

ABJECTION IN LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY BRITISH LITERATURE

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A Project Presented to

The Faculty of Humboldt State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in English: Literary and Cultural Studies

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July 2017

ABSTRACT

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In this project, I examine three major British works of literature produced in the last two decades of the nineteenth century: Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*. I show that these works reflect popular trends and fears that arose during this time, including notions of decadence and fears of degeneration. Using Julia Kristeva's conception of abjection, as described in her work *Powers of Horror*, I argue that developments throughout the Victorian era: namely the advent of the theory of evolution, the rise and expansion of large-scale industrialization, and the moral and economic benefits and ramifications of global colonization, ultimately led to social and individual insecurities that reverberated throughout popular literature of the time. I conclude that these cultural attitudes and insecurities can be seen reflected in works of literature and in their depiction of characters and behaviors whose self-abjection are a reflection of a society with an unstable self-image.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

By its very nature, a journey through graduate school is not supposed to be easy. Due to various circumstances, mine was especially drawn out and difficult. There were days and months when I wasn't sure I would make it through at all and I'm sure I tested the patience of many an individual, myself included. Since it takes a village to raise a scholar, some gratitude is required.

Thanks to my parents, especially my mother, who taught me to read, and who buried her face in a book so often I was compelled to follow suit.

A thank you to my professors, especially aMary Ann Creadon and Michael Eldridge, who not only supported my academics but gave me the encouragement to persevere. I value your invaluable criticism.

A shout out to Rebekah, my sister in all but DNA. One day we will be a pair of old women, drinking tea, wearing funny hats, and complaining about "kids these days." Good times are ahead.

And a very special thanks to Rafael Ayala, who stood by me when I could barely stand myself. I love you and thank you.

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INTRODUCTION: LATE VICTORIAN ABJECTION AND “THE IMPOSSIBLE
WITHIN”

The study that follows is formed from two approaches. The first approach takes a direct look at a particular place and time, in this case Britain in the last full decade of the nineteenth century. This, I argue, was a time of social upheaval. If the Victorian era is to be seen as a time of progress, and in many ways it was, then late Victorian thought can be viewed as reflective of that progress, its benefits, and especially, its harms. The nineteenth century had witnessed many changes for Britain—the furtherance of colonial ambition culminating in the establishment of an Empire, the increasing swell of city populations driven by industrial need, and the rise of scientific ideas that included an understanding of evolution by natural selection, to name a few—which had, by the end of the century, created an air of foreboding and pessimism. I examine through the literature of the era this effect on late Victorian society. The second approach to this study is a psychological inquiry into the nature of abjection, as theorized by Julia Kristeva, and the manifestation of abjection in the individuals caught up in a fluctuating, complex, and uncertain society. My argument posits that the late Victorian era possessed an unstable self-image, brought about by the weight of imperialism and the effects of change, which can be read in popular Gothic literature of the time.

Anyone who wishes to fully demarcate a line between one historical period and the next is bound to run into some difficulties. History doesn't work like that. When we speak of the Victorian era, or the Edwardian—or when we speak of modernism, pre-

modernism, or postmodernism—we must always remind ourselves not to get too caught up in convenient labels. Societies in history and their accompanying literatures are always influenced by what came before, and they directly influence what comes after. Try as we might to create them, no clear lines exist between one historical period and the next. So, when a scholar like myself focuses her lens on a specific time and place, I cannot view it as a paleontologist views a fossil trapped in amber. My subject is fluid, moving, influenced by forces it cannot fully understand. This rule applies to location as well. All the works studied in this thesis take place within the borders of England proper. They are domestic novels, with domestic characters and domestic concerns. But though the world outside England is rarely, if ever, directly addressed in these novels, there is a world beyond which the Britain of this time period is deeply invested in.

It is no stretch to envision the entirety of Queen Victoria's reign as an era of constant flux. The Victorians, as with any society that witnesses marked social changes in a short amount of time, often viewed these changes warily. By the early 1890s, when this study begins, the Victorians had already experienced rapid acceleration and dramatic upheavals in their worldview. As early as the 1830s, industrialization with its accompanying machinery and social benefits and pitfalls had been well underway for some time. In 1829 Scottish philosopher Thomas Carlyle was already writing of the "crisis" of the age (33). This crisis, according to Carlyle, was the result of a growing industrial society and the increased mechanization of society it brought about. "Were we required to characterize this age of ours by any single epithet," he wrote, "we should be tempted to call it, not an Heroical, Devotional, Philosophical, or Moral Age, but, above

all others, the Mechanical Age. It is the Age of Machinery, in every outward and inward sense of that word. The age which...teaches and practices the great art of adapting means to ends" (34). Carlyle, somewhat ominously, predicted that increased mechanization would lead to the diminishment of individual thought and creation. As a result of the labor required by industrialization, formerly rural populations swarmed to the cities in search of work. This often led to urban overpopulation, unhealthy and meagre living conditions, and a life that lacked leisure or opportunity for the poorest of workers. The quality of life was not improved for the lowliest populations who were all but forgotten under the march of progress.

Also during this time, the British Empire was transforming the world into the one we are familiar with today. While British laws, culture, language, and literature were all being exported to the furthest colonies, there was also an influx of foreign culture that affected Britain itself. Artists, collectors, and connoisseurs found inspiration in foreign art and design, often importing foreign artifacts and incorporating new aesthetic sensibilities into their own creations. In France, and elsewhere in continental Europe, post-Impressionist artists like Gauguin and Van Gogh drew inspiration from the Far East and South Pacific societies. This new global sensibility also found its way to England, where French-inspired artists and writers crafted their own cultural amalgamations (Thornton). As the nineteenth century wore on, increased backlash against supposed "degeneration" emerged. Research into notions such as "scientific racism" gained traction, and ideas of "cultural degeneration" caused worry for older generations. Perhaps the most prominent critic of "degenerate art" was Max Nordau, who in 1892 published the seminal work

Degeneration, a work of part pseudo-science, part cultural criticism that portrayed modern decadence as an illness that was causing the fall of “civilization.” For many, a new sense of pessimism was the order of the day in fin de siècle Europe.

While happenings abroad made an impact on British society, and foreign influence was always hovering on the fringes of even the most domestic of British concerns, there were also ideas forming within England itself that would shake British confidence. Since 1859, when Charles Darwin published *The Origin of Species*, the theory of evolution by natural selection had disrupted the way humans viewed their ancestry and their place of importance in the universe. The implications the theory held for religion were profoundly felt, and the impact was no less revolutionary than Copernicus declaring the Earth revolved around the sun. Whether people chose to accept or deny natural selection as the explanation for life, the shockwaves reverberated, and for many individuals, life suddenly seemed meaningless (Diniejko). Debates surrounding the theory of evolution, its impact and its significance for social, religious, and political life, gained prominence in the second half of the nineteenth century, and are indeed still debated as of this writing. One of the concerns that an acceptance of biological evolution brought about was the idea of *devolution*. Born partly from a misunderstanding of evolutionary theory, many concerned thinkers came to the conclusion that if an organism could evolve from a lower state to a higher state, who was to say an organism could not devolve from a higher to lower state? Evolution unwittingly provided a frame of reference for believers in degeneration such as Max Nordau and the criminologist Cesare Lombroso.

As my focus, I have chosen works that can easily fall into the category of “Gothic.” By the time of this writing, in the early decades of the twenty-first century, the term “Gothic” has taken on a plethora of meanings. Gothic literature, as an identifiable genre, found its popularity roughly a century and a half previous to the current study’s focus. (This is if one accepts, as is conventional, the first truly “Gothic” novel as Horace Walpole’s 1764 romance *The Castle of Otranto*). By the late Victorian era, however, Gothic literature had drifted from its literary roots. Apart from a few exceptions, Victorian Gothic had become removed from the medieval castles and monasteries of its namesake and replanted into an urban environment. Its characters are modern, they exist in a modern environment, and supernatural elements, when they do occur, are often established within a scientific framework rather than as the result of ancient family curses or whatever motif eighteenth century Gothic used as its foundation. Rather than the mysterious cosmic forces controlling the stock characters of traditional Gothic, the characters commonly found in Victorian Gothic are confronted by what Kristeva termed “the impossible within” that causes the subject to “[find] that the impossible constitutes its very *being*, that it *is* none other than abject” (5). Much of this internal struggle was the result of what Brantlinger refers to as “imperial chauvinism” (8). This chauvinism can be expressed either directly—through a fierce support of British conquest and domination abroad—or indirectly, through a vague but certain belief in British superiority. (I would specify this as “English” but since two of our authors, Stevenson and Wilde, originate in Scotland and Ireland respectively, this would not be entirely accurate). As British imperialism reached its zenith and nervousness began to set in, this resulted in a crisis of

masculinity that deeply affected the generation these authors belong to. This crisis of masculinity, while not the entire story, forms a large part of the culture through which these works came about, and can be read in the works themselves.

In “Culture and Anarchy,” written over two decades prior to the time of our current focus, Matthew Arnold urges his contemporaries to “[tend] towards sweetness and light” (720) and to embrace the idea of the moral perfectibility of mankind. By the end of the century, however, man was more often seen as an incurably immoral creature, subject to his own selfishness, his animal nature, and the possibility of not just a moral degeneration, but a physical one as well. Literature particularly began to hold a less didactic, moral purpose than seen in previous decades. Aestheticism, with its art for art’s sake motto, offered a more decadent view of creation. As Richard Altick explains it, this is

[i]mportant for the effects upon the literature produced in those years [when] intellectual life was troubled by the breakdown of the verities that had lent the fifties and sixties an air of stability. The church’s influence over men’s minds declined as decisively as did its influence over society and state. The confrontation of religion and natural science produced an atmosphere of secularism and skepticism. The Ruskinian “morality of art” ...lost its authority and was succeeded by an attitude toward aesthetic experience which had nothing to do with morality...Later Victorian literature speaks with a quite different voice, echoing the contemporary mood in which values were being drastically re-ordered and intellectual energies were set working in new directions. (15-16)

The literature of the 1890s, while still undoubtedly Victorian, is also witnessing glimmers of the modernist movement of the twentieth century, during which many authors expressed feelings of existential angst and, particularly during, between, and after the two world wars, increasing despair.

In this study, I analyze three popular novels produced during this confused last decade of the nineteenth century. I argue that each novel I look at reflects, through abjection, a society that appears to be losing its grip on surety. In the first chapter, I provide a short theoretical background on Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection, including my understanding of the social and psychological roots of abjection, and its importance to my analysis. Chapter Two then examines Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Evolution, and its antithesis devolution, provided contextual basis for Stevenson's plot, and although the chapter does not delve too deeply into a scientific discussion, it should be remembered that the idea of a socially and physically devolved personality was not unheard of during the time of Stevenson's writing. Chapter Three looks at Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Wilde's novel examines questions of surface and depth, and asks the reader to consider whether a man's personality and morality is dependent on his image. The fourth and final chapter analyzes Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*. While there were many contemporary social considerations Hardy included in his final novel, this study focuses on the characters' inner struggles, as outsiders in a misunderstanding and unforgiving community.

On a final note, the motif of the double appears, with more or less emphasis, in each of these literary works. I do not find this surprising in a discussion of abjection as a

psychological and social phenomenon. As explained more in depth in the chapter on Kristeva, abjection is rooted in the body, and in the trauma one experiences. When discussing a particular time and place—late nineteenth century Britain, in this case—where abjection occurs, there is always a splitting of the self. As Kristeva explains it, when abjection occurs, “repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself” (2). Abjection does not tolerate easy unification within the body, and it does not promote wholeness. Born as it is from the primal separation between mother and newborn, abjection in its very nature separates the self from the object of horror it encounters. For late Victorian writers and readers, this separation is caused by the unstable position of society itself, which the individual then internalizes. Victorian culture, following a long European tradition, was obsessed with the idea of the “Other.” Whether racial, sexual, religious, or otherwise, Britons had long been fascinated, and repulsed, by the appearance and existence of the Other. When society no longer has the cultural assurances it depends on, individuals may find themselves looking in the mirror and recognizing that the Other is often no other than themselves.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: KRISTEVA AND ABJECTION

The Oxford English Dictionary defines *abjection* as “the state or condition of being cast down or brought low” or “the action or an act of casting down, humbling, or degrading; an act of debasement, esp. of oneself.” It is a pre-modern word, dating from at least the middle ages, and it often, though not always, has religious connotations. In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva redefined *abjection*, and theorized on its psychological, cultural, and historical roots. For Kristeva, abjection is no longer simply an act of abasement—although abasement does appear in her analysis—but rather it takes on a deeper, more profoundly and psychologically complex signification. Although it manifests itself in various, often diverse, ways, abjection is a phenomenon that can arguably be found in every culture known to mankind, as universal as it is unassimilable, and as foundational as it is inescapable. At times its presence is more overtly seen and felt than at other times but it is always there, rooted in the very foundation of the human psyche. It is, according to Kristeva, “an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion [that] places the one haunted by it literally beside himself” (1).

So what, then, *is* abjection, according to Kristeva? And where does it come from? As a trained psychoanalyst, Kristeva draws heavily on the theories of Freud and Lacan in her search for an explanation. As these theories are well known, I see no need to draw them out here. I will, however, note that Kristeva’s ideas of abjection are rooted in the Oedipal triad of psychoanalytic theory. Abjection, in this view, is primal and pre-verbal. The primary abjection experienced by the individual lies in the initial separation from the

mother, and it “preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be” (10). Thus, the first instance of abjection in the individual occurs in synchronicity with the first appearance of separation, the eventual rejection of the mother, and the formation of an *I* as opposed to *Another/an Other*. As a result, “[t]he abject confronts us... within our personal archaeology, with our earliest attempts to release the hold of *maternal* entity even before ex-isting outside of her, thanks to the autonomy of language” (13). As a result, abjection is deeply tied to identity, a topic I will set aside for the moment, but one that I will return to frequently throughout this paper, as it is essential to my thesis.

The trouble with defining abjection as Kristeva does is that, for her “abjection is above all ambiguity” (9). It is not even, in its very essence, signifiable, because “the twisted braid of affects and thoughts I call by such a name does not have, properly speaking, a definable *object*... which I name or imagine” (1). “The abject,” according to Kristeva, “has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to *I*” (1). However, abjection must not be confused with what is merely the “object” or the “Other”, for “[i]f the object... through its opposition, settles me within the fragile texture of a desire for meaning... what is abject, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses” (2). Although in some ways it may resemble Freud’s observations regarding “the uncanny,” abjection is “[e]ssentially different... more violent, too... elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin [where] nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory” (5). Abjection is “related to

perversion...because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them” (15). Above all, abjection is “what disturbs identity, system, order” (4). It may be tempting to think of abjection in this way as a form of nihilism, but to do this would be a mistake. Abjection is, rather

a massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome. Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A “something” that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safeguards. *The primers of my culture*. (2) (Italics mine)

Perhaps paradoxically, abjection, cast off, rejected, and without a stable object of its own, is essential for the maintenance of social order. Humankind has, from our hunter/gatherer days in the shadowy millennia of our beginnings, sought to create order from our surroundings. This desire to find order and meaning is evidenced by the numerous remnants of art and artifacts that survive from prehistoric times.

“Significance,” wrote Kristeva, “is indeed inherent in the human body” (10). We need not even consciously create symbolism; the human imagination, as witnessed by the ubiquity of complex symbolism manifested throughout all the varying observed cultures, naturally finds the symbolic in the ordinary. It follows that if human thought and culture seeks to find meaning in the world around it, abjection is the unseen force that both destroys and

creates meaning. Defined by Kristeva as “what disturbs identity, system, order” (4), abjection is also essential to the development and maintenance of culture, as it delineates, both symbolically and often physically, “what must be thrust aside in order to live” (3). Being “neither subject nor object” (1), abjection nevertheless inhabits the borders, or the “interspace,” of both (48). It occupies the liminal sphere between what is acceptable and what is taboo, or between what is Self and what is Other. Although it is, in itself, not signifiable, abjection can nevertheless attach itself, either or both culturally and individually, to signifiable objects, symbols of the abject. These symbols may appear to vary among cultures and individuals, yet they all refer back to primal abjection, which

is coextensive with social and symbolic order, on the individual as well as on the collective level. By virtue of this, abjection...is a universal phenomenon; one encounters it as soon as the symbolic and/or social dimension of man is constituted, and this throughout the course of civilization. But abjection assumes specific shapes and different codings according to the various “symbolic systems.” (68)

Abjection, as experienced by the individual and/or the collective, finds its beginnings in the psyche, from which it emerges and becomes concrete. It asserts itself through cultural ideas of the taboo. What is acceptable and what is taboo varies among different cultures, but the social concept of the taboo, at once enacted, attractive, and ritually thrust aside, is universal. Abjection is the driving, primal force that

confronts us...with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of *animal*. Thus, by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise

area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals and animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder” (12).

This forces us to acknowledge that the abject, represented by what we may deem unpleasant, disorderly, or something that must be physically or ritually rejected, is also necessary to the maintenance of culture and identity. Cultural and/or religious prohibitions—rules regarding, for example, cleanliness, menstruation and the feminine, or the prohibition of certain foods, to name just a few—are perhaps the most obvious enactments of the abject, and the necessary rejection of such indications of the abject in society brings about meaning and order to the social system. As abjection is intimately tied up with prohibition and taboo, and as it rests on the border between what is proper and what is not, abjection is most commonly experienced, even embraced, in instances where such boundaries become blurred.

I briefly indicated above that abjection is essential to identity and identity formation. This is evident, of course, in one’s identification with, or conversely one’s conscious rejection of, one’s culture. If we accept its veracity, the primal separation from the mother is the primary experience of abjection. But it does not end there. Abjection may assert itself in the superficial rituals and prohibitions of culture and society, but it only truly becomes real when one experiences it, viscerally and even violently. In this, abjection is, ultimately, a personal feeling, not necessarily divorced from one’s surroundings but rather informed by them. It is within the individual that abjection asserts itself, transitioning “from unnamable to namable” (34) and becoming, at last, a sign. “To be sure,” wrote Kristeva,

[i]f I am affected by what does not yet appear to me as a thing, it is because laws, connections, and even structures of meaning govern and condition me. That order, that glance, that voice, that gesture, which enact the law for my frightened body, constitute and bring about an effect and not yet a sign. I speak to it in vain in order to exclude it from what will no longer be, for myself, a world that can be assimilated. Obviously, *I am* only *like* someone else: mimetic logic of the advent of the ego, objects and signs. But when I *seek* (myself), *lose* (myself), or experience *jouissance*—then “I” is *heterogeneous*. Discomfort, unease, dizziness stemming from an ambiguity that, through the violence of a revolt *against*, demarcates a space out of which signs and objects arise. Thus braided, woven, ambivalent, a heterogeneous flux marks out a territory that I can call my own because the Other, having dwelt in me as *alter ego*, points it out to me through loathing. (10)

The individual, or the ego, depends on structure or what Lacan referred to as the Name of the Father, which facilitates entrance into language and the Symbolic Order in order to gain meaning. If we are *conditioned* into a cultural and social order, then we must, initially at least, identify with that structure in a homogeneous fashion, just as the infant initially identifies with the mother. It is part of what Lacan meant when he said that our “desire is the desire of the Other.” On a social level, this means that the individual will desire what the structure desires; our wants (want as in wishing, not want as in lacking), though they may seem wholly individual, are really the wants dictated by language, and the social and familial order. Through mimesis, we come into understanding in

correspondence with that social order. Abjection, and the abject, represent the inverse of that order. Abjection arises through the *rejection* of social codings. It is “when all is said and done...the other facet of religious, moral, and ideological codes on which rest the sleep of individuals and the breathing spells of societies” (209). The resulting *jouissance* that abjection inspires, following Lacan’s understanding, is tied up with both pleasure and pain. It is an excess of both that results in a disorienting condition that both defines and destroys identity. “I experience abjection,” Kristeva asserted, “only if an Other has settled in place and stead of what will be ‘me.’ Not at all an other with whom I identify and incorporate, but an Other who precedes and possesses me, and through such possession causes me to be” (10). The implied result is a transformation, through abjection, of the individual. One not only experiences abjection, one becomes *the abject*. One should keep in mind that what is abject is always defined by the conditioning society. What is considered acceptable for one society is often taboo for another. What causes the experience of abjection is highly dependent on individual experience and is less important than the universal experience of abjection itself. What is abject is defined by the conditioning society.

