

Liberation of
language in the
picture of dorian gray
and the strange case
of dr. ...



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All language exists with two definitions. The primary, literal meaning is defined as what the object physically is, and the secondary, symbolic meaning is what the object represents. An object's literal meaning remains a stationary constant, as it exists in a physical reality, and can only change if the object also physically changes. The symbolic meaning, however, is subjective to an individual's perspective. Therefore, if a form becomes 'rigid', the symbolic meaning is also stationary and all language is restricted to producing a single interpretation. Language becomes 'ready-made' in both literal and symbolic meaning. To 'revolt' from this, R. L. Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* both offer alternative symbolic meanings for the same, set language. Through this, language is only 'ready-made' syntactically, and is liberated from the 'bondage of traditional form' through development of the symbolic meaning.

A 'ready-made' language was originally created to describe a normative, human reality. As each novel encounters the 'other', a 'double' that does not fully belong in this reality, 'ready-made' language becomes inadequate in description. Freud's theory on the Uncanny argues for an uneasiness in the heimlich developing to represent the unheimlich. Jekyll's double is both familiar in his human resemblance, and disturbingly unfamiliar in his deformity. [1] To describe the unfamiliar accurately, a new language must be created. To transition from a set, traditional language to a new, unfamiliar vocabulary presents difficulty. Mr Enfield, as a model of the reasonable, middle-class gentlemen, embodies this struggle in his attempt to articulate Mr Hyde's features in an inadequate, pre-formed language: 'He must be

deformed somewhere; he gives a strong feeling of deformity, although I couldn't specify the point.' [2] Initially, Mr Enfield describes Hyde as 'deformed'. However, he seemingly decides this singular adjective incompetent in offering an accurate portrayal of Hyde. The description transitions instead to a 'strong feeling', that features deformity, but now contains further unidentified horrors, made increasingly grotesque through the inability to determine a literal description. The only certainty present is in emotion that is 'strong' and asserts Hyde 'must' be deformed, implying a Tennyson-esque concept. Language limits emotion, as abstract feelings have to be expressed through a 'ready-made' vocabulary. Through this inability to describe Hyde in a 'ready-made' language, Enfield can neither classify him in a 'ready-made' category. Consequently, he addresses Hyde as 'he' as opposed to 'it', identifying the 'other' as physically closer to himself, Utterson and Lanyon than with any class of creature. Almost subconsciously, Enfield aligns Mr Hyde with Dr Jekyll, forcing the 'unheimlich' closer to the 'heimlich' form. Initially, Hyde is assumed to wholly inhabit the unheimlich 'other'. This sense of uneasiness therefore emerges from the inability to classify Hyde in 'ready-made' categories of 'human' or 'animal'. The new language that must be created only slightly differs from traditional form, and exists as both familiar and unfamiliar.

Stevenson struggles to mold a 'ready-made' language to a stationary image of Hyde's unfamiliar form. The Picture of Dorian Gray instead encounters the limitations of a pre-formed language through the 'other' existing not as human, but as an inanimate object capable of human activity. This variety of personification requires a new set of verbs. The portrait is seemingly

supernatural, yet it's non-human actions are restricted to a human vocabulary. Wilde creates a conscious imbalance between vocabulary and meaning by using 'heimlich', pre-existing words to describe a supernatural scene that requires new symbolism: What was that loathsome red dew that gleamed, wet and glistening, on one of the hands, as though the canvas had sweated blood? [1] Dorian does not attempt, as Enfield does, to immediately identify either the substance, or the emotion it creates within him. Instead, Dorian reverts to a question to suggest he must gain the knowledge he lacks from an outside source. The same struggle of identification that Enfield encounters is present. Dorian can see the 'red dew', but cannot decide upon a noun to accurately describe the vision, presenting an uneasiness in being unable to identify the 'unheimlich'. The consideration of, firstly, 'dew' presents an Eden-like image that traditionally would dictate a new beginning. Wilde inverts this through irony, to suggest the painting as taking, rather than giving, life. In progressing to 'sweat', the substance still remains temporarily less threatening than blood, however loses the innocence associated with 'dew'. Syntactically, and mentally, Dorian only identifies the substance as bearing the closest resemblance to 'blood' at the end. Thus far, a 'ready-made' language is adequate in description, as all these substances exist in a human world. The previously stationary symbolic meaning is then taken from a traditional context to the unfamiliar Gothic through the moisture's origin. The blood has 'sweated', not from flesh, but from the canvas. This action forces the picture to 'revolt' from its identity as an inanimate object, to a supernatural context where it becomes partially human. A 'revolt' from 'ready-made' language –that is used to describe a

mortal, earthly world –is therefore necessary. Neither Dorian nor Hyde belong to this world, and cannot be described by it's language.

