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The Most Dangerous Man in England

by Nicole Anderson

(English 1102)

The Victorian Era was a period marked by immense progress and tremendous achievement. Industry was booming, the economy was flourishing and gradually, society was changing (Chakma). No single man was more aware of this fact than “the most dangerous man in England”: the English naturalist and biologist, Charles Darwin (Fichman 17). In 1859, Darwin first published his controversial work, *The Origin of Species*. He proposed that humans were the product of the evolution of a lower species, shaking the core of society. It was not the biological process of evolution that terrified the masses; it was what Victorians thought it suggested or predicted (Ape 2005). Evolutionary theory rewrote history and challenged their concepts of religion, morality, and social status. Robert Louis Stevenson’s novella, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, is a vehicle for the Victorian people’s exploration of Darwinian theory, its relevancy to their culture, and what the future may hold for the human species.

The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde fits into the literary genre of Victorian science fiction. This variety of work first emerged in the mid-1800s and was renowned for its depictions of societal changes influenced or dictated by science and technology (Franklin). These works of this genre were not just for entertainment’s sake; they served a genuine purpose in society. In an era when science and technology were rapidly gaining momentum behind a culture once driven by Christianity, these works made an effort to understand the impact science had on the present as well as the future. Martin Fichman offers further explanation:

Science fiction helps create expectations of change by providing a cognitive estrangement. This encourages the reader to ponder both the contingent nature of what passes as the received culture of an area and, equally crucially, the potential realities of unknown but plausible futures. (163)

The introduction of Darwinian theory and the many tandem theories that followed left Victorians with many questions. Further explained in Dennis O’Neil’s article entitled “Pre-Darwinian Theories,” as a result of Europe’s strong religious beliefs at the time, the majority of 17th- and 18th-century biology concentrated on the descriptions of living things rather than where they came from.

The majority of Victorians were devout, church-going, Bible-reading Christians. Many of who took the *Book of Genesis*’s story of creation, in which God creates Earth and its inhabitants in seven days, as the literal explanation of the origins of human existence. This new explanation for human existence clashed with their culture’s primary belief system, concept of a creating God, humanity, and most importantly, their future. Many people believed that regression was at least as likely as progress within the natural and social orders (Fichman 164). Stevenson’s novella was, in true science fiction literary fashion, a tool for exploring the transition of a society, once dictated by religion, into a society influenced by science.

The character of Mr. Hyde is the novella’s primitive man. The physical descriptions of the evolutionary ancestors of modern humans made by paleoanthropologists and the words used to describe Mr. Hyde in the novella contain obvious parallels. As explained by Dennis O’Neil in his article titled “Early Transitional Humans,” members of the genus *Australopithecus*, our immediate

ancestors as well as the early transitional humans were shorter and lighter than modern man, usually only reaching around four to four and half feet in height and about seventy pounds in weight. In Stevenson's novella, Mr. Hyde was described as "dwarfish" (17). He was later referred to as "a person of small stature" (22).

Some of the most distinct physical differences between modern man and his ancestors can be seen in the skull and facial features. Australopithecus had a smaller brain, larger face and jaw, and larger teeth (O'Neil, "Early"). These differences would have varied in degrees of prominence as our ancestors transitioned into the genus, Homo. In Stevenson's novella, Mr. Utterson's character comments on Mr. Hyde, stating that he "gave an impression of deformity without any nameable malformation, he had a displeasing smile" (Stevenson 17). This statement leaves the reader wondering what aspect of Mr. Hyde's appearance will lead Mr. Utterson to suspect defect. If it had been a result of his small size, this particular abnormality would have been fairly simple to isolate. This assumption, in addition to the portion of the quotation addressing Mr. Hyde's smile, suggests something abnormal about his face. Other words used in the story to describe Hyde, such as "troglodytic," suggest that what Utterson actually sees in Mr. Hyde's are were the facial features of a less evolved or early transitional man (Stevenson 17). Furthermore, the notion of Mr. Hyde playing the role of primitive man is reinforced by Stevenson's consistently bold choices of words. The descriptions of "savage" and "hardly human!" contain obvious evolutionary undertones (Stevenson 17).