Ultimately, all abjection is self-abjection. Even the most outwardly superficial forms of abjection stimulate a violent, personal transformation. Of experiencing food abjection, “perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection,” Kristeva described an outward retching, akin to a violent illness, in which “I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish *myself*...During the course in which ‘I’ become, I give birth to myself amid the violence

of sobs, of vomit” (3). It is an inner horror, of the most basic and primal sort, that casts out the physical body, or, rather, makes the physical body itself the abject, even while the ego resides within it. Abjection cannot be removed from experience while one is enclosed in a body that continually produces the most primal representation of abjection—bodily fluids. Describing “the horror within,” Kristeva wrote that the “body’s inside... shows up in order to compensate for the collapse of the border between inside and outside. It is as if the skin, a fragile container, no longer guaranteed the integrity of one’s ‘own and clean self’ but, scraped or transparent, invisible or taut, gave way before the dejection of its contents” (53). The moment one turns away from abjection, embracing the safety of ritual, or of the Law, one is returned to it, for “from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master” (2).

At its extreme, perhaps, the one under the grip of abjection—the one who *becomes* the Abject—ends up embracing his/her abjection, becoming the willing recipient and carrier of such abjection. This could arise from an unexplained upset in the familial or social order, or an eventual rejection of such an order. Such figures are not rare; nor, in fact, are they so easily recognized, or so quickly shunned as it might first seem. “For he is not mad,” wrote Kristeva, “he through whom the abject exists” (6). Such figures of the abject are essentially willing exiles, if Kristeva is to be believed, and they are the characters that form the foundation of my thesis. So, then, how does one understand such a figure? According to Kristeva:

The one by whom the abject exists is thus a *deject* who places (himself), *separates* (himself), situates (himself), and therefore *strays* instead of getting his

bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing...Necessarily dichotomous, somewhat Manichaeic, he divides, excludes, and without, properly speaking, wishing to know his abjections is not at all unaware of them. Often, moreover, he includes himself among them, thus casting within himself the scalpel that carries out his separations. (8)

The portrait Kristeva has painted of the “one by whom the abject exists,” the exile, the deject, is a fascinated, and not wholly negative, one. For, as to the destiny of such a figure, according to Kristeva, “the more he strays, the more he is saved” (8). He can almost, if one is willing to accept it, become a symbol of desire, both desire as Lacan understood it and desire as is commonly understood by the layperson. For Kristeva, it is within such a figure that one recognizes *jouissance*, which for Lacan signified the excessive intermingling of pleasure and pain: pleasure that brings pain, and pain that brings pleasure. “Such,” wrote Kristeva, “are the pangs and delights of masochism” (5). Furthermore, there is an aura of seduction surrounding the subject-turned-abject. Kristeva proposed, not without a hint of grandiosity, that “it is out of such straying on excluded ground that [the abject] draws his *jouissance*. The abject from which he does not cease separating is for him, in short, *a land of oblivion* that is constantly remembered. Once upon blotted-out time, the abject must have been a magnetized pole of covetousness” (8). From this, Kristeva concluded that “[t]he time of abjection is double: a time of oblivion and thunder, of veiled infinity and the moment when revelation bursts forth” (9). Histrionics aside, Kristeva proposed that

jouissance alone causes the abject to exist as such. One does not know it, one does not desire it, one joys in it...Violently and painfully. A passion. And, as in jouissance where the object of desire...bursts with the shattered mirror where the ego gives up its image in order to contemplate itself in the Other, there is nothing either objective or objectal to the abject. It is simply a frontier, a repulsive gift that the Other, having become *alter ego*, drops so that 'I' does not disappear in it but finds, in that sublime alienation, a forfeited existence. (9)

As a result of this, Kristeva concludes that "[o]ne thus understands why so many victims of the abject are its fascinated victims—if not its submissive and willing ones" (9). Abjection, in such instances, is intimately connected to the sublime, as both the abject and the sublime trigger otherworldly experiences where "I...find myself removed to a secondary universe, set off from the one where 'I' am—delight and loss," and which "expands us, overstrains us, and causes us to be both *here*, as dejects, and *there*, as others and sparkling" (12). This echoes Edmund Burke's eighteenth century description of "the passion caused by the great and sublime in nature," which

is astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it. Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that, far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force. Astonishment, as I have said, is the effect of the sublime

in its highest degree; the inferior effects are admiration, reverence, and respect.

(Burke)

In such instances, one may be able to see how the abject, like the sublime, causes the individual at once pleasure wrapped up in pain, and a moment outside the *ennui* of the ordinary social order.

We have seen, then, that abjection, as the inverse of Law, resembles something like a two-headed figure. As a figurative boundary separating order and disorder, or self and other, abjection inhabits the shadows between light and dark. Abjection is what must be repelled in order to maintain a stable sense of social and cultural identity; it is also, sometimes, embraced by those symbolic “exiles” who find themselves split between dichotomies of subject/object, self/Other, inside/outside, or even savior/monster. My thesis is concerned with characters who exemplify such dichotomies. It is at this point that I hope the reader does not fall into the fallacy of black/white thinking in which there are clearly demarcated lines between cleanliness and filth, good and evil, or even self and other. In my understanding, abjection has little regard for such easy and helpful definitions. Abjection, rather, inhabits that gray space between such demarcations, and that is what makes it both so tempting and so insidious. The characters I examine in this paper are victims of abjection. Each and every one of them claims a degree of complicity in their fall into the abject—to varying degrees. Yet abjection is, ultimately, a force that overpowers them, and takes them further into the void than they intend; such falls are not recognized until it is too late. According to Kristeva:

If it be true that the abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject, one can understand that it is experienced at the peak of its strength when that subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very *being*, that it *is* none other than the abject. The abjection of self would be the culminating form of that experience of the subject to which it is revealed that all its objects are based merely on the inaugural *loss* that laid the foundations of its very being. There is nothing like the abjection of self to show that all abjection is in fact recognition of the *want* on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded...But if one imagines (and imagine one must, for it is the working of imagination whose foundations are being laid here) the experience of *want* itself as logically preliminary to being and object—to the being of the object—then one understands that abjection, and even more so abjection of self, is its only signified. Its signifier, then, is none but literature. (5) (Italics in the original)

It is thus through literature that I embark on my examination of the abject, as seen through the eyes of those characters who find “the impossible within,” and are unable to find a way out.

“MORE THAN A SON’S INDIFFERENCE”: ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON’S *THE STRANGE CASE OF DR. JEKYLL AND MR. HYDE*

I. Story of the Double

Recalling the metaphysical research that would eventually cause his undoing, Dr. Henry Jekyll M.D., D.C.L., LL.D, F.R.S. (13), trained in medicine and law, a man of good social standing and all around respectable personage has, too late, discovered a fatal truth. To friend and lawyer Mr. Utterson, he writes,

I thus drew steadily nearer to that truth, by whose partial discovery I have been doomed to such a dreadful shipwreck: that man is not truly one but truly two...I hazard the guess that man will be ultimately known for a mere polity of multifarious, incongruous and independent denizens. I for my part, from the nature of my life, advanced infallibly in one direction and in one direction only. It was on the moral side, and *in my own person*, that I learned to recognize the thorough and primitive duality of man. (48) (Italics mine)

The result is, by now, well known. Indeed, the story of Dr. Jekyll and his alter-ego, the nefarious Mr. Hyde, is arguably the most famous story of the double to arise in modern times. It has grown far beyond its humble beginnings as a penny dreadful and beyond its status (as Stevenson’s wife Fanny insisted it was) of an allegory, and straight into modern consciousness. One need not have read the novella itself to be familiar with its contents. More than a hundred years after its writing, “Jekyll and Hyde” has become as commonplace a cultural motif as its fellow nineteenth century monsters—Dracula and

Frankenstein's creature—superseding its source material and becoming a fixture of the cultural landscape. Retold countless times through theater, film, and literature, the tale has even been, in the words of one critic, “harmed by its popularity” (Saposnik 108).

Anyone coming into a serious study of *Jekyll and Hyde* must work to consciously reject the simplified version of the tale that popular culture has created: that *Jekyll and Hyde* is a simple, moralistic tale of good and evil. For in *Jekyll and Hyde*, as Peter K. Garrett points out, “[o]n the level of character and action as well as on the level of narration, we find neither unity nor purified duality but a complex weave of voices that resists conservative simplifications” (67). Hyde is a double, but not in the traditional sense. Unlike most tales of the double in literature, Hyde does not exist outside the physical body of Jekyll, nor does he resemble Jekyll in appearance. Hyde, rather, lives within Jekyll's own skin; transformed, surely, but made from the same physical matter. Hyde's sins, too, did not make their entrance into the world independently of Jekyll; they existed within Jekyll long prior to Jekyll's physical transformation into the figure of Hyde. Furthermore, it is not just Jekyll that Hyde doubles and threatens, but his companions as well, as all who encounter Hyde are drawn into his sordid, symbolic, abject power. Hyde is a reminder not just of Jekyll's own failings but of the failings and hypocrisies of Stevenson's Victorian society. The abjection that Hyde represents is not just Hyde's own disgusting nature but the disgust already within respectable “society” itself. Hyde, with his unexplainable rottenness, is everyone's double.

Appearance of the Double in literature did not, obviously, begin with the Victorian Era. Rather, “doubles and duality...have a long and distinguished literary

career” (Dryden 39). However, critics have noted that Victorian fascination with the dual aspect of mankind enjoyed a boost in popularity as the era drew on. In *The Divided Self*, Masao Miyoshi’s full-length study of “the ways in which Victorian men of letters experienced the self-division endemic to their times and gave expression to it in their writing”, he noted the “confusion, the perplexity, the deep unease of the English nineteenth century [that is] impressed on all who study the period” (ix). This is particularly seen, Miyoshi continues, in the “[d]istinctions among the several themes of self-duplication and self-division [that] arise from the source of the second self or partial self.” Miyoshi distinguishes within this theme subthemes of duplication and division. In the latter, “as in the Jekyll-Hyde personality, it [the double] splits off from within” (xii). For Miyoshi, this distinction is not as important as “what is essential to both, the disintegration of the person” (xii). Philosophers in the Western tradition have long studied the nature of mankind, both social and individual. The Ancient Greeks exhorted mankind to “know thyself.” Christian ontology long held that the world was a site of opposing struggles: good vs evil, body vs soul, heaven vs hell. These thoughts were passed down, almost wholly intact, from ancient to modern times. Advancements in the nineteenth century, however, confused much of this dichotomous thinking. With the introduction of Darwinism and the development of modern psychology, as well as rapid industrialization and the consequent changes in social formations and realities, it is not surprising that many were confused about identity. Where once man stood on the pinnacle of God-breathed creation, Darwinism had reintroduced him to his animal nature, exposing him as just another production in an evolutionary chain. If mankind could—and

did—evolve from lesser primates, what was to say he couldn't go backwards, devolve, or degeneratex once more into a lower species? Added to this newly emergent paranoia regarding mankind's place in the universe was an overall sense of cultural fatigue felt among many of Stevenson's fin de siècle contemporaries, who began to feel doubt about Western European man's seemingly irreversible progress. For centuries, the Western European male felt himself at the apex of the world: culturally, biologically, and ethically. However, by Stevenson's time, many sensed a growing "malaise of late-Victorian Britain" in which "revulsion at hypocrisy is part of what Stevenson's biographers have repeatedly pointed to—his participation in his generation's disaffiliation from organized religion and enthusiasm for Darwin and other secular thinkers" which resulted in *Jekyll and Hyde* "reflecting the widely recognized 'autumnal' quality of late-Victorian life, the sense that something was the matter not simply at home but in society itself" (Veeder 116). What was at stake in all this was identity itself, and Stevenson's novella is no less than a study of identity, in the form of the double.

Readers familiar with the double know that good things rarely follow its appearance. It is perhaps the ultimate instance of the uncanny in literature and psychology. The double is, quite literally, the Other in the self that Kristeva would argue we are always already abjecting. The double is the physical representation of ourselves that must be abjected as something improper, unclean, or otherwise threatening to the social order. The individual may embrace the altered part of himself (as Jekyll initially embraces Hyde), or reject it outright (as Jekyll ultimately, through his suicide, succeeds in doing) but the double can only be created through the individual. Thus, the "literature

of duality is, at its most obvious level, a literature about identity, or even lack of identity” (Dryden 39), and is “a threat to the integrity of the self, and frequently evidence of a Gothic, supernatural force at large that brings with it death and destruction” (Dryden 38).

The double, or doppelganger, theme is one that Stevenson himself had attempted, with varying success, to put on paper before writing *Jekyll and Hyde*. In “A Chapter on Dreams” (published in *Scribner’s Magazine* in 1888, two years after the publication of *Jekyll and Hyde*), Stevenson admits that he “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” (127). This searching came to fruition when, under financial pressure, Stevenson recalls, he

went about racking my brains for a plot of any sort; and on the second night I dreamed the scene at the window, and a scene afterward split in two, in which Hyde, pursued for some crime, took the powder and underwent the change in the presence of his pursuers. All the rest was made awake, and consciously, although I think I can trace in much of it the manner of my Brownies. The meaning of the tale is therefore mine, and had long pre-existed in my garden of Adonis, and tried one body after another in vain; indeed, I do most of the morality, worse luck! And my Brownies have not a rudiment of what we call a conscious. Mine, too, is the setting, mine the characters. All that was given me was the matter of three scenes, and the central idea of a voluntary change becoming involuntary. Will it be thought ungenerous, after I have been so literally ladling out praise to my unseen collaborators, if I here toss them over, bound hand and foot, into the arena of the

critics? For the business of the powders, which so many have censured, is, I am relieved to say, not mine at all but the Brownies'. (127)

There are two things in Stevenson's description of his process of creation that I would like to briefly point out. Firstly, and most immediately apparent, is the acknowledgment of dreams in the creative process. Stevenson's examination of his own dreams predates the rise of Freud and psychoanalysis, with its own focus on the significance of dreams, by only a few years. (Dreams also play a small part in the narrative of *Jekyll and Hyde* itself, as when Utterson finds "his imagination...engaged or almost enslaved" by the image of Hyde that "had no face, or one that baffled him and melted before his eyes" [15]).

Secondly, Stevenson here, whether he is aware of it or not, unloads onto his dreams the very scapegoating that Jekyll and his companions unload onto Hyde. Stevenson's Brownies, who do his dirty work for him, are invented figures whom Stevenson is able to indulge and blame for the more feverish aspects of his mind and personality. Whether intentional or not, and I am inclined to believe it is intentional, Stevenson is, Jekyll-like, examining his own duality, casting praise and blame on his collaborators wherever he sees fit. They are both of him and separate from him. How much of Stevenson is in Jekyll can, up to a point, only be a matter of speculation.

II. The Name(s) of the "Father"(s)

Critics have long noted the male-centered nature of *Jekyll and Hyde*. There are few women in the narrative, and those who do appear, with the possible exception of the caretaker of Hyde's Soho residence, an "ivory-faced and silvery-haired old woman" who "had an evil face, smoothed by hypocrisy" but whose "manners were excellent" (23), are

all, in some form or another, victims. All main characters are unmarried; there are no mothers, no love interests, and perhaps most importantly, acknowledgment of this lack. These seemingly respectable, professional men of the world, well-to-do doctors and lawyers, are really rather isolated in their community of bachelors. Some critics have argued for the necessity of this male-dominated narration, insisting that it is integral to the meaning of *Jekyll and Hyde*. Irving Saposnik reminds us that “Victoria’s era, despite its monarch, was male-centered; and a story so directed at the essence of its moral behavior is best seen from a male perspective” (110). While basically not inaccurate, this explanation is, I would argue, shallow and unconvincing. There are countless Victorian narratives that, while male-authored, male-narrated, or male-centered, do not exclude the female presence from its pages to the extent that *Jekyll and Hyde* does. It also does not address questions such as why the witness to Hyde’s most high profile crime, the murder of Sir Danvers Carew, should be a “romantically given” female, and why her testimony is the only one told third-hand, without a single direct quote. While I do not take for a given Saposnik’s claim that “moral behavior is best seen from a male perspective” in *Jekyll and Hyde*, it is an unarguable truth that the narrative is male dominated. So then it follows, what are we to make of this?

Addressing the social organization of Stevenson’s world, William Veeder argues that “*Jekyll and Hyde* dramatizes the inherent weakness of late-Victorian social organization” (107). The

site of *Jekyll and Hyde* is...the larger milieu of late-Victorian patriarchy [in which] Lanyon, Enfield, and Utterson participate so thoroughly in Jekyll/Hyde

that they constitute an emblematic community, a relational network, which reflects—and thus allows us readers a perspective on—the network of male bonds in late-Victorian Britain. This network marks a psychological condition as a cultural phenomenon... The resulting casualty is not simply Jekyll/Hyde but culture itself” (108). The cause of this undoing lies in the “failure to resolve Oedipal tensions. (154)

It is this “Oedipal antagonism [that] functions... as the latent cause of cultural decline” (116). Stevenson’s novella is ostensibly centered on the mysterious figure of Edward Hyde. What if, instead, the focus is on the other characters in the tale? What if Hyde himself is merely a vehicle, not just for Jekyll’s duplicitous nighttime excursions, but for all the men in the novel—and, vicariously, the reader as well? Just who *is* Hyde anyway?

