


Relocating Stevenson: From a Victorian to a post/modern world

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Abstract

Robert Louis Stevenson's novella, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) appears to be a Victorian novel. Yet, the highly acclaimed novella experiments with traditional concept of dualism and rejects the notion of dependent entities within a single body. Stevenson portrays two separate bodies embodying two separate attributes of human beings constantly in fight over power. This power relationship is reinforced by the fragmented spaces depicted by the novelist. Dr. Jekyll's decentred house with two ambiguous entrances is read as an extension of his fragmented body in a postmodern context. In this respect, the novella suggests possibilities, impossibilities and multiplicities in terms of geographical, temporal and cultural experiences. Stevenson attempts to show how modernist assumptions about the perfectibility of mankind are perverted as the novella rejects the relationship between reality and appearance celebrating a postmodern duality. Taking from Frederick Jameson's argument that postmodernism rejects essence versus reality, the aim of this paper is to examine the fluctuations of Stevenson's place in Victorian, modernist and postmodernist ideologies. Since there is no fixed reference or stability in postmodern condition or postmodern temporality, Stevenson challenges the values of Western culture and belief as a whole. As a consequence, the fragmented selves of a single body and multiple narratives of the novel further explicate the fragmented place of Stevenson within a single ideology and condition.

Keywords

Robert Louis Stevenson; Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde; Victorian; Modern; Postmodern; duality.

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Robert Louis Stevenson's novella, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), experiments with cultural dimensions of space and identity. It appears to

be Victorian with its appeal to male bourgeoisie British society. Yet, it empowers the doctrine of Victorian “separation of spheres” to a modern extent by excluding female and focusing rather on single men of both the public and domestic spaces (Wolff, 1990, p.14). Juxtaposing two separate entities within one body in fight over power is certainly the experiment of a modern scientist. Unfortunately, Stevenson’s modernist experiment fails as modernism’s faith in science and technological progress is tragically misguided. The multiple identities and fragmented bodies of Stevenson remind us of Nietzschean idea of multiple truths and consequently lead to the postmodern fragmented selves. Dr. Jekyll's fragmented and decentred house with two ambiguous entrances coincides with his fragmented body in a postmodern context as well. In this respect, the novella suggests possibilities, impossibilities and multiplicities in terms of geographical, temporal and cultural experiences.

Stevenson engages Victorian, modern and postmodern discourses with identity and space. To an extent the novella embraces a paradoxical and problematic space. The idea of depthless space occupies a significant place in Fredric Jameson's theory of postmodernism in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* as inevitable fragmentation and decentering of the subject. Thus, this paper attempts to discuss the fluctuations of Stevenson’s place between Victorian, modern and postmodern worlds. In the first part of this paper, a special attention will be given to Jameson's accounts of space in the discussions of Dr. Jekyll's problematic house with double entrances. Jameson's argument on space is significant for he believes that “our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages, are today dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time” (1998, p. 15). Since there is no fixed reference or stability in postmodern condition or postmodern temporality, Stevenson challenges the values of Western culture and belief as a whole. In the second part of this paper, Stevenson's narrative technique will be read as another challenge to the Victorian literature for he experiments with narrative forms and breaks away from the traditional unities. In this way, the fragmented selves and spaces in a single body and multiple narratives of the novella will be further explicated to uncover the fragmented place of Stevenson within a single ideology or condition.

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde is Victorian in its affinity to the scientific development and the doctrine of “separation of spheres”. As Chris Barker argues, late 19th century and 20th centuries experienced not only the excitement but also the distress caused by technological progress (2000, p. 136). The progress ironically unearthed the darker side of modern life, as issues of gender, nationality and identity were questioned and put in doubt. Life became tormented by fragmented and split identities continuously challenging the Victorian moral world. London was also fragmented like its inhabitants and revealed the darker side of modern life. A need to redefine the established norms and concepts arose by which the Victorian Age is depicted in fiction. As literary historian Carol H. Mackay argues;

“[this] was a period of intense ontological ferment. Virtually any given self-definition seemed to be in peril. At the same time, however, the period was a highly reactionary one: the very boundaries and self-definitions were reaffirmed again and again...” (2001, p. 2).

