

The double entendre
of doubles: an
exploration of
doppelgängers in 'dr.
jekyll an...



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In modern times, the term *doppelgänger* colloquially refers to anyone who looks like or acts like another person. While this is not a grand departure from the word's origin, it neglects the original connotation of evil associated with a *doppelgänger*. In fact, the Oxford English Dictionary defines *doppelgänger* (under the English adaptation of "double-ganger") as "The apparition of a living person; a double, a wraith." This definition, however, is the one interpreted by gothic writers in films and novels outside of the colloquial setting of the *doppelgänger* of one's self one might find perusing Instagram. In the story of *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson, the *doppelgänger* trope almost perfectly delineates between good and evil through a gruesome physical and psychological transformation, setting the standard for the use of doubles in modern art. The 2010 horror film *Black Swan*, directed by Darren Aronofsky, on the other hand, twists Jekyll and Hyde's definition of the *doppelgänger* to include a less black-and-white use of doubles, reflecting the change in connotation of the term as a whole over time.

The word *doppelgänger* approximately translates from German to "double-goer." While the word itself originates from German folklore, it is based off of the ancient concept of "spirit doubles," the existence of "an exact but usually invisible replica of every man, bird, or beast" (Encyclopedia Britannica). Furthermore, an encounter with one's *doppelgänger* historically foreshadowed imminent death. Many pieces of folklore and contemporary gothic artwork reflects this more traditional definition of *doppelgänger*, as well as recounts of eerie real-life events. Queen Elizabeth I purportedly had a vision of a ghostly woman on her deathbed, assumed to be her

doppelgänger, shortly before she passed away. In *Black Swan*, the introduction of Nina's more ambiguously sinister doppelgänger in the form of fellow lithe, brunette ballerina Lily initiates Nina's downward spiral into a darker version of herself which eventually also leads to her death. Similarly, in *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, the internal and external struggles between Dr. Jekyll and his evil counterpart, Mr. Hyde, also lead to Dr. Jekyll's death. This, however, is more or less where the similarities between the classic, original pop culture representation of the doppelgänger in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and the adapted, modern take in *Black Swan* end.

In *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, the doppelgänger trope takes form as Dr. Jekyll's transformational alter ego, Mr. Hyde, defining the doppelgänger in pop culture as an obvious delimitation between good and evil and paralleling the ancient origins of the doppelgänger in many ways. Dr. Jekyll is described as "large" and "handsome," possessing "every mark of capacity and kindness" (Stevenson, 18). Mr. Hyde, on the other hand, is Dr. Jekyll's opposite in every way. Hyde's stature is diminutive and "hardly human," his physical appearance is unsettling to the point of being "downright detestable," and he is frequently described as being "pure evil" (Stevenson, 16, 9, 55). Through his despicable, humanoid appearance, Stevenson creates Hyde as the embodiment of evil compared to Jekyll's appearance of goodness: an attractive, intelligent doctor with a strong, large presence. This physical inhumanity of Hyde also holds true to the legends of doppelgängers as being nonhuman reflections of their human counterparts. Furthermore, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde's actions are also opposing. Dr. Jekyll is

cited to be a religious, charitable man, while Stevenson graphically depicts the violent tendencies of Mr. Hyde, particularly in the case of Carew's murder and the description of "bones [] audibly shattered" (Stevenson, 21). Stevenson's depiction of doppelgängers as foreshadowing death also aligns with ancient legends. Dr. Jekyll's creation of Mr. Hyde eventually leads to his demise, as Mr. Hyde becomes the dominant personality and takes over Dr. Jekyll, inhibiting him from transforming back into himself. Thus, Stevenson's representation of doppelgängers as an explicit delineation between the good of Dr. Jekyll and evil of Mr. Hyde both fits with the doppelgängers origins and defines the standard for representations of doppelgängers in modern culture.

Even though *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* defines the standard of doppelgängers as an unambiguous separation between good and evil, Stevenson still muddles this line in *Jekyll and Hyde*, making way for *Black Swan's* adaptations of the doppelgänger to take form. For instance, though Dr. Jekyll created Mr. Hyde to dispel himself of all things evil, his own goodness is left vague. Stevenson never clearly states why Dr. Jekyll is kind, but simply makes a general statement about being "known for charities" (Stevenson, 28). This lack of evidence of virtue complicates the idea of Dr. Jekyll being perfectly good, as it is relatively unsupported other than the few hazy accounts made by Mr. Utterson about Dr. Jekyll's character.