All who are confronted with Hyde notice something not right with him but they are unable to explain just what this is. When the reader is first introduced to Mr. Hyde, it is through Mr. Enfield, “the well-known man about town” (8) who reports to Utterson his interaction with Hyde while the former was “coming home from some place at the end of the world, about three o’clock of a black winter morning” (9). Just what Enfield is doing at such an ungodly hour, and just where he is coming from, is not questioned or discussed. Utterson, with his “approved tolerance for others” (7), especially does not enquire. The reader is only left to infer that, wherever Enfield has just come from, and whatever he had been doing, has not been “clean.” In any case, the focus is on Hyde. Upon being asked about Hyde’s appearance, Enfield replies,

There is something wrong with his appearance; something displeasing, something downright detestable. I never saw a man I so disliked, and yet I scarce know why. He must be deformed somewhere; he gives a strong feeling of deformity, although I couldn't specify the point. He's an extraordinary looking man, and yet I really can name nothing out of the way. No, sir; can make no hand of it; I can't describe him. And it's not want of memory; for *I declare I can see him at this moment.* (11) (Italics mine)

Enfield's inability to describe Hyde's strange unpleasantness is mirrored by all others who come into contact with him. When Utterson, who instantly attaches himself to the Hyde character by naming himself "Mr. Seek" to "Mr. Hyde" (15), finally tracks down the culprit, he experiences a similar unexplainable revulsion. He notes that "Mr. Hyde...gave an impression of deformity without any nameable malformation" (17). Like Enfield, Utterson can draw up a mental picture of Hyde, can explain his individual features, and yet "not all of these together could explain the hitherto unknown disgust, loathing and fear with which Mr. Utterson regarded him," only that "the man seems hardly human! Something troglodytic" (17). Further in the novella, Hyde is described as having a "haunting sense of unexpressed deformity" (24), "something queer about [him]—something that gave a man a turn" (37), and "something abnormal and misbegotten in the very essence" of him, "something seizing, surprising and revolting" (45). The word choice may vary slightly but all men who come into contact with Hyde are unanimous in their disapproval of his appearance, though, to a man, they are unable to explain just what it is that is so displeasing. Not insignificantly, the one female who

reports of seeing Hyde has a less striking impression. When overlooking the murder of Sir Danvers Carew, the maid servant reports only that she “was surprised to recognize in him a certain Mr. Hyde, who had once visited her master and for whom she had conceived a dislike” (21). Other than recognizing Hyde, whom she had met previously, she “paid less attention” to him than to Carew, whom she notes was “an aged and beautiful gentleman” whose face “seemed to breathe such an innocent and old-world kindness of disposition, yet with something high too, as of a well-founded self-content” (21). Hyde’s significance is overlooked by the servant until he begins to assault Carew. Men in the story appear to have a much stronger reaction to seeing Hyde than women do. The reason for this lies less in Hyde himself than in what he represents to the men who witness him.

Peter K. Garrett, noting this phenomenon, suggests that, for men, “Hyde remains...faceless...a blank to be filled in by each interpreter who encounters him. His significance depends less on some pure essence within him than on the purifying effect of considering him wholly other” which results in “the flattering effect of considering hatred for him a confirmation of ‘nobler’ human instincts” (65). In *abjecting* Hyde, who is a representative of the baser, more animalistic side of man, his “interpreters” thus *project* on to him the baser sides of themselves, which they wish to keep submerged. Hyde, it seems, is largely a scapegoat for the sins of the men themselves. Garrett continues his observation: “[l]ike Jekyll, several of the other characters try to dissociate themselves from Hyde, but the ‘instinctive’ repulsion they feel toward him also binds them to him” (67) as, mirror-like, “[t]hose who confront and oppose Hyde seem to turn into his

doubles” (68). By creating Hyde and letting him loose into society, Jekyll wishes to compartmentalize the side of himself that is unacceptable to society while still keeping his own person and reputation intact. Unwittingly, he instead unleashes a figure of lawlessness that produces an “effect of contamination” on multiple fronts (Garrett 68).

Jekyll and Hyde ostensibly unfolds in a world of law and order. Mr. Utterson, the pragmatic lawyer, is the primary recipient of all documents relating to Mr. Hyde’s deeds—all wills, statements, and incidents find their way back to Utterson who, because of his profession, is the one responsible for determining how each new item of information should be dealt with. As previous critics have pointed out, he is the “utter-son” in the story, both in terms of “utterly a son” beholden to the Law (of the Father), and as the one who “utters” the law. Nevertheless, we are told, he is not one to judge his peers, since he “had an approved tolerance for others; sometimes wondering, almost with envy, at the high pressure of spirits involved in their misdeeds” (7). He seems to have been acquainted with several “down-going men” of his own class, and never been one to reprove. His sense of order, however, is never perturbed, as “his friends were those of his own blood or those he had known the longest” (7). In other words, his attention is reserved for his social peers. His “tolerance” for others smacks of vicarious pleasure in their iniquities. He may represent the law but, for his own, the law is applied selectively. Laws may be bent or broken, but as long as the iniquitous find themselves in good social standing then the order of society is still intact. That social order, one of economic, gender, and class consciousness, is the only order to be upheld. It is also the order that, most damagingly, Hyde is guilty of threatening. These men are not so much beholden to

the law as they *are* the law. Through dinners, meetings, and documents, we are constantly reminded that Jekyll and his professional cohort reinforce each other's professional, bourgeois respectability. They are, we are reminded, "all intelligent, reputable men and all judges of good wine" (19). Security in their social respectability is dependent on their collective ability to uphold each other's reputations. Hyde is the negation of all that, and it is for this reason that he appears so threatening to the men. It is not sin and lawlessness itself that makes Hyde so dangerous to those acquainted with him, it is his connection to both respectability (through Jekyll's wealth) and the lower end of the social order that gives Utterson such pause. In a social organization based on clear class divisions, there exists a comfortable order wherein even servants know their place. Poole, Jekyll's long suffering servant, enacts an awareness and acceptance of class divisions and responsibilities. Hyde, in contrast, transgresses accepted social divisions, and threatens the stability of the order.

In order to find further evidence of these assertions, we should take a close look at Hyde's specific crimes and punishments. Remember that, as readers, our first encounter with Hyde is through Enfield, Utterson's dubiously moral kin and companion. Enfield, we remember, is heading home at an ungodly hour when he witnesses Hyde come into contact with a young "girl of maybe eight or ten" (9). To Enfield's horror, "the two ran into one another naturally enough at the corner; and then came the horrible part of the thing; for the man trampled calmly over the child's body and left her screaming on the ground. It sounds nothing to hear [Enfield reports] but it was hellish to see" (9). Disregarding Enfield's strange comment that the trampling of a screaming child is

“nothing to hear,” it is the subsequent reaction to the scene that reveals our witness’ true motives. Enfield takes off after Hyde and physically returns him to the scene of the crime. The true victim of the crime, the child, is determined to be “not much the worse, more frightened...and there you might have supposed to be an end of it” (9). The men involved, however, have other ideas, and they take the punishment into their own hands.

As Enfield recounts:

I had taken a loathing to my gentleman [Hyde] at first sight. So had the child’s family, which was only natural. But the doctor’s case was what struck me...every time he looked at my prisoner, I saw that Sawbones turn sick and white with the desire to kill him. I knew what was in his mind, just as he knew what was in mine; and killing being out of the question, we did the next best. We told the man we could and would make such a scandal out of this, as should make his name stink from one end of London to the other. If he had any friends or any credit, we undertook that he should lose them. And all the time, as we were pitching it in red hot, we were keeping the women off him as best we could, for they were as wild as harpies. I never saw a circle of such hateful faces; and there was the man in the middle, with a kind of black, sneering coolness...“If you choose to make capital of this accident,’ said he, ‘I am naturally helpless. No gentleman but wishes to avoid a scene,” says he. “Name your figure.” (9)

The injured child herself is quickly dismissed from the scene, becoming now merely a catalyst for an economic transaction among men. The emotionless doctor, whom Enfield refers to as “Sawbones,” becomes important in the scene not as an attendant to the

trampled child, but as an agent of social and economic justice. Enfield and the doctor become complicit in the ensuing economic retribution in contrast to the women in the scene who are depicted as irrational, vengeful “harpies” (10). Furthermore, Hyde’s freedom is not threatened; never are the police or the law called in during this incident. It is Hyde’s name and credit that are at stake, and which the men in the scene use as leverage against Hyde. The law is taken into the hands of laymen and a transaction occurs. This transaction, which takes the form of agreed monetary payment for the injured girl, exists outside the law, among civilians. Hyde is able to escape from legal retribution and walk away a free man. This signals to Hyde, at least for a while, that his transgressions can be bought and no true punishment will occur.

Although women appear in this scene, and it is a female child that is trampled, women appear to be otherwise unimportant to the ensuing action. Even the father of the child leaves the scene with the other men to pursue a monetary reimbursement, and it quickly becomes a concern about patriarchal debt that rises to importance. Jarrold Hogle even reads in the scene a bit of vicarious male pleasure, the men in the scene being unwittingly complicit with Hyde’s trampling of the child. Hogle argues that it “shows how Hyde serves the general need of Victorian men to beat down the child and woman in themselves” (178). Hyde’s actions are vicious in the trampling over the child, but it is something else in Hyde—his appearance, what the men see reflected in him—that causes the worst harm *to the men themselves*. Hyde is one of them—able and man enough to satisfy an arbitrary debt—but they are unable to face this truth. Hyde represents what they wish not to see in themselves, and what they constantly, through abjection, must

“thrust aside in order to live” (Kristeva 3). The girl’s body then becomes a familiar commodity, and even in this instance, payment for the female body is what the men revert to. It is what they understand. Furthermore, as Hogle reads it,

Hyde’s walking over the girl does violate Christian and secular laws, but this movement of a quasi-phallic “Juggernaut”...this dragging of an erected, masculine, once-hindu idol-figure over people (mainly women and children) whose enthrallment reveals its power, is far less daunting to the men at the scene than the way the girl might remind them of what they retain in their body language. Hyde’s violence allows them to say next to nothing to or about the child or her sex. It encourages them to marginalize her...To be a Juggernaut, it turns out, is to challenge the Law of the Father with the behavior that the Law continually encourages yet tries to dissociate from its public declarations. In response, the power-seeking cruelty in that behavior starts to come out in the male observers. (179)

If we accept this reading, then despite their reflexive “casting off” of Hyde, the men are not so much offended by the child’s trampling—which they secretly are complicit in—as by Hyde’s threat to the Law of the Father, which monetary repayment is presumably meant to correct.

The murder of Sir Danvers Carew is, in at least one way, a mirrored reversal of the earlier trampling scene. Here, the victim is not the child but the symbolic Father, Member of Parliament, the ultimate patriarch and symbol of law and order. *Sir* Danvers Carew—unlike the nameless girl in the earlier scene—is highly respected in society. His

position signifies the law and order that Hyde's creation is intended to subvert. Our witness to the crime is a woman, a "maid servant living alone" who, as already noted, is "romantically given" (21). The nameless maid servant and witness is described with almost comically romantic innocence as one who "with streaming tears" had "never...felt more at peace with all men or thought more kindly of the world" (21). Witnessing the brutal and seemingly senseless murder of Carew causes her to faint for several hours before she awakes and alerts the police. Danvers' body is found "incredibly mangled" in the street with his purse and gold watch still on him, as well as, ironically, a "sealed and stamped envelope...which bore the name and address of Mr. Utterson" (22). What the envelope contains remains unexplained. Nevertheless, Utterson is once again an immediate player in the events surrounding Hyde.

Keeping in mind that the events which led to the murder of Carew are told through the perspective of a single nameless maid, Hyde's ferocious act seems to have had little provocation. Unlike Hyde's careless trampling of the child in the earlier scene, which was cruel but seemingly unintentional, Hyde's attack on Carew was deliberate. It happens around eleven at night—late, but not ungodly so—when the two men approach each other from opposite ends of the street. They meet just under the window where the maid, presumably unnoticed, is dreamily gazing out upon the street, and an interaction quickly devolves into an altercation. As they come close, the maid observes that "the older man bowed and accosted the other with a very pretty manner of politeness. It did not seem as if the subject of his address were of great importance; indeed, from his pointing, it sometimes appeared as if he were only inquiring his way" (21). Whatever the

reason for the interaction, innocent or not, Hyde responds viciously. As Carew speaks, Hyde “answered never a word, and seemed to listen with an ill-contained impatience. And all of a sudden he broke out in a great flame of anger, stamping with his foot, brandishing the cane, and carrying on (as the maid described it) like a madman” (21). The killing is brutal: the maid recalls “a storm of blows, under which the bones were audibly shattered and the body jumped upon the roadway” (22). This is not just ordinary street violence; this is a barrage.

By choosing as his singular witness to the attack a stereotypically romantic woman, Stevenson is able to accomplish a few things. Reading the description of the attack more closely, the reader can infer a different interpretation than the one the maid imagines. Stevenson’s careful word choice indicates the maid is an unreliable witness. Carew did not merely approach Hyde, he “accosted” him, a verb that implies aggression or insistence rather than mere formality. The “pretty manner of politeness” the maid observes, then, may either be projection on the maid’s part or indication of something a bit more illicit. The maid presumes little importance in the interaction between the two men, merely believing that Carew is “inquiring his way,” yet a close reading also indicates a generous lapse of time in the qualifier “sometimes.” If he is “sometimes” seeming to do something, then the interaction is taking longer than what is initially described. Hyde listens with an “ill-contained impatience,” also implying that the conversation is taking longer than a simple inquiry may suggest. A few critics, Veeder among them, have pointed out the inconsistencies in this narrative. Veeder observes:

Since every act is motivated, the apparent absence of provocation by Carew and the patent excessiveness of Hyde's reaction encourage us to look to the unconscious. What we see is a dramatization of the son's psyche, a playing out of oedipal, patricidal fantasy. Though "madman" and "ape-like" are applied to Hyde...these conventional explanations mask the true nature of a rage articulated initially by "stamping with his foot"...This is a gesture of petulant immaturity. In this context Carew's exemplary nature marks him as the enemy whose slightest provocation will set Hyde off. And provocations do appear amid Carew's politeness...The maid's narrative, with its "sometimes," "only," and "but," suggests that something more than "inquiring his way" must have occurred. (127)

Veeder reads a literal and figurative "oedipal triangle" occurring in this scene. The two men, meeting at the bottom, form the base of a triangle with our silent witness marking out the apex (Veeder 128). Although she is witnessing a savage crime happening before her eyes, the maid does not call for help. Rather, she quietly observes Carew's bones audibly shattering and his helpless body jumping upon the sidewalk before fainting for three hours. Only later, when she revives, does she call for help. This reveals a perhaps unintentional complicity on the maid's part. "We can therefore," Veeder concludes, "view her conduct in terms of the son's wish fulfillment. Silence implies consent. Mother does not cry out because she is captivated by the son's puissant attack on the weak father" (128). Veeder also connects the maid's fainting with the "'little death' of orgasm, [that] attests to the son's adequacy as replacement for the father" (128). Furthermore, the weapon used in the murder, Hyde's phallic cane, splits in two under the force of the act.

Whatever the direct reasoning behind Hyde's killing of the "Father," Carew, the action causes Hyde to disappear. Hyde is now a fugitive for whom "thousands of pounds were offered in reward, for the death of Sir Danvers was resented as a public injury" (28). Nevertheless, no amount of monetary payment will truly absolve him of this act in the way that the trampling of the child was absolved. The day following the murder, Utterson re-enters the scene and becomes central to the investigation. In fact, it is Utterson, the utter-son, who arrives at the police station and identifies the body as belonging to Carew. Once again, in the clear light of day, away from the criminal and sexual implications of the night, the men return to their professional and financial interests. Upon confirmation of the patriarchal importance of the victim, the "eye" of the officer in charge "lighted up with professional ambition" (22). The Father will be avenged, and the son, who in this instance carries out the law of the Father, will rise in prominence. Utterson also recognizes the murder weapon, the broken stick that "he had himself presented many years before to Henry Jekyll" (22). The stick appears to provide proof that Hyde is indeed the murderer, but it also implicates Jekyll and, by association, Utterson himself. Utterson does not outright reveal this knowledge to the officer, likely protecting himself and Jekyll from any direct connection to the murder. He does, however, reveal his knowledge of Hyde's lodgings, inviting himself along in the law's search for the culprit.

As Utterson and the officer ride through the foggy streets of the "dismal quarter of Soho...with its muddy ways, and slatternly passengers" (23), Utterson's conscience is not entirely clear, for "[t]he thoughts of his mind...were of the gloomiest dye; and when he glanced at the companion of his drive, he was conscious of some touch of that terror of

the law and the law's officers, which may at times assail the most honest" (23). We know, however, that Utterson, despite his ostensible honesty and devotion to the law, is himself not immune to turning a blind eye, particularly when it involves himself and his social companions, who must be protected for the sake of propriety and continuation of the social order. Hyde, as one who exists on the fringes of this patriarchal order and society, provides a scapegoat for all the iniquities of Jekyll, Utterson, and those of their social class. Although at this point we know he has an intimate, though unexplained, connection to the reputable Jekyll, Hyde is forever outside the order of respectability. Although we know that Hyde has money, or access to Jekyll's money, he himself remains lodged in the seedier side of town. The scenery surrounding Hyde's lodgings provides a contrast to the bourgeois world of the patriarchs, and as Utterson and the officer arrive, the contrast is noted:

As the cab drew up before the address indicated, the fog lifted a little and showed him a dingy street, a gin palace, a low French eating house, a shop for the retail of penny numbers and twopenny salads, many ragged children huddled in the doorways, and many women of many different nationalities passing out, key in hand, to have a morning glass; and the next moment the fog settled down again upon that part, as brown as umber, and cut him off from his blackguardly surroundings. This was the home of Henry Jekyll's favourite; of a man who was heir to quarter of a million sterling. (23)

Utterson is clearly discomfited by what, to him, "seemed...like a district of some city in a nightmare" (23). This is Utterson's London, but it is not the London Utterson recognizes,

or wishes to recognize. This area of town: cheap, sooty, dark, and full of downtrodden people, represents the side of England and English society that, although close in distance, is far from the daily reality Utterson wishes to acknowledge. As Valdine Clemens notes:

Hyde belongs to the “night side” of London life with which many Victorian men were actually quite familiar. However monstrous he may seem, he is the shadow self not only of Jekyll, but of Victorian society in general. As the inferior double who embodies and exposes this society’s moral deficiencies, Hyde triggers the “awareness of guilt” that Otto Rank describes as “measur[ing]...the distance between the ego-ideal and the attained reality” (76). Jekyll, whose repressed sexuality erupts in sadism and brutality and ends in his own self-destruction, epitomizes a collective sense of guilt and concomitant anxiety about the “reinvansion of darkness” into the comfortable, privileged lives of the ascendant professional and merchant classes of English society. (129)

This sustained hypocrisy is something Utterson is undoubtedly aware of, and which gives him so much anxiety. It is also what causes him to believe the circumstances uniting Jekyll and Hyde could only be nefarious. The seedier side of London life is one thing that gave late Victorian society trouble—for how can such a superior, wealthy, imperial society give rise to such squalor within its own borders?—but even more troubling is the connection between this life and the world of respectable professionals. The figure of Hyde unites these two seemingly alternate yet deeply intertwined realities. It is not merely that Hyde is himself of a lower order that must be abjected; it is Hyde’s obvious

personal and financial connection to Jekyll, and subsequently Jekyll's social class, that causes such anxiety. Hyde resides in Soho, but Hyde will not *stay* in Soho. Utterson does not know at this point that Hyde is literally walking around in Jekyll's shoes, but he does sense that Hyde is usurping Jekyll's position, pretending to respectability—a social sin that Utterson instinctively rejects. Saposnik notes that:

The universal hatred directed at Hyde both in and out of the story is a striking verification of the extent to which Victorian England feared what he represented...Victorian anxieties contributed greatly to *Jekyll and Hyde*'s success. The fictional paradox revealed the social paradox; Jekyll's dilemma spoke for more of his countrymen than many were willing to admit. (116)

The mere knowledge of Hyde's existence has, until now, haunted Utterson's waking thoughts and nightly dreams. As time passes following the murder, however, and the threat of Hyde's presence daily fades, Utterson's fears begin to subside, and he considers the "death of Sir Danvers...more than paid for by the disappearance of Mr. Hyde" (28). Even death, it seems, can be considered a fair exchange.

