

# The dual nature of humanity in dr jekyll and mr hyde essay

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## **The Dual Nature of Humanity in Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde**

The strange tale of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, written by Robert Louis Stevenson is infamously well-known for its discussion of the dual nature of humanity. With the mild-mannered Dr Jekyll and his evil, rampaging alter-ego, Mr Hyde, the novel is an allegorical discussion of the human condition and the division between our good and bad sides which all of us harbours inside of ourselves. Each of us can relate to being happy and sad, good-humoured and grumpy, generous and selfish; good and bad. The tale of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde is an extreme examination of that condition. Arguably though, the true meaning of the novel is not fully revealed until the entire story of the two men is unveiled at the end - suggesting that the true nature of a person is not revealed until the end of their life; we all mask our dark sides in fear of being socially rejected and then, invariably, following our deaths, our dark sides are revealed to our loved ones - skeletons coming out of the closet and so forth. The novel mirrors this as a form of 'art imitating life' by not fully revealing the true dual nature of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde until the very last. Equally, the novel reflects the private and public forms of the Victorian man (Danahay & Morse, 2007, p186) Stevenson's novel reflects the dual nature of the human condition in its fullest sense.

Dr Jekyll's interest in the duality of human nature is infused throughout the book and is its basis for the plot. In his full statement of the case, Jekyll clearly states that "man is not truly one, but truly two." (Stevenson, 2010, p93) which immediately draws attention to his belief that no man is without his light and dark sides equally. This is clearly demonstrated in human life:

every individual has the capacity to become angry about something as much as they do to react calmly to a situation. Of course, this theory implies that the two sides must live in harmony with one to produce a happy, healthy, sociable individual. However, it is Dr Jekyll's desire to differentiate and separate the two that causes him to accidentally amplify his darker side.

The description of Mr Hyde that runs throughout the book is best described as being vague and non-specific. As a general rule, witnesses describe him as being ugly but without being able to give exact details of his appearance. The reader's first encounter with Mr Hyde happens almost as immediately as when the book begins: an eyewitness account, given by a Mr Enfield. He is described by the aforementioned as "a little man who was stumping along eastward at a good walk" (Stevenson, 2010, p7) which immediately brings about a mental image of an individual who is vertically challenged by walking quickly - the term 'stumping' does suggest a certain level of unusualness attached to the figure who is not strolling but rather sounds as though he is hurrying along in a heavy-footed fashion. Enfield's continued description in chapter one suggests that "He is not easy to describe. There is something wrong with his appearance; something displeasing, something downright 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." (Stevenson, 2010, p12). This idea of his appearance as being illusive and indefinable adds to the strangeness of the character - it is as if he is just half a person who slips into the night and out of memory. This idea further compounds the concept of

the duality of human nature by implying as a result that the individual is only half available when only the dark side is on show. By a matter of deduction, it is easy to infer from this that Stevenson is suggesting that both the dark and the light sides are needed to make one complete person.

Jekyll's potion which turns him into Mr Hyde could, arguably, be a metaphor for the demons that invoke the darker side of men - by which, I mean alcohol, drugs, sex and so forth. In creating the potion, Jekyll states that he sought to separate these two sides on the following grounds: "If each, I told myself, could but be housed in separate identities; life would be relieved of all that was unbearable; the unjust delivered from the aspirations might go his way, and remorse of his more upright twin; and the just could walk steadfastly and securely on his upward path" (Stevenson, 2010 p95). It is clear from this statement that Jekyll had good intentions in his hypothesis but that, in practice, he found that the potion merely augmented his darker side - suffocating his better-meaning half. This makes quite a stark comment about the human condition: our darker side is stronger than the good - it presides dominant over the good. If it were contravened to as much, the novel would have been about a man who sipped a potion and became infinitely lovelier than the average person. However, this is not the case - Jekyll becomes Hyde; he becomes evil, ugly and horrid. If this theory is correct then it implies that Jekyll's potion simply just removes the kindly human elements, reducing the individual to nothing more than a symbol of evil.

It would be unfair to even equate Mr Hyde to an animal because he actively seeks to carry out acts that inflict pain on individuals purely, so it would seem, for the pleasure of it. Animals act out of a sense of survival however, Mr Hyde knows that he will return to a comfortable home and lifestyle with plenty of food and money - he needs not to act for his survival. Therefore, his foul actions are carried out simply because he enjoys it. In his statement, Jekyll describes Hyde's reaction to a threat on his life as inducing a new emotion: " Hyde in danger of his life was a new creature to me; shaken with inordinate anger, strung to the pitch of murder, lusting to inflict pain."

(Stevenson, 2010, p115). Whilst this does indicate some survival instincts, it is Jekyll's choice of words which demonstrates that there is a sadistic streak in operation at the same time: in particular, ' lusting to inflict pain' is an interesting turn of phrase - it does not indicate a sense of survival but rather a desire to cause more suffering than is strictly necessary. Whereas an animal kills cleanly and for the purposes of feeding, Hyde seems intent on killing through carrying out the greatest amount of pain first. This idea of Hyde presents human beings in a much less than favourable light: it is often said that ' we are just animals' but the suggestion here is that animals have an even greater sense of empathy than humans in their darkest hour - humans have a blood lust which is not immediately comparable with anything in the animal kingdom. So, the implication is that human beings in their most Hyde-like state are more animalistic than animals themselves.

Robert Louis Stevenson directly addresses the dual nature of humanity in his novel, Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde. He does this largely through the presentation of

Mr Hyde as being the dominant of the two and by suggesting that one cannot be a successful member of society without the other. This is demonstrated by Hyde's inability to assimilate comfortably into society without Jekyll's calming influence whilst Jekyll is occasionally lacking in force which Hyde has in spades. Despite the suggestion that Hyde, as the dark side of the human condition, is stronger and more prevalent, the implication is most definitely that one cannot properly survive without the other. Although Hyde is presented as being the stronger of the two, he is also presented as being irrational, aggressive, sadistic and socially unacceptable meaning that he could never successfully live alone, without the light side of his personality. Stevenson's novel presents the duality of the human condition explicitly: human beings require the dark and light sides of their personalities to be strong yet kind, determined yet calm, intense yet relaxed. Jekyll and Hyde reflect the human duality in its fullest sense.

## **References**

Danahay, M. A. & Morse, D. D. (2007). Victorian animal dreams: representations of animals in Victorian literature and culture. Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Ltd.

Stevenson, R. L. (2010). Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde. London: Bibliolis Books.