Furthermore, for Dr. Jekyll to willingly create and put such evil in the form of Mr. Hyde into the world in order to selfishly rid himself of the torture of having to repress his own demons, he must not be purely good. Thus, through the lack of substantial support for Jekyll's righteousness as well as the egotistical act of Jekyll creating Hyde in the first place, Stevenson

muddles the line between good and evil in the story. Hyde is also portrayed as less than pure evil throughout the tale. As an example, when Hyde encounters Dr. Lanyon, he speaks eloquently and acts “civilly enough” towards him, as described in Dr. Lanyon’s account, showing he is, in fact, capable of behaving well (Stevenson, 49). As follows, Hyde, too, complicates Stevenson’s relationship between good and evil. This ambiguity departs from the ancient origins of the doppelgänger as threatening and sinister and makes way for the evolving interpretation of the doppelgänger, as shown in *Black Swan*.

In Aronofsky’s *Black Swan*, the doppelgänger trope takes a very different form, expanding the gray area touched upon in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and demonstrating the changed perceptions of doppelgängers in more contemporary culture. The 2010 film’s use of doubles is less obvious than the gruesome transformation of Dr. Jekyll into Mr. Hyde. For instance, the protagonist, Nina, has many approximate doubles instead of one true counterpart like Jekyll and Hyde. While Lily could be seen as Nina’s alter-ego double, she is not as evil or ghastly (neither in physicality nor character) nor is she obviously the doppelgänger. Lily’s appearance approximates Nina’s, as they are both thin, petite, brunette ballerinas, but they are not exact doubles, and Lily’s actions are also not as clearly evil. In fact, many of the scenes where Lily acts maliciously, as in the moment where Lily seduces Thomas in an attempt to take Nina’s role, are suggested to be Nina’s hallucinations. Nina, in many ways, also acts as her own doppelgänger. She begins the film as the perfect daughter—obedient, sweet, and submissive—yet as she delves into the role of the *Black Swan*, she

creates her own evil alter ego. In the scene where Nina screams at her mother and rebels by going out to the clubs with Lily, we see the other, edgier side of Nina emerging. Even still, Beth, the dancer of the Black Swan role before Nina, offers another option as a double for Nina. As a doppelgänger, Beth represents Nina's abysmal fate after her role as the Black Swan. Beth, too, is changed by the role and her relationship with Thomas, and ends up in a mental hospital- a future that seems likely for Nina given her loose grip on reality by the end of the film, when she stabs herself in a vivid hallucination of her fighting with Lily, another option for her doppelgänger. Through the depiction of multiple doppelgängers for one person, Aronofsky takes the ambiguity of doubles touched upon in Jekyll and Hyde and expands it to create even more gray area in the definition of a doppelgänger, further departing from the doppelgänger's origins and demonstrating the changed conception of doubles that currently exists in popular culture. The possible existence of multiple doppelgängers for one person instead of one true doppelgänger in Black Swan reflects the less strict view that doppelgängers exist all around us in different forms and might even be lurking among us now, which unsettles us for the purposes of Black Swan and excites us for the purposes of social media.

While Black Swan does not directly address nor even include social media, despite being made in 2010 during the rise of Facebook, Aronofsky's suggestion that doppelgängers can be all around us reflect and mock the flippant attitude we have towards doubles in a social media setting. The now more familiar meaning of doppelgänger simply signifies someone who physically looks or behaves like another person. In fact, the ominous origins

of the word are virtually completely forgotten in the lens of Facebook applications like “ Find My Doppelgänger,” a gimmick that claims to find one’s celebrity lookalike. Rarely do the results ever reflect any remote physical similarity between Facebook user and celebrity figure, unlike the doppelgängers in both *Black Swan* and *Jekyll and Hyde*. While this element of social media might not reflect the traditional nature of the doppelgänger, social media profiles themselves might. A social media profile is a close approximation of its living counterpart, but it is a perfected version of one’s self for public display. In this sense, a social media profile might be the best modern example of the “ spirit double” origin of the doppelgänger: an exact, yet nonliving (or invisible) replica of a living being with character traits also mildly different from the original being, but, in the case of social media, this replica is usually an improvement in certain ways.

In its daily usage, the word “ doppelgänger” has virtually entirely lost its more horrific undertones. But, its origin is not completely lost. The concept of doppelgängers clearly remains a source of fear in humanity as demonstrated by its frequent appearance in modern TV shows, like *Orphan Black* and *Dollhouse*, and horror or psychological-thriller films, like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and newly released *Enemy*, beyond interpretations in *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *Black Swan*. The representations of the evil double trope in popular culture demonstrates that we still struggle with the idea that we are at war with ourselves in good versus evil, and our focus on the doppelgänger in modern art and social media portrays our attempt to reconcile that, or take advantage of our fear of our own duality.

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