III. In the Agonized Womb of Consciousness

Hyde was born in a transformed laboratory that was once used as an anatomical theater. Dr. Jekyll "had bought the house from the heirs of a celebrated surgeon; and his own tastes being rather chemical than anatomical, had changed the destination" (25). The original purpose, however, seems fitting, as this is the place where Jekyll, reminiscent of his literary predecessor Dr. Frankenstein, creates the creature that is Hyde. Hogle remarks that "Jekyll, withdrawing into a decayed anatomical theater in order to replace an old

form of science with a new one, recalls many a gothic hero who hopes to construct a unified sense of self in an antiquated location apparently removed from the vagaries of rapid economic change” (167). Both conveniently and symbolically, the laboratory has two entrances: the front entrance, accessible through the house, is where Jekyll, his servants, and his companions enter the lab. The back entrance is utilized by Hyde, and it is through this entrance that Enfield, and later Utterson, first notice Hyde entering and leaving. As back entrances are commonly seen as being used by the lower classes or for the purpose of shady business transactions, Hyde’s use of this door is fitting. Within the lab itself, “a flight of stairs mounted to a door covered with red baize” leading to the cabinet, a “large room, fitted round with glass presses, furnished, among other things, with a cheval-glass and a business table, and looking out upon the court by three dusty windows barred with iron” (25). It is a room within a room, appearing at once both prison-like and domestic. It is here, in this womb-like retreat, that Jekyll first gave “birth” to Hyde and where, eventually, they are destroyed.

Mr. Utterson, and through him the reader, first gains entrance into this mysterious place immediately following the murder of Sir Danvers Carew. He is shown in by Poole, Jekyll’s faithfully suffering servant, and encounters a sickly looking Jekyll. Jekyll, of course, knows of the murder, though he claims knowledge only through the news being shouted outside the house. Utterson wastes no time in questioning his boyhood companion. His main fear, it appears, is that Jekyll is helping “hide Hyde,” and he fears further scandal: “If it came to a trial,” Utterson warns, “your name might appear” (26). The threat of social ruin is never far from Utterson’s thoughts. Jekyll assures him: “I

cannot say that I care what becomes of Hyde; I am quite done with him. I was thinking of *my own character*, which this hateful business has rather exposed” (26) (italics mine).

Utterson is surprised and relieved at Hyde’s apparent selfishness, yet he does not entirely understand the depth of Jekyll’s statement. Utterson, is still thinking about Jekyll’s reputation, and certainly Jekyll is as well, but for Jekyll, the *character* this business has exposed runs deeper than mere reputation. It has revealed to Jekyll far more about his own *inner character* and being that, along with the threat of public exposure, causes Jekyll such remorse. “I have had a lesson,” he says as Utterson begins to leave, “Oh God, Utterson, what a lesson I have had” (26)! It is a lesson that is learned too late. Jekyll may hope to be rid of Hyde, but his transformation into Hyde is one that cannot be undone; he has always, in a way, been Hyde, the complete physical and mental transformation being merely its visual manifestation. What the Jekyll/Hyde body must now endure is physical and emotional abjection—its ultimate signifier being death. We encounter Jekyll, again through Utterson, only one last time. This time Utterson and his kinsman Enfield are passing by the courtyard which Jekyll’s laboratory cabinet looks out upon. Jekyll is seated in his cabinet “like some disconsolate prisoner” (32), the barred windows a physical representation of the mental prison Jekyll is now reduced to. Jekyll has now isolated himself, but he still desires companionship and agrees, with a smile, to chat through the window until

the smile was struck out of his face and succeeded by *an expression of such abject terror and despair*, as froze the very blood of the two gentlemen below. They saw it but for a glimpse, for the window was instantly thrust down; but that glimpse

had been sufficient, and they turned and left the court without a word. In silence, too, they traversed the by-street; and it was not until they had come into a neighbouring thoroughfare, where even upon a Sunday there were still some stirrings of life, that Mr. Utterson at last turned and looked at his companion. They were both pale; and there was an *answering horror* in their eyes. (32)

(Italics mine)

It is only when they are back on the street, in the midst of society, that Utterson is able to utter the words: “God forgive us, God forgive us” (32). One wonders what Utterson thinks they should be forgiven for. It appears he feels complicit in some sort of transgression, or he is partly guilty of whatever has caused Jekyll such abject despair. Jekyll’s sins are his own, but they are shared, in some way, by his companions. Utterson’s own guilt is unexplained, but it is sure that he, in some way, shares the sins of his peers. The “answering horror,” also, hints at some secret knowledge of whatever has caused Jekyll’s downfall.

As a narrative, *Jekyll and Hyde* leaves out as much as it includes. Told from various points of view and by various narrative voices—Utterson, Enfield, Lanyon, the nameless maid servant, and Jekyll—the reader must remember that each narration is only part of a whole. Even Jekyll’s own “Full Statement of the Case,” which purports to explain, once and for all, the mystery of Jekyll and Hyde, is told by a man who is at the limit of his own abjection, and unable to fully be honest with himself. As Ronald R. Thomas notes, the narrative “recounts the estrangement of a speaker from his own voice and a writer from what he has written... The act of self-narration is revealed in *Jekyll and*

Hyde to be a ritual act of self-estrangement rather than the act of self-discovery that it purports to be,” so that “[t]he end of *Jekyll and Hyde* is the fragmenting of the self into distinct pieces with distinct voices, not the bringing together of those pieces into some unified character who speaks with a single voice” (73). Jekyll himself, while trying to explain his own division within himself, becomes unable to fully articulate who is doing the speaking, and who is doing the acting—who, when all is said and done, is responsible for it all. Before he has even given birth to the physical representation of Hyde—childbirth being the chosen metaphor, if not the actual physical process that Hogle references, and which I adopt—Jekyll admits that he “stood already committed to a profound duplicity of life” (48). Hyde already existed, fully formed, within Jekyll, and was not a separate being produced solely through Jekyll’s transforming potion. Jekyll insists he “was in no sense a hypocrite; both sides of me were in dead earnest; I was no more myself when I laid aside restraint and plunged in shame, than when I labored, in the eye of day, at the furtherance of knowledge or the relief of sorrow and suffering” (28). This duplicity, however, causes Jekyll great unhappiness until, though his metaphysical research, he begins to work out the possible “separation of these elements” (49). Jekyll dreams of a complete separation of his disparate parts, a separation so clean that “the just could walk steadfastly and securely on his upward path...no longer exposed to disgrace and penitence by the hands of this extraneous evil” (49). Believing the evil side of him to be “extraneous,” or at least in a position to become extraneous, Jekyll is already showing himself to not be fully self-aware. In creating Hyde, Jekyll is just as guilty of every sin Hyde commits as Hyde himself is—if the two can truly be separated. Nevertheless, Jekyll

laments that “[i]t was the curse of mankind that these incongruous faggots were thus bound together—that in the agonized womb of consciousness, these polar twins should be continually struggling. How, then, were they dissociated” (49)? It is through a chemical compound that “the trembling immateriality, the mist-like transience, of this seemingly so solid body in which we walk attired” could be thrust off, and a new form adopted (49). The very “fortress of identity” (50), which housed the singular and respectable Jekyll, could now be altered and become the reprehensible Hyde.

The body of Jekyll contains two persons—the figure and person who is moral and respectable, and the secretly sinning Hyde. Hyde contains only one person, one concern: the cruel, sensuous, and villainous Hyde. All men are made of such “incongruous faggots” consisting of good and evil, which causes our complex moral struggles and which form the basis of abjection. Yet “Edward Hyde, alone in the ranks of mankind, was pure evil” (51). Jekyll makes some attempt at explaining the physical manifestation of Hyde. We remember that all who encounter Hyde, particularly the male representatives of the patriarchal order, are repulsed by some unexplainable deformity in Hyde’s person. None can quite articulate it but all are struck by it. A sociological look at Stevenson’s description of Hyde, however, makes much more sense when viewed through the Darwinian and anthropological discourse of his time. Hyde is seen as smaller in stature, which Jekyll attributes to his taking up the smaller portion of his (Jekyll’s) personality. However, various descriptions of Hyde also have clear racial and animalistic features as well. In his “Statement,” Jekyll recalls an unwilling transformation into Hyde overnight and waking to notice his change. Directly addressing Utterson, Jekyll recalls:

In one of my more wakeful moments, my eye fell upon my hand. Now the hand of Henry Jekyll (as you have often remarked) was professional in shape and size: it was large, firm, white and comely. But the hand which I now saw, clearly enough, in the yellow light of a mid-London morning, lying half shut on the bed clothes, was lean, corded, knuckly, of a dusky pallor and thickly shaded with a swart growth of hair. It was the hand of Edward Hyde. (54)

Later, Jekyll describes an unconscious transformation into Hyde where again he describes his hand as being “corded and hairy” (58). The smallness, dusky pallor, and hairiness would all signal to Stevenson’s contemporary readers racial as well as bestial differences. Judith Halberstam notes that “Hyde, as the dark side of Jekyll, functions within the novel as a stereotype of otherness. In other words, he embodies the traits of the ugly and the undesirable and makes those traits essential signifiers of evil.” Citing Homi Bhabha, Halberstam argues that “[t]he stereotype... both fixes the other within racist discourse and recognizes the other as a danger and threat to all notions of origination and racial purity. The ambivalent aspect of the stereotype is, then, a function of the possible simultaneity of fear and desire within representations of otherness” (80). Further descriptions of Hyde note his bestial nature and connection to animals, which range through (but are not limited to) having an “ape-like fury” (22), who “cr[ies] out like a rat” (36), is “masked like a monkey” (37), gives out a “dismal screech, as of mere animal terror” (38), and has, according to Jekyll himself, “apelike spite” (62). Cyndy Hendershot reads this as Jekyll’s “[attempt] to reify the animal as Hyde and hence purify the human Jekyll of his association with the animal world” (105). Furthermore, “Hyde’s uncanniness is produced

by the fact that the blending of animal and man in him is an imperceptible one. As a cultural mirror for those he encounters, he indicates to them that the human and the animal cannot be compartmentalized into binary oppositions” (109). This reflects Kristeva’s theory that “[t]he abject confronts us...with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of *animal*. Thus, by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder” (12). Hyde’s animal nature allows those who encounter him to abject him as not wholly human or civilized, but it also threatens the clear distinction between the human and the animal that provides a comfort to civilized society. It also provides an uncanniness that, for Victorian readers, may still have had a sense of shocking novelty. Valdine Clemens observes that, while all who encounter Hyde are repulsed by him, “Darwin records that people tend to feel similarly about apes...For the Victorian observer unused to seeing such animals, it would more likely be the unsettling combination of difference *and* similarity that would be frightful; it might be a bit like looking at oneself in a fun-house mirror” (140). Hyde, then, resembles something both familiar and repulsively different. His viewers can recognize him as nominally human, but are driven to abject that side of him that reminds them of their own animal natures.

Hyde is also feminized, as Poole reports hearing him “[w]eeping like a woman or a lost soul” (38), and when Dr. Lanyon reports of him that “he was wrestling against the approaches of the hysteria” (45), a distinctly feminine affliction. However, it is Jekyll who provides the *true* maternal body in the tale, as he endures the original gestation and

preforms the first “birth” of the smaller, dependent, and child-like Hyde. Describing his first transformation, Jekyll recalls

the most racking pangs succeeded: a grinding in the bones, deadly nausea, and a horror of the spirit that cannot be exceeded at the hour of birth or death. Then these agonies began swiftly to subside, and I came to myself as if out of a great sickness. There was something strange in my sensations, something indescribably new and, from its very novelty, incredibly sweet. I felt younger, lighter, happier in body...I knew myself, at the first breath of this new life, to be more wicked, tenfold more wicked, sold a slave to my original evil; and the thought, in that moment, braced and delighted me like wine. I stretched out my hands, exulting in the freshness of these sensations; and in the act, I was suddenly aware that I had lost in stature. (50)

The “racking pangs” of Jekyll’s transformation are reminiscent of childbirth, and we must recall Kristeva’s insistence that abjection “preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the memorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be” (10). Furthermore, according to Kristeva, “I experience abjection only if an Other has settled in place and stead of what will be ‘me.’ Not at all an other with whom I identify and incorporate, but an Other who precedes and possesses me, and through such possession causes me to be” (10). Hogle makes the connection between the Jekyll/Hyde transformation and the “casting off” of childbirth (177). And it is Jekyll himself who states that “from these agonies of death and birth” he has produced the fiend that is Hyde. Hyde, in turn, is the destroyer of Sir Carew

as the representative “Father,” and, ultimately, of Jekyll. Speaking of his two aspects in the third person, as Jekyll often does, Jekyll recalls of their relationship that “Jekyll had more than a father’s interest; Hyde had more than a son’s indifference” (55). It is, however, more than indifference on Hyde’s part as a resentful Hyde destroys a portrait of Jekyll’s own father, another instance of petulant rage against the paternal. Jekyll comes to believe that “had it not been for his fear of death, he would long ago have ruined himself in order to involve me in the ruin” (61). At the end, the two are “knit...closer than a wife” (61), and, no longer able to live with each other, must now only die together.

In the end, Jekyll fears—with reason—that his own identity, if such exists, is to be swallowed up entirely by Hyde. He can no longer control his transformations, and the powders which with he used to create his transforming potion cannot be found again, as Jekyll begins to realize the “first supply was impure, and that it was that unknown impurity which lent efficacy to the draught” (61). How ironic for Jekyll that the very ingredient that caused his original transformation was itself a tainted amount. At the very end, Utterson and Poole break in on Jekyll/Hyde in the laboratory cabinet and observe a scene of relative peace:

There lay the cabinet before their eyes in the quiet lamplight, a good fire glowing and chattering on the hearth, the kettle singing its thin strain, a drawer or two open, papers neatly set forth on the business table, and nearer the fire, the things laid out for tea: the quietest room, you would have said, and but for the glazed presses full of chemicals, the most commonplace that night in London. (39)

The scene would actually appear to be quite domestic if it weren't for the smell of kernels, which hints at cyanide, and the "body of a self-destroyer" (39) that lay on the floor. Jekyll has performed the ultimate act of abjection—against the self, and against the double, who is the self multiplied. It is both murder and suicide, and yet it is also Jekyll's only way out of "the horror of being Hyde" (59). In a way, it is the only form of redemption left available to Jekyll. On the verge of discovering the truth about Jekyll/Hyde—that they are one and the same—Uttersson has one remaining hope for Jekyll: that "we may at least save his credit" (41). For Jekyll may or may not be truly gone at this point, but Uttersson may at least preserve his good name, which Uttersson himself is personally invested in. In a brief moment of significance, Uttersson and Poole "came to the cheval glass" before which the Jekyll/Hyde personae saw so many transformations, and "into whose depths they looked with an involuntary horror. But it was so turned as to show them nothing but the rosy glow playing on the roof, the fire sparkling in a hundred repetitions along the glazed front of the presses, and their own pale and fearful countenances stooping to look in" (40). What they feared to see reflected in the glass is anybody's guess: perhaps it was the truth of their own abject faces peering back at them.

“STRANGE IDOLATRY”: OSCAR WILDE’S *THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY*

“Yet each man kills the thing he loves” Oscar Wilde, “The Ballad of Reading Gaol”

I. The Critic as Novelist

It would arguably be difficult to name a book as self-conscious and reflective of its own time and author as *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Perhaps more than any other work examined in this current study, *Dorian Gray* encapsulates the spirit of its era and the personality of its creator to the extent that many readers, and even critics, find difficulty separating the characters in the novel from the charismatic figure of Oscar Wilde himself. In an 1894 letter, Wilde wrote of the novel’s main characters: “Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry what the world thinks me: Dorian what I would like to be—in some other ages, perhaps” (*Letters* 352). For the modern reader, the history of Wilde’s own later trials, prison sentence, and exile make the tale of Dorian Gray’s slide into abjection even more poignant, and the connection between creator and creation more inextricably bound. It is almost as if Vivian’s statement in “The Decay of Lying,” that “Life imitates art far more than Art imitates life,” was as prophetic as it was subversive. (*Intentions* 307).

To a modern reader, the crime(s) of Oscar Wilde, of obscenity and “the Love that dare not speak its name,” would likely not be seen as crimes at all. Indeed, to many readers, Wilde is somewhat of a social martyr, a victim of the hypocrisies of the Victorian era, which demanded public morality and attempted to turn a blind eye to the failings of its own society. For this, history has largely forgiven Oscar Wilde, whose own

fate—unlike that of Dorian Gray—was advertised in public as a warning against those who may attempt similar transgressions. Victorian society was all too willing to lay its own sins upon Wilde, a punishment for Wilde’s own audacity in calling out such hypocrisies in the first place. Or, as biographer Richard Ellmann described it, Wilde “reached for the main implication of his disgrace through a double negative; though men thought he was unlike them, he was *not*. He was a genuine scapegoat” (103). Both Wilde’s contemporaries and later critics have wondered at Wilde’s “rush to social destruction,” as Harold Bloom termed it (5); his sense that he “was a martyr in his own eyes” (Yeats 12); or even his “Christ-like affinities,” (Knight 39) in which “because there is an exhibitionist compulsion on such men [as Wilde] to reveal themselves, Wilde could not remain content with his social mask” (Knight 40). As for those “Christ-like affinities”, which can be seen in Wilde’s own more personal writings, G. Wilson Knight writes, somewhat histrionically but not entirely untruthfully, that “it remains a martyrdom, a crucifixion, a self-exhibition in agony and shame. The shame may be of the essence; at the least it shatters all the pseudo-dignities and masks of our lying civilization” (41).

