Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde Revisited

by Dennis Merritt, Kevin Lu, and Frazer Merritt

Abstract:

The publication of Robert Lewis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* in January of 1886 created a shock wave in the consciousness of its readers. It was an instant success in and beyond the literary world as people were confronted with the uneasy thought that evil originated within the individual and not from an external source like the Devil. This was nine years before Freud conducted his first psychoanalysis and decades before Jung introduced the concept of the Shadow.

Stevenson was known as the author of *Treasure Island* and children's poetry but had long been looking for a vehicle to write about the strange Other he had been aware of since his childhood nightmares. The inspiration for *Jekyll and Hyde* came directly from a dream, and he attributed most of his literary success to help from the "Brownies," the "little people," in his interior world and dreamland. The novel can be seen in relation to the love-hate relationship with his father upon whom he depended for financial support during his lifelong struggles with severe respiratory illness, which led to drug addiction in attempt to cope with the illness. For Stevenson, the Other was primarily the dark side of the strict Calvinistic religion of his father and proper late 19th-century Scottish culture, yet the concept is even more relevant today as we face the evils of terrorism, racism, white-collar crime, rising authoritarianism, and intolerable levels of polarization in modern societies.

Key words:

Robert Lewis Stevenson, Jekyll and Hyde, Jung, Shadow, Other, dreams, Putin, Ukraine, opioid crisis

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February 24, 2022 – Russia invades Ukraine.

January 6th, 2021 – Insurrection in the US Capitol.

September 11th, 2001 – Al-Qaeda's terrorist attack.

These tragedies were, to a significant degree, the result of ignorance regarding the human psyche: evil that is not recognized within ourselves gets projected, resulting in horrific treatment and atrocities committed onto the Other. This is one of the key lessons of Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.* Published 136 years ago, Stevenson's novel shocked the world, yet now in the 21st century the deeper implications of his disturbing vision continue to haunt us. His brilliance was to illustrate that evil originated *within* the mind – not externally or from the Devil. In our attempts to suppress this evil, it only grows more powerful. The novel's message is, in too many ways, more relevant today than ever. It would be wise to revisit the story's deeper meaning and psychological import.

Unlike other literary works that took the public decades to fully understand and appreciate – such as Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* or F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* – Stevenson's novel struck a global cultural nerve. Within six months after publication in January of 1886, it had sold 40,000 copies in Britain and 250,000 copies in North America. It catapulted Stevenson to celebrity stardom, and with his face splashed across newspapers and gossip rags, the public was "Louis mad" for "the greatest author living." (Harman, 2005, pp. 324, 398) People who never read fiction loved it, ministers sermonized about it, and it was the subject of leading articles in religious papers. (307-308) It was, in other words, an instant classic, and the Jekyll-

and-Hyde character entered the collective consciousness. But what accounts for the novel's astonishing success?

The construct of this novel puts the reader in a detective role trying to solve the strange case that is really *themselves*, and every human, and demands that we investigate how we hide the dark sides of our nature in the hopes of upholding an acceptable and morally upright persona. The story follows a respectable, late-19th century Victorian doctor of a Calvinist persuasion who is developing a drug that will isolate and dissociate his dark side, thereby enabling him to live unencumbered and be purer in public appearance. Mr. Hyde grows in strength after several transmutations until he commits wanton evil and can no longer be prevented from overtaking Dr. Jekyll's consciousness. When a friend discovers his dark secret, the "good" doctor fears public humiliation and commits suicide. The story ends with a confessional letter written by Jekyll before his death explaining why he conducted the experiment and how it became uncontrollable. This hits the reader with a heavy dose of psychic reality about the evil lurking in each of us and the necessity of constructing a persona that more closely aligns with the values and ethical imperatives of the archetypal Self. (Hopcke, 1995; Sauder MacGuire, 2017)

Jekyll confides in his suicide note a belief that all humans are a commingling of good and evil, and the evil that is Edward Hyde is "the lethal side of man." (Stevenson, 1886, p. 88) There was a certain lack of vitality and freedom in Jekyll's life, whereas Hyde lived an electrifying existence. What began as "undignified" pleasures for Mr. Hyde quickly morphed into "vicarious depravity." He became "a being inherently malign and villainous," totally self-centered and "drinking pleasure with bestial avidity from any degree of torture to another"; his mind became consumed with fear and hatred, twisting him into a "child of hell." (pp. 91, 101)

Stevenson used his considerable writing skills to convey the frightening dimensions of what were, in fact, based on real-life experiences. He had been obsessed since childhood with Scotland's most notorious psychopath, William Brodie, an heir to a family fortune and known to all as a deacon, head tradesman, and powerful politician in Stevenson's hometown of Edinburgh. Brodie lived a double life indulging in cock fights, prostitutes, alcohol, and robbery. Stevenson admired Brodie's subversion of authority, particularly since Stevenson detested the hypocritical Calvinist society of the late 1800s and the severity of his Calvinist parents. During his rebellious university phase, he lived a bohemian lifestyle, haunting the same taverns and brothels that Brodie had frequented 100 years earlier, drinking excessively, abusing opium, and even dressing like the infamous criminal.

