

Foreword

There are things which a man is afraid to tell even to himself, and every decent man has such things stored away in his mind. – *Fyodor Dostoevsky*

Bournemouth, in the autumn of 1885, and Robert Louis Stevenson has just bid farewell to his parents, who have been with him and Fanny, his wife, for three long weeks. It has been a painful visit. Thomas, his father, beginning to show signs of dementia, has been in a state of gloom and superstition. Maggie, his mother, frequently close to hysteria, has, in Fanny's words, "crushed and exhausted" her son with her complaints. She has also passed on to him the cold she has been nursing, and since Stevenson is, as ever, ill and painfully thin, Fanny fears the worst. "If Louis dies, it will be murder," she says darkly.

Dark days, dark thoughts, and yet a period of extraordinary creativity. That year sees the completion of *Prince Otto*, a romance; *Markheim*, a disturbing story of murder and repentance; *Olalla*, a Gothic tale shot through with violence and sexuality; and the febrile beginnings of other projects – a novel, a biography, a play, embarked on but never completed.

There follows, however, one story which will, in Stevenson's own words be "conceived, written, rewritten, rewritten, and printed inside ten weeks", and is to become his most celebrated literary success, the source of more than thirty films and countless doctoral theses, one that will enter the lexicon as a synonym for the troubled state of the human mind.

The genesis of *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* is still, today, as keenly debated as anything Stevenson ever wrote.

The version given by Fanny satisfied the Victorian public, and played to its instinct for the supernatural. Her husband, she told his biographer, had happened on the story in a dream, uttering "cries of horror" as he slept. She had shaken him awake, to his

great irritation. “Why did you wake me?” he demanded. “I was dreaming a fine bogey tale.” He was to elaborate on it himself later, telling an American journalist: “... I dreamed the story, not precisely as it is written, for of course there are always stupidities in dreams, but practically it came to me as a gift, and what makes it appear more odd is that I am quite in the habit of dreaming stories.” He had dreamt of a man “pressed into a cabinet, when he swallowed a drug and changed into another being. I awoke and said at once that I had found the missing link for which I had been looking so long, and before I again went to sleep, almost every detail of the story, as it stands, was clear to me.”

It is certainly true that Stevenson laid great store by his dreams, and believed that he had learned how to control them; he said they were brought to him by creatures he called “the Brownies”, describing them as “the little people who manage man’s internal theatre”, and he paid tribute to their creative genius. “My Brownies ... do one half my work for me while I am fast asleep, and, in all human likelihood, do the rest for me as well, when I am wide awake, and fondly suppose, I do it for myself.”

But that, as Stevenson himself concedes, is only part of the story. Luckily for us, he was as fascinated by the creative process as we are, and wrote about it eagerly. His essay, ‘A Chapter on Dreams’, predating Sigmund Freud’s seminal work by little over a decade, delves into the subconscious with the same intent. What came to him in dreams had been mulled over, distilled, concocted during a lifetime of imagination and memory. “Let it boil slow,” he wrote, “then take off the lid and look.”

The concept of duality in the human being was one that had lingered with him for many years. It has become almost a cliché of RLS studies to trace it back to his childhood in Edinburgh, and his explorations of the two sides of that city, the Old Town with its dark, narrow streets, its poverty and prostitution, and the New Town, where the Stevenson family lived in respectable elegance. He lived the divided life itself, and wrote about it often, describing

the “beggarly women of the street, great, weary, muddy labourers, poor scarecrows of men, pale parodies of women” whom he met on his adventures with his friends in the less salubrious areas of the city. He was brought up, too, on famous Edinburgh tales, like that of Major Weir, the respectable Covenanter, who, late in life, confessed to “crimes of the most revolting nature” and was burnt in the Grassmarket, crying “I have lived as a beast, I must die as a beast.” Or Deacon Brodie, alderman and cabinet-maker, who turned thief at night, and was hanged on a gallows of his own making; the Stevensons even had a chest of drawers in their house on Heriot Row, that Brodie had fashioned.

That he was often prey to doubts about his own nature was also a running theme in Stevenson’s life and work – the guilt he felt about his failure to embrace the “life of action” and the family’s great engineering tradition; his ambivalent feelings towards his censorious father; his complex and volatile relationship with Fanny. He referred frequently to his “attacks of morbid melancholy” and believed himself sometimes to be at war with himself. In a letter to the French sculptor Auguste Rodin, he talked of wrestling with “the other one, the stupid one ... he whom I disavow, but whom I control sufficiently to make him take up a pen.” He was even tortured by his own success as a writer: “There must be something wrong in me, or I would not be so popular,” he said.

