

Wilde and Stevenson Reflect on the Implications of London's Growth

During the nineteenth century, English cities experienced immense growth and change due to national industrialization. The population of cities increased as impoverished workers and their families continually moved from the rural countryside to the city to find work. This spike in density resulted in a rapid shifting of these cities' atmospheres. Ultimately, the increase in density led to greater health risks, a shift in social stability, and perhaps most significantly, a change in community and connections. These new, modern British cities fostered an environment where individuals could hide, remain anonymous, and act invisibly—an action that the small country towns of Britain had previously prevented—leading to the association of cities as places lacking morals. The play *The Importance of Being Earnest*, by Oscar Wilde, and the novella *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, by Robert Louis Stevenson, both capture the rise and changes of the nineteenth-century English city. Despite these works' very different tones, their outlooks upon the English city and how the urban landscapes foster anonymity through impersonality, and freedom from the connection are very similar. While the moral repercussions of anonymity they explore are different, the two works have striking similarities, including split identities, identity switching, and social duplicity. The two stories argue that the growth of cities and the new opportunities they provide are detrimental, resulting in individuality that is easily lost or corrupted.

The Importance of Being Earnest starts its exploration of moral misadventure and ambiguity in London, despite taking place, for the most part, in Hertfordshire. It is in London where Jack loses one identity and is given another. As a child, Jack was left, unbeknownst to him, by Miss Prim, “in the cloak-room at Victoria Station,” inside “a somewhat large, black leather hand-bag” (Wilde 2233). This excursion to the city as a child has an enormous impact upon Jack. It is in the city where a helpless child, without ever knowing it, loses his identity as Earnest. This loss, or swap, of identity is the catalyst for many of the play's comedic elements, but also serves as a grave and subtle warning about what the city can do.

In describing the station where Miss Prim left Ernest, she chooses to portray it as “one of the larger railway stations in London” (Wilde 2261). Miss Prim blames the loss on her carelessness, but her choice of words paints a broader picture of blame. It is on a trip from the country to the city when the baby is lost. The loss of identity occurs after moving from the country—a place of virtue, structure, and clear society—to foggy, confused London that hides and obscures. In embarking on this journey Miss Prim is mirroring the movements and experiences of the countless men and women flooding English cities for work. It is not only London where Ernest is lost but also one of “the larger railway stations” (Wilde 2261). Railway stations were somewhat new, for the time, and helped to facilitate much of the growth the British cities were experiencing. Moreover, they act as a crossroads for people. At train stations, people of all walks of life were given an opportunity to move physically across Britain, but also move socially as well. At this convergence, Ernest is lost and is completely reborn as Jack.

This stripping and replacing of identity is wholly facilitated by the city. Both stories treat the city as an institution that takes people in and quickly transforms them. As an “institution,” the city functions differently in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Dr. Jekyll is afforded a second identity that can move smoothly in tangent with his existing one, whereas Jack is transformed and lives one, albeit false life. Many of the characters from *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* fit the popular stereotype of being “men of science.” These men are highly educated middle-class bachelors, who are defined by their modern interests in science or law. Humorously, but importantly, Dr. Jekyll inhabits all the nuances of this stereotype. He is known as, “M.D., D.C.L., L.L.D., F.R.S., etc.” meaning he is a Doctor of Medicine, Civil Law, and Law, as well as a Fellow of the Royal Society (Stevenson 2173). With his three doctorates, fellowship, and social standing, his reputation within this specific London stereotype is beyond reproach.