But the rebellion was short-lived: at age 22, Stevenson had a severe relapse of a respiratory illness, which, since childhood, had often kept him in a liminal, near-death realm. After his health failed, Stevenson became dependent on his father's money and addictive drug cocktails to stay alive. Morphine, chloroform, ether, but especially Laudanum – a combination of opium and alcohol – led Stevenson into a tortuous life of the agonies and ecstasies of drug addiction. This played out in confessional form with Hyde's character coming to dominate Jekyll's consciousness and, it is theorized, was responsible for Stevenson's death at age 44 of a cerebral hemorrhage, a potential consequence of years of opioid abuse. In a case of life imitating art, Jekyll's decline can be seen as that of an addict becoming hooked on the drug transformation until one loses control and the addiction takes over. The message of the novel is clear: if you remove all restraints, evil will emerge and eventually dominate, with deadly consequences. (Sheehan, 2004)

Jekyll and Hyde are alive in America with the Sackler family, owners of the now bankrupt Purdue Pharma that produced OxyContin, an addictive opioid pain medication. The family profited by $12 - 13 billion (Sandler, 2019) and supported the company's push to increase sales representatives' visits to doctors and other prescribers when profits began to drop at one point. (Wilmsen & Bebinger, 2019; Whitaker & Hornblower, 2020) Political contributions ensured that politicians crippled the government's ability to monitor and investigate towns and cities with exorbitant sales of OxyContin, as well as find and punish doctors who oversubscribed. (Whitaker, Rosen & Hornblower, 2017) Company data on the drug's addictive nature was suppressed, a costly omission that has led to the loss of 930,000 lives since 1999, which has devastated millions of families and friends. (Chiaello & Brandt, 2021) In addition, US economic losses are estimated at $631 billion over a four-year period. (Dodge, 2019) The Jekyll (persona) side: a successful corporate family known for huge philanthropic contributions. The Hyde (shadow) side: the heinous death toll and untold misery inflicted upon millions. This is more than white-collar crime. This is white-collar evil arising out a tension between polarities described lucidly by Mark Saban (2019).

In 1885 at the age of 35, Stevenson was in one of his ill phases and heavily abusing Laudanum, when he awoke from a nightmare that became the inspiration for *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. He dreamt a man was being pursued for a crime and pressed into a cabinet where he swallowed a powder and, in front of his pursuers, changed into another being. Stevenson had a cabinet in his childhood bedroom – it had been made by William Brodie. For years he had been looking for a way, a vehicle, to write about the Other: "that strong sense of a man's double being which must at times come in upon and overwhelm at times the main of every thinking creature." (Stevenson, 1892) Upon waking, he "knew at once that I had found the missing link . . . , and

before I again went to sleep almost every detail of the story, as it stands was clear to me." (Hammerton, 1907, pp. 84-85) He worked feverishly on the story and had it ready for the printer within ten weeks. (Stevenson, 1892)

Stevenson readily gave credit to the world of dreams as inspiration for his writings, as dreams provided his most profound experiences of the Other (Papadopoulos, 2002), that liminal and imaginal space out of which he wrote. He first encountered the Other through his many near-death experiences in childhood from his illnesses, and the "other" side of the bourgeois Calvinist society of his parents. He gives a detailed description of his experience of the dream world in his essay "A Chapter on Dreams," which refenced his childhood nightmares, as well as a nightmare in his college years that left him with substantial anxiety during the day and a sense that he "led a double life – one of the day, one of the night – one that he had every reason to believe was the true one, another that he had no means of proving to be false." (Stevenson, 1892) One is instantly reminded of Jung's (1963) own struggle between what he called personalities one (consciousness, represented by the predictability of his father) and two (the unconscious, represented by the unpredictability of his mother). Stevenson's father invented tales to help young Robert fall asleep, but when he became a writer he had what he called the "little people," his "Brownies," who manufactured his dreams and helped him to develop marketable tales. Stevenson gave this description of his relationship to the Brownies:

