

threaten a sort of cultural entropy or abjection, the swamps or sewers of mediocrity or vulgarity into which, they feared, excellence—high intelligence; literary and artistic aura—was sinking.⁸

* * *

KATHERINE LINEHAN

Sex, Secrecy, and Self-Alienation in *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*[†]

At the end of his life, realizing with horror the profundity of the physical bond connecting him to the now-despised alter ego within him, the middle-aged bachelor Henry Jekyll uses a striking phrase to describe that bond. Hyde was "knit" to him, he writes, "closer than a wife, closer than an eye" (61).¹

Peculiar absences make up much of the stuff of *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and "closer than a wife" waves like a flag over one such absence: the lack of a woman in any visibly important role in the lives of Jekyll-as-Jekyll, Jekyll-as-Hyde, or, for that matter, any of the bachelors who make up the tale's small all-male central cast. For many readers and critics, the non-appearance of women as equals or intimates to the main characters, taken together with the tale's lack of specificity about Jekyll's night-time pleasures, has stood out as a speaking absence in the text, an invitation from an author gagged by Victorian rules of reticence about sexuality to read the shadowy Mr. Hyde as an expression of underground sexual appetite on Jekyll's part. Exactly how that sexuality is to be seen is a matter of some of dispute. Victorian readers F. W. H. Myers and Gerard Manley Hopkins construe Hyde's acts of violence as displaced forms

8. For a general account of how late-Victorian intellectuals responded to "the masses" and mass culture, see John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses*. Jerrold Hogle's interpretation of *Jekyll and Hyde* in terms of Julia Kristeva's concept of "abjection" makes perfect sense in psychoanalytic terms; I am suggesting that, as it is usually figured, "the masses" is a sociopolitically "abject" category. See Hogle, "Struggle for a Dichotomy," in Veeder and Hirsch, eds., *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde after One Hundred Years*. For that matter, all of the psychoanalytic interpretations of Stevenson's tale in Veeder and Hirsch's anthology make sense, but do not preclude the more historical interpretation I am presenting here. Besides Hogle's essay, see also the essays by Veeder, Peter Garrett, and Ronald Thomas.

[†] Derived from "'Closer Than a Wife': The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll's Significant Other," a paper delivered at the "RLS 2000" conference in Little Rock, Arkansas, November 11, 2000, and included in *Robert Louis Stevenson Reconsidered: New Critical Perspectives*, ed. William B. Jones, Jr. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, forthcoming 2003). The present article differs substantially from the original on which it is based and is printed with the permission of McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers.

1. Page numbers are from this Norton Critical Edition.

of heterosexual sadism.² Vladimir Nabokov in the 1950s suggested that the "all-male pattern" of the tale evokes notions of "homosexual practices so common in London behind the Victorian veil," whether Stevenson intended it or not; several subsequent critics, including Elaine Showalter, have argued that a study of the repressions engendered by taboos against homosexuality is exactly what Stevenson intended.³ Still other commentators, such as Stephen Heath, William Veeder, and Janice Doane and Devon Hodges, have variously interpreted Hyde as emblematic of unrecognized male sexual neurosis, unresolved oedipal anger, or an attraction-repulsion response to female emotionality.⁴

Many of these recent readings view meaning in the tale as emanating partly from a realm of semi-conscious creation, in which Stevenson's doubtless complex personal feelings about sexuality interact with attitudes and anxieties embedded in his culture. Without repudiating what can be the value of that approach, I would like to turn the prism of Stevenson's multifaceted little masterpiece to examine the role of what I take to be a particularly conscious component of authorial thought in shaping ideas and imagery in the story around issues of sex, secrecy, and self-alienation. I propose to consider the tale (published in 1886) in light of Stevenson's comments about it in a November 1887 letter to John Paul Bocock, as well as two unfinished commentaries on ethics Stevenson composed between 1879 and 1883, in order to explore the logic of Stevenson's insistence to Bocock that hypocrisy, not sex, was the source of what was harmful in Jekyll's activities as Hyde. That exploration helps us appreciate the way that Stevenson, a rebel against the sexual puritanism of his childhood religion, but inheritor of its concern for moral self-vigilance, saw secrecy and a withdrawal from human bonds as preconditions for a form of self-alienation disastrous to psychological and spiritual well-being. Viewed in this framework, the absence of women from the plot as sex objects may be less of a clue to Hyde's violent nature than their absence as *love* objects. Similarly, the particular nature of Jekyll's appetite for pleasure, sexual or otherwise,