Additionally, through the adoption of the more than four titles, “M.D., D.C.L., L.L.D., F.R.S., etc.” Dr. Jekyll is both hiding and self-aggrandizing (Stevenson 2173). Each title serves to describe him as a man. But ultimately, serve a purpose similar to the function of the city: to obscure. Titles create an image of a someone who, in turn that person can hide

behind, allowing someone to *think* they know a person before meeting or talking to them. In this case, allowing Dr. Jekyll to hide behind his letters—to his own destruction. Titles hide the fluidity of identity and do not describe or inform the individual's soul, rather serving to disguise it. It is Dr. Jekyll's titles that cover up suspicion of his dark secret and the corruption that his being has given in to. This serves as a criticism of not only cities, but of social order. Dr. Jekyll shows that men of science and high social standing can be more morally corrupt than a lowly worker, newly come from the country. Moreover, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* warns that when one is forced to hide their true emotions from all—as the city life forces one to—the outcomes can be terrible.

However, despite or due to his sterling reputation, Dr. Jekyll decides to embrace “the two natures that contended in the field of [his] consciousness” (Stevenson 2201). He “recognise[d] the thorough and primitive duality of man” and embraced how he “was radically both” good and evil (Stevenson 2201). Dr. Jekyll was fascinated by the new life Mr. Hyde could afford him and weary of “the dryness of a life of study,” Dr. Jekyll decided to live a double life (Stevenson 2203). The city of London helped him achieve this too. London sets the scene for the moral duplicitousness of Mr. Hyde, as Dr. Jekyll is allowed to indulge in his more hedonistic side through his excursions out as Mr. Hyde. The lack of a concrete identity possessed by either actor replicates London's lack of a concrete identity. After all, how can a city in such a constant state of flux have a consistent identity? London makes the perfect playground for both the morally virtuous Dr. Jekyll and the narrator and morally bankrupt Mr. Hyde. As London is able to foster both identities, characters such as Dr. Jekyll can become exposed to and further engage in immoral actions, resulting in the creation of a separate identity Mr. Hyde.

The difference in how the two stories treat the nature of identity is in assumption. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Jack is forced to assume a new identity by the confusing nature of the city. Whereas Dr. Jekyll chooses to adopt one and, through the confusing nature of city life, is able to hide and live two different lives. Despite the different ways that the two characters have their identities split, the end results are very similar. The city acts directly as an agent in their lives, shaping and changing who they are. This is done in part through the

different social structures that the city imposes onto them and in part through the confusion of city life that provides cover.

The Importance of Being Earnest goes a step further in demonstrating the differences between the effects of the country and city upon people, with its constant shifting between the two. Jack escapes from his home in the countryside to London under the pretense of visiting a made-up little brother: Earnest, whereas Algernon uses the fictional Bunbury to escape London and its less than pleasant social obligations. The creation of fictionalized lives as forms of escape from the city underlines the inherent conflict of the city. The endless possibilities of lives that the city affords its inhabitants are too much for the human will not take advantage of. The use of these fictional stories as a method of escape demonstrates the pressure of the multitudes of lives a city affords one and the necessity of escape. This practice of niche lying—decreed “bunburying” by Algernon—to escape daily life is in both ways heavily facilitated by the city (Wilde 2236). Nevertheless, the city not only allows for bunburying but encourages it. London acts both as a place to escape into fantasy and to escape from as the occasion arises.

Jack’s countryside manor, which he chooses to escape from, provides him neither “profit or pleasure,” yet “it gives [him] position” (Wilde 2232). This conflict that splits the countryside between being half useless and half useful is also the same conflict found in London and, to a large degree Jack’s inner conflict. Jack’s home in London is seen as “unfashionable,” but “easily altered” by Lady Bracknell (Wilde 2232). This blend of tastelessness and modern transience is a commentary upon the city. London is an “easily altered” setting that reflects the multifaceted aspects of those who inhabit it, demonstrating the same conflicts of the people themselves and following the same whim. One side of a street can be fashionable, while the other is not, but “both, if necessary” can be “easily altered” (Wilde 2232). The malleability of the cityscape is indicative of the lack of concrete identity it possesses. Jack’s position in life is a mirror for these reflections on the purpose and character of the city and countryside. Like the city, he is easily changeable, wanting to be baptized, therefore changing his identity because it is fashionable and the most convenient

option available to him. Nevertheless, part of the split in his identity that occurs is more reflective of the country.