In that vein, it can be argued that Wilde was above all a critic (Bloom 1). His subjects were many and included critical essays about art, theater, and the proclivities of his own society. *Dorian Gray* is his only novel, and many have argued that it is not a particularly great one. Jeff Nunokawa even explicitly lays it out: “Let’s face it,” he writes, “the book is boring” (357). That boredom, for Nunokawa, is representative of the *ennui* that represented so much of fin de siècle decadence as a movement and a

philosophy. The common view is that *Dorian Gray* is itself a work of criticism in novel form: much like Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* written not a decade earlier espoused Pater's philosophy of self-discovery, Wilde's novel is a vehicle for Wilde's own philosophy of life and its relation to art. For Wilde, however, adherence to a life of hedonism—the New Hedonism, as Henry Wotton terms it—leads to an emptiness and paranoia that can only result in self-destruction. Though rumors abound regarding Dorian Gray's secret vices—the nature of which are only alluded to in the novel—Dorian is literally able to save face, at least for a time. When Basil Hallward visits Dorian and expresses dismay and a warning at “the most dreadful things...being said against you in London,” he is incredulous that Dorian could actually be guilty: “Mind you,” Basil tells Dorian, “I don't believe these rumours at all. At least I can't believe them when I see you. Sin is a thing that writes itself across a man's face. It cannot be concealed” (126). Dorian's secret, of course, is that his sins *are* reflected in his appearance—just not the flesh and blood version. Like the homosexuality that Wilde and his companions were forced to keep in secret, Dorian is forced to hide his portrait—his double and the manifestation of his own sins—in secret, behind a locked door and a shroud. The difference, however, is that while Dorian's lack of a personality of his own causes him to become cruel and immoral, Wilde was, I would argue, intensely moral—just not in the superficial way society demanded. As noted earlier, abjection is always defined and delineated by the constructs of an individual society. For late-Victorian Britain, public morality was fiercely guarded, while private “transgressions” of social mores were meant to be kept hidden.

As a man of his time—Dandy, Aesthete, decadent, and wit—Oscar Wilde was infatuated with artifice. Like many of his social contemporaries in the world of art, letters, and theater, Wilde was influenced by Walter Pater, the *pater*, or *father*, of the movement toward “Art for Art’s sake.” The term, originating in the French by Gautier, was adapted and anglicized by Pater and served as a sort of credo by the Aesthetic movement. Ironically, it is Pater’s “Conclusion” to *The Renaissance*—deemed so incendiary that Pater himself excluded it from the second edition—that Dorian follows with such blind adherence, and such fatal consequence. Pater’s insistence that “[n]ot the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end,” and his injunction that “[t]o burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life” (334), is echoed in Lord Henry’s advice to Dorian that

[t]he aim of life is self-development. To realize one’s nature perfectly—that is what each of us is here for... I believe that if one man were to live out his life fully and completely, were to give form to every feeling, expression to every thought, reality to every dream—I believe that the world would gain such a fresh impulse of joy that we would forget all the maladies of mediaevalism, and return to the Hellenic ideal. (19)

In response to this, Dorian, ever impressionable, finds that “[l]ife suddenly became fiery-coloured to him. It seemed to him that he had been walking in fire” (20). Dorian, with the most Hellenic of names, follows this advice to the letter. Yet, strangely, it is not self-discovery that Dorian finds, but self-destruction; not lifelong joy and inspiration, but an ever-increasing misery and paranoia. Harold Bloom finds a correspondence in Wilde’s

own life, reflecting that “Pater, and not Lord Alfred Douglas, was Wilde’s disaster” (3). Just as Dorian Gray “could not free himself from the influence” (105) of the mysterious “poisonous book” (104) sent to him by Lord Wotton, the young Wilde was influenced at a young age by Pater’s writings. The call to live life to the fullest extent was arguably partly responsible for Wilde’s reckless behavior, and the libel suit that ultimately caused Wilde’s own abject fall from society.

Nils Clausson, in comparing Dorian to Pater’s Marius, finds that “the Gothic plot of *Dorian Gray* is ultimately inconsistent with the Paterian plot of self-development, for the twin themes of self-development and degeneration are antithetical, if not contradictory, suggesting as they do positive and negative movements, respectively” (343). Clausson, instead, places *Dorian Gray* firmly in the genre of late-Victorian Gothic, alongside Stevenson’s *Jekyll and Hyde*, in which “degeneration from a higher to a lower state” becomes the driving theme (343). Nor is Clausson the only one to compare *Dorian Gray* to its immediate predecessor. In “The Decay of Lying,” Wilde himself makes more than a brief reference to Stevenson’s novella, having Vivian relate a story of “a friend of mine, called Mr. Hyde,” who found himself enacting the scene of the trampling over the child in Stevenson’s novella (*Impressions* 309). It is, for Wilde’s Vivian, just one example of life imitating art.

There is a limit, however, to how far I would take the comparison between Oscar the writer and Dorian the character. Oscar Wilde may have, perhaps somewhat flippantly, expressed a desire to be Dorian “in some other age,” but the author is not the creation. The difference—apart from the fact that, at least to our knowledge, Oscar Wilde never

murdered anyone—is a matter of self-awareness. While *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a novel that is nothing if not self-aware, its protagonist, the vain and impressionable Dorian, shows a distinct lack of self-awareness that may be, even more than his cruel narcissism, his tragic flaw.

II. “Behind Every Exquisite Thing...”

Just who *is* Dorian Gray, the titular character through and around whom such tragedy occurs? If his companions are to be believed, Dorian possesses a singular and magnetic personality. Before he even enters the novel, the reader is introduced to Dorian’s character through the words of his admirer, the lovesick Basil, as he tells Lord Henry Wotton that upon first laying eyes upon Dorian, “[a] curious sensation of terror came over me. I knew that I had come face to face with some one whose mere personality was so fascinating that, if I allowed it to do so, it would absorb my whole nature, my whole soul, my very art itself” (10). A short while later, Basil further admits to Henry that “[a]s long as I live, the personality of Dorian Gray will dominate me” (15). For his part, Lord Henry also becomes intrigued although, unlike Basil, Henry’s attraction is less homoerotic and more scientific. Psychology, at this time, may still be a burgeoning science, but Henry is already a skilled practitioner. Henry, we are told, “had been always enthralled by the methods of natural science, but the ordinary subject-matter of that science had seemed to him trivial and of no import. And so he had begun by vivisectioning himself, as he had ended by vivisectioning others. Human life—that appeared to him the one thing worth investigating” (51). To Henry, whose power of influence is referenced multiple times in the story, Dorian makes for a perfect subject, a specimen of study.

People are taken in by the “exquisite” figure of Dorian Gray. His youth and beauty, to say nothing of his genealogy and tragic parentage, provide a reason for his attractiveness to society. Yet, when we look beyond the gushing tributes of his admirers, Dorian’s own personality falls flat. From the beginning, Dorian appears naïve, eager to please, and more than a little impressionable. Basil speaks of the singular “personality” that drew him to Dorian, but one would not be wrong to suspect that Basil’s admiration was more physical than intellectual. The truth, if we really look at Dorian’s own words and deeds, is that Dorian himself possesses little personality of his own. He lacks self-awareness, is easily influenced and, perhaps the greatest sin of all, is actually quite boring. He is beautiful, petulant, and self-centered, but he lacks ideas of his own. In just a few minutes and a few words, Lord Henry’s influence paves the path for Dorian’s entire future. In less than a single afternoon in Basil’s studio, Dorian becomes “dimly conscious that entirely fresh influences were at work within him. Yet they seemed to him to have really come from himself” (20). Dorian does not even recognize when he is being manipulated. A few short months after their meeting, Henry reflects on his influence over Dorian, and concedes that “to a large extent the lad was his own creation. He had made him premature” (51). Lord Henry, we are told, finds “exquisite pleasure in playing on the lad’s unconscious egotism” (84). And even Dorian, in an early scene, admits to Lord Henry, “I do everything that you say” (43). It is not long before Dorian’s own words begin to echo Henry’s Wilde-like quips.

Like any good Dandy or Decadent, it is no surprise that Dorian gives in to fads and brief fascination. But there is also a sense of tragedy in his story. Orphaned at a

young age, Dorian is raised by his cold, “mean dog” of a grandfather (32). Upon hearing Dorian’s history, Henry Wotton reflects that

it had yet stirred him by its suggestion of a strange, almost modern romance. A beautiful woman risking everything for a mad passion. A few wild weeks of happiness cut short by a hideous, treacherous crime. Months of voiceless agony, and then a child born in pain. The mother snatched away by death, the boy left to solitude and the tyranny of an old and loveless man. Yes; it was an interesting background. It posed the lad, made him more perfect as it were. Behind every exquisite thing that existed, there was something tragic. (34)

Lord Wotton views Dorian’s background as a tragic romance that only heightens his interest in Dorian as a psychological study. For Wotton, it is the story and the romance that surrounds Dorian as a work of art, molded in large part by Lord Wotton himself, which is important. Basil Hallward may be the artist in the story, painting Dorian’s portrait as he, Basil, sees Dorian, but Lord Wotton views himself as sculpting a work of living art out of the flesh and blood Dorian. Lord Wotton sees himself as an early psychologist, an observer of human behavior, but also as an influencer. Dorian’s family history is romantic enough for a novel, and for Lord Wotton it is the perfect living story. Furthermore, devoid as Dorian is of a solid family foundation or any intimate familial connections, Dorian is the perfect vessel for outside influence. Dorian’s reactions toward outward expressions of emotion by others reflect his indifference to the needs of others. This indifference is the result of a lack of close relationships early in his life. We can see the repercussions of this early emotional abandonment through Dorian’s brief infatuation

with the idea of Sibyl Vane. Denied a maternal influence, Dorian has no referent for feminine love. His only love object, Sibyl Vane symbolizes to him a shifting parade of female characters; he idolizes her because to him she is not a real girl/woman. When asked by Lord Wotton, “[w]hen is she Sibyl Vane?” Dorian replies, “Never” (49).

Conversely, Dorian is denied paternal guidance. Raised by his grandfather who, “had always hated and desired to keep [Dorian] at a distance” (101), Dorian has no knowledge of the Lacanian Law of the Father. Thus it is not surprising that Dorian’s love should turn inward, toward narcissism.

“Abjection,” writes Kristeva, “is *a precondition of narcissism*” (13). Furthermore, “[n]arcissism is predicated on the existence of the *ego* but not of an *external object*” (62). If Dorian’s narcissism is based in his lack of early childhood affections (such as an attachment to a mother), it is only intensified by the adoration he receives from others. He seems naively unaware of the true nature and extent of Basil’s adoration of him, yet becomes instantly enthralled with his own portrait: “[w]hen he saw it [the portrait] he drew back, and his cheeks flushed for a moment with pleasure. A look of joy came into his eyes, as if he had recognized himself for the first time... The sense of his own beauty came on him like a revelation. He had never felt it before” (25). Basil loves Dorian but Dorian is unable to return that love. It is only through Basil’s portrait that Dorian realizes his true object of love: himself. The moment he sees it, the portrait becomes the object of his affection, the “Other” of his desire. The portrait mirrors his own image, becoming that reflection through which Dorian recognizes himself for the first time. This brings about “the narcissistic crisis” that, Kristeva writes, “provides, along with its truth, a view of the

object” (15). Lord Henry, in a perhaps unwitting display of foreshadowing, acknowledges this connection: “Why, my dear Basil, he [Dorian] is a Narcissus,” (7). Like Narcissus, Dorian’s reflection becomes the cause of his own eventual self-destruction. However, unlike Narcissus, Dorian’s portrait does not remain a mere reflection of the original; it becomes a subject, and not a mere object. Both subject and object, the portrait stands in an indefinable space. In this space, it becomes a symbol of the object.

This fracturing of personalities occurs when Dorian, influenced by Henry’s words and becoming aware of his own fleeting beauty, utters his fateful prayer:

How sad it is! I shall grow old, and horrible, and dreadful. But this picture will remain always young. It will never be older than this particular day of June... If it were only the other way! If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old! For that—for that—I would give everything! Yes, there is nothing in the whole world I would not give! I would give my soul for that! (25)

Dorian’s newfound belief, instilled in him by Lord Henry’s Mephistophelean influence, that “[y]outh is the only thing worth having” (26), causes him to act irrationally. Basil is horrified by this new behavior in his friend and love interest, and threatens to destroy the portrait that, only a short time earlier, he considered his best work. When Dorian leaps up to stop Basil, he pleads to the painter, exclaiming “[i]t would be murder!” (27). The portrait becomes increasingly personified, not a mere image but a character of its own. As Lord Henry and Dorian begin to leave for the theater, Basil becomes morose. “I shall stay with the real Dorian,” he says (28). He does not know how true his words are.

III. The Consciousness of Degradation

The first change in the portrait occurs when, rejected by the fickle and narcissistic Dorian, Sibyl Vane kills herself. Yet before Dorian even notices this change in his double, his view toward the world changes. As Dorian leaves the theater following his final encounter with Sibyl—whose name, hearkening back to the Sibyls of ancient Greece, is itself prophetic—Dorian’s rosy-colored view of the world becomes darkened:

He remembered wandering through dimly-lit streets, past gaunt black-shadowed archways and evil-looking houses. Women with hoarse voices and harsh laughter had called after him. Drunkards had reeled by cursing, and chattering to themselves like monstrous apes. He had seen grotesque children huddled upon door-steps, and heard shrieks and oaths from gloomy courts. (75)

The abject images before him are realities of London life, yet they are also reflections of the abject occurring within Dorian himself. As morning comes, however, Dorian is given a brief respite from the horrors of the night. The “beauty” of the flowers “seemed to bring him an anodyne for his pain” (75). It is in this mood that Dorian returns home and notices the portrait.

Dorian’s first action upon seeing the change in the portrait is symbolic. Noticing the “touch of cruelty in the mouth” of the portrait, Dorian picks up “an oval glass framed in ivory Cupids, one of Lord Henry’s many presents to him” and “glance[s] hurriedly into its polished depths” (77). He looks from the mirrored image in the glass to the portrait and realizes there is indeed a difference, however slight, in both reflections. In this scene Dorian, the flesh and blood version, is staring into two identical yet altered reflections.

The mirror serves as a go-between for both flesh Dorian and portrait Dorian. It is through the mirror that Dorian begins to awake to the truth of the portrait as he remembers that “[h]e had uttered a mad wish that he himself might remain young and the portrait grow old; that his own beauty might be untarnished, and the face on the canvas bear the burden of his passions and his sins” (77). The portrait offers Dorian a brief chance at redemption as Dorian faces, literally, the consequence of his own crimes: “It [the portrait] had taught him to love his own beauty. Would it teach him to loathe his own soul” (78)? Dorian struggles with whether this change is reality or illusion. As Dorian and the portrait stare at each other, Dorian feels “[a] sense of infinite pity, not for himself, but for the painted image of himself,” and he realizes that “[t]he picture, changed or unchanged, would be to him the visible emblem of conscience” (78).

Dorian struggles with the cause of this change, and what this change means. He wonders: “[w]as there some subtle affinity between the chemical atoms, that shaped themselves into form and colour on the canvas, and the soul that was within him? Could it be that what the soul thought, they realized?...Or was there some other, more terrible reason?” (81). What exactly the connection is between Dorian and the portrait is never truly explained, and does not really matter. What matters is that “[i]t had made him conscious how unjust, how cruel, he had been to Sibyl Vane” (81). He briefly comes to believe that there is some good to come out of the changing of the portrait, resolving that the portrait that Basil Hallward had painted of him would be a guide to him through life, would be to him what holiness is to some, and conscience to others, and the fear of God to us all. There were opiates for remorse, drugs that could lull

the moral sense to sleep. But here was a visible symbol of the degradation of sin.

Here was an ever-present sign of the ruin men brought upon their souls. (81)

Dorian attempts to rectify this wrong, believing that “[t]here is a luxury in self-reproach” (81). His attempt is not born of selflessness, or true pity for others, much less an awakening love for Sibyl Vane. With regards to Sibyl, “[i]t was the girl’s fault, not his” and “he had suffered also... She had marred him for a moment, if he had wounded her for an age” (77). It is, instead, Dorian’s portrait that Dorian worries about and feels pity for. The portrait, his double, is all that truly matters to the narcissistic Dorian, who confesses, “I can’t bear the idea of my soul being hideous” (82). By his soul, Dorian means his portrait, and if the portrait is hideous then so, in a way, is Dorian. As for Sibyl, she is swiftly brushed aside as “one of the great romantic tragedies of the age” (91) who, in Dorian’s words, “had no right to kill herself” (84).

Dorian’s main concern is to safeguard the portrait, which has become “the mask of his shame” (80). Significantly, his chosen hiding place is the room once built for Dorian to use “as a play-room when he was a child, and then as a study when he grew somewhat older” (101). This room saw the development of Dorian; now it would see his “degeneration.” Although Dorian is the only person with access to this room, he chooses to cover the portrait with “a large purple satin coverlet heavily embroidered with gold” that “his grandfather had found in a convent near Bologna” (98). Dorian recognizes something ironic in the shroud:

It had perhaps served often as a pall for the dead. Now it was to hide something that had a corruption of its own, worse than the corruption of death itself—

something that would breed horrors and yet would never die. What the worm was to the corpse, his sins would be to the painted image on the canvas. They would mar its beauty, and eat away its grace. They would defile it, and make it shameful. And yet the thing would still live on. It would always be alive. (99)

The fact that the portrait is wrapped in a death shroud becomes a symbol of the death of Dorian's own soul; a fact that Dorian, in a rare instance of awareness, realizes. Initially, at least, this does not matter, as Judith Halberstam notes that "while his painting takes on the appearance of depth, Dorian remains a perfect surface, a canvas stretched across a soul" (54), and furthermore, "for Dorian, and one presumes for Wilde, the surface is all that identity consists of" (63).

Wilde's novel travels through many years in just a few hundred pages—less, in the original Lippencott's version. His chronology is confused and Wilde is careless with specifics. As Dorian becomes increasingly more degenerate, and the portrait increasingly reflects this degeneracy, Dorian's attitude toward the portrait begins to change. Initially, Dorian is delighted in viewing the change. The reader is informed that

often, on returning home from one of those mysterious and prolonged absences that gave rise to such strange conjecture among those who were his friends, or thought they were so, he himself would creep upstairs to the locked room, open the door with the key that never left him now, and stand, with a mirror, in front of the portrait that Basil Hallward had painted of him, looking now at the evil and aging face on the canvas, and now at the fair young face that laughed back at him from the polished glass. The very sharpness of the contrast used to quicken his

sense of pleasure. He grew more and more enamoured of his own beauty, more and more interested in the corruption of his own soul. He would examine with minute care, and sometimes with a monstrous and terrible delight, the hideous lines that seared the wrinkling forehead or crawled around the heavy sensual mouth, wondering sometimes which were the more horrible, the signs of sin or the signs of age. He would place his white hands beside the coarse bloated hands of the picture, and smile. He mocked the misshapen body and the flailing limbs. (106)

As for Dorian himself—the flesh and blood version—he “never knew . . . that somewhat grotesque dread of mirrors, and polished metal surfaces, and still water” (105). His visage never changes, although his reputation does. For a time—even, perhaps, until his death—Dorian’s flawless appearance gives pause to those who whisper behind his back and sometimes shun him. “Even those,” the reader is told, “who had heard the most evil things against him, and from time to time strange rumours about his mode of life crept through London and became the chatter of the clubs, could not believe anything to his dishonour when they saw him . . . They wondered how one so charming and graceful as he was could have escaped the stain of an age that was at once sordid and sensual” (106).

As noted above, the true extent of Dorian’s crimes is never drawn out. What is known among polite society is that many whom Dorian befriends fall into ruin. There is a possible element of homosexuality that accompanies many of Dorian’s sins. The reader now knows that Wilde himself, along with Wilde’s homosexual companions, were forced to hide their sexual proclivities from society. It would not be a surprise that Wilde would

include homosexual practices as one of Dorian's social "sins." We get a glimpse of a possible homosexuality in one scene where Basil confronts Dorian on the night of his murder. Basil asks:

Why is your friendship so fatal to young men? There was that retched boy in the Guards who committed suicide. You were his great friend. There was Sir Henry Ashton, who had to leave England, with a tarnished name. You and he were inseparable. What about Adrian Singleton, and his dreadful end? What about Lord Kent's son, and his career? I met his father yesterday in St. James's Street. He seemed broken with shame and sorrow. What about the young Duke of Perth? What sort of life has he got now? What gentleman would associate with him?