2. *The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Catherine Phillips (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 243 [see p. 101 in this edition]; F. W. H. Myers to R. L. Stevenson, February 27, 1886, in *Robert Louis Stevenson: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Paul Maixner (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 215.
3. Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), p. 194; Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (New York: Viking, 1990), pp. 105-114.
4. The emphases respectively of Stephen Heath in "Psychopathia sexualis: Stevenson's *Strange Case*," in *Critical Quarterly* 8: 1-2 (1986): 93-108; William Veeder in "Children of the Night," in *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde after One Hundred Years*, ed. William Veeder and Gordon Hirsch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); and Janice Doane and Devon Hodges in "Demonic Disturbances of Sexual Identity," in *Novel* (Fall 1989): 63-

may matter far less than the fact that by living a double life to avoid moral accountability, he shuts the door of his soul to conscience and thereby opens another door to the entry of what Stevenson calls "the diabolic in man."

The November 1887 letter in which Stevenson addresses issues of sexuality and hypocrisy in the tale comes as an indignant response to a report that Bocock, an American journalist, sent him concerning the acclaim given by New York theater-goers to actor Richard Mansfield's sensationalized stage portrayal of Hyde as a sexual predator who commits murder in his lecherous desire for access to the newly created figure of Jekyll's fiancée. In a reply marked "Private," Stevenson vents his exasperation with the Victorian prudery that equates sexual appetite with evil, and thereby fails to see that Hyde's cruelty stems not from Hyde's drive for sex, but Jekyll's drive for concealment:

Hyde was . . . not, Great Gods! a mere voluptuary. There is no harm in a voluptuary; and none, with my hand on my heart and in the sight of God, none—no harm whatever—in what prurient fools call "immorality." The harm was in Jekyll, because he was a hypocrite—not because he was fond of women. . . . The Hypocrite let out the beast Hyde—who is no more sexual than another, but who is the essence of cruelty and malice, and selfishness and cowardice: and these are the diabolic in man—not this poor wish to have a woman, that they make such a cry about.⁵

Sexuality is often mistaken for evil, Stevenson adds, because it can readily become an *arena* for the worst in human behavior: as he puts it to Bocock, "The sexual field and the business field are perhaps the two best fitted for the display of cruelty and cowardice and selfishness. That is what people see; and these they confound."

The proposition that sexual desire carries absolutely no intrinsic harm appears also in the third chapter of Stevenson's "Lay Morals," an essay he began drafting in 1879 in the midst of a passionate involvement with the American woman he was to marry in 1880, Fanny Osbourne. Stevenson further proposes in the essay, however, that sexuality can become a *vehicle* for the good or ill of the human soul, depending upon whether it serves as a force for self-integration or self-alienation. His argument on this point is worth briefly summarizing, given the implications for *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* of what the essay proposes about both the danger of self-division and the role of love in promoting self-unification.

5. All quotes in this paragraph are from Stevenson's letter of [? Mid-November 1887] to John Paul Bocock, Yale *Letters* 6:56–57, excerpted on pp. 86–87 of this Norton Critical Edition.

Stevenson's central claim in the third chapter of "Lay Morals" is that we live most fully and well when all our faculties, sensual, emotional, and spiritual, are utilized in a way that accords with something he variously calls "conscience," "the central self," "inner self or soul," or "righteousness."⁶ This "Something" ("it may well be the love of God; or it may be an inherited . . . instinct") carries a sense of larger purpose and rightness which flashes upon us intermittently; when it does, "the intimacy" with "inner self" is "renewed again with joy." The risk in sexuality, he observes to readers assumed to be male, is that though sexual appetite is merely "a physical need like the want of food or slumber," it is so "imperious" in its demands that "in the satisfaction of this desire, as it first appears, the soul . . . oft unsparingly regrets and disapproves the satisfaction." The likely outcome is a fracturing of the self, a condition of living "alternately with our opposing tendencies in continual see-saw of passion and disgust."

However, division of soul and body such as the demands of sexuality can impose is only a minor version of what the essay goes on to define as that form of more permanent estrangement from the "central self" that makes the worst ill of the human soul. The "one declension which is irretrievable and draws on the rest" Stevenson warns, "is to lose consciousness of oneself." Moments of communion with the inner self or soul are intermittent at best, he suggests; drifting away altogether from the effort of maintaining contact with the soul produces what he apocalyptically characterizes as "temporal damnation, damnation on the spot and without the form of judgment." The darkly religious language here is a clue, I think, to Stevenson's being on the same track of thought involved in his statement to Bocock that "the Hypocrite" in Jekyll "let out" the evil qualities that represent "the diabolic in man." For all his rebellion against puritanical prudery and hypocrisy, and for all his interest in a secularizing reconsideration of Christian theology in light of Victorian science, Stevenson retained from the Scotch Presbyterianism of his Edinburgh childhood a large burden of concern about the way small sins could grow into large ones if left unvisited by the eye of conscience. And surely habitual hypocrisy invites just such a drift from responsiveness to soul and conscience. A public image of sanctity becomes an alibi to the self *from* the self, a shield under which fault can breed and fester undetected.