Hertfordshire, therefore, acts as a foil to London. The country and the city are constantly placed at odds against each other through both the acts that take place in each setting and the discussion of character that occurs. Algernon goes to Jack's countryside estate with the express purpose of creating a little mischief and confusion for his enjoyment. One of the first things that he proclaims is how his assumed character of cousin Ernest is "not really wicked at all" (Wilde 2239). However, his intentions are far from being blameless. Nevertheless, despite his bunurying and deliberate attempt to cause confusion, at the end of the play—in the country—everything is worked out. All the problems the city has created, such as Jack's identity and a marriage proposal, suddenly become clear. The relief that the countryside provides in the question of identity, reflects the feelings regarding the disagreeable situations caused by overpopulation. Without the anonymizing influence of the city, the play suggests, life becomes clearer.

While not directly comparing London's atmosphere to the atmosphere of the countryside, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* seems to connect natural phenomena to what the city allows its inhabitants to get away with. For example, the night that Mr. Hyde murders Sir. Carew, "Fog rolled over the city in the small hours," hinting at bad events (Stevenson 2180). The pervasiveness of the night and the density of the fog both foreshadow events, set tone, and foreshow the truth behind Mr. Hyde and Dr. Jekyll. The fog acts both to conceal their relationship and highlight the mystery of it. In fact, throughout the whole story, London is described as "a nocturnal city," whose most important and secret actions occur at "night under the face of the fogged city moon" (Stevenson 2175). Mr. Hyde seems to rule this night which permanently drapes the novel. Even if London has bright days, it does not matter because evil pervades it constantly. The city's atmosphere does not just match its events but seems to help obscure and cover them up.

At the start of the book, when the origins and search for Mr. Hyde are being recounted. The interest in him is caused when he is seen to "trample calmly over the child's body and [leave] her screaming on the ground" (Stevenson 2171). Mr. Hyde

“atones” for his crime by begrudgingly paying “hundred pounds for the child’s family” (Stevenson 2172). After he paid, Mr. Hyde vanishes for the first time, causing Mr. Utterson to search all of London for him. Moreover, the search is no easy feat. London not only acts to create Mr. Hyde, through anonymity, but the same anonymity acts to protect him. Again, after the murder of Sir Carew, the city hides Mr. Hyde from the police and Mr. Utterson, thwarting a justice that is widely acknowledged to be deserved. The city seems to foster the creation of Mr. Hyde in so far as that Dr. Jekyll enjoys the opportunities and experiences that Mr. Hyde offers him in the city. Dr. Jekyll took joy in being Mr. Hyde. He liked how, as Mr. Hyde, he did not feel constrained by manners, rules, and social norms. He was truly free because of the lack of inhibitions that Mr. Hyde felt so he could explore his deepest desires.

Both the *Importance of Being Earnest* and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* deal heavily with the idea of cities and how they cause confusion and foster anonymity and explore cities relative to identity. The main city in each of the stories, London, creates an intense backdrop for the two pieces that reflects the characters themselves and their inner struggles as they are reflected in their settings. Jack, from *The Importance of Being Earnest*, is a critique of the confusion that cities cause. The series of mistaken identities replicate the multitude of identities fostered within a city all competing to be heard above the din. As a victim of London’s confusion, he is forced to assume and live under a new identity that nearly costs him his marriage, but the countryside allows him some relief from the oppressive identity of the city. Dr. Jekyll, likewise, uses the confusion of the city of obscure himself and creates a new identity: Mr. Hyde. Both identities that Jack and Dr. Jekyll assume are brought on by the city. Furthermore, the city’s confusion allows them to experience life in a completely different way. London, in both stories, is a messy, confusing, and seedy environment where it is not possible to survive intact. In this way, both stories argue that the growth of cities and the new opportunities they provide are detrimental, resulting in individuality that is easily lost or corrupted.

Works Cited

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