

# Language, Culture, Banality, and Resentment: The Turn Toward and the Return from the Linguistic in Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*

**Martin Fashbaugh**

Department of English  
Black Hills State University  
Spearfish, SD 57799  
[Martin.Fashbaugh@bhsu.edu](mailto:Martin.Fashbaugh@bhsu.edu)

## **Abstract**

In this article, I argue that Dr. Jekyll's transformation into Mr. Hyde is a move toward the pre-linguistic, originary center and away from Victorian gentlemanly culture, which Stevenson presents as a realm of collective intentionality and self-denial. Jekyll, Mr. Enfield, Dr. Layman, and Mr. Utterson all belong to a professional class of men who subscribe to austere rules of conduct. This austerity is not only reflected in non-verbal followings of social custom, but also in the formalized, imitative manners of speech, which imply allegiance to the values of restraint and refinement—in other words, a *deferral* conveyed through tired customs and regulated speech, not in unique forms of artistic or poetic expression. Despite all the stress, worry, and fret from which Utterson suffers because of Jekyll's disturbing associations with Hyde, the good lawyer is nonetheless presented with an opportunity to get involved in a real-life drama that brings relief from the tedium of routine and custom. Through Mr. Utterson, we gain insight into Jekyll's internal struggle, long before we encounter the doctor's written testimony in the novel's last chapter. While Utterson moves toward the "center" of the Jekyll mystery, one that tests his ability to properly interpret a long string of signifiers, Jekyll appears to think he has no linguistic means to channel his resentment in a deferred, productive way. Consequently, Jekyll searches for a more primordial solution, one that requires a move away from the cultural-linguistic and toward the center of the originary scene.

**Keywords:** Generative Anthropology, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Robert Louis Stevenson, Victorian novel, mimetic theory.

## I.

Mr. Utterson, the lawyer and narrator of Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and his eponymous client suffer from a couple of forms of resentment. On the one hand, both Utterson and Jekyll are resentful of the prospect of being less "gentlemanly" than their peers, and, in response to this possibility, they do their best to maintain a strict code of behavior. On the other hand, they are resentful of being gentlemen, of having to repress instincts and compulsions while those of the working class and more relaxed aristocracy are freer to act capriciously. While Jekyll's resentment consumes him after he begins drinking the concoction that turns him into Mr. Hyde, Utterson finds a relatively productive way of controlling it, which includes his quest to uncover the truth behind the Jekyll-Hyde relationship, a pursuit that interrupts the tedium of his Victorian upper-middle-class existence. Rather than following an appetitive desire for appropriating a central object, which is what Hyde's violence at the expense of the trampled girl and murdered member of Parliament (Sir Danvers Carew) represents, Utterson chooses a pathway of deferral by examining a series of clues (signs) which eventually help him to solve the mystery. Discovering the truth through the reading of signs, Utterson's coping with his suppressed resentment takes a linguistic turn while Jekyll turns away from the humane linguistic and toward the bestial. This essay examines how Stevenson's novella uses Utterson and Jekyll to critique the rigid decorum of Victorian gentlemanly culture while showing both a productive and self-destructive way of managing it. The productive means of coping involves deferral, what Eric Gans calls the *abortive gesture of appropriation*, in which the subject avoids mimetic conflict through the representation of the central object rather than through the attempt to capture it. We will see how Utterson's quest to solve the Hyde mystery is abortive rather than appropriative while Jekyll's transformation into Hyde is destructive, for it is directed toward the originary center, before the origin of language and culture.