If such is the danger of alienating body from soul and deed from conscience, Stevenson on the other hand credits maturely committed sexual love with a considerable power of combating such self-alienation. In "Lay Morals," he suggests that the glory of

6. "Lay Morals," published posthumously in the 1896 Edinburgh Edition of *The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson* 4 ("Miscellanies"). These and all subsequent quotes from "Lay Morals" can be found on pp. 342-348 in this edition of the essay.

wholehearted love is that it can educate the senses into harmony with the best impulses of mind and conscience:

But let the man learn to love a woman as far as he is capable of love; and for this random affection of the body there is substituted a steady determination, a consent of all his powers and faculties, which supersedes, adopts, and commands the other. The desire survives, strengthened, perhaps, but taught obedience, and changed in scope and character. Life is no longer a tale of betrayals and regrets; for the man now lives as a whole; . . . through all the extremes and ups and downs of passion, he remains approvingly conscious of himself.

In "Reflections and Remarks on Human Life," a commentary on ethics begun a year later than "Lay Morals," Stevenson extols the very conditions of matrimony as a source of self-integration. His point, in the paragraph headed "Marriage," is that when two loving, inevitably fallible human beings share life and lodgings, moral self-awareness is invaluable advanced through the resulting increased accountability of deed to conscience. Theological language is invoked in this tribute to marriage on a note of exaltation that contrasts strikingly with the threat of "temporal damnation" associated with estrangement from conscience in "Lay Morals":

To take home to your hearth that living witness whose blame will most affect you, to eat, to sleep, to live with your most admiring and thence most exacting judge, is not this to domesticate the living God? Each becomes a conscience to the other, legible like a clock upon the chimney-piece. Each offers to his mate a figure of the consequence of human acts. . . . and though I continue to sin, it must now be with open eyes.⁷

The passage's image of a marital partner as a divinely educative mirror makes it a suggestive point of reference for Henry Jekyll, narcissistically infatuated with his own image in the cheval-glass as Hyde, and so unresponsive to the consequences of his acts that "conscience slumbered" (53) while his inner self descended to murderous violence.

Indeed, turning back to the story from the prose writing, it becomes apparent that many of the ideas presented in Stevenson's moral essays about love's capacity to promote psychic self-unification and moral self-awareness are played out in reverse in *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Or rather, intimations of love's gifts hover in this magnificently suggestive spook story as a kind of ghost presence latent in the all-important motif of bonds, while Hyde stands

7. "Reflections and Remarks on Human Life," published posthumously in the 1896 Edinburgh Edition of *The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson*, Appendix, 40.

as a damning commentary on the intensification of psychic self-alienation and moral blindness that come with Jekyll's accelerating breaking of bonds.

The word "bond," taken as a noun or verb, is woven throughout the tale. It is variously used in reference to bonds of affectionately close acquaintance, inner bonds of spirit and flesh, and bonds of social responsibility. Henry Jekyll throughout his adult life has apparently had at best only a limited tolerance for any of them. Tormented by "an almost morbid sense of shame" over his irresistible attraction to pleasures he finds "undignified," as he puts it in the document he leaves for Utterson, he has long held the conviction that "it was the curse of mankind that these incongruous faggots [the "just" and "unjust" selves within him] were thus bound together"(49). He sought to unbind those tendencies in himself even before the creation of Hyde, simply by assigning them separate existences, one of the day and one of the night, left unaccountable to each other or to the world at large. It is unthinkable that a wife or family member should be allowed close enough to know of his secret life. Only the bonds of male friendship remain to Jekyll, and they, along with the bonds of social restraint, will be sacrificed through his creation of Hyde.⁸ A decade before the present action of the tale, a quarrel with Lanyon over the theories that will produce Hyde breaks "a bond of common interest" between the two men. The actual emergence of Hyde through a process of chemical transformation is accompanied by a characteristic sensation which Jekyll twice describes as "a solution of the bonds of obligation"(50, 58). As that unnatural freedom from accountability gives license, over time, to the most recklessly willful of impulses, Hyde bludgeons an old man to death in a scene that the maid who witnesses it describes by saying that "Mr. Hyde broke out of all bounds." In the end, with Hyde a hunted murderer and Jekyll ever more subject to involuntary transformations, Jekyll withdraws from all social contacts. The man who broke all bonds and bounds is seen immured in a "house of voluntary bondage"(31) and destined for suicide.

