

Timothy Moll

English 203

Professor McNiel

December 19, 2018

The Battle of Classification and Individualism
in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*

Economic class has always been a cause of separation between people. People tend to congregate into the groups they fit in with and one of the factors of deciding how much people have in common is with economic class and social class. These economic and social classes dictate how people are supposed to act, according to society. These “social policies” of how someone is supposed to act causes them to change the way they act and even hide their passions from the world. People then begin to represent and imitate their peers in certain actions as to fit in with them. The codes imposed onto them by society cause them to have a self they can show in public and one they must hide from society as to not be ridiculed for not fitting in.

This novel was written in the year 1886, this was during the tail-end of the Victorian era. The Victorian era is known for their dresses and their chivalry, but the Victorian era also had the social class system implemented into society. This meant the era had a strong presence of social class and people were always trying to get themselves onto the next level socially. This is because of the importance of class with your perception by the people around you. The higher your perceived class is the more morally sound you were seen as, or the “better” you and your decisions were seen as. This also worked inversely as the lower class you were the more you were expected to act in “animalistic” and immoral ways (Mack). These codes “left very room for any form of expression of desires because people could not do recreational things like go to a

tavern or express physical attraction” (Mack). This meant that people of the era had to hide their desires in order to fit into what they were expected to be.

In the novel, Jekyll represents an ideal Victorian-era man. He is well respected, he is a doctor, and he is wealthy. He may even be perceived as perfect. Another reason he is seen as an ideal man of his time is his strict ability to follow the conducts of a high-class man. He acts exactly as he is expected to. Even in his introduction he is drawn in a perfect light. The novel describes him as a ”well-made, smooth-faced man” and “every mark of capacity and kindness” (Stevensen 19). His first impression is altered due to his social class, he is seen as such a respected man instantly due to his class. This was commonplace in the Victorian era. If someone was known to be respectable and wealthy then it was common practice to have judged them as instantly being trustworthy and beautiful, as this was the stereotype of the wealthy. This beauty only is surface deep though as Jekyll must act differently as to uphold his standings socially.

In this era, economic and social classes dictate how people are supposed to act, according to society. The higher on the social rankings you are the more scrutiny you are put under to act the way you are “supposed” to act. Jekyll was under this scrutiny and was aware of it so he had to adapt in order to preserve his social class and keep his respectability. He had to adapt due to the fact that he had passions and desires that did not align with what was expected with a man of his stature of the Victorian era. Dr. Lanyon describes his ended friendship with Jekyll as ““But it is more than ten years since Henry Jekyll became too fanciful for me”” (14). This text shows that Jekyll began acting differently to the point of losing one of his close friends. He had to hide part of himself to fit into his class. This is because of the era he was in. As the Victorian-era sought perfection, so undesirable pieces of personalities were ignored and bottled up (Mack). And it was these passions that he hid that cost him one of his close friends, Dr. Lanyon.

Jekyll in the novel believes in the thought that people are not “good” or “bad” but a grouping of both. He represents the Freudian theory of the structure of the mind. This theory was rejected by the Victorians because of the desire to hide the undesirable. People of the era wanted perfection, more specifically to see perfection so the thought of someone being imperfect did not align with their views (Mack). Jekyll has these desires that do not align with what he is expected. So he must adapt This problem of having desires and then not being able to act on them due to the fear of being scrutinized is the exact reason Hyde was created.

Jekyll had to create his alter ego as a defense for his social class while acting upon his desires that his inner self had. One such act was Jekyll's drinking problem. Jekyll drank gin alone, which could mean he was an alcoholic which on its own would be enough to hurt Jekyll's reputation (Victorian Social Codes in Jekyll and Hyde). This one issue that he must hide shows how much even small acts such as drinking must be done in private. Because of this, Hyde was created and completely took over on the hidden self-Jekyll had. He acted upon things no man of Jekyll's class would do and he did so with no social repercussions as Hyde was a lower-class man. He had no social code to withstand. In this respect, the double of the novel represents someone's perceived personality versus their inner self. The inner self is our personality that lies in everyone (Layson, Hana, and Jules Law). This inner self is hidden by people due to fears of losing social class and standing due to revealing desires.

Hyde was created and was a manifestation of Jekyll's hidden self. He was Jekyll's “ugly” side. His alter ego is even described as being “pale and dwarfish, he gave an impression of deformity without any nameable malformation” (19). This is a timeless fear that those who act immorally, or evil will physically become uglier or evil looking in appearance. This description of Hyde shows that fear as he is the representation of Jekyll's evil side and he is physically

represented as evil too due to his appearance. This is a representation of how people of this class were described when being viewed by a class seen as above them. The lower the class the less respect you were given and the “uglier” you were seen as. This then means the upper class saw the lower classes as being evil or immoral while also physically seeing them as ugly. “Deformity without any nameable malformation” is particularly strong line as he was seen as broken or wrong for no nameable reason. Which is also a representation of the views of the lower class. They were seen as being wrong and their deformity was how they acted.

This issue of assigning rules for how people should act still a societal phenomenon today. There is only one change to this activity. With our access to more data of social media, we can see more people who are higher class doing atypical of their class and at a very fast rate. So the impacts can be lessened by the sheer amount that cannot be focused on due to the pace of everything happening. So, in a way the higher class has some less restrictive social code. This sometimes is not the case as in media today if a crime is committed by a person who is in poverty it is seen as routine, but any crime committed by a wealthy person is seen as “big” news. This is because we still today expect the higher class to act as such and are more likely to be shocked by a person of wealth committing a crime than someone of a lower class. We assign such things as crime to the lower class while viewing people of upper classes as being reputable and respectable people. This is just the same as the people of the novel are viewed as. The rich are the good and the poor are the bad, according to society.

Every person has their outside self and their inner self. In the novel the inner self must be masked off from society as to keep Jekyll's class and reputable status while also acting upon his desires. This is an issue today as well, as social media impacts how people present themselves as it can allow for them to not reveal their true selves but the person they want to be seen as. They

can easily act as they wish and be perceived the way they want to be without having to present their “undesirable” traits to the world. So, the issue has almost grown from something of the higher class to an issue that encompasses everyone. You can now have people of all classes trying to hide their undesirable traits as to get a social leg up. With the implementation of social media and the ability to pick what is seen by others it must be asked. How much of your mask are you taking off?

Works Cited:

Layson, Hana, and Jules Law. "Victorians and the Hidden Self: Cultural Contexts for Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde and The Picture of Dorian Gray." The Newberry, dcc.newberry.org/collections/victorians-and-the-hidden-self. Accessed 10 Dec. 2018.

Mack, Valerie. "Reputation and Social Perfection: The Social Creation of Mr. Hyde." Outstanding Gateway Papers, Illinois Wesleyan University. Accessed 10 Dec. 2018.

Mycroft, Harry. Discuss the Intersection of Monstrous Appearance, Moral Action and Pride in The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde and Let The Right One In. University of Nottingham. Accessed 10 Dec. 2018.

Stevenson, Robert Louis. Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Norton & Company.

"Victorian Social Codes in Jekyll and Hyde." Victorians @ TTU, 6 Apr. 2016, victoriansttu.wordpress.com/victorian-social-codes-in-jekyll-and-hyde/. Accessed 10 Dec. 2018.