

Morally questionable smog in the fiction of Stevenson and Pynchon

Experience, Human Nature



The Crying of Lot 49, by Thomas Pynchon, and The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, by Robert Louis Stevenson, both explore the ambiguous nature of human morality through the lens of mystery. Both texts are set in an urban environment, the character's surroundings constantly obscured with an ever present, metaphorically resonant smog and fog respectively. This fog is physical manifestation of the morally dubious nature of the characters and the sinister underpinnings of both stories. This sordid undercurrent is only explicitly revealed to the protagonists when the smog dissipates, thereby implying that one cannot see the darkness that lurks beneath the facade of urban environments through the moral fog. This forces the readers to consider what the fog of modern society might be hiding in their own lives.

In both stories, the fog can be assumed to be a constant, and both protagonists experience epiphanies when it parts by chance or when they manage to rise above it. When the smog clears momentarily in The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, everything is thrown into sharp relief; the reality of the dark underbelly of London is revealed to Utterson, the protagonist, in crisp detail.

“ For a moment, the fog would be quite broken up, and a haggard shaft of daylight would glance in between the swirling wreaths. The dismal quarter of Soho seen under these changing glimpses, with its muddy ways, and slatternly passengers, and its lamps, which had never been extinguished or had been kindled afresh to combat this mournful reinvasion of darkness, seemed, in the lawyer's eyes, like a district of some city in a nightmare. [...]

As the cab drew up before the address indicated, the fog lifted a little and showed him a dingy street, a gin palace, a low French eating house, a shop for the retail of penny numbers and twopenny salads, many ragged children huddled in the doorway, and many women of many different nationalities passing out, key in hand, to have a morning glass; and the next moment the fog settled down again upon that part, as brown as umber, and cut him off from his blackguardly surroundings.” (23)

It is only when the fog clears that Utterson can see the disquieting, hidden part of London.

Oedipa is similarly accustomed to seeing through smog, she only notices it when it is absent or when she is removed from it. One such instance is her arrival in San Narciso, the smog fades as she overlooks the city and its absence startles her enough that she has to, “squint for the sunlight” (24). In doing so, she can see more than what is right before her eyes.

“She looked down a slope, [...] onto a vast sprawl of houses which had grown up all together, like a well-tended crop, from the dull brown earth; and she thought of the time she’d opened a transistor radio to replace a battery and seen her first printed circuit. The ordered swirl of houses and streets, from this high angle, sprang at her now with the same unexpected, astonishing clarity as the circuit card had. Thought she knew even less about radios than about Southern Californians, there were to both outward batters a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate. There’d seemed no limit to what the printed circuit could have told her (if

she had tried to find out); so in her first minute of San Narciso, a revelation also trembled just past the threshold of her understanding. Smog hung all round the horizon, the sun on the bright beige countryside was painful; she and the Chevy seemed parked at the centre of an odd, religious instant. As if, on some other frequency, or out of the eye of some whirlwind rotating too slow for her heated skin even to feel the centrifugal coolness of, words were being spoken. She suspected that much.” (24)

The jarring lucidity she experiences, and her realization that there is something interconnected and deliberate, something sinister and uncomfortable lurking below the exterior facade of San Narciso echos Utterson’s sudden confrontation with the reality of the seedy underbelly of London, for both are only visible when the fog parts. These moments of clarity, moments in which the characters notice the smog screen through which they ordinarily observe their surroundings and the world is thrown into high enough relief that darker plot becomes almost visible, are all the more interesting when one considers the metaphorical implications of the fog.

In *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, the fog keeps Utterson’s London in a perpetual state of murky twilight. It not white or black but, “ rich, lurid brown” (23). The morality of the characters in both stories is similarly unclear – Jekyll is sympathetic due to his pain and eventual remorse yet he repeatedly chooses to become Hyde, to personify and nurture the worst part of his nature. The readers root for Oedipa as she attempts to unravel the mystery and conspiracy of the Trystero but her character is questionable as she repeatedly cheats on her husband in the process. However, both texts

remain equivocal on how their characters should be viewed; characters within the stories judge their contemporaries (as Utterson judges Jekyll) but, the final moral estimation is left open to the reader's interpretation. Within the text, the characters are allowed to remain neither black or white – they are a “ rich, lurid brown” themselves (23). The fog can then be metaphorically seen as a fog of questionable morals, as both authors project the morally dubious nature of their characters onto the city in which they live. This, in turn, says something larger about the urban environments they inhabit.

In using the fog to obscure the truth and to cast a shadow of moral doubt over both cities, the authors suggest that the same happens throughout modern, urban life. Pynchon alludes to the spread of moral ambiguity in modern, urban society directly, when, during an instant of unwitting perspicuity, Oedipa herself notices the metaphorical and physical fog spread to an area the “ folklore,” claims it hadn't previously infiltrated, though she refuses to admit that what she sees is smog, given the implication that its presence conceals something nefarious,

“ Looking down at San Francisco a few minutes later from the high point of the bridge's arc, she saw smog. Haze, she corrected herself, is what it is, haze. How can they have smog in San Francisco? Smog, according to the folklore, did not begin till farther south. It had to be the angle of the sun.”(108)

Hence, in concerning themselves with the spread of moral fog, both texts encourage readers to attempt to peer through it, through the obstructions of urban development, to get to the heart of things. They suggest that urban cities exist under this brown cover, in moral twilight zones, which allows things like the conspiracy of the Trystero or the mystery and murder of Jekyll and Hyde to go unseen and unrecognized. This in turn fosters in their readers the feelings of unease and morbid curiosity, similar to the feelings of justified paranoia experienced by Oedipa and Utterson.

By illustrating that the fog that shrouds Oedipa and Utterson's cities conceals the sinister and mysterious plots at work in both stories and projecting the morally questionable nature of the characters onto that fog, *The Crying of Lot 49* and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, suggest that urban environments allow their inhabitants to exist in a state of moral blindness and urge their readers to look for the moments when things become clear, to watch for the parting of the smog, and to really take notice when it happens, hinting that perhaps the events of these books, or at least things of a similarly sinister nature, are more plausible than one might think, and that one might be able to see them if only the fog would part.

Works Cited

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