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*L'Appel du Vide: Making Spaces for Sinful Exploration in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde**

L'appel du vide, French for “the call of the void,” defines the psychological phenomenon wherein a person standing at a high point has the seemingly inexplicable urge to hurl themselves off the edge despite knowing the serious and typically deadly consequences of doing so. This phrase can also be used to define the desire to self-destruct, whether that means engaging in harmful behavior or following the original definition of leaping from the cliffside. Now, there are ways to safely explore these illogical desires. Whether one chooses to bungee jump off a bridge, drink oneself into oblivion, or spend the night with a well-paid stranger, humanity has incorporated spaces dedicated to exploring “the void” into its societies. However, what of humanity’s other, more sinister urges? With spaces being provided for substance abuse, gambling, and extramarital sex, it seems as though humanity has drawn a hypocritical line in the sand in regard to which immoral acts are acceptable and which are condemnable. This concept of societal hypocrisy is a major theme in Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Stevenson’s novella, published in the wake of Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*, explores how humanity may “adapt” sinful behavior to a conservative and restrictive society, such as that of Victorian England. Thus, Jekyll’s use of science to physically separate himself from his dark side as well as his preparation of living quarters and a legal identity for his shadow self can be seen as an attempt to fit his impulses into a society that would scorn them;

however, with this comes the question, Is it possible to create a space for vice that fits within societal frameworks? And if so, is the premeditated construction of such spaces less or more sinful than simply committing the act outright? Because Stevenson's own morality crisis, the result of his Calvinist upbringing and his experience as a law student, left him with more questions than answers in the context of moral truth, the novella can be read as a means through which the author explores these ethical inquiries; thus, by approaching the novella with these spaces for vice and the call of the void in mind, we can hope to answer these questions.

Before diving into an analysis of the novella, it is necessary to first address the seemingly paradoxical dual nature of vice, a concept that is as alluring as it is shameful. The reasoning behind these conflicting perceptions lies in the means through which morality is defined. In "On Appearing Just and Being Unjust," Lawrence Beals states, "Both in the life of the individual and in the lives of societies the origin of ethical ideas occurs as some form of intolerance. Something is not to be put up with," meaning that an act being declared immoral relies on some form of disruption to a preexisting system or "order" (611). Thus, morality is based on perception, a visible cause and effect. When there are negative effects resulting from an action, it is seen as threatening and thereby immoral. However, the case is quite different when the act, or the consequence of said act, is unable to be witnessed. Immoral acts conducted privately and removed from the public eye remain in a gray area, a concept Beals expands on further: "Unless an act alleged to be criminal evokes retaliation, its status as crime is open to doubt" (609). Thus, the motivation to act justly lies in the fear of punishment and public shame, as stated by Plato in his discussion of the Ring of Gyges¹ in *The Republic* (Plato 122). However, according to Plato's argument, if the fear of being punished is removed, perhaps by the magical invisibility of the

¹ Plato proposes a moral dilemma in which an individual obtains a ring that grants the wearer invisibility; thus, it is up to the wearer to choose to act justly or unjustly outside societal gaze.

Ring of Gyges or, in the case of Jekyll and Hyde, the ability to transform into an almost unrecognizable persona, vice becomes a self-serving, inconsequential indulgence. This then raises the question, If moral codes are based in perception, what do we make of imperceptible sinners? Furthermore, how do we categorize criminal activity that, at the very least, attempts to reduce its threat to societal order? It is here we must turn to Stevenson, Jekyll, and Hyde.

Stevenson was a man haunted by shame due to his Calvinist upbringing and the surroundings of Victorian society and, as a result, was plagued with moral questioning throughout his life. Additionally, the publication of *Origin of Species* just a few decades prior to the novella's construction as well as Stevenson's travels through the South Pacific and exposure to non-European culture led the author to question his understanding of the validity of Victorian and Christian morality in the face of evolution and the New World. This struggle for ethical definition is apparent in a statement made by Stevenson: "Ethics are my veiled mistress; I love them, but I know not what they are" (*Letters* 6). Specifically, the author was focused on the evasion of morality and on sins that go hypocritically unpunished, a theme that pervades *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Stevenson's passionate distaste for hypocrisy is evident in his retaliation to an argument that the Jekyll/Hyde character is a mere sexual deviant: "There is no harm in a voluptuary; . . . 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; he says so himself, but people are so filled full of folly and inverted lust, that they can think of nothing but sexuality" (13). Along with his high regard for ethics and disdain for hypocrisy, Stevenson also states that humanity as a whole, himself included, has a love for sin. Thus, it can be inferred that, at least for Stevenson, even those dedicated to ethical codes have an inherent call to darkness, or, in Jekyll's words, "Man is not truly one, but truly two" (Stevenson, *Strange*

Case 49). Everyone feels the call of the void, but ethical codes and all the shame involved with breaking them keeps humanity from fully succumbing to these vices. However, if moral law were abandoned, a fear enabled by the introduction of the theory of evolution, what would prevent humanity from running amok? With the awakened option of atheism, there was no guarantee that immorality would be punished after death. The responsibility to serve punishments or, at the very least, keep immoral actions contained fell to mankind.