## II.

In the early chapters of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, the narrator devotes much time to the character of Utterson, through whom Stevenson penetrates the mysteries of Hyde and the reclusiveness of Jekyll. In Utterson, the reader discovers the highly regulated lifestyles within the social circle he shares with Jekyll, Mr. Enfield, and Dr. Lanyon. Utterson and his friend Enfield, for instance, take walks every Sunday evening, followed by Utterson's "dry divinity" reading just before bedtime. Utterson is a slave to a routine, one that prevents him from indulging in extracurricular pleasures such as attending the theatre, for we learn that Utterson likes going to the theatre but "had not crossed the doors of one for twenty years" (7). This fact is crucial to understanding the Victorian professional world to which the lawyer belongs, where men of his class need to regulate their emotions and imagination. Utterson's highly regulated lifestyle exhibits what Ahmet Sner describes as a "Victorian economy of common sense," in which affections and fancies "must adhere to the principle of

frugality in the economic world” of the novel (223). This frugality principle extends well beyond the economic and into the interpersonal and behavioral sphere. Benjamin O’Dell notes that maintaining one’s status as a gentleman required “persistent control and restraint” (512). Such asceticism and competitiveness may have been required to maintain one’s civil character, but they discouraged generative, creative acts or indulgences because one was continuously trying to either reach or remain at the center of polite society. More importantly, this continuous asceticism could put a strain on the psyche, as is the case with Jekyll and, to a lesser extent, Utterson. As Utterson illustrates, the rigid standard for spending money is indelibly linked to a heavily regulated and ritualistic lifestyle. The reader’s early acquaintance with Utterson and his utilitarian realm of “common sense” makes Jekyll’s stated motivation for producing and drinking his transformative potion seem more plausible and understandable, for it enables him to loosen these oppressive, socially constructed inhibitions.

In many ways, Jekyll and Utterson are in similar predicaments. For example, Jekyll might equally be explaining Utterson’s disposition when he admits, “And indeed the worst of my faults was a certain impatient gaiety of disposition, such as has made the happiness of many, but such as I found it hard to reconcile with my imperious desire to carry my head high, and wear a more than commonly grave countenance before the public” (47-48). Jekyll is describing an agonistic struggle between his inclination toward spontaneous expression and action and his social circle’s expectations of the “persistent control and restraint” behind this grave public countenance. Similarly, the narrator describes Utterson as one who strives to maintain a stern, austere demeanor:

Utterson the lawyer was a man of a rugged countenance that was never lighted by a smile; cold, scanty and embarrassed in discourse. However, at gatherings, after a few drinks, something eminently human beamed from his eye; something indeed which never found its way into his talk, but which spoke not only in these silent symbols of the after-dinner face, but more often and loudly in the acts of his life. (7)

The narrator is describing a man who is inclined toward animated expression, as suggested by the glint of “something eminently human beacon[ing] from his eye.” But societal expectations have conditioned him to considerably repress it to meet the standards of behavior for a Victorian professional gentleman. This pressure to put on a grave face in society and to suppress his natural gaiety of spirit, of course, gets to the heart of Jekyll’s problem, which is the clampdown of his intuition, instincts, and imagination. Katherine Linehan places the imperative to suppress such “impatient gaiety of disposition” within the context “of the Evangelical cast of Victorian Christianity, with its call for its renunciation of soul-endangering levity in favor of self-disciplined moral earnestness” (qtd. in Stevenson, footnote 2, 48). Stevenson’s novel is objecting to the notion that levity, gaiety, and capriciousness are soul-endangering; in fact, the story implies that the opposite is the case: overly determined moral earnestness corrodes our humanity and can lead to destructive

pathologies and crippling resentment. Jekyll, for example, feels he has no creative or cultural means to cope with the burdensome ethos his peers expect him to uphold. He thinks his only recourse is the act of sparagmos resulting from an attempted return to the *originary scene*, a name for the event that commences the formation of the human.

