepted and standard at that time. Yet Stevenson's language—in the voice of Jekyll—both parallels the dissociation theory of his time and anticipates recent neo-dissociation theory that assumes originary plurality rather than fragmented unity.

Pierre Janet published *L'automatisme psychologique* in 1889; Breuer's and Freud's *Studies in Hysteria* was published in 1895; Morton Prince's *The Dissociation of a Personality* in 1905; and Pierre Janet's *The Major Symptoms of Hysteria* in 1907. All drew on over two decades of studies,

chiefly Charcot's observations of hysterical patients at the Salpêtrière; all recorded dual personalities and/or alternating consciousness with specific accounts of hysterical symptoms. In his lectures published in 1907, Janet described a wide range of behaviors in hysterics, all of which he defined as forms of dissociation. But by the 1920s, Freud had been credited with offering, in addition to description, a hypothesis of causation: his theory of repression and sexual trauma—actual or fantasised—as the origin. This was seen in Henderson and Gillespie's *A Textbook of Psychiatry* (1927), which went into seven editions by 1950, as supplying a deficiency in Janet, despite the recognition that a sexual aetiology of hysteria could not account for the massive 'hysteria' of soldiers in World War I.^[15] That Freud's sexual hypothesis cannot explain many examples of 'hysteria' has not prevented the continuing reading of a text without direct representations of sex as repressed sexual desire. And, of course, it could be, for we are never told specifically what Hyde does in his nocturnal life beyond the incidents when he tramples a child, murders Sir Danvers Carew, and 'smites' a woman who speaks to him. Stevenson's denial of the 'mere voluptuary', after all, adds that 'the sexual field and the business field are perhaps the two best fitted for the display of cruelty and cowardice and selfishness'.^[16] This, he says, people confuse with sexuality as an evil in itself. Sexuality, then, is evil when it is cruel, cowardly and selfish, but so are other such acts. What distinguishes Hyde absolutely from other humans is that he has no identity or motives other than evil, and in that sense he is a full personality, but wholly unlike the common human lot shared by Jekyll. Jekyll makes this clear in his account of his life-long awareness of Hyde within and delight in recognising Hyde as also himself, even though Hyde is utterly indifferent to good or to Jekyll. Perhaps more important, for recognising this form of duality, Hyde is neither unconscious nor repressed: Jekyll knows him, if not fully, 'from very early', and Jekyll does not create him; he releases him. 'Splitting' is intentional but neither a defense mechanism nor simply disintegration. 'He' is doubled, not halved, since Hyde has none of his character.

Jekyll's confusion of pronouns, his shift from 'I' to 'he', has been frequently noted as revealing ambiguity about his identification with Hyde. But in stating that he 'cannot say "I"', Jekyll demonstrates a phenomenon noted in other accounts of multiple personality. In *The Dissociation of a Personality*, for example, one personality consistently claims to be the same as the conscious version of 'Miss Beauchamp' and says 'I' for both; Sally, a distinctly different personality who, though neither evil nor hateful, appears and disappears much as does Hyde, insists that she is *not* 'Miss Beauchamp' and always refers to the latter as 'she'. Whatever Stevenson previously read or was familiar with, he represents personality formations found in psychiatric literature.^[17] Regardless, then, of Hyde's specific evil behavior, his existence and character—whether or not through the catalyst of drugs—are definable through psychological theories developing in the 1880s and later, as a recognisable, if presumed rare, form of hysteria. I wish to demonstrate this by making three points: Hyde's behavior fits descriptions in Janet of

hysterical dissociation; Stevenson uses the same terms in the text itself; and recent renewal of interest in dissociation theory rather than Freudian repression suggests comparable structures of personality. What Stevenson did, in an astonishingly modern portrayal of dissociation, was to provide an image for a distinctly different way to understand an ancient phenomenon in which—in the words of a recent psychiatric article—‘dissociation begins with the assumption that some multiplicity of mental process is typical and normal, in the sense of coexisting levels of control that are usually well-coordinated’ and, when ‘dissociation becomes evident’, lay ‘bare some of the underlying “multifarious” architecture of the mind’.[\[18\]](#)