In *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Stevenson exemplifies the containment of vice through Jekyll's scientific pursuits and his physical transformation into Hyde, an act that allows Jekyll to explore his dark side while maintaining his social graces. Jekyll is able to exist in a moral gray area for the reader and other characters in the novella because he and Hyde act independently and function in different spaces; it is only when these spaces begin to overlap that there are consequences for Jekyll's actions. Jekyll's actions demonstrate not only a fear of the law but also a fear of being perceived while being unlawful, a fear of his darkest desires being known as just that, his own. Although Darwin destabilized the figurehead for morality, specifically Abrahamic religion, British society still held firmly to these values and had ingrained them into most facets of life; thus, rejection of the preexisting moral law was threatening and declared wrong, so Jekyll is unable to freely act on his desires as himself without becoming a threat to Victorian society and his own social standing. Because of this, he turns to science, a field that functions objectively and is based on progress, as a means for him to "dominate the ways others see him and the way he sees himself," as stated by Richard Gaughan (184). The objectivity of science removes science from moral obligation, which serves to justify the existence of Hyde as well as Jekyll's subsequent enabling under the pretense of the pursuit of knowledge; science is its own space. This mad scientist form of justification is explored by the

scholar Gary D. Rhodes, who states that “[the scientist’s] ego held true to the maxim *sapere aude*,² even when it led him to hazard in pursuits man was meant to leave alone” (311). Thus, Jekyll uses science to satisfy his craving to understand his lust for sin, and it is science that steers him straight into the darkness. Through science he is able to achieve a sort of moral loophole and separate his public persona from his private desires, maintain innocence, and evade social and legal repercussions. However, as the novella progresses, Stevenson intimates that attempting to evade ethics is in itself a sinful act, and Jekyll is only able to avoid responsibility for so long.

While Jekyll is widely considered to be the good half of the wicked duo, it is important to recognize that there is really no duo at all, that Jekyll’s actions are Hyde’s actions and vice versa. As previously stated, switching between the two egos merely creates a means for Jekyll to remove himself from societal shame on both an internal and an external level. Laura Helen Marks, in her chapter on dual nature and pornography, compares Jekyll’s transformation into Hyde to people justifying their consumption of pornography: “like Dr. Jekyll of Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, [porn consumers] are ‘normal,’ everyday men who manage the conflict between their self-image as decent, ethical people and their continued enjoyment of material that violates their own ethical standards” (123). The average porn consumer engages with the socially shamed content in the privacy of their own home and therefore can be convinced that because they were not seen and no one was directly harmed by their consumption, they remain morally secure.

This furthermore reflects Plato’s argument in *The Republic* that humanity will stray from morals if there is no fear of being caught. Donald Verene, in his analysis of the Ring of Gyges and the sociopath, states, “We are just and follow the laws because of faintness of heart. If we

² Latin for “dare to know”; contextually, it applies to the scientist’s drive for knowledge, which overshadows moral responsibility.

were free of any concern of suffering apprehension and penalty we would do whatever we wished” (203). Because Hyde operates as a being of “pure evil” with no moral responsibility and thus does not feel guilt, it is clear that he is not the one attempting to evade ethical responsibility, but rather it is Jekyll searching for a way to relieve himself of his wanting to sin without facing consequences (Stevenson, *Strange Case* 52). Jekyll’s agency in the terror tale suggests that he is guiltier than Hyde is: as J. Gerard Dollar states, “Jekyll enters into his experiment and subsequent addiction with his eyes open, knowing that by putting himself in the power of his drug he risks death. He is very consciously making a moral decision” (270). Jekyll makes the “moral decision” to manifest his vice-filled desires into Hyde, and once the other self is created, he allows for the perpetuation of evil by going so far as to purchase an apartment for Hyde in Soho, a rough neighborhood that will provide high-risk victims and discrepancy, essentially making Soho Hyde’s personal playground. Therefore, by attempting to subvert morality by constructing a space for his sinful alter ego, Jekyll is the true threat to Victorian ethics and society: the adaptive criminal.

The consequences of Jekyll’s experimentation with vice appear when he is no longer able to keep his two sides separated and begins turning into Hyde without intending to. This lack of control dismantles Jekyll’s fantasy that he is an innocent man, and he and Hyde have become so intertwined that his previous statement, “the moment I choose, I can be rid of Mr. Hyde. I give you my hand upon that,” is no longer applicable (Stevenson, *Strange Case* 16). Jekyll becomes too entrapped in sin to break free, and by living according to his senses and impulses, he becomes consumed by them. The philosopher Benedict de Spinoza, in his book the *Ethics*, speaks of the dangers of living by emotions only: “the man who is subject to affects is under the control, not of himself, but of fortune, in whose power he so greatly is that often, though he sees

the better for himself, he is still forced to follow the worse” (197). Because Jekyll can freely explore and indulge even his most twisted emotions and impulses, he continually and consciously chooses to masquerade as Hyde in Soho and remains ignorant to the possible consequences. Once Hyde is able to manifest without Jekyll’s knowledge, the doctor loses control of himself and is thereby no longer his own master. Here his punishment begins.