Women are also ruined by association with Wilde, such as the wife of Lord Gloucester, who "implicated" Dorian "in the most terrible confession [Basil] ever read" (128). There is also the issue of Alan Campell, whose connection to Dorian is also unclear, but who fears the secret Dorian holds against him so much that he is willing to become an accomplice in erasing the evidence of Basil's murder. Although Dorian remains a member of polite society—Wotton, for one, never loses his friendship—it is clear that Dorian is instrumental in bringing to ruin the lives of many who surround him.

The only time the reader is taken, firsthand, into Dorian's degeneracy, is during a visit to the opium dens along the docks. It is here the reader sees the sordidness, not merely of Dorian's own soul, but of the London that polite English society would rather have forgotten—and often did. It is in these dens, in the hidden part of London, where the abject castoffs—both of England and England's far reaching empire—sought their

pleasures, or relief from their pains. It is here the reader can get a sense of gnawing despair:

Dorian winced, and looked round at the grotesque things that lay in such fantastic postures on the ragged mattresses. The twisted limbs, the gaping mouths, the staring lusterless eyes, fascinated him. He knew in what strange heavens they were suffering, and what dull hells were teaching them the secret of some new joy. They were better off than he was. He was prisoned in thought. Memory, like a horrible malady, was eating his soul away. From time to time he seemed to see the eyes of Basil Hallward looking at him. Yet he felt he could not stay...He wanted to be where no one would know who he was. He wanted to escape from himself. (156)

Pleasure and pain are married in Dorian's mind by this point. While Dorian feels "the terrible pleasure of a double life" (146), he also begins to be aware of a sense of guilt. Excess, and the New Hedonism, which had been the cause of Dorian's initial loss of innocence, now becomes as much a burden as it is a pleasure.

The portrait, which had once so enthralled Dorian, begins to become a burden as well. While Dorian is out living his life of sin and the senses, the portrait hangs in secret, changing and aging with sin and time. Dorian grows increasingly paranoid that the portrait may be discovered; so paranoid that "[h]e hated to be separated from the picture that was such a part of his life, and was also afraid that during his absence some one might gain access to the room, in spite of the elaborate bars that he had caused to be placed upon the door" (118). His paranoia is so extreme that, while entertaining guests at

his country estate, sometimes “he would suddenly leave his guests and rush back to town to see that the door had not been tampered with, and that the picture was still there” (118). Shortly before killing him, Dorian confesses to Basil of the portrait that “[i]t has destroyed me” (131). He still appears at dinner parties, pleasing polite society, yet he no longer takes pleasure in life. He becomes “sick with a wild terror of dying, and yet indifferent to life itself” (165). When confronted by Lord Henry following the accidental shooting of James Vane, Dorian tells the former: “My own personality has become a burden to me. I want to escape, to go away, to forget” (169). Memory, like a persistent mistress, hangs on.

Much of the language in *Dorian Gray* takes on the tone of confession and repentance. It was a theme common to Wilde and his decadent peers. An attraction to Catholicism was a feature of the life and works of many *fin de siècle* writers of Protestant England and Wilde himself converted to Catholicism shortly before dying in Paris, the birthplace of the Decadent movement. While it appears throughout the novel, in no place is it more apparent than at the final scene. Thinking of the way his life had turned out, Dorian’s thoughts turn to penance and punishment. It is not the first time Dorian feels these sentiments, but it will be the final time. Thinking on his youth—his true youth, and not the false youth the portrait had given him—Dorian “knew that he had tarnished himself, filled his mind with corruption and given horror to his fancy; that he had been an evil influence to others, and had experienced a terrible joy in being so” (181). Dorian regrets having, in his youth, made the fateful prayer that ensured the portrait, and not Dorian, would bear all the marks of age and sin. “Better for him that each sin of his life

had brought its sure, swift penalty along with it. There was purification in punishment. Not 'Forgive us our sins' but 'Smite us for our iniquities' should be the prayer of man to a most just God'" (181). Dorian is aware that his secret double life, symbolized by the contrast between his physical appearance and the appearance of the portrait, cannot be reconciled. On the surface, Dorian appears to others to reflect a life lived morally and without excess. It is only the portrait that remains the visual reminder of Dorian's secret iniquities. If the portrait, through physical alteration and decay, reflects the true soul of Dorian Gray, then the painted Dorian must be the one who takes the punishment.

Dorian's first action, the rage of a narcissist in revolt, is to smash the same Cupid-rimmed mirror that had first reflected the difference between the flesh and blood Dorian and the painted, corrupted Dorian. Smashing the mirror is a metaphor for the smashing of Dorian's illusions, and of a reflection Dorian no longer appreciated. Hoping that he had begun to redeem himself—and that his redemption would begin to show in the portrait, Dorian goes to look at his other self. What Dorian finds, to his dismay, is not a sign of spiritual cleansing but "the curved wrinkle of the hypocrite" in the portrait's mouth. Contrary to reflecting a better self, the picture appears worse than ever. "Confess?" Dorian wonders. "Did it mean that he was to confess" (182)? He feels, perhaps that "it was his duty to confess, to suffer public shame, and to make public atonement." That, however, is not something Dorian is willing to do: "Was he really to confess? Never" (183). Surface and image are everything. If there is a sacrifice, it had to be the other Dorian—the portrait—that was sacrificed.

Dorian stabs the painting with the same knife with which he had stabbed Basil Hallward. A double murder was to be had at that blade: “As it [the knife] had killed the painter, so it would kill the painter’s work, and all that meant. It would kill the past, and when that was dead he would be free” (183). The painting “had been like conscience to him” and “he would destroy it” (183). Dorian knows how closely the painting is tied to his own soul, that it is an embodied manifestation of his soul. Yet, in his narcissism and desire to truly have a clean slate, he does not realize that in killing the painting—the “real Dorian”—he is killing himself. It is a suicide that is not a suicide. With all his talk of God and repentance, Dorian does not truly desire repentance, just the idea of it. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* may be “about” a lot of things: art, our relation to art, the society of Oscar Wilde and his contemporaries, and decadence itself. It is also a reminder that one may never truly escape one’s own sins, even if an image temporarily carries some of the burden.

IV. Culture and Corruption

Dorian Gray represents many things, but above all he is representative of an individual caught between two worlds. He is wealthy and beautiful, and admired by high society for these traits. Yet he is corrupt: a man who, at a whim, will leave his wealth and luxury to slink toward the darkest corners of London. Like Hyde, and like many of his fellow aristocrats of the day, Dorian Gray has two faces. To his peers, he is admirable for possessing the traits most would envy. Though he is suspect, avoided and rejected by many who hear rumor of his exploits, Dorian’s wealth and beauty protect him from the worst punishments. As those around him fall into disgrace, Dorian remains an image of

beauty, a “beautiful caged thing” (139), whose worries are only the result of his own darker urgings. Dorian Gray was not born for an abject existence; he cultivated it as an art form.

“Death and vulgarity,” says Lord Henry, “are the only two facts in the nineteenth century that one cannot explain away” (175). As the nineteenth century drew to a close, so too, in many ways, did the earlier hopes of an England at the height of Empire. Victorian England pretended to embody morality and respectability, yet held within its borders an underbelly of poverty, addiction, and prostitution. The wealthy, like Lady Agatha in *Dorian Gray*, undertook charitable missions to help feed and clothe the less fortunate of English subjects. Then they took themselves back to their drawing rooms to congratulate themselves for their good deeds. It was hypocrisies such as these that made Oscar Wilde an opponent of charity. In “The Soul of Man Under Socialism,” Wilde wrote: “Accordingly, with admirable, though misdirected intentions, they [the majority of people] very seriously and very sentimentally set themselves to the task of remedying the evils that they see. But their remedies do not cure the disease: they merely prolong it. Indeed, their remedies are part of the disease” (1). Wilde was a great critic of the society that first lauded, then prosecuted, and ultimately punished him. In *Dorian Gray*, Wilde uses a familiar Gothic form to further press this criticism. In constructing the character of Dorian Gray, a man who, like the charitable figures who publicly perform good works while remaining guilty of upholding a social structure that ultimately is responsible for human suffering and abjection, Wilde is pointing out the divisions and contradictions exemplified by an imperfect society.

In commenting on the novel as an antidote to familiar Victorian literature, Sheldon W. Liebman comments that

[i]n the typical Victorian novel, cosmic justice is confirmed (the good are rewarded, though chastened, and the evil are punished), moral certainty is attainable...personal responsibility is assumed, and self-unification is possible. In the universe occupied by Dorian Gray, however, these verities do not hold. The novel culminates in a suicide rather than a marriage...And the central character disintegrates instead of acquiring a credible, coping self. In this respect, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* signals the end of a literary era and looks forward to those other turn-of-the-century and pre-World War I novels of cosmic despair and moral paralysis. (313)

Donald R. Dickson holds a similar view of the novel and the era, noting both that “[t]he failure of Dorian...to achieve the aesthetic ideals of Wilde’s generation clearly sounds the death knell of the Aesthetic Movement even as it heralds the ennui of the *fin de siècle*” (5), and “Dorian Gray is not simply the story of one man’s attempt at self-discovery. Sibyl, Dorian, Basil, and Lord Henry together seem to represent the failure of an entire generation to achieve its ideals” (13). If this seems too pessimistic, the reader should remember that *Dorian Gray* never truly has a resolution. Perhaps Dorian’s death is a redemption of sorts; perhaps not. He is certainly not a likeable enough, or even drawn-out enough, character to generate any sort of pathos. His story ends with a suicide and a discovery; that is all. The only survivor in the novel, apart from the unrelenting Lord Henry, is the portrait itself, hanging handsomely just the way Basil had painted it

years before. It is the surface that matters, after all, and Dorian's youthful image is the one thing that lives on.

“THE TRAGEDY OF UNFULFILLED AIMS”: THOMAS HARDY’S *JUDE THE
OBSCURE*

I. A “distinctly ‘modern’ work”

Written at the tail end of the nineteenth century, Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure* is the last and, according to many of its critics, the darkest of his novels. According to David Lodge, “*Jude the Obscure* is, by general agreement, Thomas Hardy’s bleakest, most pessimistic, most depressing novel” (195). Laura Green is in agreement, calling Jude “the most radical as well as the most pessimistic of Hardy’s novels” (526). Taking into context the general pessimism and social criticism represented in Hardy’s oeuvre, modern critical response to Hardy’s final novel is telling. The novel itself was greeted by a perplexed and often combative audience of contemporary critics. Like Wilde not long before him, Hardy’s novel was considered obscene by many, who found its depictions of marriage and (female) sexuality, as well as its blatant attacks on traditional institutions, unforgivable. A. Alvarez has observed that *Jude* is Hardy’s

finest novel...yet its publication in 1895 provoked an outcry as noisy as that which recently greeted *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. The press attacked in a pack, lady reviewers became hysterical, abusive letters poured in, and a bishop solemnly burnt the book... The real blow to the eminently shockable Victorian public was the fact that Hardy treated the sexual undertheme of his book more or less frankly: less frankly, he complained, than he had wished, but more frankly than was normal or acceptable. (113)

Even Hardy's wife, a devoutly religious woman, was appalled by Hardy's work.

Following its publication and the ensuing attacks by both critics and moralists alike, an embittered Hardy gave up novel writing altogether and spent the remaining decades of his life focused on poetry, the latter also being considered a less "feminine" form of self-expression than prose (Green 525).

Outrage is not uncommon in our own, comparably more secular age. However, the treatment *Jude* received, along with the works of contemporaries of Hardy like Wilde and Lawrence, may seem extreme, even quaint. While sex provides a major backdrop to the novel, the actual act is merely hinted at, a desire that is fully present yet graphically absent in the text itself. The murder-suicide of Little Father Time and Jude and Sue's younger children is horrifying, yet suicide itself was nothing new for English literature. Curiously, though the murder-suicide scene is perhaps the most shocking part of the novel, it produced much less outrage than the arguably more mundane aspects of the novel: its discussion of marriage, the church, and other institutions that Victorian society ostensibly held dear, yet which faced many upheavals throughout the nineteenth century, particularly as the twentieth century drew nearer.

Jude the Obscure is an undeniably Victorian novel in structure and language, yet as a work of historical significance it appears to straddle two literary eras—that of the Victorian and that of the modernist. In scope, it positions itself in the nineteenth century, while looking forward to the twentieth. Hardy's biographer Irving Howe asserted that

Jude the Obscure is Hardy's most distinctly 'modern' work, for it rests upon a cluster of assumptions central to modernist literature: that in our time men

wishing to be more than dumb clods must live in permanent doubt and intellectual crisis; that for such men, to whom traditional beliefs are no longer available, life has become inherently problematic; that in the course of their years they must face even more than the usual allotment of loneliness and anguish; that in their cerebral overdevelopment they run the danger of losing those primary appetites for life which keep the human race going; and that courage, if it is to be found at all, consists in a readiness to accept pain while refusing the comforts of certainty.

(134)

Howe has identified the existential crises plaguing many men of Hardy's generation—a generation that includes Stevenson and Wilde—which resulted in the sense of abjection displayed by characters like Jude. Furthermore, Howe continues, “Hardy's last novel was not quite the outcry of a lonely and embittered iconoclast that it has sometimes been said to be. *Jude* displeased official opinion, both literary and moral; it outraged the pieties of middle-class England to an extent few of Hardy's contemporaries were inclined to risk; but it also reflected the sentiments of advanced intellectual circles in the 1890s” (134). Perhaps the extreme response to *Jude* had less to do with the novel itself than with a reaction to changes occurring in society during the later years of the Victorian era—an era that, from its inception, saw frequent fluctuations in its social order, whether those changes were economic, scientific, or religious. Any major changes in any given society produce conservative backlash and a desire to regress to a more comfortable familiarity, whether or not the perceived stability of familiarity is based in reality. Fear of change is endemic, and any age becomes an “age of anxiety” when divisions arise.

The response to Hardy's last novel is also, it must be noted, an example of Victorian hypocrisy. As has been noted elsewhere, the Victorians (in general) perceived themselves, at least outwardly, to be moral and upstanding. However, in most cases the reality was much different. While sexual modesty was lauded, prostitution thrived, and while national prosperity seemed assured for many, millions more lived in squalor. It was a paradox that, while not entirely ignored by the Victorian public, was seen as an ill to be given public lip service while the underlying problems were never really resolved. What Hardy was doing in *Jude* was, in one sense, merely laying on the page what existed in society itself. The central characters of Jude and Sue may be figurative and literal outsiders in the novel—shut out from institutions, shunned for their unconventional lifestyle, and feeling internally in opposition to, even sometimes in revolt against, the world immediately surrounding them—yet I would argue that they are more representative than atypical of the age they inhabited. In many cases, it is a war waged against themselves, and their own thwarted ambitions, that cause Jude and Sue such distress, more than the social order that appears to reject them. In truth, it is Sue, and eventually Jude who pull away from the outside world, as much as the outside world pulls away from them. In order to justify their choices and their actions, Jude and Sue are drawn further towards each other, selfishly retreating to their own inner circle as a bulwark against forces that are sometimes, though not always, out of their control. If they are symbols of abjection, it is not merely that abjection has been thrust upon them but that they enact and perform an abject existence as the only available option in a world they cannot fully comprehend, with values they do not share.

That is not to say that Jude and Sue are not sympathetic characters. They are entirely sympathetic, and their tragic destinies are no less heartbreaking for their own culpability. On the contrary, I would argue that their culpability makes them even more sympathetic. Victorian literature is filled with despairing characters who face tragic fates. Sentimentality was a common feature of nineteenth century British literature—who can forget Little Nell from Dickens’ *The Old Curiosity Shop*—but much of the affect in sentimental literature relied on the power of forces outside the characters’ control. Such characters are often unwilling victims rather than consciously acting participants. Sue and Jude, despite their relatively humble status, do not fall into that category. Whether or not they realize it—and in many cases they do seem willfully unaware—the lives they lead are mostly, of their own doings and decisions. As a writer, Hardy was no stranger to affect or sentimentality. But *Jude* is a decidedly unsentimental novel. One may weep with Sue over the unfortunate deaths of the three young children. Yet the reader must remember that it was Little Father Time whose hands caused the deaths of the two younger ones, and then himself. Sue also has some blame for the incident, as it is her fatalist talk to Little Father Time that unwittingly and ultimately drives him to perform that dreadful act.

This chapter proposes that while Jude and Sue—and by extension Little Father Time—are indeed victims of circumstances outside their control, they are largely to blame for their own ultimate downfalls, whether that fate means death, as with Jude, or self-imprisonment in an unwanted marriage, as Sue ultimately consigns herself to. Perhaps it is true that, as Aunt Fawley warns Jude, fate itself has caused marriage to end

in such misery for the Fawleys (13). But such prophecies are often self-fulfilling, and whatever abjection Jude and Sue experience—and their abjection arises in many forms—they are ultimately the abject creators of their own misery. As self-destructive as they are, together and apart, and as abject as they become, their own inner turmoil is their greatest foe. Of course, the world is not kind to the pair. But neither are they kind to themselves, or each other for that matter. As sincere as is their affection, so is their ultimate separation and descent into abjection inevitable.

II. “One Person Split in Two”

Although this study is primarily rooted in a theory of abjection, it has examined the appearance of the double in the works being analyzed. This is not an accident, since, as abjection is rooted in the self, the appearance of abjection is always caused by a splitting of the self. In *Jude*, the appearance of the double is not as immediately apparent as it is in the works of Stevenson or Wilde, yet when one takes a close look, it is just as present. Sue and Jude, although cousins, begin by leading very different lives, with different views that are sometimes diametrically opposed: Sue’s heathenism versus Jude’s Christianity, Jude’s sensuality versus Sue’s apparent asexuality, or Sue’s flightiness versus Jude’s constancy. Yet once they come together, they cannot seem to stay apart for long. They pathologically rely on each other, enmeshed in a relationship that would in later decades likely be called codependent. As Phillotson observes, when discussing with Gillingham the end of his marriage: “I have been struck with these two facts; the extraordinary sympathy, or similarity, between the pair. . . They seem to be one person split in two” (183)!