In his 1906 lectures, Pierre Janet stated that the most important psychological studies of the previous twenty years had as their object ‘hysterical phenomena’, which he defined as forms of dissociation, whether in localised amnesia, fugue states, conversion disorders in which blindness or deafness or paralysis occurred without an organic base, or successive or alternating personalities which could have amnesia or be co-conscious. He devoted a chapter of *The Major Symptoms of Hysteria* to double personalities, categorising types such as alternating or co-existing, dual or multiple, and states that alternate, or dominating somnambulisms in which one state or the other dominates. A renowned example of the last, and one similar to Jekyll and Hyde, was that of Felida X. A ‘reserved, melancholy and timid’ person, she began to fall asleep and awake gay, active, and free of her otherwise frequent illnesses. At first these second states lasted only briefly, and, when she awoke in her presumed ‘natural’ state, it was without memory of the second. Gradually, however, the second state became dominant both in length of time and altered behavior. During one period of gaiety, she became pregnant, no doubt as horrifying for a nineteenth-century French lady of reserved temperament as Hyde’s secret pleasures for a ‘grave’, professional Victorian gentleman. As she learned of her condition, she feared to be thought mad, since she could not remember the first state.[\[19\]](#) A similar case was that of Mary Reynolds, who began with reciprocal states but in whom one became dominant. Towards the end of her life, the memories of each state seemed partially to blend. Like Jekyll and Hyde, Mary’s states had different handwriting,[\[20\]](#) contrasting moods, and distinct personalities. Since then, and especially in the 1980s and 1990s, many narratives of multiplicity have been published, usually by therapists claiming to cure them, but these characteristics are repeated. Moreover, although it may seem that Hyde’s embodiment in a smaller, younger, paler, and frightening self places it in a separate category as demonic or simply hallucinatory, many multiples experience their bodies in very different ways—in size, age, gender and physical ability. In Morton Prince’s narrative, for example, Sally experiences herself as younger and healthier than ‘Miss Beauchamp’. The supposedly objective body is itself subject to separate, subjective self-perception, a possible reason for Hyde’s fascination with his image in the mirror.

What Stevenson represents is thus well within the realm of psychological studies, then and now, and explicit, if considered unusual, observed behavior. One may only guess how frequent such experience might be since, like Hyde, it would remain hidden. My point is that Hyde's presence is not dependent on a theory of repressed desire but fits more overtly in a theory of a 'normal' multiplicity of the self that, in this case, takes the form of a good/evil split. If Janet, other theorists of dissociation in his time, and recent theorists of dissociation and neo-dissociation describe a broad range of duality and multiplicity, Stevenson not only represents what they observe but uses the language of dissociation theory himself in at least three ways: first, Lanyon labels Hyde a hysteric, and does so even more technically in the draft version; second, Jekyll initially describes Hyde as an always-present part of himself but later shifts to the third person pronoun as he realises how 'other' Hyde is; and third, in Henry Jekyll's 'Full Statement of the Case', Jekyll provides a self-revelatory concept of identity recently taken up by neo-dissociation theorists Woody and Bowers to define the meaning of dissociation not as a disintegration of prior unity, but as a prior multiplicity only revealing itself with the weakening of 'higher conscious functioning', i.e., Jekyll's control of those co-existing selves, the struggling 'polar twins', prior to his fatefully deliberate cutting apart of 'warring members'.

In 'Dr. Lanyon's Narrative', Lanyon describes Hyde's behavior immediately before and after he drinks the potion. As a doctor, Lanyon might be expected to recognise medical symptoms, but in any case, the terminology is medical. 'I could see', Lanyon reports, that 'he was wrestling with the approaches of hysteria'. In the draft version edited by William Veeder, Lanyon says 'the approaches of the "globus hystericus"'—the medical term for the ball of emotion assumed to rise as hysteria in the throat. In the printer's copy this becomes 'the hysteric ball', and in the printed text 'hysteria'. That the change did not mean simply a shift to a popular use of 'hysteria' is evident in Hyde's behavior: of nine symptoms Janet lists for a convulsive attack of hysteria, Hyde manifests eight: meaningless movements, eyes open and staring, distorted mouth, grinding teeth, piercing cries, injected eyes, congested face, and hysteric ball. Only the latter is rephrased to omit 'ball'.