Brian McHale’s claim is also supportive of this argument; “Victorian realism is, after all, the norm against which they have measured postmodernist fiction and found it wanting” (2004, p. 220). In this respect, fixed definitions and established norms of Victorian period were open to be challenged, redefined and rewritten by breaking the boundaries and fixed essential truths as seen in Stevenson’s fiction. Victorian doctrine of “separation of spheres” privileged male to the public space, yet restricted female into the domestic. However, Stevenson strengthens the male privilege of public space in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by intentionally excluding female characters. Except for minor female characters as maids or servants Stevenson ignores Victorian feminine ideal in his novella.

In Stevenson’s writing London becomes a virtual narration in which the story of the “down-goingmen” is told (1995, p. 3). All male characters are single without any family connections and there is no instance of a perfect Victorian family as we have read in the novels of Austen, Eliot, Dickens or Hardy. In this respect, Stevenson destabilizes the traditional norms of the Victorian society and disturbs the air of reality or “fact” to borrow Dickens’ words (1995, p. 3). As Jameson argues;

“Modernism in general did not go well with over-stuffed Victorian furniture, with Victorian moral taboos, or with the conventions of polite society. This is to say that whatever the explicit political content of the great high modernisms, the latter were

always in some mostly implicit ways dangerous and explosive, subversive within the established order” (1998, p. 178).

Stevenson’s subversive setting foreshadows the inherent danger Jameson hints, as in Stevenson’s writing London is depicted in darkness and ambiguity. Mr. Utterson’s “dark bed”, questions he tries to solve about the mysterious Mr. Hyde in “mere darkness,” and “wider labyrinths of lamp-lighted city” portray a rather problematic and a gothic setting (1995, p. 14). For instance, the strange door Mr. Utterson and Mr. Enfield encounter at the beginning of the novella has a story, and they play Hide and Seek to discover it. It does not look like the door of a conventional Victorian house for it breaks the orderly line of the street;

“Two doors from one corner, on the left hand going east, the line was broken by the entry of a court...sinister block of building thrust forward its gabel on the street. It was two storeys high; showed no window, nothing but a door on the lower storey and a blind forehead of discoloured wall on the upper; and bore in every feature the marks of prolonged and sordid negligence. The door, which was equipped with neither bell nor knocker, was blistered and disdained....and for close on a generation no one had appeared to drive away these random visitors or to repair their ravages” (Stevenson, 1995, p. 5).

Utterson and Enfield attempt to locate the door against historical space and what Enfield recalls is a past with “odd story” (1995, p. 5) in which Stevenson’s dark and mysterious character Mr. Hyde tramples over a child’s body (1995, p. 6). In Enfield’s narration the door signifies the entrance of a space where mystery and violence intermingle and oppose to the high morality of Victorians. Furthermore, Stevenson’s ambiguous door is inaccessible to the outsiders except for its “deformed” (1995, p. 9), “Satan-like” (1995, p. 6) and detestable inhabitant Mr. Hyde. It is significant that Hyde uses “the old dissecting room door” not the main entrance (1995, p. 19):

“It seems scarcely a house. There is no other door, and nobody goes in or out of that one,...the windows are always shut, but they’re clean. And then there is a chimney, which is generally smoking; so somebody must live there...and yet, it’s not so sure; for the buildings are so packed together about that court, that it’s hard to say where one ends and another begins” (Stevenson, 1995, p. 9).

Here Stevenson blurs the perceptions of space as the orderly Victorian street is transformed into a complex one where assumptions about spatial unity and coherence are questioned. Enfield calls the street as “Queer Street” (1995, p. 9). The end of Victorian morality connected to the Victorian doctrines of space is also echoed in Utterson’s experience of London streets;

“Round the corner from the by street there was a square of ancient, handsome houses, now for the most part decayed from their high estate, and let in flat chambers to all sorts and conditions of men: map-engravers, architects, shady lawyers, and the agents of obscure enterprises” (Stevenson, 1995, p. 19).