> I am sometimes tempted to suppose I am no story-teller at all, but a creature as matter of fact as any cheesemonger or any cheese, and the whole of my published fiction should be the single-handed product of some Brownie, some Familiar, some unseen collaborator, whom I keep locked in a back garret, while I get all the praise and he but a share of the pudding. I am an excellent adviser, I pull back and I cut down; and I dress the whole in

> the best words and sentences that I can find and make; I hold the pen, too; and I do the sitting at the table, which is about the worst of it; and when all is done, I make up the manuscript and pay for the registration; so that, on the whole, I have some claim to share, though not so largely as I do, in the profits of our common enterprise. (Stevenson, 1892)

His description of his part in the writing process aligns with Jung's reflections of the role of the individual in the creation of visionary art. (Jung, 1931) Jung writes:

> One might also describe it [a work of art] as a living being that uses man only as a nutrient medium, employing his capacities according to its own laws and shaping itself to the fulfilment of its own creative purpose . . . . (par. 108) While his conscious mind stands amazed and empty before this phenomenon, he is overwhelmed by a flood of thoughts and images which he never intended to create and which his own will could never have brought into being . . . . Here the artist is not identical with the process of creation; he is aware that he is subordinate to his work and stands outside it, as though he were a second person; or as though a person other than himself had fallen within the magic circle of an alien will (par. 110).

Stevenson's characterization of the Brownies mirrors the "little people" in our dreams Jung talked about and Jung's view that the deeper unconscious is an amoral realm (Jung, 1969, par. 209; Jung, 1973, p. 283; Jung, 1975, par. 317):

> I do most of the morality, worse luck! and my Brownies have not a rudiment of what we call a conscience . . . . For the most part, my Brownies are somewhat fantastic, like their stories hot and hot, full of passion and the picturesque, alive with animating incident; and they have no prejudice against the supernatural. My Brownies have not a rudiment of what

> we call a conscience and never convey any ethical narrowness; conveying hints instead of life's larger limitations. (Stevenson, 1892)

Popular culture presumed Hyde's depravities to be of a sexual nature, and it was unusual for a 19th-century doppelgänger story to exclude romance, sex, and the basic Oedipal triangle, but Stevenson was adamant that the story was not purely about heterosexual improprieties. (Beattie, 2001, p. 1)

> 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. (Stevenson, 1995, p. 56)

A deeper, more sinister storyline is played out in this all-male tale. Stevenson clearly stated that his message is aimed at the male bourgeoise. The novel, it is theorized, could be considered to be a vehicle to express his ambivalent feelings toward his father that he could not consciously admit (Beattie, 2001). It has also been suggested that it is a manifestation of the crushing realization that his father's own unfulfilled desire to become a writer was finding expression in his own life. (Harman 2005, p. 12) "Generally speaking," Jung observes, "all the life which the parents could have lived, but of which they thwarted themselves for artificial motives, is passed on to the children in substitute form. That is to say, the children are driven unconsciously in a direction that is intended to compensate for everything that was left unfulfilled in the lives of their parents." (1925, par. 328) Hatred appears in the story as the dastardliest act that Hyde committed and one that ultimately led to his downfall: in a rageful state, Hyde clubbed to death an older man asking for directions, i.e., an older man who is lost, doesn't know the way, and is

seeking advice/direction from his Hyde side. Stevenson's father, Thomas, failed to provide direction in the world for his son, but more importantly, Robert felt his father had cut himself off from vital life energies that he despised, just as Dr. Jekyll came to despise Hyde. Stevenson believed this is what killed his father, as he conveyed in the eulogy: "One could almost see the struggle between the creature of cramped hereditary conventions and environment and the man nature had intended him to be." (Stevenson, 1923) Rage directed against the father is shown by Hyde destroying the portraits of the father in Jekyll's cabinet.

Rage is also directed against legalities, the realm of personality number one and the persona. Utterson the lawyer is emblematic of rationality and the legal profession, who, like the other men in the story, are trapped in their pragmatic world, unable to discern the connection between their friend Dr. Jekyll and the Mr. Hyde they discover in his quarters. The lives of these men are empty: respectable in society, but void of joy, enthusiasm, feelings, intimacy, and women. (Beattie, 1998) Thomas's relation to sex was encapsulated by his support of the Magdalene Society that helped prostitutes, whose plight Thomas blamed on men; in other words, it was the wicked, lustful behavior of men that caused women to "fall." This is neurotic behavior: relief by being punished for the forbidden desire. His wife, Margaret, was the ever-positive, maidenly type Thomas needed to cheer him up during his many depressive episodes.