The dichotomy of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde is a comment on Cesare Lombroso's 1870 post-Darwinian theory of the criminal man, casting Mr. Hyde as the archaic criminal dwelling within Dr. Jekyll. Inspired by the concept of Social Darwinism and its widely abused scientific data, Italian physician Cesare Lombroso developed a hypothesis involving the origins of criminal behavior in humans. Lombroso claimed to have discovered specific physical and behavioral traits shared in criminals, apes and savages. These connections combined with his knowledge of Darwinian theory, lead Lombroso to conclude that criminals are "evolutionary throwbacks in our midst." He explained that the remnants of human's ancestral past lie dormant in our genetics, and for some less fortunate individuals, the past resurfaces (Gould 133).

According to Martin Fichman, Darwin himself believed that evolution offered some important pieces required in understanding the puzzle of human ethics. Darwin believed that morality should be approached in the same way an evolutionist would approach any other physical human trait; all these changes were products of natural selection and were inspired by pressures from the environment (Fichman 146). These are all theories that Darwin attempted to prove in his 1871 work, *Descent of Man*. Although none of the various biological explanations for morality were concrete, they still caught the attention of Victorians. They wondered if Darwin were headed in the right direction, what would become of the conventional answers to moral behavior provided by religion and philosophy.

It has been established that the physical appearance of Mr. Hyde is consistent with that of primitive man but the details of Dr. Jekyll's participation have yet to be addressed. At first glance, he appears a civilized, well-respected, modern man. Early in Stevenson's story, Mr. Utterson describes him:

...He now sat on the opposite side of the fire- a large, well made, smooth-faced man of fifty, with something of a slyish cast perhaps, but every mark of capacity and kindness. (Stevenson 19)

Even within this preliminary description of Dr. Jekyll's character is the suggestion of something devious within him; the hint of something more lying dormant just below Jekyll's surface

echoes Lombroso's theory of the criminal man. In the chapter of Stevenson's novella titled "Henry Jekyll's Full Statement of the Case", Dr. Jekyll explains the origins of his behaviors:

And indeed the worst of my faults was a certain impatient gaiety of disposition, such as has made the happiness of many, but such as I found it hard to reconcile with my imperious desire to carry my head high, and wear a more than commonly grave countenance before the public. Hence it came about that I concealed my pleasures; and that when I reached years of reflection, and began to look round me and take stock of my progress and position in the world, I stood already committed to a profound duplicity of life. (48)

In this passage, Dr. Jekyll confesses the internal struggle he feels between his natural pleasures and the high expectations of self-control placed upon him. In order to survive within Victorian society, a higher moral code of conduct was required. This is an exemplary case of an evolutionary adaptation emerging from environmental pressure. Addressing his true identity, Dr. Jekyll states:

It was on the moral side, and in my own person, that I learned to recognize the thorough and primitive duality of man; I saw that, of the two natures that contended in the field of my consciousness, even if I could rightly be said to be either, it was only because I was radically both; and from an early date... (49)

This primitive quality he recognizes within himself is, according to post-Darwinian theory, the genetic residue of his ancestral past. Jekyll describes his initial reaction to the physical transformation into Mr. Hyde as "natural and human" (Stevenson 51).

Another feature of *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* consistent with Darwinian theory is the depictions of female characters within the story, and furthermore, lack thereof. As retold by humanities and history professor, Martin Fichman, following Charles Darwin's reconstruction of human evolution, a number of his respected colleagues merged with specialists in the fields of gynecology, psychology, and anthropology with the intentions of forming a determinist theory based on biology. They proposed that women were anatomically, psychologically, and intellectually different from men. They argued on biased scientific grounds that women were less capable, would never match the intellectual triumphs of men, and could never possess the same level of power and authority (Fichman 139-40). This philosophy is revisited in the novella via the shortage of female characters and the consistent depiction of the existing female characters as weak, passive, and inferior. There are four brief interactions with females throughout the entire story. The first interaction involves the young girl who had been trampled by Mr. Hyde on the street. In Mr. Utterson's account of the incident, he says that after assaulting her, Hyde "left her screaming on the ground" (9). However, the doctor who has witnessed the incident says that the girl was unharmed; she was "more frightened" (9). Though there was no physical harm done, she was incapacitated by fear. The child is portrayed as a weak, helpless female being physically overpowered by a man and in need of rescue.