Before they even meet, Jude, in a characteristic fashion, creates an ideal of Sue that is not reflective of her true person. Initially unwilling to betray his aunt's warning against pursuing an acquaintance with his cousin, Jude, somewhat creepily "kept watch over [Sue], and liked to feel she was there. The consciousness of her living presence stimulated him. But she remained more or less an ideal character, about whose form he began to weave curious and fantastic day-dreams" (73). Jude's feelings toward Sue, as a married adult, are not at all unlike his childhood fantasies of Christminster. Such wishful fantasy-making remains a central part of Jude's personality until near the end of the novel, when disillusionment finally, fatally sets in. His perception of the cousin he does not yet know is somewhat in opposition to the real Sue. Jude, spying on Sue working in the "sweet, saintly, Christian business" of her employment (72), or attending church (74), thinks of Sue as "a kindly star, an elevating power, a companion in Anglican worship, a tender friend" (74). Sue, however, possesses a more secular worldview, at one point purchasing two statuettes, of Venus and Apollo, from a street vendor and "enter[ing] with her heathen load into the most Christian city in the country" (77). Jude, later hearing that Sue's statuettes had been broken by Miss Fontover, assumes, quite incorrectly, that the statuary was "[t]oo Catholic-Apostolic for [Miss Fontover]...No doubt she called them Popish images," to which Sue ambiguously replies, "[i]t was for quite some other reason that she didn't like my patron-saints" (84). Jude is eventually distressed to discover that Sue does not share his religious feeling, twice comparing her to Voltaire (122, 133). When Sue recounts once "cutting up all the Epistles and Gospels into separate *brochures*, and re-arranging them in chronological order" (121), Jude experiences "a sense of

sacrilege” (122). Sue’s reply to Jude is, “you take so much tradition on trust that I don’t know what to say” (123).

Despite their intellectual differences, sexual incompatibility, and Jude’s legal attachment to Arabella, Jude remains almost obsessively devoted to Sue. Although Sue eventually senses Jude’s true feelings, she responds platonically to his devotion. Desiring as she does to be considered intellectually as an equal to men, she resents their sexual attraction toward her. While Sue’s interests in men are cerebral, they cannot help but be drawn to her physically. Sue’s response to unwanted sexual attraction is to initially reject the sexual act altogether, an act of abjection that is intended to sustain the intellectual purity of the relationship. Sue’s desire for physical autonomy also reflects the desired goals of the New Woman ideal emerging around the same time. However, while New Woman feminism often embraced sexual freedom, Sue’s response is to reject physical intimacy. Later in the novel, when Sue thoroughly castigates herself for the deaths of the children, it is with language that evokes sin (209), defilement (320), and fleshly mortification (272). Ironically, while Jude professes a Christian devotion, though it is “rather on an intellectual track than a theological” (72), he is the one who is still married and who occasionally indulges in the generally un-Christian practices of extramarital sex and drinking to intoxication. Jude pines after Sue while still married to Arabella; resents her marriage to Phillotson, though he is still married to Arabella; and struggles constantly against his own weaknesses to women and drink. It is Sue who, although throughout most of the novel feels antipathy toward religion, remains willingly, even stubbornly, chaste.

Such chastity on her part is frustrating to the men who find themselves drawn to her though they, curiously, patiently endure it.

Sue's aversion toward sex has not been ignored by *Jude's* critics. Immediately following its publication, reviewers arguably focused as much on the "representation of Sue's 'pathological' sexuality" (Green 539) as they did Jude's educational aspirations.

Regarding this curious focus of attention, Laura Green argues that

reviewers could overlook the fact that Sue's story was one of intellectual ambition, and Jude's one of sexual weakness, partly because tradition assigns the woman the sexual, and the man the intellectual, role in narratives of the Fall. In fact, *Jude the Obscure* challenges precisely such distinctions between character as socially contingent and character as inherently constituted and, most fundamentally, between masculine and feminine fulfillment. If the novel is explicitly concerned with Jude's intellectual aspirations and their failure, it is equally explicitly concerned with Sue's intellect, while, despite the fascination exerted by Sue's sexual peculiarities, it is Jude whose sexual appetite precipitates the tragic action. (537)

Green connects this contemporary preoccupation concerning Sue's sexuality (or lack thereof) with resistance against the New Woman literature circulating during the same time as *Jude*, pointing out that "[m]any critics who disparaged *Jude* did so by associating it with 'New Woman' narratives" though Hardy himself "hesitantly" rejected this claim (539). However, Hardy, in an 1895 letter to Sir Edmund Gosse, insists that

there is nothing perverted or depraved in Sue's nature. The abnormalism consists in disproportion, not in inversion, her sexual instinct being healthy as far as it goes, but unusually weak and fastidious. Her sensibilities remain painfully alert notwithstanding, as they do in nature with such women. One point illustrating this I could not dwell upon: that, though she has children, her intimacies with Jude have never been more than occasional, even when they were living together...and one of her reasons for fearing the marriage ceremony is that she fears it would be breaking faith with Jude to withhold herself at pleasure, or altogether, after it; though while uncontracted she feels at liberty to yield herself as seldom as she chooses. This has tended to keep his passion as hot at the end as at the beginning, and helps to break his heart. He has never really possessed her as freely as he desired...Sue is a type of woman which has always had an attraction for me, but the difficulty of drawing the type has kept me from attempting it till now. (349)

Hardy's suggestion that Sue possesses a normal sexuality but that she prefers to "withhold herself at pleasure" is a revealing look into the crafting of Sue's view of sex and her sexuality. That Hardy confesses to "an attraction for" women like Sue also reveals the carefulness with which he crafted her character, and the sympathy he felt for Sue. Whether or not Hardy's insistence that Sue possessed a "healthy" sexuality is supported by the text is up for debate, and ultimately depends on the individual reader. However, despite Hardy's explanations concerning his character, the text of the novel does reveal some aversion toward the sexual act on Sue's part. This sentiment is revealed when Sue first reunites with Jude after leaving Phillotson. She has consented to live with

Jude but continues to resist a physical connection. When Jude accuses her of being “incapable of real love” (192), Sue responds “in hurt tones,”

my liking for you is not as some women perhaps. But it is a delight in being with you, of a supremely delicate kind, and I don't want to go further and risk it by— an attempt to intensify it! I quite realized that, as woman with man, it was a risk to come. But, as *me* with *you*, I resolved to trust you to set my wishes above your gratification.” (192)

Sue admits to being aware of Jude's physical desire for her but she does not share that desire. However, more than merely restraining from having sex with Jude, Sue appears to resent Jude's having sex at all. When Sue discovers that Jude had had relations with Arabella at the same hotel they are staying at, Sue becomes “so mortified that [Jude] was obliged to take her into her room and close the door lest the people should hear” (194). Sue accuses Jude of being “treacherous...to have her again!” and asks him why he is so “gross” (194). Writing on the topic, T. R. Wright notes that

the more the New Woman attempts to escape the role of erotic object to which so many men reduce her, the more she succeeds only in provoking still more sexual interest, offering in addition to her other charms the challenge of a difficult conquest. As a pioneering feminist Sue Bridehead fails fully to overcome the problem of liberating herself from male expectations without repressing her own sexuality. As a late Victorian she finds herself torn between ascetic and hedonistic, Hebraic and Hellenistic, tendencies—unable to free herself, in spite of her ‘mental emancipation’, from a deeply ingrained fear of sexuality. (120)

For women, and particularly for the New Woman, sexual attractiveness has socially and historically been a defining feature of femaleness. This is true regardless of whether such an intrinsically sexual nature is desired or repelled by a particular society. For the Victorians, woman was considered at both extremes: they were either good and pure—the “Angel in the House” celebrated in an 1854 poem by Coventry Patmore—or they were villainous and man-consuming. (Bram Dijkstra does a decent job of tracing these competing ideals in *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin de siècle Culture*.) Being reduced to either extreme left women like Sue little room to fully develop into complex, self-actualized humans. Hardy’s characterization of Sue is largely an attempt to dispel the myth of the one-dimensional female. Opinions are bound to differ, and there can be no true consensus regarding Sue’s sexual nature; she is, after all, a complex character with complex feelings who often appears unable to understand her own continually inconstant emotions. If she appears to experience abjection at the prospect of the sexual act, it is at least partly a resistance to being objectified and reduced to a sexual being. With Sue’s characterization, Hardy is rejecting the familiar Victorian image of the woman’s role as wife and mother. Sue seeks her own freedom from these gendered restrictions, and her inability to fully escape her sexual nature causes those desires to turn inward, into abjection.

Throughout her marriage to Phillotson, Sue recoils from consummating their union to a degree that would certainly seem abnormal. Rather than sleep in the same bed with her husband, Sue sleeps in a cramped and windowless closet where “spiders’ webs

hung overhead” (176). She eventually insists on separate bedrooms; late one night

Phillotson’s

preoccupation was such that, though he now slept on the other side of the house, he mechanically went to the room that he and his wife had occupied when he first became a tenant of Old Grove Place, which since his differences with Sue had been hers exclusively. He entered, and unconsciously began to undress... There was a cry from the bed, and a quick movement. Before the schoolmaster had realized where he was he perceived Sue starting up half-awake, staring wildly, and springing out upon the floor... Before he had thought that she meant to do more than get air she had mounted upon the sill and leapt out. She disappeared in the darkness, and he heard her fall below. (180)

Sue’s reluctance to have sex with Phillotson could be explained as an aversion to the man himself or the age difference between them, or her love for Jude. Yet the text does not entirely bear this out as a simple explanation. Discussing her unhappy marriage with Jude, Sue confesses that

[i]t is said that what a woman shrinks from—in the early days of her marriage—she shakes down to with comfortable indifference in half-a-dozen years. But that is much like saying that the amputation of a limb is no affliction, since a person gets comfortably accustomed to the use of a wooden leg or arm in the course of time!... But it is not as you think!—there is nothing wrong except my own wickedness, I suppose you’d call it—a repugnance on my part, for a reason I cannot disclose, and what would not be admitted as one by the world in

general... What tortures me so much is the necessity of being responsive to this man whenever he wishes, good as he is morally!—the dreadful contract to feel in a particular way in a matter whose essence is its voluntariness!... I wish he would beat me, or be faithless to me, or do some open thing that I could talk about as a justification for feeling as I do! But he does nothing, except that he has grown a little cold since he has found out how I feel. (169)

Sue's admission that she would prefer Phillotson beat her is startling and not a little masochistic. That Sue possesses masochistic tendencies is apparent elsewhere in *Jude*, and ultimately becomes her remaining method for penance by the end of the novel. That Sue believes her aversion to be "wickedness" also foreshadows her eventual self-abjection and abnegation. Following the deaths of the children, when Sue enters into a life of complete penance and returns to Phillotson, she ultimately gives herself to him, telling Mrs. Edlin, "I am going to make my conscience right on my duty to Richard—by doing a penance" (313). Sue's immediate and complete reversal of her strongly held, independent opinions will be discussed further, but for now I will add that when Mrs. Edlin tells Jude that Sue had begun submitting herself to Phillotson sexually, the widow contends that it is "as a punishment to her poor self" (317). Sue's ultimate physical submission to Phillotson does not come from a change in attitude toward sex but a desire to enact, through sex, her repulsion toward herself. Sue still experiences abjection in the sexual act and has embraced her sexual abjection as a form of masochistic atonement.

Regardless of Sue's sexuality, whether it is a general repugnance, a desire for physical autonomy of her person, or some mixture of the two, Sue possesses ideas about

gender that are non-conforming, particularly for the society she is rebelling against. At times she appears genuinely naïve concerning relations between men and women. During one conversation she tells Jude:

My life has been entirely shaped by what people call a peculiarity in me. I have no fear of men, as such, nor of their books. I have mixed with them—one or two of them particularly—almost as one of their own sex. I mean I have not felt about them as most women are taught to feel—to be on their guard against attacks on their virtue; for no average man—no man short of a sensual savage—will molest a woman by day or night, at home or abroad, unless she invites him. Until she says by a look “Come on” he is always afraid to, and if you never say it, or look it, he never comes. (118)

Sue’s belief in the culpability of women in their own sexual assault is innocent at best, dangerous at worst. Although on the one hand it suggests Sue’s belief in a woman’s control over her own sexuality, it also reveals a wishful belief in the basic goodness of mankind. She may initially have lived a life arguably more worldly than the more rurally based Jude, but up until this point she inadvertently admits to a life that is innocently cloistered. This is supported by her confessions regarding the status of her loveless marriage to Phillotson, including her statement to Jude that “before I married [Phillotson] I had never thought out fully what marriage meant, even though I knew. It was idiotic of me—there is no excuse. I was old enough, and I thought I was very experienced” (171). There are many aspects of marriage Sue could be referring to: the perceived and legal role of a Victorian woman to be submissive to her husband, the “sordid” nature of sexual

union, or the permanent status of marriage. It is likely all of these things and more Sue objects to, and for which she regrets her rather rash decision to marry Phillotson.

Sue desires, above all, a platonic relationship with men, and that is likely one of the reasons she resents their physical desire for her. She recalls to Jude that

[w]hen I was eighteen I formed a friendly intimacy with an undergraduate at Christminster... We used to go about together—on walking tours, reading tours, and things of that sort—like two men almost. He asked me to live with him, and I agreed to by letter. But when I joined him in London I found he meant a different thing from what I meant. He wanted me to be his mistress, in fact, but I wasn't in love with him... He said I was breaking his heart by holding out against him so long at such close quarters; he could never have believed it of woman. I might play that game once too often, he said... His death caused a terrible remorse in me for my cruelty... He left me a little money—because I broke his heart, I suppose.

That's how men are—so much better than women! (118)

Sue's naivety is once again at work here, but there is something else that is expressed—Sue's desire for a male companionship that is completely free of sexual desire. Richard Dellamora draws attention to Sue's relative lack of female companionship throughout the novel. According to Dellamora, "[t]he careful hedging of Sue from intimacy with other women has a valence within the male homosocial economy of the book since Hardy was aware that her wish to retain control of her own body was liable to be construed in contemporary sexology as a sign of sexual inversion" (255). It is true that Sue seeks out little female companionship, seemingly desiring connections with men that are purely

intellectual. In an act of psychological gender bending, Sue desires to be seen as “one of the men,” an intellectual equal. That the men she draws close to her—Jude, Phillotson, and the unnamed deceased undergraduate—desire her physically as well as intellectually, causes everyone involved heartache. Jude desires her mind, but also her body, and at one point we are told, “[i]f [Jude] could only get over the sense of her sex, as she seemed to be able to do so easily of his, what a comrade she could make” (123). Later in the novel, as Sue prepares to leave Jude for the last time, Jude laments that “perhaps I spoilt one of the highest and purest loves that ever existed between man and woman” (28), through the act of sex.

In many ways, Sue and Jude represent two halves of a soul/body union. They also appear to switch gender roles, at least in their traditional symbolism. Sue takes on a role as the airy symbol of cold intellect, or one who is bodiless and simply soul, while Jude—coarse, rustic, highly sexed—is the body and the earth. In many descriptions, Hardy draws an image of Sue that seems at times almost disembodied. In one image, we are told, “she hardly touched the ground” (231). Jude calls her “the most ethereal, least sensual woman I ever knew to exist without human sexlessness” (272), and, a short time later, “a sort of fay, or sprite—not a woman!” (279). Compared to Arabella’s fleshy womanliness, Sue appears almost androgynous, physically a woman but rejecting all that her physical body might entail. Throughout most of the novel, Sue rejects the supposed physical limitations of being a woman. In doing so, Sue is also rejecting the commonly perceived social limitations of womanhood. Unlike Jude, Sue desires neither to be

physically man nor woman; she wishes only to be Sue, respected for her mind and not her body.

III. "Done because we are too menny"

Little Father Time, despite or, perhaps more likely because of his name, seems timeless. Born from the fleshy union of Jude and Arabella, the boy is an anomaly. A proverbial "old soul," he never seems to have been a child at all. He is representative of the new generation Irving Howe spoke about for whom "life has become inherently problematic" and who "accept pain while refusing the comforts of certainty." From our first description of Little Father Time, we are told that

[h]e was Age masquerading as Juvenility, and doing it so badly that his real self showed through crevices. A ground swell from ancient years of night seemed now and then to lift the child in this his morning-life, when his face took a back view over some great Atlantic of Time, and appeared not to care about what it saw.

(218)

Though still a small child, Little Father Time has already adopted the *fin de siècle* attitude of *ennui*. Although he appears to become almost instantly attached to Jude, and especially Sue, nothing they do for him brings him any joy. When they bring him to the local Agricultural Show in an attempt to "try every means of making him kindle and laugh like other boys" (231), Little Father Time remains unaffected. Sue is aware of his indifference, noting that "though they had taken him to everything likely to attract a young intelligence, they had utterly failed to interest" him (235). Little Father Time

knew what they [Jude and Sue] were saying and thinking. “I am very, very sorry, father and mother,” he said. “But please don’t mind!—I can’t help it. I should like the flowers very very much, if I didn’t keep on thinking they’d be all withered in a few days!” (235)

Little Father Time’s seemingly innate despair and nihilism causes him to look at flowers and see their eventual decay. Life, for him, is not about beginnings but always the eventual end.

Despite his chronological youth, Little Father Time gives the impression of an old man, one who has seen and done it all, and has no more desire for experience. A “singular child” (221), he is described as seeming “like an enslaved and dwarfed Divinity,” who speaks “impassively,” and when we see him travelling alone to meet with Jude for the first time, we are told that he “fell into a steady mechanical creep which had in it an impersonal quality—the movement of the wave, or of the breeze, or of the cloud” (220). He is not emotionless; upon meeting Sue, he asks if he can call her mother and “a yearning look came over the child and he began to cry” (220). He is a child that was never wanted, and his desperation and preternatural wisdom reflects that. He sees beyond, or seems to see beyond, the immediate world around him. Jude and Sue find him “to be in the habit of sitting silent, his quaint and weird face set, and his eyes resting on things they did not see in the substantial world” (221). He was given no name at birth, merely the nickname “Little Father Time...because I look so aged, they say” (221). Quiet, morose, he takes up so little space that “[Sue and Jude] were hardly conscious of

him” (223). Despite his relative lack of youthful enthusiasm for the world, Little Father Time is more his father than his mother, as Philip M. Weinstein notes:

[Arabella is] exactly as well adjusted to the meaningless conditions of life as Father Time is incapable of coping with them... That solemn child is the ultimate doomed Platonist in Hardy’s world. Absorbing somewhere in his consciousness the full ravage wrought by time upon value, he has frozen his perception of the world into a posture of unforgivable stasis. He lives in a perpetuated, last-judgment landscape, all things appearing to him in their form of final exhaustion. (247)

Despite his often apparent lack of emotion, Little Father Time has Jude’s sometimes crippling sensitivity. Far before his time, he seems to be aware of something—some otherworldly pain—that most people are not. He is the manifestation of a worldly abjection, who seems destined for a doomed end, before his life has even really begun. It is not just the flowers whose eventual decay prohibits Little Father Time from enjoying them; this sentiment is carried over onto everything the child encounters.