Symons urges a revolt in both 'ready-made language' and 'form'. In *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, Stevenson revolts from this traditional form through narrative style. Instead of adhering to a singular narrative voice, the different narrative perspectives allow the novella to exist simultaneously as a crime report and memoir. However, even these distinct categories are not definite. Dr Lanyon's narrative is a separate chapter yet is interrupted by Jekyll's epistolary, suggesting that a claim to an account does not deem it exclusively one perspective. 'Dr Lanyon's Narrative' focuses on physical interpretation: 'as I looked, there came, I thought, a change –he seemed to swell –his face became suddenly black' (Stevenson, p. 41). If this novella is categorised as a crime report, the third person narration is the 'traditional form', as the perspective traditionally approaches the crime from the outside. Lanyon is detached in the action of seeing –'I looked' –and reporting what physically appears –'his face became suddenly black' –in front of him. However, this sense of detachment is also limiting. He restricts identity to the basic and external, and can only describe Jekyll in a child-like context of colour, with 'black', one-dimensionally representing death. Despite initially categorizing Stevenson's novella as a crime report, Lanyon's perspective is still subjective. He reports what he 'thought' 'seemed' to be real, suggesting that an attempt to remain within a traditional narrative form is, in itself, difficult. Stevenson perhaps deems Lanyon's narrative as necessary to identify the bondage of a traditional, wholly aesthetic, third person narrative. As this form is restricted to exterior identity, Lanyon's

analysis cannot extend to the possibility of psychological motive behind action. 'Henry Jekyll's Full Statement of the Case' is therefore necessary to this fiction also, as the title suggests a forensically accurate, physical description is not a 'full statement'. In moving from this detective genre – that identifies who has committed the crime– to a first-person, psychological account, –why the crime was committed– Stevenson completes the narrative through adding the possibility of emotion. Only through revolting from the rigidity of one narrative is the reader allowed to examine and consequently sympathize with Jekyll's actions, that are revealed as compulsive.

As previously established, Stevenson 'revolts' from traditional form through the act of writing. Wilde also revolts from the 'bondage' of traditional form through concept. Instead of language, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* interacts with art. Traditionally, Victorian art carried a political or social message, such as Ford Maddox Brown's 'Work', that depicts reality to provoke emotional reaction and subsequently action. Wilde breaks this 'bondage' through the aestheticism movement of the 1890's. His novel both exists as and contains 'art for art's sake', revoking any responsibility previously associated with the action of viewing art. Dorian's picture is created to provoke pleasure, not to induce social action: 'Art has no influence upon action. It annihilates the desire to act' (Wilde, p. 198). Wilde perhaps condemns this extreme lack of traditional form, and the responsibility that accompanies it. Aestheticism refuses not only 'action', but the 'desire to act', a drive that future action is dependent upon. However, identifying future action, if the activity is not specified, as either good or evil is almost impossible. Removing this desire does not deem Dorian as either antithesis, but creates an indifference to

responsibility and consequence. Whilst his hand does not personally murder Sibyl Vane, his indifference inadvertently causes her death. A 'revolt' to aestheticism can therefore be condemned as dangerously liberal. In refusing the social responsibility traditionally associated with art, Dorian refuses a moral responsibility also, suggesting that a lack of 'bondage' allows for too much freedom. This unsustainability, exhibited by Dorian's inability to uphold a visual perfection, suggests aestheticism can only ever exist as a 'revolt' and will not develop as the new 'traditional form' of art. This 'revolt' in art is initially harmless, as Wilde claims the painting has 'no influence' on Dorian's actions. He temporarily achieves this by splitting his conscience and physical body between painting and the human form. Yet, this separation does not consider mental influence. The painting haunts Dorian's mind until it, ironically, does affect his actions. In attempting to engage with aestheticism to 'revolt' from the 'traditional form' of art, Wilde almost returns to again to a traditional form. The picture becomes art with a meaning and an inescapable responsibility. Bondage of form, even when attempted, cannot be easily broken.

