

# **Tenability of Colonial Moulds in the Posthuman Body: A Study of the Grotesque in Stevenson vis-à-vis Avant-Garde Cinema**

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## **Abstract**

Body is a site where colonial discourse critiques itself. In the backdrop of the innumerable human lives lost owing to the current pandemic, the concept of the body needs further exploration. Reading a text in the light of this shift is significant for postcolonial theory as the concept of 'boundary' between the human and the non-human is problematized by a new dialogue between anthropocentrism and the centrality of machines. The paper aims to highlight, with analogies from experimental cinema, how the idea of 'human' is done away with by an inanimate entity in R. L. Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Monstrosity exists on the borders precisely to question the 'human' and point towards the 'post-human.' If we understand 'empire' as being suggestive of the supremacy of humans, we reach an altogether new level in critical posthumanism.

**Keywords:** body; critical posthumanism; anthropocentrism; colonial discourse; grotesque

The human body is an interesting setting for studying the vulnerability of the colonial viewpoints. While works of Defoe and Conrad have been discussed as clearly reflecting the system of values supporting colonialism, R.L. Stevenson's novella: *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, which has a London setting and English characters, is an instance of how the language of empire is insidious. When we explore the workings of a colonial mindset in

this novella, we also get to understand the entropy or the measure of disorder in the system of colonialism. Brett Lunceford's article "Posthuman Visions: Creating the Technologized Body" (2012), "For Those to Come: An Introduction to Why Posthumanism Matters" by Kumm, Berbarry and Grimwood (2019) and "Agency Between Humanism and Posthumanism: Latour and his Opponents" by Andrew B. Kipnis (2015) are some of the write-ups that meticulously explore the conscious enhancement of the human body. But the entropy hidden in these enhancements is an area that requires further analysis. The colonial project begins with the step of establishing differences between concretized nations. For Britain to imagine and consolidate her identity as a nation, it becomes necessary to create other nations unlike herself. This difference is asserted by setting up boundaries. Britain constructs maps first for herself and then for the colony. A similar anxiety can be found in the figure of Dr. Jekyll in the novella. He recognizes in himself the simultaneous existence of the two provinces of 'good' and 'ill'. But he abhors the dualism. He wants to recognize his self in definite terms. So, he wonders: "If each...could but be housed in separate identities, life would be relieved of all that was unbearable..." (Stevenson).

The 'house' refers to the separate bodies that Jekyll and Hyde come to be. The next step that takes the colonial mission forward is assigning values to the imagined differences. Let us look at the contrasting descriptions of Jekyll and Hyde in the text. Jekyll's hand is "large, firm, white and comely" while Hyde's hand is "lean, corded, knuckly, of a dusky pallor and thickly shaded with a swart growth of hair." (Stevenson) At a point Hyde is also said to have a "black, sneering coolness" (Stevenson) about him. During the narration, Jekyll is portrayed as capable, kind, moral, religious, and rational, while Hyde is immoral, cruel, Satanic, instinctive, inhuman, and monstrous. Now that values have been assigned, the next step is strategic essentialism. Stereotyping is an intelligent method of exercising control. Flux is difficult to regulate. An important component of stereotyping is 'fixing' the object at a particular point in

time. Hyde's primitivity is reflected by various descriptions of him as a small man, ape-like, less robust and less developed. He is said to impress upon his beholders an unexplained deformity. And at one point he is referred to as a troglodyte, meaning, a person living in a cave, especially in prehistoric times. The word fixes him at the stage of savage existence.

Now, the next step is teaching the savage how to behave. Let us take two instances. When Utterson meets Hyde for the first time and tells him that he knows about him from Jekyll, Hyde retorts in anger: "He never told you...I did not think you would have lied." (Stevenson) Immediately, Utterson says in a manner of teaching: "Come, that is not fitting language." (Stevenson) Later in the story we see Lanyon doing the same. Jekyll is resting on a bench in Regent's Park when suddenly and unintentionally he is transformed into Hyde. Unable to go back to his laboratory, he contrives a situation wherein he gets Lanyon to bring the required drawer from his cabinet. At midnight, when he goes to get the drawer, Lanyon gets offended by his impatience and gives him a demonstration of civility. (Stevenson)

Edward Hyde gets little chance to speak in the novel. It is illustrative of another intelligent move on the part of the colonizer : making sure that the colonized remains a passive, non-participating subject of the colonial discourse. In his first meeting with Utterson, Hyde asks him, "How did you know me?" Utterson replies, "By description." (Stevenson) Throughout the text we see Hyde being described by others (who are white, irrespective of class.) The instance of his trampling a child is depicted by Enfield, Utterson's friend. His murdering Sir Danvers Carew is related to us by a maid who witnessed it. His transformation into Jekyll is described by Lanyon. And at various other points, he is seen through the eyes of Jekyll, Utterson and Poole.