His strange outsider status allows him to fit in well with Sue and Jude, who christen him after his father, and vow to love him. Before and after the births of the younger children, the three of them form a family unit that seems at odds with the rest of the world. They appear to exist on the outskirts of society, working within it for a living, but socially separated from it. For a time, and for Little Father Time’s sake, Jude and Sue discuss getting married. While witnessing a marriage, they discuss themselves and the prospect of a legal union between them. During their conversation, “Jude said

he...thought they [Jude and Sue] were both too thin-skinned—and they ought never to have been born” (226). Jude expresses a belief that “they were unlike other people” (227), and thereby unfit for a normal, married, family life. Interestingly, Sue challenges this idea because she

still held that there was not much queer or exceptional in them: that all were so. “Everybody is getting to feel as we do. We are a little beforehand, that’s all. In fifty, a hundred, years the descendants of these two [the couple getting married] will act and feel worse than we. They will see weltering humanity still more vividly than we do now, as ‘Shapes like our own selves hideously multiplied’ [a line from Shelley] and will be afraid to reproduce them.” (227)

Sue appears to prophetically sense something despairing in the future generation that Jude is not yet willing to see. Hardy places in Sue’s words an ominous warning regarding the fate of humanity that looks forward to the pessimistic tones of the modernists. Nevertheless, despite Sue’s proclamation of generational solidarity, Jude holds tight to his outsider status, exclaiming, shortly before the deaths of the young children, “I am an outsider to the end of my days” (259)!

This sense of not belonging to a particular community causes an existential crisis and ultimately plays a large part in their downfall. J. B. Bullen remarks that

[i]n the case of Sue and Jude, existential anxieties, problems about faith, and doubt about action and moral judgement, and above all about the value and status of marriage, are expressed in debate, discussion, and argument, all of which allow no time to observe or contemplate those things lying beyond the immediate sphere

of interest. It is as if their anxieties actually generate a form of sensory deprivation, which forces them to exist in a kind of limbo, cut off and remote from external sources of pleasure and joy. (237)

The two are so wrapped up in each other that they seem to orbit each other, all but oblivious to the world around them and the communities they live in. Naturally, they feel the pangs of rejection when their unconventional way of living is questioned and they are shunned. This is particularly damaging when their means of living becomes an issue and they cannot work. But they do not desire, as others do, a solid place in their community, preferring to live as they please, regardless of convention. As it particularly affects Sue, Rosemarie Morgan writes that

[i]n *Jude*, Hardy addresses himself to the dual issue of woman's obligation to submit to 'present pernicious conventions' and the long-term psychological effects of this—the long term effects of her enforced repression, subjection and degradation...Sue's socio-political outlook, in which she is not typical of any one faction, class or category...allows Hardy to perceive her as set-apart, unique, the 'outsider' he himself can identify with. However, in so far as she is sexually repressed, psychologically conditioned a 'loser', a 'casualty' of her class and background, she is representative of her suffragist peers who, in the public sphere at least, accommodated similar frustrations and defeats and encountered comparable destructive attitudes. (114)

Despite Jude's yearning to become a part of the church intelligentsia, the two express little to no political consciousness. Although Sue rails against conventions like marriage

and the church, she does so privately, without seeming to make any moves to change things. She is intellectual but apolitical, and her self-absorbed nature causes her to view the world as callously unfair rather than malleable. When rumors regarding her relationship with Jude begin to circle at the college where she is training to become a teacher (112), Sue's reaction is to escape through a window and go to Jude, despite knowing what potential repercussions would befall her rebellion. Excusing herself to Jude, Sue protests "[t]hey locked me up for being out with you; and it seemed so unjust that I couldn't bear it" (115). Later, Sue castigates Jude for calling her "a creature of civilization," insisting rather that she is "a sort of negation of it." Jude's response is to comment that Sue doesn't "talk quite like a girl" (117). For Sue, any act of social or political disobedience begins and ends with a reaction to perceived personal unfairness. She is trapped in the limitations of her womanhood, but she, like Jude, is also trapped by her own willful self-destruction.

Self-destruction in the novel culminates in the murder-suicide of Little Father Time and Jude and Sue's two younger children. Arguably one of the most heartbreaking scenes in English literature, the murder-suicide is the catalyst that drives Sue and Jude apart: Sue to her penitential remarriage to Phillotson, and Jude to his death. Naturally, this is a novel, and Hardy has crafted his characters to do as he wills them to satisfy his meaning and narrative, but the reader can still ask whether the incident would have been preventable or not. Little Father Time, with his fatalistic personality and outlook, seems to have always been doomed for a tragic end. But his conversation with Sue the night before the hangings also lays some blame with Sue. In a seemingly uncharacteristic

tantrum, Little Father Time is panicked by the family's unfortunate situation and "a brooding undemonstrative horror seemed to have seized him" (263). A mentally healthy mother would have, we would hope, put aside her own turmoil and helped comfort a frightened child, but Sue gives in to her negativity, telling Little Father Time that there is nothing the latter can do, and that "[a]ll is trouble, adversity and suffering" (263)! When Little Father Time asks, somewhat rhetorically, whether "[i]t would be better to be out o' the world than in it, wouldn't it?" Sue only replies, "[i]t would almost, dear" (263). Upon hearing that there would soon be another child in the family, Little Father Time "jump[s] up wildly" and scolds Sue, telling her "I won't forgive you, ever, ever" (264)! This is extreme behavior for a relatively undemonstrative child, yet Sue is still too wrapped up in her own worry to soothe him.

When the children are found hanging the following morning, Sue is understandably inconsolable. Little Father Time's suicide note: "Done because we are too menny" (266) causes her to realize her conversation with the boy the night before had ultimately driven him to the act. The shock and grief then causes her to lose the fourth child, who is stillborn. While Sue is lost in her grief and self-reproach, Jude assures her that

[i]t was in his [Little Father Time's] nature to do it. The doctor says there are such boys springing up amongst us—boys of a sort unknown in the last generation—the outcome of new views of life. They seem to see all its terrors before they are old enough to have staying power to resist them. He says it is the beginning of the coming universal wish not to live. (266)

This is an eerie echo of Sue's earlier statement about coming generations "feel[ing] worse than we," as well as Hardy's near-prophetic foresight into the nihilism of some of the future modernist generation. As for Jude and Sue, this single incident destroys them. Jude still desires a union, and a life with Sue, which he will do until the end of his life, but Sue can only exclaim that "our perfect union—our two-in-oneness—is now stained with blood" (267)!

This is the point where, for all intents and purposes, Jude and Sue switch places. It is not something that is lost on Jude, as we are told that

[o]ne thing troubled him more than any other; that Sue and himself had mentally travelled in opposite directions since the tragedy: events which had enlarged his own views of life, laws, customs, and dogmas, had not operated in the same manner on Sue's. She was no longer the same as in the independent days, when her intellect played like lambent lightning over conventions and formalities which he at that time respected, though he did not now. (272)

Jude loses the faith he had clung to all his adult life, while Sue renounces herself and turns to the church, and self-mortification, for a lifetime of penance. This is in contrast to everything we have learned about Sue throughout the novel, including her beliefs, her skepticism, and her sacrilege.

The reader should not mistake Sue's sudden change in purpose and direction as selfless. In fact, her self-denying plunge toward penance remains a self-absorbed impulse that has more than a hint of willful masochism in it. "Our life," she tells Jude, "has been a vain attempt at self-delight. But self-abnegation is the higher road. We should mortify the

flesh—the terrible flesh” (272), and, “I well deserved the scourging I have got! I wish something would take the evil right out of me, and all my monstrous errors, and all my sinful ways” (272)! A few lines later, she continues, “[s]elf-renunciation—that’s everything! I cannot humiliate myself too much. I should like to prick myself all over with pins and bleed out the badness that’s in me” (273)! Sue’s intense grief, and her extreme reaction to it, is entirely understandable. But her willing dive into self-abjection—and her graphic, detailed description of what it should entail, are in character with her histrionic nature. As for the children, according to Sue it is almost as if they had no purpose of their own but “it is right that they should be [dead]! I am glad—almost. They were sin-begotten. They were sacrificed to teach me how to live!—their death was the first stage of my purification” (288). The idea that the children, both Sue’s and not-Sue’s, should have been born merely to be sacrificed to ultimately give purpose to Sue’s life reveals Sue’s borderline narcissism.

As for Jude, it is not just the loss of the children, but the loss of Sue as well, that causes his will to live slip, his health to fade, and sends him to the grave. To Arabella, he says of Sue that “[t]o save her own soul she lets mine go damn” (297)! Those who are familiar with Hardy’s other works would not be surprised to find such tragedy befalling his characters. But with *Jude* it is an ending that seems almost not so much sad as unfulfilling. And that is perhaps the point. As David Lodge points out:

There is no suggestion, in the novel, that the protagonists could have achieved happy and fulfilled lives. Their ideals and aspirations prove to be vain, impracticable illusions, and when they try alternative courses of action these too

prove to be disappointing or worse. Jude and Sue are trapped in a maze of unhappiness, from which there is no escape—except death. (194)

Jude, Sue, and even Little Father Time, are destined to find themselves in a cycle of despair. But, although the hardships they endure are real, their dissatisfaction with what life has offered them at this historical moment and with their constrained social status is the ultimate cause for their abjection, and that dissatisfaction comes from within their own personalities. Hardy himself, in his Preface to the First Edition, describes his effort as

a novel addressed by a man to men and women of full age; which attempts to deal unaffectedly with the fret and fever, derision and disaster, that may press in the wake of the strongest passion known to humanity; to tell, without a mincing of words, of a deadly war waged between flesh and spirit; and to point the tragedy of unfulfilled aims. (5)

The “shattered ideals of the two chief characters” (Hardy 6) is, more than hunger, more than even loss, what haunts *Jude the Obscure*. For these characters, life could never match up to what dreams promised. And that “modern vice of unrest” (69) that Jude feels in his soul is what causes every other struggle the characters encounter to seem like mere pantomime.

CONCLUSION

When any scholar embarks on an academic project, no matter how large or small, there is one question that one must never let stray from the mind: what is the purpose? Why study literature, or history, or art? Why spend countless hours laboring over something that, for many people, has no practical purpose? Scientists do not, for the most part, have to rationalize their research because it carries (we believe) a utilitarian purpose. It is the same for economists, mathematicians, and experts in similar fields. But for those of us in the Humanities, there is more of a need to justify our work. We must consistently ask ourselves the questions, before they are addressed to us: Why am I studying this? Why write about it? Who is my audience? And why should any of us care? For those born and raised with minds like mine, the answer has always been simple: I do it because literature has always given me pleasure, because history has always fascinated me, and because I believe that curiosity, in all its forms, should be encouraged and developed. There are many who share my belief, but not all do. Writing from my place in history—in the early decades of the twenty-first century—there is a general belief that there are much more important concerns than those laid out in the previous pages and that, in the most extreme examples, my labor does not matter at all. Yet when we focus our attention on a specific period in history, as this study has done, we find the past is not as much a static record of things that happened as it is a foundation on which we understand our own place in the world.

There are many lessons fin de siècle Europe can teach our own society in the twenty-first century. Naturally, when we study any period from history—its literature, its philosophy, its culture and values—we do so from a position of privilege because we possess an historical knowledge that the people we study did not. For the most part, late Victorian Europe carried an air of pessimism over it. Concerns over decadence, degeneration, and national (read: imperial) collapse reflect a culture of uncertainty or, worse, despair. For decadents like Wilde, *ennui* was the order of the day. But such a thorough embrace of boredom as a badge of honor also reflects a nihilism that is often not fashionable but destructive. Overlaying each of the works discussed in the previous pages is a dark pall. In *Jekyll and Hyde* it is a literal fog that was not just a feature of contemporary London (whose Victorian fog—what we would now call smog—is well documented), but a literary device used to impress the reader with a sense of foreboding. For *Dorian Gray* it surfaces in the characters themselves who, though fashionable, are largely nihilistic. And *Jude the Obscure* is not shy about wallowing in the gloom of its characters' fates.

The pall that had begun to spread over Europe in the later decades of the nineteenth century was not, we now know, a momentary cultural and political phase, but the early wakening of something much, much darker to come.

The characters studied in the previous pages are just as much products of their society as the authors who created them. When Jekyll devolves into the repulsive Hyde, his features reflect the racism that pervaded (and, unfortunately, still pervades) Stevenson's Europe. Antisemitism is also blatant in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The

Jewishness of the owner of the theater where Sibyl Vane works is emphasized multiple times in just a few pages, becoming practically the only definable feature or personality trait he possesses. His character, though small, is merely a “horrid old Jew” (47) who has little other purpose than to become a caricature. These sentiments are not limited to the works I discuss. Racism, and its cousin degeneration, are defining features of other works of the time, all of which could easily have been used in this study. H.G. Wells’ *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and Sir Conan Arthur Doyle’s extensive works involving Sherlock Holmes are just a few of many examples provided by this time period. In *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, the notion of degeneration lies at the forefront. Like the works analyzed in the current study, Wells’ short novel focuses on an issue that deeply concerned society in the 1890’s. In this case, it was animal vivisection. The human/animal hybrids encountered by Prendick in the novel are seen as abominations that eventually abandon their humanness and revert to their animal nature. *Dracula* should also be viewed as a novel reflecting the views of its time. Fear of the Other is predominant here. Dracula himself calls to mind fears of foreign invasion, since Count Dracula is an Eastern foreigner who lands in England and begins sucking the blood of England’s women, turning them to creatures like him in the process. He is also a symbol of degeneration, viewed as having child-like instincts and a criminal brain. His degenerate nature causes degeneration in the civilized men and women of England he encounters. Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* is often rightfully studied as a novel about the horrors of colonialism and the dangers of mixing cultures, in this case “civilized” versus “uncivilized.” But Kurtz’s degeneration also situates him

perfectly as a symbol of abjection caused by a decay in culture and values. The Europe Marlow returns to at the end of the novel is seemingly civilized at the surface but hides a rottenness that Marlow, through his encounters with the “Other,” can now recognize. And For Sherlock Holmes, racial stereotypes running throughout the stories reflect an unease with the “Other” that was seen as one of the dangers of colonial encounters. These are just a few literary examples. Every single one of those works, and more, could easily have fit into my thesis.

It is not just racism but politics that was beginning to form a feature of the pall I speak of as spreading over late nineteenth century Europe (though racism and politics are often intertwined). For Britain, it was Empire that was its main concern. After all, it was proudly the Empire on which “the sun never set.” The failings of imperial ambition are now, after decolonization, well acknowledged. But in much of the British imagination of the time, imperialism was seen as a civilizing mission. Kipling’s call to embrace colonialism as “The White Man’s Burden” allowed those sympathetic to imperialism—in Europe and elsewhere—to find moral as well as financial satisfaction in the pursuit of land and spread of culture. For some, the lure of “The British Empire” as an almost quasi-mystical symbol of English superiority lent a particular pathos to its eventual downfall. Acknowledging this, Brantlinger posits that “[i]mperialism itself, as an ideology or political faith, functioned as a partial substitute for declining or fallen Christianity and for declining faith in Britain’s future” (228). Devotion to such a mission and such a belief, however, was met with the increasing disruption found throughout the colonies, and within the borders of Britain proper. Brantlinger continues: “After the mid-Victorian

years the British found it increasingly difficult to think of themselves as inevitably progressive; they began worrying instead about the degeneration of their institutions, their culture, their racial 'stock'" (230). Belief in the value of colonialism, and its civilizing mission, met with uncertainty about its continuing future. Racial and cultural pride facing inevitable cultural decay is one of the driving forces behind abjection. It is during this period of increasing anxiety that the works analyzed in this project were written.

The current study focuses on a very particular time and place but, with a small amount of revision, my thesis could work for other historical eras as well. A student of twentieth century German culture will find much material for a study of abjection. After World War I and the collapse of several European heads of state, an upending in societal structure and a void in leadership allowed authoritarian powers were able to take hold. In Germany, the short lived Weimar Republic was an era of decadence and cultural disruption that is not entirely dissimilar to the decadence and disruption that we see in the late nineteenth century Britain of this current study. It is here, also, that abjection found its home. Like England of the 1890's, Germany of the 1920's was a time of transition. It was also a time that saw a flourishing in art and design that, seemingly conversely but not surprisingly, coincides with a rise in abject thought. German Expressionism, in both film and painting, reflect a society struggling with first the coming and later the repercussions of a costly and gruesome war. In both painting and cinema, figures and scenes are distorted to such an uncanny extent that the viewer may feel the disorientation, despair,

and yes, abjection, felt by a nation that had just endured one ordeal, and was about to face an even greater one.

It is also during this period that the roots of fascism gained ground, particularly in Germany, though its influence spread elsewhere. Fascism, for many, provided a comforting sense of cultural protection. At the same time, fascism reflects a culture in crisis. Healthy societies do not become fascist, only sick ones. A sick society may turn its self-abjection outward, projecting self-doubt onto a scapegoat. This results in racial persecution of nearly unimaginable scales, resulting in horrors such as the Holocaust. Fear of cultural decay causes a society to find solace in a reversion to notions of racial purity and national supremacy. Such societies not only reject but fear any symbol of supposed “degeneracy,” whether seen in literature, art, or the human “Other.” For Germany, common antisemitism like that seen in *Dorian Gray* takes on new meanings, and the supposed cause of cultural decay must be eliminated. What was once an idea becomes a reality. For Nazi Germany, so called “degenerate art” became a symbol of a society in need of fixing. Ironically, the 1937 exhibition that featured degenerate art likely served to create an interest in the very same artworks that were deemed unfit for society. Also ironically, the confiscation and sales of these artworks provided economic fuel for the Third Reich and its ensuing atrocities. While “degenerate art” proudly immerses itself in abjection, the society that rejects such displays of decadence also, perversely, dwells within abjection.

These events, though still decades away, saw their roots formed in the period focused on in this study. Perhaps, eerily, this sense of pessimism, collapse, and abjection

that pervades fin de siècle thought and literature was more prescient than we acknowledge. Society *was* collapsing during this time, and its authors saw, felt, and knew it. Their abjection, loathing, and despair are not merely literary devices but an honest documentation of something looming very largely in the fabric of their society. If we take this view of history, which I have attempted to do in this study, there is no doubt that it has lasting ramifications for our understanding of ourselves. Their experience, after all, is our inheritance. As of the time of this writing, the United States is currently experiencing its own form of cultural and political abjection. We are currently witnessing a society as culturally and politically divided as the one examined in this thesis. Much of this current feeling of abjection comes from the same insecurity felt by late Victorian Britain. The future is uncertain, and the need for a racial or political scapegoat is present. There are even accusations of degeneracy that eerily reflect those experienced in 1940's Germany. White rage, toxic masculinity, and economic fury and indignity seem to be present everywhere. In these times of abject uncertainty, we must be vigilant, and recall the warnings of history. We can find those warnings found in no better place than in literature.

On a final note, we return to Kristeva, who asks rhetorically, “[d]oes one write under any other condition than being possessed by abjection, in an indefinite catharsis” (208)? The answer may be more complex than Kristeva hints at but she does assert that “all literature is probably a version of the apocalypse that seems to me rooted, no matter what its socio-historical conditions might be, on the fragile border...where identities (subject/object, etc.) do not exist or only barely so—double, fuzzy, heterogeneous,

animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject” (207). This statement easily applies to a figure like Jekyll, whose metamorphosis into the animal-like Hyde is a reflection of an identity in crisis. Or Dorian Gray, unable to find his own identity and relentlessly trying on others, while his hidden portrait alters as the original sinks further into abjection and decadence. Or Jude Fawley and Sue Bridehead, whose differing personalities are only gendered manifestations of a single being in crisis, and who ultimately change identities as they face their own personal apocalypse. In every one of these cases, abjection is the vehicle that drives the characters’ destruction. It is also, however, the catalyst for transformation in whatever form it takes.

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