

Sexual Orientation and Identity in *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*

Abstract

This article examines identity through a psychoanalytical reading of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, to examine the effects of an individual's sexual orientation on their self-identity. The article considers factors both internal and external as I seek to provide insight into society's often oppressive relationship with sexuality, providing contrasts between biological and psychological approaches to the subject.

One's sexual orientation is defined by the gender or genders that one is attracted to. For many, deciphering one's orientation, accepting oneself, and combatting other hurdles associated with sexual identity, can prove to be extremely difficult. Each individual's journey is a personal one, which often results in different expressions of the overwhelming emotions experienced. In the past, sexual orientation was a taboo subject, and still remains undiscussed and undeniably shunned by some societies nowadays. The 'word "homosexuality" appeared in print for the first time in Germany in 1869',¹ clearly displaying the extent to which sexual identification was a prohibited subject of discussion previously.

Sexual orientation and its relationship with mental health is apparent throughout history and continues to have relevance. The foundational work *Psychopathia Sexualis*, written by Krafft-Ebing in 1886, was one of the first psychological pieces to explore sexual identity. Krafft-Ebing concluded that homosexuality was inhumane and alien, thought to be a disease contracted hereditarily. Scientists even attempted to use hypothalamic surgery to "cure" homosexuality. 'The first destruction of the ventromedial nucleus in a human being was carried out in 1962'² in attempt to reverse their homosexuality. Although extremely outdated, both analyses provide evidence as to why individuals repress their own sexuality, sometimes ignoring impulses and thereby causing additional mental instability. It could be argued that, in *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, the character of Jekyll could represent the perfect example of a self-repressed homosexual living in the hostile Victorian community. Both characters are irrevocably linked as there are blurred lines between them making the reader sceptical of the existence of two definite characters. Jekyll can be read as internalising the negativity associated with homosexuality at the time and as a result he is unable to comprehend it, thus his denial is displayed through his fiendish scampering and appearance; '[he] is not easy to describe. There is something wrong with his appearance'.³ Freud's psychoanalytic theory of duality is an alternative perspective that could offer another explanation of the ambiguity of characterisation in *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. However, 'ministers, politicians, attorneys, jurists and other laypersons use

¹ David M. Halperin, *How to Do the History of Homosexuality*, (London: The University of Chicago Press, Ltd., 2002) p. 130.

² Simon LeVay, *Queer Science: The Use and Abuse of Research into Homosexuality*, (London: The MIT Press, 1996) p. 135.

³ Robert Louis Stevenson, in *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, (Great Britain: Clays Ltd, St Ives plc, 2010) p. 7.

psychoanalytic writings to justify their anti-gay attitudes',⁴ which is an example as to why individuals repress their sexual orientation due to homophobic historical theoretical perspectives. Freudian psychoanalysis is not only a literary theory, it is relevant to an array of topics; with such a strong view on homosexuality in such a broad theoretical perspective, it is obvious as to why people – potentially including characters like Jekyll and Hyde – bury their own sexual identity. A liberation of internal tension can be externally released in a range of ways: violence, delusion, self-destruction, to name but a few. Jekyll's proposed means of mastering his covert frustration is through his alter-ego as 'Mr Hyde broke out of all bounds, and clubbed him to the earth'.⁵ Hyde's process of breaking out of supposed restraints mirrors that of the catharsis of a sexually repressed individual, purging their damaging introspection. His mental instability caused by his repression categorises him as a criminal, widening the social void between him and the other, accepted societal members.

The common debate whether 'biological factors [or] those which have stressed social influences on the development of sexual orientation'⁶ has evidently been under discussion since so-called deviation from sexual norms were brought to attention. Some biological explanations of male homosexuals is that they have a 'deficiency in prenatal androgen [and therefore] should lead to a homosexual orientation'.⁷ This scientific approach therefore suggests homosexuality is in fact something uncontrollably specific to those who develop it during embryonic development, not an environmentally conjured characteristic. It follows that in Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* the character Hyde is made to seem alien as he has 'no face'.⁸ However, individuals still struggle to accept their sexual orientation internally although biology makes it clear that deviation from heterosexuality is no deformity.

Hyde does not only display the internal struggles of an oppressed homosexual. The character's physical complexion, or lack of, showcases the external difficulties that people with sexual identity issues face. Stevenson's character, Mr Hyde, is undefined, but it is evident due to the ambiguity of his appearance that he does not fit the stereotypical norm of a Victorian man. The other characters cannot describe their disturbance in reference to Mr Hyde; 'He is not easy to describe'⁹ and '[gives] an impression of deformity without any nameable malformation'.¹⁰ This vague description of Hyde's physical appearance mirrors one's mental disassociation when one battles with the certainty of their sexual orientation.

One of the great things about literature is its ambiguity. Authors often write in such a way that their intended meaning for readers, if any at all, can be interpreted differently by individuals with alternative viewpoints and personal attributes. The gothic novella *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* was never intended as a gay allegory, although many

⁴ Joel D. Hencken, 'Homosexuality and Psychoanalysis: Toward a Mutual Understanding', in *Homosexuality: Social, Psychological, and Biological Issues*, ed. by William Paul, James D. Weinrich, John C. Gonsiorek and Mary E. Hotvedt (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 1982) pp. 121-148 (p. 123).

⁵ Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, p. 23.

⁶ Diane Richardson, 'Theoretical Perspectives on Homosexuality', in *The Theory and Practice of Homosexuality*, ed. by John Hart and Diane Richardson (London: St Edmundsbury Press, 1981), pp. 5-37 (p. 6.)

⁷ Richardson, 'Theoretical Perspectives on Homosexuality', p. 21.

⁸ Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, p. 12.

⁹ Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, p. 10.

¹⁰ Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, p. 16.

critics have interpreted it this way. Stevenson uses the protagonist Dr Jekyll and his mental state to exhibit the struggles experienced by an alienated member of the Victorian community. The novella generated the popular term 'a Jekyll and Hyde personality', derived from the character's split personality. An abundance of gay critics suggests that the protagonist's duality is a direct portrayal of a sexually repressed middle-class doctor. During the Victorian era homosexuality was a taboo subject, and was considered a threat to the traditional family structure. Critics say Jekyll's hidden homosexuality is channelled into the character of Mr Hyde, an outsider due to his supposed sexual orientation. The doctor's deterioration can be seen as a consequence of his inability to reconcile his sexuality with social convention, and Hyde is free to explore his sexual desires. Stevenson wrote, 'It was the hand of Edward Hyde',¹¹ when describing Jekyll's awakening from a forgotten night. Jekyll is attracted to his darker – supposed homosexual – side; Hyde embodies Jekyll's sexual side repressed.

Both the external and internal battles some individuals encounter with their sexual orientation can generate overpowering anxieties that fester, often leaving those affected with both emotional and physical scars depending on the experiences they face. However, any sexual deviation from heterosexuality is exceedingly more acceptable in modern-day society; although homophobic acts and prejudices are still prominent, though less so than in the past. In an ideal society, external factors that impose a threat to those struggling with their sexual orientation would be eliminated; with all sexualities becoming universally acceptable and the decriminalisation of sexual acts that condemn people for certain practices. Although external threats potentially may be eradicated, it is arguable that the internal struggles cannot be prevented as they are entirely a product of the mind.

In conclusion, I have come to realise that those that try to categorise individuals are belittling them, since such an outlook ignores individuality entirely. Therefore, I propose that, although I have introduced a range of different arguments in regards to sexual orientation, I have only explored minimally the theme of sexuality, because the topic is vast and it may be unhelpful to summarise sexual identity categories.

¹¹ Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, p. 61.

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