### III.

This transformation into Hyde is a move toward a pre-linguistic, originary center and a turn away from Victorian gentlemanly culture, which Stevenson presents as a realm of collective intentionality and self-denial. Jekyll's means of breaking from this oppressive culture is, of course, quite destructive; consequently, Stevenson's novel underscores the importance of deferral through the *abortive gesture of appropriation*. Resentment is natural and unavoidable, but the only rational and humane choice for resentment is the representation of the originary scene rather than a futile rush to its center. This novella critiques a social order where cultural representation and engagement are stagnant and criticizes the utilitarian undervaluing of the arts. The utilitarian philosopher John Stuart Mill, who, like Jekyll, experienced a period in his life in which the tedium of existence was insufferable, discovered the importance of the arts, especially poetry, in cultivating a private emotional life that saved him from self-destructive tendencies. Both Utterson and Jekyll need to cultivate what Mill describes as the "interior culture of individual" (83), and the novel implies that to prevent perverse rushes to the originary center, which is the brutal alternative to the generative cultural act of representation, a rejuvenation of the creative spirit is necessary.

Such rejuvenation is dependent on the deferral and re-orientation of mimetic desire through the aborted gesture of appropriation, which Eric Gans defines as a "*sign* that represents or *names* the central object in its inaccessibility to make it the object of a sign and to sacralize it" (*Scenic Imagination* 3). Language and art result from relinquishing pursuit of the desired object and expressing this desire by signifying the object. The sign arises from what Gans describes as "a turning away from the other as a model to the object of desire as model" ("Mimetic Paradox and the Event of Human Origin"). The turning away from the other and toward the object is a creative and peaceful act. It is creative because it creates a need to represent the object rather than to pursue it aggressively through competition fueled by mimetic desire. Unfortunately, Utterson, Lanyon, and Jekyll live in a relatively sealed world where there is little room to cultivate a desire for anything new. When describing the company at one of Jekyll's gatherings, the narrator refers to Jekyll and the guests as "five or six old cronies, all intelligent, reputable men and all judges of good wine" (19). The statement implies that, beyond their shared appreciation of fine wine, they have all cultivated similar tastes and behavior patterns, allowing mimetic desire to shape their behaviors and pursuits. Such mimesis leads to oppressive conformity and a society where creativity is undervalued; a Victorian gentleman like Utterson feels compelled to favor decorum over spontaneity. It is a world that Richard Altick describes as one of

“respectability” and “seriousness.” In *Victorian People and Ideas*, Altick points out that *respectability* “was a ‘good’ term, signifying social approval elicited by conduct that conformed to the Evangelical mode” (174-75) and *seriousness* was “puritanically opposed to the vanities and frivolities of life, devoid of humor, and intolerant of others’ frivolity and indulgences” (175). It is easy to see how repression of humor, frivolity, and indulgences disinclines one from finding new and creative ways to signify the ordinary center, for a gentleman was devoted to maintaining his “gentlemanly status,” which James Eli Adams describes as requiring “a strenuous psychic regimen” (6). Unfortunately, Jekyll cannot cope with the strain of upholding this gentlemanly status as a consequence of his not being able to defer his desire within the scene of upper-middle-class Victorian culture.

In such a situation, there is always the chance that one might respond in a destructive rather than in a generative, imaginative fashion because artistic creation or, in Utterson’s case, participation in the arts are discouraged rather than encouraged. As Walter E. Houghton notes, Victorian gentlemen often “concealed or suppressed their true convictions and their natural tastes. They said the ‘right’ thing or did the ‘right’ thing; they sacrificed sincerity to propriety” (394). We witness this sacrifice of sincerity to propriety in Utterson’s friendships, as the narrator informs the reader that Utterson’s relationships were with “those of his own blood or those whom he had known the longest” and that “his affections, like ivy, were the growth of time, they implied no aptness in the object” (7-8). In other words, Utterson’s friendships were predicated on convenience and habit, not on genuine feelings of affection or a shared passion for any interest. However, these relationships, such as the one he has with Enfield, provide Utterson with some psychic relief from the dryness of Victorian professional life, as is made clear in the following passage:

It was reported by those who encountered them in their Sunday walks, that they said nothing, looked singularly dull and would hail with obvious relief the appearance of a friend. For all that, the two men put the greatest store by these excursions, counted them the chief jewel of each week, and not only set aside occasions of pleasure, but even resisted the calls of business, that they might enjoy them uninterrupted. (8)

We can see that this weekly stroll is not for the purpose of conversation, which would enrich an otherwise dull friendship. It is worth noting that, despite the banality of this ritual, their walk is something to which Utterson and Enfield look forward; in fact, it is the highlight of their week. Of course, this “chief jewel” of an event says more about the oppressive drabness of their professional life than it does about the quality of their friendship. Nonetheless, these weekly strolls are refreshingly unfocused occasions separated from the “calls of business,” allowing for Utterson and Enfield to each awaken their inquisitive spirit.