The act of describing the 'other' is important. The British colonizers wanted to convince both their countrymen and the Easterners of the validity of such descriptions. So, the East

became a subject of thorough study for them. Something like this is found in Stevenson's novel. Utterson, to see the face of the man "without bowels of mercy" haunts the door, which he has seen Hyde come out of:

In the morning before office hours, at noon when the business was plenty and time scarce, at night under the face of the fogged city moon, by all lights and at all hours of solitude or concourse, the lawyer was to be found on his chosen post. (Stevenson)

Once he sees Hyde, he says, " Now I shall know you again. It may be useful." (Stevenson) This sentence illustrates the colonizer's tendency to politically interpret the knowledge gathered. The Britishers did not describe India as they saw the nation. They transformed the knowledge gathered into something that fed their colonial intentions and then presented it to the wider public. Here, in this novella, Utterson interprets Hyde's features as hardly human and this justifies his right to humanize him.

We can see that the colonial tendencies work out well till this point in the analysis of the narrative. But my thesis is that the discourse falls apart because the body is taken as the site of the play of these tendencies. The body has an agency of its own and Hyde, though muted for a major part of the plot, speaks emphatically through the body that is given to him. Monstrosity exists only to lead to the negation of 'human' and point towards the post-human. And this is interesting because the text belongs to the Victorian period of English literature when the question "What does it mean to be human?" pervaded all genres of literature. An interesting paper on " The Victorian Body" by Peter J. Capuano published by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln describes how the body became a subject of fascination during the nineteenth century, when medical models of the body were developed and disseminated, and when technological advancements in general were on the rise. So, anatomy, physiology,

disease and other aspects of the human body were often explored in texts of this time. However, the concept of *Homo faber* which is Latin for Man, the Maker is completely disregarded in the narrative of this novella, and hence I see in it the seeds of critical posthumanism that explores the boundary between anthropocentrism and biocentrism. Even then, Stevenson seems to anticipate the overthrowing of both the supremacy of man and the indestructability of human empire on earth. Jekyll confesses: "I became in my own person, a creature eaten up and emptied by fever, languidly weak both in body and mind and solely occupied by one thought: the horror of my other self" (Stevenson).

Here, Hyde has successfully turned the tables. That abominable part of Jekyll's self is no more just a part and his power of projecting the figure of Hyde as and when he desires is irrevocably lost. But the new story begins when neither Jekyll nor Hyde is the wielder of power.

The drug occupies the liminal spaces between the two figures from where it begins to assert its new identity as one who controls the appearance of the monstrous tendencies. As has been observed in the field of post-humanist studies, humans are corollary to the more significant 'struggle between entropy and negentropy.' (Herbrechter 5) It must be noted that Jekyll, while involved in his scientific studies, remarks that "...man is not truly one, but truly two. I say two, because the state of my own knowledge does not pass beyond that point...man will be ultimately known for a mere polity of multifarious, incongruous and independent denizens." (Stevenson) This statement gives agency to something other than the 'human' which is no more conceived of as a single, inviolate entity. It is rather considered inadequate and in that feeling of inadequacy lies the defeat of colonialism which is habituated to express itself through the construct that one race/caste/class/gender is superior/inferior to another.

The first thesis on *Monster Culture* by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen goes like this: "The monster is born only at this metaphoric crossroads, as an embodiment of a certain cultural

moment-of a time, a feeling, and a place...Like a letter on the page, the monster signifies something other than itself: it is always a displacement, always inhabits the gap between the time of upheaval that created it and the moment into which it is received, to be born again” (Cohen, ch.1).

In this story the cultural moment which Coven points at is then an overturn of the colonial framework while physical colonization was in place. Even at that time when scientific discoveries were in a nascent stage, Dr. Jekyll knew that the multiplicity of selves could have physical manifestations too. Here the doctor seems to anticipate “The Beast”, the twenty-fourth personality of the man suffering from dissociative identity disorder in the 2016 American psychological thriller *Split*. Interestingly, “The Beast” has enhanced physical abilities. While the other selves have human names like Barry, Dennis and Patricia, the last malevolent self has an animalistic representation. In this light Stevenson’s use of the term ‘bestial avidity’ (Stevenson) for Hyde is foreboding for humanism as such.