Having the ability to adopt a new persona and engage in sin across town provides shelter and security for Jekyll’s fear of the law, but when this sinful space bleeds into the doctor’s everyday life, he loses control and thus returns to the shame, guilt, and anguish of a sinful man in a world that demands righteousness. Jekyll’s languish takes a physical and mental toll on him: “Under the strain of this continually impending doom and by the sleeplessness to which I now condemned myself, ay, even beyond what I had thought possible to man, I became, in my own person, a creature eaten up and emptied by fever, languidly weak both in body and mind, and solely occupied by one thought: the horror of my other self” (Stevenson, *Strange Case* 62). Jekyll is fearful not only of being discovered but also that he will no longer be able to control himself; thus, his original goal to control the ways he is perceived and the way he sees himself is dismantled. Again, here it is important to remember that Jekyll and Hyde are one and the same and that Jekyll has simply become addicted to living shamelessly; Daniel Wright emphasizes this idea: “In any case, to assume that Jekyll represents human ‘good’ while Hyde embodies that which is ‘evil’ is to forget that Hyde is but the consequence of Jekyll’s experiments in forbidden science” (255). Despite Jekyll’s attempts to keep his two sides separate and remove himself from his sin, Hyde “exists only by the will of Jekyll; he has no independent being” (255). Like the consumers of pornography in Marks’s analysis, Jekyll relies on privacy to maintain his appearance to both himself and the outside world as an honest Victorian man. Therefore,

although the doctor attempts to contain his vice in a designated space, the worlds become convoluted and destroy one another, as evident with the murder or suicide of Jekyll and Hyde at the novella's conclusion. Thus, through the case of Jekyll and Hyde it is clear that creating space for vice only enables addiction to sin and breeds self-destruction.

Designated sinful spaces are not a new concept and have been a part of human existence for centuries. The existence of such places implies an inherent and historical lack of self-control in humankind, and while promoted as an acceptable means of blowing off steam and quenching that call of the void, they only provide a means for self-destruction and addiction. The key facet of these institutions is self-destruction. The reasons those running our societies will allow for drinking, gambling, and drug use lie in the fact that these are acts that, for the most part, harm only the one partaking in such vices and thereby are not a threat to society as a whole. Similarly, Jekyll is able to indulge Hyde because of the physical transformation and placement in Soho; these actions do not harm Jekyll's social sphere, and if any harm were to be done, surely society would benefit from the death of a few Soho prostitutes, so how could Hyde pose a threat to Victorian life? However, once members of Jekyll's circle cross paths with Hyde, the threat of harm bleeds into everything Jekyll holds dear: his career, his friends, and his reputation. Once the doctor is no longer able to reel in his dark side, both he and London are at risk; thus, the means of containing vice is not foolproof. This reflects the consequences of the real-life counterparts of moral hypocrisy; locations that promote sinful behavior, such as Las Vegas, nicknamed "Sin City," have built an economy that relies on preying on addictions and indulging in darkness. Tourists flock in droves for the sweet relief of shameless indulgence in vice under the pretense that "what happens here, stays here" and are able to return to their office job, sweet suburban nuclear family, perhaps even Sunday church service without regret. However, the city

they left behind is plagued by sex trafficking that fills nearby brothels and tunnels full of homeless men and women who just couldn't quite reach that jackpot. But none of that matters because, after all, they did it to themselves, right?

Moral hypocrisy relies on the fact that only the one succumbing to immorality is harmed, thus creating a market for self-destruction. Stevenson's obsession with this topic is woven throughout *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, which paints a macabre portrait of life without balance, a life where good and evil do not work hand in hand but rather overwhelm each other. The harshly rigid law and culture of Victorian society was implemented out of fear to smother immorality at the hands of atheism, and Jekyll has no option but to evolve in a way that provides shelter from the all-seeing and ever-judging Victorian gaze. However, by separating himself into two personas, the evil within is left without a leash and leaves Jekyll to be consumed by darkness. Perhaps Stevenson's fixation on shame and punishment at first glance appears strict and, for lack of a better word, a bit of a buzzkill, but the presence of shame is necessary for forgiveness. Just as good is necessary for evil to exist, shame is required for redemption. The deadly fate of Jekyll and Hyde promotes this need for balance within society and critiques the sin and the society that allows for this fate. Thus, through the novella it can be inferred that the removal of shame by the normalization of vice through designated sinful spaces is dangerous and that anarchy must be balanced through order. So, when the void calls, be wary of how you answer. No sin can be truly harmless.

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