Freud would doubtless have had a field day with all of this, though it was perhaps a later psychiatrist and fellow Scot, RD Laing, who saw “the divided self” as the natural state of man, with whom Stevenson would have felt more at home.

In the end, however, everything is subsumed in a Gothic tale, which Stevenson tells supremely well. “I had long been trying to write a story on this subject, to find a body, a vehicle for that strong sense of man’s double being, which must at times come in upon and overwhelm the mind of every thinking creature,” he told a friend. He needed a good story for the Christmas market,

and this, he thought, was it. “I’ve got my shilling shocker,” he announced. Too shocking, it seems, for Fanny. When Stevenson showed her the manuscript, she criticised it – either, as she later claimed, because she felt the “allegory” of good and evil was not sufficiently brought out, or, more likely, because she thought the overtly sexual allusions might damage Stevenson’s reputation. Outraged by her objections, he thrust the manuscript into the fire and burnt it. He then rewrote the entire story.

Whether it was indeed toned down can only be guessed at. There is a hint of that in a surviving manuscript where Dr Jekyll confesses that he had been a “slave of disgraceful pleasures”, a phrase replaced in the final version by the more anodyne “I concealed my pleasures”. Nor do we learn what Hyde really got up to in his rampages through the town, simply that he represented something degenerate in Jekyll’s nature. The references to his small size, his simian characteristics – “an impression of deformity without any nameable malformation”, as Stevenson describes it – suggest a Darwinian throwback to something primitive. That Stevenson, indeed the whole late Victorian era, shared the idea that civilisation was threatened by a streak of *fin de siècle* degeneration, has been explored by Dr Julia Reid in her study of Stevenson and his fascination with science and theories of evolution. Hyde represents the uncontrolled mayhem that man’s degenerate self may lead to.

A simplistic myth, however, has grown up around *Jekyll and Hyde*, which Stevenson never intended. It is that Hyde represented the evil side of the good Dr Jekyll, and that he, the civilised being, sought unsuccessfully to fight off the dæmonic. The truth is more subtle and more insidious. For, as Stevenson himself observed, “you cannot drain evil out of a personality and leave the good, since the two are inextricably mixed”. Jekyll is drawn to his manic side, because that is what he craves. “The harm was in Jekyll, because he was a hypocrite,” wrote Stevenson. When Jekyll looks in the mirror and sees the evil face of Hyde, he

does not recoil: “when I looked upon that ugly idol in the glass, I was conscious of no repugnance, rather of a leap of welcome. This, too, was myself.”

It is this that makes the tale as recognisable today as it was then, though we have learnt far more than late nineteenth century psychology ever encompassed about the two sides of the human brain. We are familiar with the conflicts of schizophrenia or bipolar disorder, if not their origins. The American psychiatrist Kay Jamieson has written about the feverish excitement the bipolar patient feels when the manic side of his illness strikes; and there is a body of evidence about the triggers that turn an apparently solid citizen into a killer.

We know too about drugs. Stevenson invents an elixir, a powder that has the capacity to turn a bland life into one of high excitement, but which also has the power to destroy. Even when he knows that the powder is fatal, Jekyll cannot resist it. And the scene where Mr Hyde, now desperate for the fix that will transform him back to his normal self, begs Dr Lanyon to hand it over, presents the ineluctable image of the drug addict. “Have you got it?” he cries. “Have you got it?”

Each reading of the story reveals another layer of meaning. Is the killing of Sir Danvers Carew evidence of a homosexual encounter, as some critics claim, or a violent resolution of Stevenson’s suppressed feelings towards his father? Is the essential pessimism of the story a window on the author’s own despair, or does it, rather, offer a glimpse of the dark side of the human soul, and a warning of things to come? Stevenson set his story in London, not Edinburgh, and within a couple of years of its publication another Hyde had wreaked his vengeance on that city, when Jack the Ripper stalked the streets of the East End, killing and dismembering women in an orgy of violence. We have seen too many Rippers since then to realise that they are not simply an aberration of society, but something deep and intractable in human nature itself.

It is this that is at the heart of Stevenson's narrative, and which makes it as chilling as it ever was. As Henry Jekyll begins to comprehend the full horror of what he has unleashed, he attempts to describe what has happened to him. Hyde, he says, is "something not only hellish but inorganic". It comes from the depths, but it is recognisable. It is loathsome but it represents a part of us. And it has power over life itself. "That was the shocking thing; that the slime of the pit seemed to utter cries and voices; that the amorphous dust gesticulated and sinned; that what was dead, and had no shape, should usurp the offices of life."

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