The novella is titled “Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.” The word case is important. In medical terms, it refers to a condition of body or mind. And that condition is an instance of disease or injury. Let us look at the phrases in the narrative connected with disease: ‘deathly sick’, ‘cold hand’, ‘feverish manner’, ‘qualm of faintness’, ‘morbid.’ (Stevenson) And this extract from the chapter “Incident of Dr. Lanyon”:

He had his death-warrant written legibly upon his face. The rosy man had grown pale; his flesh had fallen away; he was visibly balder and older; and yet it was not so much these tokens of a swift physical decay that arrested the lawyer’s notice, as a look in the eye and quality of manner that seemed to testify to some deep-seated terror of the mind. (Stevenson)

All these expressions of disease have been used in connection with the doctor. While Hyde is supposed to be the one with deformity, the doctor seems to be suffering from some unexplained malady. And all this is because of the drug: the fascination and anxiety its effects entail. This struggle between order and disorder is the consequence of a non-human agency. The colonizers aimed to establish their supremacy over the colonies by demonstrating their 'ordered' ways of living as opposed to the 'savagery' of the natives. However, that very order fell apart when they contracted diseases in the colonies and even brought them home to Britain. Jekyll wants to maintain an order too. He wants to house his primal urges in a separate body so that they can be unrestrained. But he ends up creating evil all around, even in the figure of Jekyll who is guilty of moral monstrosity. While Jekyll is said to be an 'incongruous compound' (Stevenson) containing both good and evil, Hyde is described as 'pure evil.' (Stevenson) And the drug "was neither diabolical nor divine; it but shook the doors of the prison house of my disposition," the doctor says (Stevenson). So we have a triptych here: Jekyll, Hyde and the drug, all having a connection with entropy and not negentropy.

The first chapter is titled "Story of the Door." This is a symbolic beginning to the novella. It gives us an impression of some house that the door belongs to. And the house must no doubt be significant if it introduces the story. Let us assume the figure of the house as a body in itself. Two descriptions must be noted here: "...a sinister block of building thrust forward its gable 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 distained." (Stevenson) Then, in the words of Mr. Enfield: "It seems scarcely a house. There is no other door, and nobody goes in or out of that one but, once in a great while, the gentleman of my adventure. There are three windows looking on the court on the first floor; none below; the windows are always shut but they are clean.

And then there is a chimney which is generally smoking; so somebody must live there. And yet it's not sure; for the buildings are so packed together about the court, that it's hard to say where one ends and another begins." (Stevenson)

There is something uncanny about these descriptions. It calls to mind Maya Deren's 1943 experimental film *Meshes of the Afternoon*. In the short film, we see a door in the beginning too. When it is opened with a key, we are led into a surreal representation of man's primal fears. And the greatest of these fears is the temporality of the body. Hence, the attempt by Jekyll to transcend the limits of the human body. Transhumanism, however, is interesting because it raises certain important questions. Once an alien element does something to 'human' features, is the return to the 'normal' in control? Is there a necessity for return? Is there a point of no return and is it scary or liberating? Does the alien element assume qualities of the 'human' while displacing the 'other' towards monstrosity? Where then does power lie? In the hands of the alien? In the hands of the human? In the hands of the monstrous? Tables are being turned repeatedly. So, is this an instance of Derrida's *différance*, as hinted at by Cohen, and 'colonialism' as a concept is impossible? Further, if we listen to the arguments of body scholars, we come across the proposition that the body is non-self, even an enemy. This complicates the scenario further.

The descriptions of Hyde's residence are interesting. They echo Hyde's supposed deformity and secrecy. However, the word 'gable' hides the word 'able' which hints at Hyde's personality well-built for evil. We see that this concept of distortion in Hyde's physique is an instance of the insinuating operations of ableism: "...the violence permissible with ableist ideologies emerges as a form of thoughtlessness because no one has thought to ask: *who is really the narcissist here?* Is it the person who has come to identify with a disability or is it the able-bodied person who designates then denigrates the (abject) other (but "not me"; "never me") as disabled?" (Scuro, Prologue) So, we have Lanyon, Enfield, Utterson trying to



interpret/describe Hyde at various points. But the limitations of such descriptions are revealed when Hyde is also talked of as unknowable. And this is an ability too, to hide one's whereabouts, intentions and appearances well. At a point Utterson is obsessed to know Hyde from close quarters and he says, "If he be Mr. Hyde...I shall be Mr. Seek." (Stevenson)