If we consider Jekyll's flight from the "curse" of man's dual nature in light of Stevenson's point in "Lay Morals" that desires of flesh and spirit are likely to *seem* irreconcilable until a man "learn[s] to love a woman as far as he is able," we glimpse a little-considered interpretive possibility: that Jekyll is the victim of a flawed assumption about human nature from beginning to end. The lesson Jekyll concludes he has "been made to learn," that "the doom and burthen of our life

8. For an argument that bonds of social connection and social restraint in the tale can be viewed as part of a Victorian debate about the values of autonomy versus community, see Martin Danahay, *A Community of One* (Albany: State University of New York at Albany Press, 1993), pp. 135-45.

is bound forever on man's shoulders"(49) may be right in regard to the inviolability of the bond that connects flesh to spirit within the self, but not, as I am supposing Stevenson would see it, in regard to the belief that this bond constitutes the "doom" of human existence. By this reading, Jekyll gets into trouble—and retains a central element of narrative impercipient—partly as a result of a form of underdevelopment. He never credits and so never discovers sexuality's power to bridge body and soul. Seeing no way of breaking out of his cycle of pleasure and remorse but to give guilt-free license to his desires, he compounds self-alienation and accomplishes the very reverse of developmental maturation, enacting through Hyde a social Darwinist nightmare of regression to the level of the child, the animal, even "the slime of the pit"(60). It is a form of self-sabotage which deserves to be read partly as Stevenson's rueful commentary on the damage that can be done to the psyche by the sexual puritanism rampant in Victorian society.

Such a reading can strengthen the sympathy readers may feel for the sheer, reckless, lust-for-life energy of Jekyll's blind rebellion against an unlivable ideal of goodness. That touch of renegade sympathy is surely precisely the effect Stevenson wants at certain moments in the tale—as for example, the moment of Jekyll's first chemical transformation, which Jekyll in his statement recounts in a sentence constructed so as to turn its second half into a deliciously subversive surprise: "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; and the thought, in that moment, braced and delighted me like wine"(50).

At the same time, Stevenson also weaves into the text various indicators of what remains in Jekyll's case a component of reprehensible moral blindness—a blindness that reflects not on the assumptions of his society, but on his own choice of deceit and social isolation to avoid accountability for actions he considers shameful. One measure of Jekyll's personal responsibility for his plight is the point of contrast we are given in Utterson. Utterson has been identified by a number of commentators as a *parallel* to Jekyll: a repressed bachelor given to puritanical self-censorship, wearing an air of professional respectability, and harboring something like vicarious pleasure in other men's high-spirited misdeeds. My own sense is that Stevenson manages to allow such parallels to intensify the atmosphere of slippery surface appearances and risky domestic isolation built up around his all-bachelor cast, but he meanwhile cues us to see that Utterson, quite unlike Jekyll, would never be the man to parade as a paragon of virtue while indulging his desires on the sly. The "dusty, dreary and yet somehow lovable Utterson" is too unprepossessing for that and too excessively, even comically diligent in monitoring himself—

as when after meeting Hyde, he is left "groping in all the corners of memory, lest by chance some Jack-in-the-Box of an old iniquity should leap to light there"(19).

A weightier hint of Jekyll's culpability speaks through the opening line of the poem with which Stevenson dedicates *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* to his cousin Katharine de Mattos: "It's ill to loose the bands that God decreed to bind." In its dedicatory context a celebration of a loving kinship tie, the line also doubles as an epigraph for Jekyll's story of bond-breaking. Most importantly, by warning against the breaking of bonds in terms that echo God's own rebuke to human presumption in the Book of Job ("Canst thou bind the sweet influences of Pleiades, or loose the bands of Orion?" [Job 38:31]), the line connects to the tale's use of biblical allusion, imagery of bonds, and devil-associations for Hyde in ways that invite us to consider Jekyll's creation of Hyde as an act of Satanic presumption yielding a Satanic nemesis.