This use of medical terminology is repeated in 'Henry Jekyll's Full Statement of the Case' when Jekyll ponders his duality as something 'natural', something he remembers as always present rather than created by repression. 'It was the curse of mankind that these incongruous faggots were thus bound together—that in the agonised womb of consciousness, these polar twins should be continuously struggling. How, then, were they dissociated?'^[21] This query about 'dissociation' follows upon the 'truth' that has doomed him, and that, more fully than the first two examples of Stevenson's use of the language of psychology, both asserts the theories of his own time and accurately predicts later ones: that 'man is not truly one, but truly two', that this is only his own state of knowledge, and that more likely 'man will be ultimately known for a mere polity of

multifarious, incongruous and independent denizens'.^[22] In his own case, he claims the duality was on the moral side and in his own person. He makes no claims to generalise on the nature of these independent denizens.

Moreover, Jekyll's desire from early life is to separate the two selves that are distinct but equally present. His purpose is to allow each to go his own way and to let each exist without the inhibitions and guilt of the one or the limitations of the other. Jekyll learns how to free Hyde, but, as Hyde lives and acts, he becomes stronger while Jekyll loses the control he could maintain when he alone had agency. Exercise and nourishment empower Hyde until he cannot be stopped. This shift in ability to exercise control is, interestingly, a key event also in Prince's description of the lives of 'Miss Beauchamp' and Sally: the longer and more often Sally appears and speaks, the more she is able to continue doing so. Similarly, in Janet's account of Felida X., the second state—more lively and healthy than the first—initially lasted only an hour or two. But, Janet states, 'little by little, this state developed singularly; it lasted for hours and days, and as the subject was now much more active, it was filled with all kinds of serious incidents'.^[23] Thus Jekyll's self-description parallels other narratives of duality in its development of agency as in its medical definitions.

It is for these reasons that Erik Z. Woody and Kenneth S. Bowers, in a 1994 article on neo-dissociation, use Jekyll and Hyde as the model for some 'multiplicity of mental processes' that is 'typical and normal'. Indeed, they assert that 'This is, properly, the Stevensonian view'.^[24] Their concluding metaphor goes beyond the psychiatry of Stevenson's time and suggests a radical new way also to view Jekyll and Hyde: 'It is an intriguing fact that nothing can prevent the possibility of two operating systems coexisting on the same hardware—for example, Windows and OS/2, either of which could be "brought up" during a particular session.'^[25] Like Windows and OS/2, Jekyll and Hyde are equally real, and they co-exist, though only one is embodied at any given time. Hyde is not, then, Jekyll's repressed desires and feelings since he is neither repressed nor unconscious, nor is it necessary to explain his existence more than Jekyll's: their status as personalities is not different, only their times of embodiment and agency. As Woody and Bowers define it:

The action of the drug in the story is simply to bring to light divisions that were *already* within: the action tendencies elicited in Hyde, horrific as they are to Jekyll, always lay dormant within Jekyll. The drug, rather than creating a second personality, weakens the integrative mechanisms by which the gaping cracks in a personality are papered over and normally hidden from view.^[26]

One need only explain the existence and nature of what is not assumed to be typical or normal, as psychiatry once explained homosexuality or Church fathers once explained women. What

simply *is* needs no explanation, as heterosexuality and maleness were never explained. In 'selves' that are *already* plural, alternate or different personae or personalities may be as 'normal' as the presumed unitary self. If Robert J. Lifton, writing in 1993 in *The Protean Self*, correctly identifies the modern self as 'fluid and many-sided', and describes 'tendencies toward multiplicity to the point of fragmentation' as 'rampant in both the modern and postmodern',^[27] Stevenson is perhaps more originary of modernism than Eliot or Conrad. Hyde is there because he is there. And his evil is one manifestation of the human condition, a condition not new but framed by profoundly altered ways of understanding the self.

NOTES

[1] Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p.15.

[2] Baudelaire, quoted in Nicholls, p.16.

[3] Nicholls, p.16.

[4] Pierre Janet, *The Major Symptoms of Hysteria*, 2nd ed. (1907; New York: Macmillan, 1920), pp.3-4.

[5] Janet, p.4.

[6] Frederic W. H. Myers, 'Multiplex Personality', in Katherine Linehan, ed., *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Norton Critical Edition (New York: Norton, 2003), p.134.

[7] Myers, p.135.

[8] Karl Miller, 'The Modern Double', in Linehan ed., *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, pp.124-5.