Decaying Victorian houses symbolize the end of the Victorian morality at large and foreshadows the evil transforming the streets of London into an underground heart of a completely different city. For instance, in the middle of the night a maid-servant witnesses the murder of Sir Danvers Carew on the street from her window and remarks the “ape-like fury” of Mr. Hyde (Stevenson, 1995, p. 26). Evil and violence have already broken in the quiet street. In this instance, historical, traditional and geographical stability of Victorians is not sustainable anymore. It is constantly undermined with the intrusion of the queer and the evil as London is recreated as a bewildering immersion of postmodern claim.

In this postmodern space, the entrance Mr. Hyde is allowed to use to access Dr. Jekyll's house is lateral and rather backdoor just like the affairs he is associated with. Furthermore, it is “curiously unmarked” (1991, p. 173) according to Jameson’s reading of a postmodern hotel, Bonaventure and “seems scarcely a house” to recall Mr. Enfield's observation of the mysterious door (1995, p. 9). Yet it still “aspires to being a total space, a complete world” (Jameson, 1991, p. 173). Similarly Dr. Jekyll’s house with two entrances, one of which is dislocated within the completeness of the house, locates two fragmented identities and is still a complete house. The lateral door achieves a seemingly placeless dissociation of Dr. Jekyll’s house from its neighbourhood and breaks away from the traditional unity and coherence of Victorian life codes. Moreover, this peculiar door is still linked to the main house and links the house to the main street, just like the main entrance but as “its equivalent and its replacement or substitute” (Jameson, 1991, p. 173).

Then, it is difficult to map the position of this strange door in the “mappable external world” in Jameson's terms (1991, p. 175). Yet from the by street Mr.

Utterson reaches the main entrance of the house where Dr. Jekyll resides. Compared with the inaccessible part of the house, Dr. Jekyll's door has "a great air of wealth and comfort" complying with the Victorian notions of domesticity (Stevenson, 1995, p. 19). The ambiguity of the door coincides with Mr. Hyde since all the characters in the novel point out to the difficulty of describing this mysterious person as an essential being like that of postmodernism; "it wasn't like a man; it was like some damned Juggernaut"(my emphasis), "really like Satan", (7), "detestable", "deformed" and etc., (Stevenson, 1995, p. 6). Soho flat, the supposed residency of Mr. Hyde remains obscure as well. What is the function of this rarely visited flat? Is it for disguise? Why Stevenson has created it first of all? All these questions remain unanswered in the text.

Since the main entrance of the Victorian house is no more valid for Mr. Hyde, Dr. Jekyll's servant narrates that very little of Mr. Hyde is seen on that part of the house since he uses the laboratory door (1995, p. 20) or the "old-dissecting room door" (1995, p. 19). In particular, Dr. Jekyll's experience of space as ambiguous and multiple makes the laboratory another postmodern space. Laboratory becomes a network of hidden location of power and control. It is figured as a space in which subjective experience is one of inescapable isolation. Utterson realizes a "distasteful sense of strangeness" as soon as he steps in the laboratory "once crowded with eager students and now lying gaunt and silent, the tables laden with chemical apparatus, the floor strewn with crates and littered with packing straw, and the light falling dimly through the foggy cupola" (Stevenson, p. 31).

Now, it has become the sanctuary of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. The sense of strangeness felt by Utterson is experienced more powerfully by Dr. Jekyll. He is forlorn. The feeling of loneliness culminates into an alienation with one's self as Dr. Jekyll broods over the alienation he feels in his own house when he transforms himself into Mr. Hyde; "I stole through the corridors, a stranger in my own house; and coming to my room, I saw for the first time the appearance of Edward Hyde" (Stevenson, 1995, p. 75).

What is more, the feeling of alienation grows when transformations occur impromptu. In the window incidence when Utterson and Enfield catch the glimpse of

Dr. Jekyll's transformation, he has actually locked himself up in his laboratory, watching the street from the window beside "dusty windows barred with iron" (Stevenson, 1995, p. 32). Dr Jekyll becomes a passive spectator of life outside just like the conventional Victorian powerless female. As he cannot control the transformations, Dr. Jekyll confesses that he had to run away from his own house before daylight that was no longer his and found his cabinet a sanctuary (1995, p. 76). In another instant he feels desperate as he calls Lanyon's help and cries as follows; "If I sought to enter by the house my own servants would consign me to the gallows" (1995, p. 87). His detachment from his own body and space puts Dr. Jekyll dismissed to the margins, whose spatial entity contest the singularity of postmodernism. As Homi Bhabha argues in *The Location of Culture* it is this shift from the singularities that "has resulted in an awareness of the subject positions- of race, gender, generation, institutional location, geopolitical locale, sexual orientation- that inhabit any claim to identity in the modern world" (1993, p. 1).