Rage is also aimed at Thomas's religious beliefs when Hyde writes blasphemies in Jekyll's biblical texts. Robert's hatred toward the conservative Christianity he was raised on harkens back to a very young age when he was sickly and in pain. Survival became a very internal struggle. A dedicated and devoted nurse nicknamed "Cummy" tended to him, but her brand of Christianity was even more severe than Stevenson's parents and turned his already fearful world of survival into a hellish nightmare with the Devil lurking behind card games, novels, and the theatre. He

became convinced he would not live long and die young, and only God could save his soul from eternal hellfire. The neurotic, hypochondriacal parents became hyper-vigilant and fretted over Robert's health; to extend his life, they spent considerable finances throughout his life to support such things as long stays in health resorts throughout Europe. There was a morbid connection between father and son via Robert's many respiratory illnesses.

Thomas had a powerful pre-Oedipal bonding with his son. He had never developed a strong, stable sense of himself, so the world as "object" was always a little fearful – such is the hallmark of an anxious attachment style. Thomas had a weak ability to regulate emotions and his ego defenses were less developed: things are split into good and evil, with evil being projected onto others and the good held onto for a positive sense of self. Robert shared many of these traits with his father, which contributed to a deep, unconscious connection with him. The double bind was that Thomas shared with his son a playful side – an expression of his "inner child" – and a love of language, wit, and word, together with a childish sense of adventure.

It was important to Thomas that his son had his spiritual convictions that captured Thomas very deeply because of his personality structure, i.e., his form of Calvinistic religion amplified his sense of unworthiness and provided rigid forms to structure his undeveloped personality.

Robert admired the success and respect his father enjoyed, something that eluded him until later in his writing career after the incredible success of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. But he had to tread lightly around his childish, mercurial father who was prone to irrational temper explosions. He cruelly berated Robert about his agnosticism, threatening to disown him and saying that he wished Robert had never been born. Robert resented his father: for his financial dependence on him, for his inability to support his writing interests and talents, and for his strict Calvinist religious views. When *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* was written, Thomas began showing signs of

losing his mental abilities and his wit. The Old King was weakening and failing to provide his son with a strong, masculine model and energy at a time when Robert was in the sickest, weakest position of his life. This love-hate relationship and Stevenson's anger and guilt played out in the connection between the respected Dr. Jekyll and his creation, Mr. Hyde. (Beattie, 1998, 2001) Stated another way and on a psychological register, it manifests as a tension between two souls (Saban, 2019) – the realm of consciousness overseen by the persona at war with the alterity of the unconscious as manifested by the shadow.

It was a stroke of genius for Stevenson not to specify Hyde's "depravities" and "bestial avidities," even though one of his many literary gifts was an ability to vividly encapsulate a moment in the reader's mind. A person who saw Mr. Hyde said one look from him was "so ugly . . . it brought out the sweat on me like running," (Stevenson, 1886. p. 4) and he repulsed people with a "black sneering coolness . . . like Satan." (p. 5) Another who had a good look at Hyde said, "He is not easy to describe. There is something wrong with his appearance; something displeasing, something down-right detestable. I never saw a man I so disliked, and yet I scarce know why. He must be deformed somewhere; he gives a strong feeling of deformity, although I couldn't specify the point." (p. 8)

Stevenson's descriptions of Mr. Hyde turned him into a literary Rorschach test: it was up to the individual to *imagine* what was evil based on his or her personal, cultural, and religious beliefs. Various journalists and psychology pundits over the years have claimed to have discerned a sensualist, pleasure-loving hedonist; forbidden heterosexual acts; masturbation fantasies; etc. This is a vital element in making Stevenson's tale a timeless classic: every generation in every culture will have an evolving sense of what is dark and despicable about elements in their culture, and, with some courage, to recognize that as part of themselves.

What shocked the 19th-century reader was that this book was written by the famed author of beloved children's poetry and a boy's adventure story, *Treasure Island.* More disturbing to a culture steeped in conservative Christianity was the heinous thought that evil existed within us: the Devil we imagined to be "out there" was really a projection of our own psychic makeup. People could no longer say, "The Devil made me do it!", as American comedian Flip Wilson exclaimed. We now had the awesome responsibility of curbing the evil within ourselves and in the systems we create.

This was the endpoint in the evolution of the gods from being powerful forces out in nature and the exterior world to being psychological forces within ourselves. Nietzsche proclaimed in 1882, "God is dead. And we have killed him." Most frightening was the question he then raised, "What water is there for us to clean ourselves?" The obvious evil in the world did not disappear because people stopped believing in a god somewhere, out there, and his shadow side on earth, the Devil.