[9] A 2005 film, for example, represents the character of Jekyll/Hyde as a medical student with access to drugs, and depicts murders in graphic detail: *Jekyll + Hyde* DVD (Santa Monica, CA: Lionsgate, 2005), while newspapers in 1888 linked the story to both the Marquis de Sade and Jack the Ripper. For a discussion of the text as representing contemporary ideas of 'moral insanity', criminality, and sexual perversion, see Robert Mighall, 'Diagnosing Jekyll: the Scientific Context to Dr Jekyll's Experiment and Mr Hyde's Embodiment' in *Robert Louis Stevenson: The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde and Other Tales of Terror* (London: Penguin, 2002).

[10] Robert Louis Stevenson to John Paul Bocock, Saranac Lake, [? Mid-November 1887], in Linehan, ed., *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, p.86.

[11] See, for example, William Veeder, 'Children of the Night: Stevenson and Patriarchy', in *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde after One Hundred Years*, ed. William Veeder and Gordon Hirsch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp.107-60; Jerold Hogle, 'The Struggle for a Dichotomy:

Abjection in Jekyll and His Interpreters', in Veeder and Hirsch, pp.161-207; for a review of film versions treating the evil as repression, see Katherine Linehan, "'Closer Than a Wife": the Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll's Significant Other,' in *Robert Louis Stevenson Reconsidered: New Critical Perspectives*, ed. William B. Jones, Jr. (London: McFarland & Company, 2003). In an article on duality in Jekyll and Hyde, published as I was writing this paper, Anne Stiles discusses pre-Freudian psychology, including Pierre Janet, and also points to 'a larger body of Stevenson criticism in which Freud's later works overshadow any late-nineteenth-century scientific sources from which Stevenson might have drawn'. Stiles's broader focus parallels my own reading, but her specific discussion examines the then-current theory of the double brain. See Anne Stiles, 'Robert Louis Stevenson's *Jekyll and Hyde* and the Double Brain', *Studies in English Literature* 46, no. 4 (2006), pp.879-900.

[12] See Veeder, 'The Texts in Question', in Veeder and Hirsch, pp.3-56.

[13] Mighall, p.155.

[14] Julia Reid also reads the earlier drafts as more explicitly sexual but argues that the changes represent 'a toning down of the sexual content, indicating an attempt either to offer more respectable, family reading, or to increase the tale's imaginative reach by making Jekyll's sins less specific, or to bring thematic unity to the tale. The last explanation is most convincing: removing the emphasis on sexual misdemeanor allowed Stevenson to stress instead the dangers of denying primitive instincts.' 'The intriguing nature of Hyde's atavism', she notes, 'is that it resides in the eye of the beholder.' See Julia Reid, *Robert Louis Stevenson, Science, and the Fin de Siècle* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp.100-101.

[15] David Henderson and R. D. Gillespie, *A Text-book of Psychiatry*, 7th ed. (1927; London: Oxford University Press, 1950), pp.179-180.

[16] Stevenson to John Paul Boccock, in Linehan, ed., *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, p.87.

[17] See Morton Prince, *The Dissociation of a Personality: A Biographical Study in Abnormal Psychology*, 2nd ed. (1905; New York: Longmans, 1925). For a discussion of shifting pronouns see, for example, Peter K. Garrett, 'Cries and Voices: Reading *Jekyll and Hyde*' in Veeder and Hirsch, pp.59-72.

[18] Erik Z. Woody and Kenneth S. Bowers, 'A Frontal Assault on Dissociated Control' in *Dissociation: Clinical and Theoretical Perspectives* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1994), p.53.

[19] Ann Stiles notes that the case of Felida X. was 'widely ... discussed in the British press'. Stiles, p.6.

[20] Jekyll claims to have his 'own' handwriting, and they are recognisably similar; moreover, Jekyll says he created one for Hyde. They nonetheless retain these differences as indications of identity.

[21] Stevenson, in Linehan, ed. *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, p.49.

[22] Linehan, ed., *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, p.48.

[23] Janet, p.80.

[24] Woody and Bowers, p.53.

[25] Woody and Bowers, p.75.

[26] Woody and Bowers, p.53.

[27] Robert Jay Lifton, *The Protean Self: Human Resilience in an Age of Fragmentation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p.1, p.8.