In the instances of transformation Dr. Jekyll prefers to use words such as "prison" and "capture" (Stevenson, 1995, p. 89), and describes his condition as "slavery" (1995, p. 77) trying to find his "city of refuge" in the body of Jekyll imprisoning himself to domestic space (1995, p. 85). Dr. Jekyll's centred or decentered self within the social space of alienation embodies the contradiction of modernism itself. The socially alienated Mr. Hyde is also alienated spatially. Yet he does not complain.

Actually at the beginning of his experiences Dr. Jekyll enjoys the pleasures of his evil self and identifies Hyde with himself; "This, too was myself. It seemed natural and human" (Stevenson, 1995, p. 76). This shift is apparent in his final confession as he calls Hyde with a third person pronoun "he"; "Hyde in danger of *his* life was a creature new to me", "*he* sat all day gnawing *his* nails; there *he* dined, sitting alone with *his* fears...*He*, I say-I cannot say, I" (1995, p. 88). The alienation turns into "the horror of [Jekyll's] other self" (Stevenson, 1995, p. 90). Furthermore "The powers of Hyde seemed to have grown with the sickliness of Jekyll" (1995, p. 90). Eventually evil dominates forcefully and breaks the order of Dr. Jekyll disregarding the historical relationship to the creator. The role reversals question the power structures of the existing order. Jameson's argument on postmodern condition

implies the changing positions of dominant, recalling Bhabha's theory of the other in *Nation and Narration* emerging forcefully and inevitably within cultural discourse (1993, p. 4). Stevenson's novella and modern man at the same time suffer from a case of fragmentation as subordinate dominates over the dominant.

Hence, Stevenson depicts fragmented identities in fragmented spaces. The ambiguous house, Soho flat, and deserted laboratory are the variety of fragmented spaces Stevenson creates. The fragmented spaces coincide with the fragmented identities enabling them access via different entrances to the very space. Stevenson's projected world is reflected in the presentation of two doors within a single house. If two separate identities could reside in one body, two entrances could also complete the whole picture as a sanctuary for both. Indeed, through fragmented places Stevenson tries to signal contemporary man's displacement in the world, either in Victorian or Modern/Postmodern world.

The fluctuating place of Stevenson in the literary canon could also be reinterpreted by means of his style. While Stevenson experiments with fragmented characters and spaces, at the same time he signals the end of serious social problem novels of Eliot, Hardy, Dickens, and Gaskell by taking from the sensational forms such as gothic, fantasy, science fiction, and detective stories. We can see numerous references to gothic, detective stories, and science fiction in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Indeed there is a close kinship between gothic and postmodernism. As Ruth Helyer argues in 'Parodied to Death: The Postmodern Gothic of American Psycho';

"both have certainly thrived amid industrialisation, urbanisation, shifts in sexual and domestic organisation, and scientific discovery....Both discourses are vague and difficult to define, they encourage the use of the imagination, and become associated with an incoherence that, because it is at the whim of individual interpretation" (2000, p. 6).

Furthermore, Helyer argues that in a fragmented postmodern world of isolated individuals, guilt, anxiety, despair and internalizing fear produce narratives which focus on psychological disturbance and are "dominated by fantasy, hallucination and madness" (2000, p. 11). Dr. Jekyll feels guilty. His despair and fear is represented in his isolation and fear from his other dangerous half. In this respect, gothic and postmodern narratives demonstrate the impossibility of being one or the other. Thus

they try to present characters who ambivalently demonstrate both binary oppositions as in the case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

Stevenson's fiction borrows a lot from them and reflects this cultural and social fragmentation of the period in the novelist's style. Jameson argues that postmodernism erases some boundaries or separations and "the older distinction between high culture and so-called mass or popular culture" is fascinated by

"paperback categories of the gothic and romance, the popular biography, the murder mystery and the science fiction or fantasy novel. They no longer quote such texts as a Joyce might have done, or a Mahler; they incorporate them, to the point where the line between high art and commercial forms seems increasingly difficult to draw" (1998, p. 165).