Thus far, the form, both the 'traditional' and the 'revolt', has been examined as stationary concepts. The traditional form is implied as stationary through its 'bondage', and the 'revolt' exists as a new form, yet is still stationary. Walter Pater argues for a development, that 'every moment some form grows perfect in hand or face.' [1] Pater focuses on the transition between forms, highlighting this experience as more important than the form you either begin, or finalize with. Dr Jekyll views bondage as, specifically, the human body that remains in a 'traditional', singular form.

The transition to Mr Hyde is, in Dr Jekyll's perspective, growing 'perfect', as his experiment is essentially a success in his liberation from a singular form. However, in choosing to break free of this bondage, Jekyll can never again return to a singular physical form: 'if I slept, or even dozed for a moment in my chair, it was always as Hyde that I awakened' (Stevenson, p. 53). Without this bondage to a single body, the boundaries between Jekyll's two forms also cease to exist. The narrative 'I' claims Jekyll's voice, yet is simultaneously conscious that he has 'awakened' as Hyde. The human form, ironically, still remains as a bondage for Dr Jekyll. He is successful in breaking free from a physical bondage, yet his mind remains imprisoned within a different form. Despite Pater's focus on experience, the transition occurs during 'moments' where Jekyll is in a 'doze', and barely conscious. The experience therefore belongs to the 'perfect' form he becomes, and the reader is refused access to Hyde's narration. The transformation itself is not witnessed, as if the reader too is in a state of semi-consciousness. Even in Pater's idea of development, Stevenson introduces new 'rigid' forms. 'Always' suggests a definite result to the process, and simply a transition to a different, certain form. To escape wholly from the 'bondage' of form, whether traditional or not, Jekyll must eternally remain within this 'moment', an action unsustainable in itself.

The concept of 'bondage' has been explored as both negative in its restricting influence, and positive in its implication of necessary social boundaries. Pater's statement defines growth as moving towards perfection, suggesting that any 'bondage' that refuses movement is a negative concept. The Picture of Dorian Gray instead considers Pater's idea of growth

as a negative aspect. Wilde extends this concept beyond a 'moment' to an entire lifespan, defining growth as a submission to the bondage of a physically decaying human form. The moment where Dorian anticipates this exists as his realization that youthful beauty is invaluable, displacing the vocal proclamation 'I would give my soul for that!': Yes, there would be a day when his face would be wrinkled and wizen [...] the grace of his figure broken and deformed (Wilde, p. 26-27). The image of Dorian's future self is aligned with Hyde's present condition in their claim to deformity. When Enfield describes Hyde, deformity equates to a degenerative, physical form. Instead, Dorian's 'deformity' relates to his 'grace', suggesting his worth is based entirely on a socially accepted aesthetic beauty. An attempt to alter 'traditional form' is therefore attempted. Dorian temporarily inhabits a transcendent, immortal form and attempts to assert it as the traditional human form by living his entire life through it. The human body is not capable of liberation, as it is for Jekyll, but acts as a cage that will stunt Dorian's social aspirations by becoming inadequate in decay. Through looking to the future, Wilde pre-empts a process that will occur after Pater's 'moment' of perfection. It remains impossible to move beyond the highest level of perfection. After Pater's 'moment' has passed, the human form cannot develop any further, and will begin to degenerate. For Dorian, the 'bondage' to a particular form becomes an ambition. However, to remain as a 'traditional' form is still defined as a mortal, physical bondage. Instead he attempts to 'revolt' from form, not to Pater's development, but to a form that will not decay, but still resemble a human. Therefore, that action of looking forward to an impending moment acts as the defining moment where

Dorian decides to escape the 'bondage' of decay that a traditional human is subject to.

To 'revolt' from 'traditional form' has consequences. Society punishes both Dr Jekyll and Dorian Gray for revolting from tradition as individuals. Dorian is forced to unite his conscience with the 'bondage' of his physical frame, returning once again to a conventional human form. In parallel, Dr Jekyll is refused existence in a reality where he can inhabit a form that accepts no social responsibility. For social change to occur in an established culture, it must occur as a gradual, collective change to a new tradition. The attempts of both protagonists can therefore only ever exist as an individual 'revolt', and will never develop to a reformed tradition. Society punishes both Dorian and Jekyll for revolting from tradition, deeming the death of the rebels as the only method to maintain this 'bondage'.

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