We are brought here to the tale's most powerful intimation of blame against Jekyll, but at the same time its most powerful source of dread on his behalf. True to the story's origins in "a fine bogey tale" of a dream,⁹ Stevenson lets us dwell throughout the story in the terrified perception of the characters, Jekyll included, that Hyde is an autonomous being motivated by an inexplicable, repellant force of evil suggestive of the devil himself.¹ Overtones of the supernatural resonate almost as a subliminal effect as those who meet Hyde testify to the chill felt in the very marrow of one's bones, the sinking of the pulse, the "haunting sense of unexpressed deformity"(24) that his presence produces. Enfield resorts to calling Hyde "hellish" and "like some damned Juggernaut"; Utterson concludes after meeting him that he has seen "Satan's signature upon a face"(17). Jekyll himself, recounting the march of events by which the tastes of his biochemically projected alter ego "began to turn towards the monstrous," ends by calling him "my devil," "that child of Hell," and "something not only hellish but inorganic"(56, 59, 60). The sequence of terms reflects Jekyll's increasing sense of persecution at the hands of an invading alien, a thing of darkness he is by no means willing to call his.² In this way, Stevenson gets what I suspect he most wants from the devil-associations given to Hyde: a breadth of suggestiveness appropriate to the power, multidimensionality, and unfathomability of evil, or of horror itself; and an effect of nightmare fear in imagining the self occupied, mind and body, by an ever-stronger potential for a seemingly inhuman sabotage of all that we want to call good, sane,

9. See p. 77 in this edition.

1. For Jenni Calder's framing of a context for the devil-dimension of Hyde, see the excerpt on pp. 126-28 in this edition.

2. Cf. Prospero's line about Caliban in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* 5.275-76: "This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine."

or civilized. However, Stevenson also insinuates a number of details into the text indicating that Jekyll, in ways he cannot see but bears responsibility for, remains every bit as much Hyde's author as he was in the beginning—and indeed gives signs of it in the way that his *Jekyll*-persona is inhabited by the diabolic. Jekyll's "full statement," as well as Hyde's letter to Lanyon, echoes Scripture for the purpose of turning a sacred lesson about human subjection to God's power into a bid for escaping accountability.³ Jekyll in his "smooth-faced" (19) duplicity, as well as Hyde in his hell-bent licentiousness, shows an aspect of the face of evil.⁴

Stevenson leaves entrenched deep within the allegorical framework of the story the logic that refers Hyde's increasing demonism to the growth of fault made possible by Jekyll's abandonment of moral accountability. He promotes our empathetic engagement first with Utterson and then with Jekyll as he plunges us from the bewildered spectator standpoint into the last act of a drama in which Jekyll is symptomatically embroiled in the demonic consequences of his own two-facedness. We see Jekyll struggling in anguish to preserve what he intuitively feels to be the shrinking remains of his soul and clinging to an awareness of the element of a genuine love of virtue in himself as a sign that he is no hypocrite; we are little inclined to dwell on the fact that the self-estranged doctor, poor devil, is shrinking from ownership of the side of his being that flourished in the licentiousness he himself granted it.

The carefully worked imagery of bonds in the tale remains the reader's chief vehicle for glimpsing the possibility that the absence of women as love objects traces back to the same source as the presence of the diabolical: impulses of secrecy and self-alienation likely open to fly-by-night sexual encounters, but closed to love's lessons in self-revelation and self-integration. Stevenson does boost the visibility of this embedded motif in the final chapter, however, by weaving grotesque inversions of familial and domestic intimacy into Jekyll's own description of the final stage of his relationship to Hyde. Distorted, even murderous inversions of bonds bespeak the nemesis Jekyll has brought on himself. The "polar twins" he had thought to liberate from one another have turned to battle with a "hate . . . equal on each side." The biochemically produced offspring toward whom he once had "more than a father's interest" has become a

3. Hyde's "my troubles will roll away as a story that is told" subverts the message of Psalms 90:9: "all our days are passed in thy wrath: we spend our years as a tale that is told." Similarly, Jekyll's likening of Hyde to the captives of Philippi gaining release from prison glosses over the fact that the captives of Philippi in Acts 16:26 are God's servants, Paul and Silas, whom God sets free as a deliverance from religious persecution.
4. Stevenson may be hinting as much when he drops a folk-term for the devil, "Old Harry" into the very apostrophe to Jekyll with which the unsuspecting Utterson laments the evil he sees on the face of Hyde: "O my poor old Harry Jekyll, if ever I read Satan's signature upon a face, it is on that of your new friend."

"child of Hell," an "insurgent horror" who "lay caged in his flesh, where he heard it mutter and felt it struggle to be born"(61), and who, in one of those cycles of birth, vengefully burns the letters and destroys the portrait of Jekyll's own father. The crowning irony inheres in the image of matrimony contained in the phrase with which this essay began. For it is surely the most grimly apt of punishments that Jekyll's flight from the bonds of love and conscience, as well as his attempted escape from the detecting eye of judgment (such as, in "Lay Morals," a spouse can divinely represent), should turn implosively into his appalled awareness of being haunted by a succubus who dwells within him "closer than a wife, closer than an eye."