This transition between genres is evident in Stevenson's style in general and in his novella in particular. In the case of *Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* the style of Stevenson is ambiguous just like his protagonist/s. Stevenson's narrative technique displays experimentation with forms and it suggests another challenge to the nineteenth century Victorian literature. Stuck in between two different poles of blurred identities, the novella experiences such blurring between high and popular genres. The affinities of Stevenson's work with popular genres, boundary crossing between different disciplines, and experimentation with the narrative forms of high and low literature have already been studied in a very comprehensive and invaluable book (Ambrosini and Dury, 2006). In this respect, the narrative style of Stevenson is not only ambiguous but also problematic since -as Jameson has already pointed out to the difficulty- it is difficult to understand these blurred or fragmented texts, just like we as readers find it difficult to cope up with the shifting identities of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

Boundary crossing between high and low literature, popular and sensational forms and the fragmented bodies of Dr. Jekyll or Mr. Hyde parallel with the fragmented text comprised of eight narrated chapters and two epistolary ones. Stevenson manipulates the third person omniscient by epistolary technique- the eighteenth century narrative technique of gothic and sensation novels. The respected lawyer Utterson's narration dominates the first eight chapters with a brief inclusion of Mr Enfield and a maid (Stevenson, 1995, p. 5-7). Although minor, Stevenson's excluded female character contributes to the narration here by witnessing the murder

of Sir Danvers Carew. Ironically she is the only person to witness the murder and her female gaze provides this witness from an upper window- not on the very street. She may be insignificant for Stevenson but without her contribution, the story of Mr. Hyde would have been incomplete. This intrusion of female narration is significant and symbolic at the same time on a deeper level, since the ignored female voice could be read as the female opposition to hegemony of the male and postmodern reversal of existing powers. The female gaze and eyewitness in Stevenson's novella challenges typically marginalized male dominance of modernism by breaking the male dominant narration.

The conventional narrative sequence is disrupted after Utterson's narration and followed by "Dr. Lanyon's Narrative" (Stevenson, 1995, pp. 61-70) enclosing another letter by Hyde and "Henry Jekyll's Full Statement of the Case" (1995, p. 71-92). When the letters are discovered both writers are dead but it is this narrative form that enables the reader to learn the true story. Linda Hutcheon's argument on postmodern narratives elucidates the function of these letters: "[f]acts do not speak for themselves in either form of narrative: the tellers speak for them, making these fragments of the past into a discursive whole" (1989, p. 59). So, in Stevenson's novella, it is not only Lanyon, Enfield and Utterson but also the ignored female voice and the letters that complete and take over the narrative as a discursive whole. The last chapter, Jekyll's full statement concludes the narrative action and culminates the fragmented narrative. The fragmentary structure involves a confession and the narrative voice shifts between 1st and 3rd person narrations as pointed out earlier.

Finally, Dr. Jekyll's nostalgic yearning for his peaceful past and Mr. Hyde's explosive revolt against his creator is the outcome of the postmodern condition men face in Jameson's meaningless and depthless world. Postmodern rejection of the belief that one can ever move beyond the surface appearances into a deeper truth leaves us with multiple surfaces; spaces and identities. Blurred, split and ambiguous personalities of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde coincide with the fragmented style of Stevenson's fiction since gothic, detective story and science fiction contribute to Stevenson's experiment on duality. Stevenson experiments on fragmentation in many ways. While Stevenson's style fluctuates between high serious literature and popular

genres, fragmented narratives in fragmented spaces also contribute to the story Stevenson tells. The excluded female completes the gaps of Stevenson's narration by her gaze from an upper window. Her stance is symbolic for she represents the ignored and subordinate of the existing order. Hence, it is the modern condition that anticipates the postmodern condition leaving us with fragmentation everywhere.

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