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde was the prescient construct of a literary genius that foreshadowed by nine years the beginning of modern psychoanalysis with Freud's first psychoanalytic case in 1895, "The Dream of Irma's Injection." Freud disturbed the world with convincing descriptions of his self-analysis and in-depth explorations of his clients' psyches that exposed the dark underbelly of our conscious lives and presentations. He described the psychic mechanisms of our Jekyll-and-Hyde dual nature: suppression and repression of undesirable traits, projection of our dark sides onto others followed by attacks on them, converting our psychological problems into physical symptoms (somatization), etc.

Jung woke up the British public when his *Face to Face* interview was broadcast on the BBC on October 22, 1959. "The only real danger that exists is man himself," he said. "His

psyche should be studied, because we are the origin of all coming evil." (Burnette, 1959) Jung saw Evil as the archetypal core of the Shadow and furthermore stated, "The world hangs on a thin thread, and that thread is the human soul". (Wehr, 1988, p. 438) That thread got a lot thinner with the recent incarnation of Mr. Hyde on the world stage: Putin's shocking invasion of Ukraine that began on February 24, 2022. Putin *is* the Russian state: this man of KGB mentality has eliminated the opposition, violently at times, and surrounded himself with "yes men" who owe him allegiance after he divvied up the riches of the former Soviet Union between himself and his cronies. Putin was humiliated by the fall of the USSR in 1991 and he, like many Russians, is searching for a sense of identity.

Putin has broad support from his countrymen for restoring Russia to a position of power and influence while maintaining what he considers to be a unique Russian identity different from the rest of Europe. Bringing the second largest European country, Ukraine, with agricultural riches and deep cultural connections, back into the Russian orbit is important to that vision. Yale professor Tim Snyder, a historian of Central Europe, sees an irrational dimension in Putin's behavior because he is driven by a *belief* that Russia and Ukraine have a unique identity. This is based on the originating myth of a warlord, Valdemar, from a clan of Viking slave traders called the "Rus," who were converted to Christianity around the year 1000. Ukraine had 1,000 years of history situated around Kiev before becoming part of the Russian Empire in the late 17th century. Yet Putin's use of the past is based on a fantasy of a lost unity, what Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983/1996) have coined the invention of tradition. It is Putin's heroic task to restore this idealized unity by invading Ukraine and waking up Ukrainians about their foundational mythic roots and reunifying the countries physically and spiritually. Ukraine's drift to the West and the growth of a Ukrainian Orthodox Church that is separate from the Russian Orthodox Church

threaten Putin's quest for unity; he sees Ukraine's interest in joining NATO as more of a threat to that unity than a militaristic threat to Russia. (Karma, Galvin & Geld, March 15, 2022) Putin infuses the Ukrainian invasion with the irrationality of a religious fervor, ready to sacrifice the Russian economy, tear up three decades of global diplomacy, and destroying Ukraine to save it – this is a dangerous apocalyptic vision about which Robert Ray Lifton (2000) has written about so persuasively. With Putin's increasing desperation, Mr. Hyde has reached his most fearful aspect – that is, humanity's shadow side of our human-created scientific method – the threat of nuclear warfare.

We suggest that understanding Putin's actions belongs within the constellation of an archetypal imperative imaged as Mr. Hyde. This archetypal underpinning can help us to elucidate the way in which the Russian president has dangerously created his own intoxicating potion for unity, which has tremendous psychological force and persuasiveness for many because of his conscious mobilization of a fantasized, spiritual origin myth. In other words, what analytical psychology brings to the table is a way of recognizing the psychological dimension of the toxic *mythistory* (McNeill, 1986) that Putin administers to the masses. While to most of his countrymen Putin personifies a heroic ideal, aided and abetted by a tight control of the media, many external observers see the opposite. This may be helpfully framed as an archetypal image of Mr. Hyde, with all its nuanced psychological dimensions that we have explored throughout this paper.

The greed that precipitated the opioid epidemic, oil companies promoting climate change denial, the murder of George Floyd, Putin's invasion of Ukraine and the threat of a nuclear holocaust. . . We are, and forever will be, the "origin of all coming evil," an ongoing manifestation of our Mr. Hyde nature – our *human* nature. It is the supreme challenge of our time

to work against our nature, an *opus contra naturam*, by becoming conscious of the shadowy Other within ourselves and not demonizing and projecting it, deepening the already serious divisions in an increasingly polarized world.

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