#### IV.

Indeed, on one of these walks Utterson’s level of excitement changes when he is presented

with an opportunity to redirect his energies toward the meaningful activity of learning the mystery behind the Jekyll-Hyde relationship. When Utterson becomes aware of the mystery of Hyde, he develops a clear purpose: to penetrate the center of an unknown, and, in this case, no real rivals are motivating this project. Through his quest to discover why Henry Jekyll has entrusted his will to Hyde, Utterson is reconstructing the originary scene of the crime in the form of a narrative that will be completed by the book's end, thanks in large part to Lanyon's and Jekyll's letters. Utterson's reconstruction is, in the broad sense, a creative and cognitive act that will lead eventually to a declarative explanation of Jekyll's mysterious actions. Most importantly, Utterson's quest to learn the mystery provides him with relief from his ordinary, imitative world, one in which there is no apparent object for his attention, just the tedious pressure of having to retain his position at the center of Victorian gentlemanly culture.

Jekyll's solution to cope with this strain is, of course, to live the double life, as he explains in a letter:

Hence it came about that I concealed my pleasures; and that when I reached years of reflection, and began to look round me and take stock of my progress and position in the world, I stood already committed to a profound duplicity of life. Many a man would have even blazoned such irregularities as I was guilty of; but from the high views that I had set before me, I regarded and hid them with an almost morbid sense of shame. It was thus rather the exacting nature of my aspirations than any particular degradation in my faults that made me what I was, and, with even a deeper trench than in the majority of men, severed in me those provinces of good and ill which divide and compound man's dual nature. In this case, I was driven to reflect deeply and inveterately on that hard law of life, which lies at the root of religion and is one of the most plentiful springs of distress. (48)

In high society, Jekyll puts on the mask of the gentleman, but he frequently escapes into a secret life of decadence. Such a habit makes him ashamed, and, consequently, he seeks a way to clear his conscience. Furthermore, and as we can see in the above passage, his remorse over his secret life compels him to think seriously on the topic of religion, which he views as a cultural phenomenon resulting from embarrassment over succumbing to selfishness, greed, lust, and the seven deadly sins. However, the intellectual interest in studying religion as a way of deferring desire is not as influential as Jekyll's appetitive nature, which pulls him towards the center. Interestingly, the pretext of discovering the truth regarding religion's origins is one that interests many practitioners of GA, who have investigated how religion emerges from language and studied how language comes from the deferral of appropriation. Jekyll is unable to accomplish this goal of tracing the origin of religion because the concoction he drinks unleashes his appetitive instincts rather than supporting his intellectual curiosity.