The maid who witnessed Sir Carew's murder through her bedroom window accounts for the second female appearance. In her description of the night of the murder, she is portrayed as naïve and powerless at the mercy of her own emotions. Her thoughts just before witnessing the violent incident are recounted:

It seems she was romantically given, for she sat down upon her box... and fell into a dream of musing. Never (she used to say, with streaming tears, when she narrated the experience) never had she felt more at peace with all men or thought more kindly of the world. (21)

Furthermore, after witnessing the fatal attack, the maid faints. She is merely a passive witness to the crime and is of no use to the immediate circumstance. Had she also been in danger, she would have been defenseless against her attacker.

The last two women accounted for are Dr. Jekyll's cook and housemaid. Poole, Dr. Jekyll's butler, wants Mr. Utterson to hear first-hand the difference in Dr. Jekyll's voice. Upon entering Dr. Jekyll's house, they are met by a huddle of servants.

At the sight of Mr. Utterson, the housemaid broke into hysterical whimpering; and the cook, crying out 'Bless God! It's Mr. Utterson,' ran forward as if to take him in her arms. (34)

The housemaid's hysteria at the sight of Mr. Utterson reinforces yet another depiction of a weak, irrational woman in need of rescue. Moreover, the cook is so desperate that she almost crosses the strictly observed boundaries between opposing social classes (servant and master) and nearly embraces him.

In addition to the obvious lack of female presence in Stevenson's story, there is an absence of sexuality. This lack of sexuality addresses Victorians' concerns regarding declining birthrates among the upper class and the future of the human species. Martin Fichman elaborates:

The major dilemma posed by evolutionism: would the future of the human race be graced by progress- ethically as well as technically – or, rather, scarred by degeneration and regression? (164)

In an era defined by progress, nothing could invoke fear quite like the possibility of regression as prompted by the theories of Social Darwinism. According to the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, in the time between 1800 and 1900 birthrates decreased by forty percent. These decreases were even more dramatic among the middle and upper class. Many speculated that if the lower class produced more offspring than the upper class, human evolution would favor the "undesirable" traits of the lower class citizens. Thus this would hinder further advancement, potentially leading to the regression of their society and eventually, the entire species. In the novella, it is presumed that all of the main characters are bachelors. There is no mention of significant others or even potential romantic interests. In describing the women that are included in the story, their physical appearances hold no weight and none of them have been given proper names. This leads the reader to believe that sexual relations between men and women were rather infrequent among upper class Victorians and would have accounted for the plummet in reproductive rates.

For the people of the Victorian Era, Charles Darwin had earned his reputation; he and his theories invoked fear and wonder, questioned authority, rewrote history, and inspired Robert Louis Stevenson's science fiction novella, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. However, some readers may have perceived Stevenson's novella as a comment on Christianity's model of good and evil. Attractive as this notion may appear, it would have been inconsistent with the true nature of science fiction literature. Although religion did hold the metaphorical reigns of Victorian society, neither Christianity nor the concepts of good and evil were remotely scientific or technological; they were old concepts. Furthermore, had Stevenson written *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* with another scientific or technological discovery in mind, it would not have accounted for the

obvious depiction of Mr. Hyde as primitive man; no other scientific discovery of the era could have inspired Stevenson's consistent use of descriptive imagery containing such evident primitive undertones. By casting Mr. Hyde as the archaic man within the modern Dr. Jekyll, Stevenson was free to compare and contrast the old and the new. He fashioned his characters as instruments for exploring Darwinian theory, Victorian society and human nature; Stevenson channeled the thoughts of the people into his work and allowed them to see the sights and muse the future.

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