Here he plays upon the name Hyde and points at the word 'hide.' This gives rise to these connotations: (a) conceal/protect (b) a camouflaged shelter used to observe wildlife at close quarters, and (c) the skin of an animal, especially when tanned or dressed. All of these can be applied to how Hyde functions in the story. He manages to conceal/protect his secret till death. The concept of a hidden post from where he is being observed seems to have no meaning for him. Just as birds do not consider humans as humans(/threat) unless they are in the open, Hyde is oblivious of the public till they pose as a threat to his identity. And the connotation of animal skin is of significance because Hyde takes pleasure in his bestiality and seems to revel in the scandals he gets himself into. So, he is, in a way, thick-skinned. Even when he faces the ire of the public, he does not temper his attraction towards evil unrestrained by reason. He finds his way. And if we understand Hyde as displaced, we will notice that these tendencies are attributable to the drug. A drug conceals effects, is neutral to the observers at the experiment table and retains its identity as the chemical responsible for various effects, pleasant or unpleasant. So, is body something to be colonized at all? Or is the mind the only thing fit to be controlled? And if that is the case, the transhuman, supposedly with a body that transcends the human, can also be subject to oppression/limitations. So, is post-humanism free from humanism? Or does it retain the same vulnerabilities which it aims to rid itself of? An important point that must be noted here is Hyde's portraiture when he is desperately looking for the chemical with the right kind of impurity to turn him back to Jekyll. Utterson and Poole find him moaning, screeching in terror and finally, succumbing to death. So, is this body (Jekyll/Hyde) inviolate, after all?

The use of the word 'Juggernaut' (Stevenson) in connection with Hyde is something to analyze. From the religious connotations the word got distanced and was used to refer to a mindless, massive force that could crush anyone and anything on its way. If we go to the origins of the word, it has the meaning of the preserver/lord of the world. But the body of the lord is different from the human body one is habituated with. And this is an interesting use of the word by Stevenson to automatically connect non-human with cruelty/evil. Hyde trampling the child is compared to the force of the lord's chariot assuming that the chariot killed many devotees. But that is actually not the case. The chariots move very slowly taking into consideration the vast multitudes surrounding them. Eventualities are solely the result of carelessness on the part of the onlookers. However, this fact has been distorted and the word damned has been coupled with Juggernaut. This presupposes that anything not in the image of the human hides entropy within it. The use of the word 'faggots' (Stevenson) to describe the two facets of good and evil also has a statement to make. It refers to a bundle of sticks bound together as fuel. The concept of fuel is important. Fuel gives rise to or adds to power. Power lies at the root of colonialism. If Jekyll intends to separate the faggots, he unintentionally disrupts the power equation that operates within any colonial framework. In this we see an indication of the impossibility of the post-human as a viable option because then the agency is compromised too.

Stevenson, in this scientific exploration of something akin to eugenics, seems to anticipate the pessimism portrayed in the experimental movie *Darkness, Light, Darkness* (1989) directed by Jan Svankmajer. The anxiety of the body parts assembling themselves one by one to become whole is palpable. The intention of course is clear: to be the best version of a body. However, once the work is done, the space does not allow the form to be at ease. The lights must be turned off to hide the bizarre, thus nullifying the purpose of the post-human. The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde is, in fact, strange because no two names are needed. The *Hyd-ing* of Jekyll is a sign that the 'human' is on the verge of extinction and the fact that

Hyde could not sustain his identity anticipates that transhumanism is not liberating in any sense. Thus, the human as a colonizer is an idea that has receded. The post-human condition cannot be sustained by artificial intelligence as it carries within itself its undoing: the human thinking. It is interesting to consider in this light Ben Howell Davis' exploration of Fernand Léger's 1924 film *Ballet Mécanique*. He questions the fleeting appearance of a parrot amidst a repetition of human and machine images. Perhaps this is to remind the viewers that there is stability neither in man nor in machine. The images only produce a dizzying sensation. But the bird is not caught in the ballet. It escapes disorder. (Davis) In conclusion, it can be said that turning of the human body into a grotesque contraption renders the posthuman condition unstable as there seems to be an ellipsis after the hyphenated 'post-' and 'human' becomes something that can be understood only in its absence.

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