This drink transforms Jekyll into Hyde, who serves as a reminder of our protohuman ancestry, prior to the origin of language. For instance, upon seeing Hyde for the first time, Utterson describes him as “something troglodytic” (17). Later, the narrator describes Hyde’s ape-like fury while inexplicably clubbing Sir Danvers Carew to death. Finally, toward the end of the last chapter (Jekyll’s letter) Jekyll refers to Hyde’s “ape-like spite” (62). These descriptions of Hyde allude to the Darwinian age of the second half of the Nineteenth Century, where the origins of humanity were being traced back to chimpanzees and apes. In *On The Origin of Species*, Charles Darwin writes that humans “descended from a hairy, tailed quadruped” (551). Darwin’s conclusions changed the way Victorians viewed the human condition, for they learned to see themselves as possessing a bestial, primordial aspect that could overtake their humanity if they were not careful. By changing into Hyde, Jekyll is turning away from what GA characterizes as the linguistic order of social construction, which is what differentiates humans from animals, in favor of this primordial longing to return to humanity’s quadruped, pre-linguistic roots. This was a time in which mimetic desire dominated proto-human communication and violence. As GA scholars have argued, the need to avoid violence eventually led to the creation of language and culture, which was predicated on the deferral of violence and redirection toward the object. Gans asserts, “The only way to avoid destructive violence is to refocus our attention from the human model to the object toward which his gesture points” (“The Little Bang”). Rather than becoming engrossed within the human model in the competitive struggle with rivals for appropriating the object, one can reimagine the object as being too sacred for appropriating. One then makes an originary sign for that object, which forms a simulated world of culture once removed from the originary center. Gans asserts that linguistic signs “subsist not in the real world but in a language-world that lies ‘above’ the real world and in which it can be represented” (“The Little Bang”). It is through the symbolic, generative act of linguistic representation of the center that mimetic conflict is avoided, while an appropriative move toward the center, or the “real,” would eventually lead to violence.

## V.

The reason Jekyll attempts an actual rather than symbolic flight to the center is undoubtedly complex, and any explanation one can provide (including Jekyll’s own) is incomplete. However, a starting point would be to restate the claim that Jekyll is unable to act with a modicum of spontaneity and freely express himself. Once he transforms into Hyde, his only recourse toward relief is hedonism and violence, a return to bestial, instinctual living from which the originary scene of the human was supposed to have lifted us. By creating or experiencing art or finding other ventures that enable one to contemplate the originary scene without reenacting it in such a literal fashion, one can defer violence through the redirection of violent tendencies. As Gans points out in *A New Way of Thinking*, creating and experiencing art encourage us to “experience over time an oscillation between the perception of the representation and its meaningful interpretation that models the genesis of the originary sign”; therefore, “Every artwork is designed to provoke in us a model of the

originary event" (205). Consequently, the witnessing and producing of art provides the opportunity to contemplate the artistic process that goes back and forth from the originary to its representation. Furthermore, art can free the individual from the entrapment of the ritual community because "art does not presuppose membership in a ritual community but generates its internal significance in the individual spectator" (Gans *A New Way of Thinking* 205). Art, both for the creator and for the viewer, draws the reader away from the ritual community and toward an "internal," imagined community. Unfortunately, Jekyll and, to a lesser extent, Utterson are trapped within the world of ritual and lack either resolve or the conscious habit to seek comfort and escape through art. Jekyll's predicament is, of course, more severe: his repression drives him toward violence, the antithesis of art's purpose, which rescues one from mimesis and the replicated center of the originary scene. Jekyll's rush to the center is a flight away from his humanity and toward his animal instinct. Utterson, on the other hand, copes with his repression and banal life through a little "dry divinity reading"; peculiar evening walks with Enfield, which seem to signify a break from the professional pressures; and a natural curiosity in the lives of others, which draw him out of the scene of gentlemanly society. In a broad sense, it is the "art" that Mr. Utterson sees in the lives of others that gives him temporary freedom from his repression.

Indeed, one's understanding of art and the viewing of art needs to be broad, so broad as to include any flights of curiosity. When considering Utterson's actions, one can argue that reading and interpreting a story is a creative, reconstructive act. Utterson's quest is to reconstruct the narrative that reveals the complete explanation for the Jekyll-Hyde relationship, and his endeavor is artful in that it draws him away from the ordinary realm of mimesis to the extraordinary realm of mystery. Such an escape relieves him temporarily from a resentment he has quietly been trying to suppress for quite some time. The night that he learns of the existence of the shadowy Hyde character is a sleepless one because he is tortured and tantalized at the mystery that lay before him, as Stevenson describes in the following passage:

He would be aware of the great field of lamps of a nocturnal city; then of the figure of a man walking swiftly; then of a child running from the doctor's; and then these met, and that human Juggernaut trod the child down and passed on regardless of her screams. Or else he would see a room in a rich house, where his friend lay asleep, dreaming and smiling at his dreams; and then the door of that room would be opened, the curtains of the bed plucked apart, the sleeper recalled, and lo! there would stand by his side a figure to whom power was given, and even at that dead hour, he must rise and do its bidding. The figure in these two phases haunted the lawyer all night; and if at any time he dozed over, it was but to see it glide more stealthily through sleeping houses, or move the more swiftly and still the more swiftly, even to dizziness, through wider labyrinths of lamplighted city, and at every street corner crush a child and leave her screaming. And still the figure had no face by which he might know it; even in his dreams, it had no face, or one that baffled him and melted before his eyes;

and thus it was that there sprang up and grew apace in the lawyer's mind a singularly strong, almost an inordinate, curiosity to behold the features of the real Hyde. (14-15)

At this point of the story, Utterson is yet to meet Hyde, so he derives his visions of Hyde's nefarious actions not from experience but, rather, from Enfield's anecdote of Hyde knocking over the girl and his own speculations on how the brute holds power over Jekyll. Utterson's imagination fails to come close to visualizing Hyde's face, even in his dreams, where his imagination would be most liberated to conceive such a thing. This failure to imagine is frustrating, and this frustration pushes him to have a direct encounter with Hyde. Both Enfield's description of Hyde and Utterson's clear failure to fully imagine Hyde's visage increase Utterson's need to see Hyde for himself, and Utterson's motivation and frustration stem from his inability to appropriate Hyde within the confines of the imaginary. This pursuit of imaginary appropriation is a lyrical and solipsistic activity, but it is a sort of activity that helps fuel the subject's desire to return to the scene of triangular conflict and re-engage in the pursuit of appropriating the object. As Gans asserts, "The origin of desire is directly linked to that of the imaginary" (*The End of Culture* 27), for, on the one hand, the imaginary extends from the aborted gesture of appropriation, which is a productive redirection of attention from the center and toward the periphery, where the subject can represent the central object. On the other hand, the imaginary can reignite desire for a return to the center since art and culture imply that the central object is sacred, not in the sense that it is holy, but in that it has become the source of others' desire. The viewer and creator can return from the imaginary and toward the object at the scene's center, both in cases when the imaginary vividly reconstructs the center and especially in cases when the imaginary falls well short of the mark. In Utterson's case, his imagination fails to adequately construct the figure of Hyde based on his friend Enfield's account, and it is at this point that Utterson becomes highly motivated to take the action needed to fully understand the Jekyll-Hyde connection. By finding Hyde and learning the facts of the case, he can know what Hyde looks like and gain a clearer understanding of the type of control that Hyde has over Jekyll. Learning the secrets of this mystery are important to Utterson because it gives him a feeling of empowerment that he rarely experiences in ordinary life. Unlike Jekyll, Utterson's quest for empowerment is constructive because he highly engages his cognitive and imaginary faculties while pursuing knowledge rather than engaging in primitive, appetitive satisfaction.

## VI.

Utterson's solution to the tedium of Victorian gentlemanly life is both creative and socially acceptable, for his actions lead to the pursuit of an objective truth, which Lanyon's and Jekyll's letters ultimately provide for him. Jekyll's solution, on the other hand, is primordial and destructive because his acts point toward an inaccessible originary scene just before the formation of language. Rather than an abortive act of representation, he engages in the savagery of appropriation, leading him to a pattern of violence. In the end, Stevenson's

novella subtly teaches readers the importance of curiosity, art, and culture to the human person. As Matthew Arnold declares in *Culture and Anarchy*, “Culture looks beyond machinery, culture hates hatred; culture has but one great passion, the passion for sweetness and light” (52), which to Arnold mean charm, pleasantness, and aesthetic pleasure. To look beyond this machinery is to abort self-interested appropriation, which leads to violence, and to choose, instead, representation, which leads to a culture of discovery, art, and peace.

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