

The Interior Other: Gender and Monstrosity in Victorian Gothic Novels

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ABSTRACT

Abstract: Representations of monstrosity in literature reveal the cultural tensions of specific historical periods, as collective social fears become embodied by creatures intended to disturb their audiences. Gothic novels of the late Victorian Era rely on these representations of darkness in society, and the different monsters created by Victorian authors reflect various views of social norms, particularly in relation to gender. This essay focuses on the sexualized vampires in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and Robert Louis Stevenson's physically repulsive representation of the duality of humankind in *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. While Stoker's engagement with monstrosity villainizes female sexual subjectivity, Stevenson's depiction of corruption questions socially performative masculinity. Considering Aubrey Beardsley's images of Salomé, rendered for the 1894 publication of Oscar Wilde's play by the same name, alongside these literary texts makes the relationship between gender and colonialism in representations of monstrosity visible. These illustrations emphasize the potential for sexually subjective female monsters, like those in *Dracula*, to contradict social gender norms as Mr. Hyde does. However, the exoticized nature of these drawings also highlights the association between imperial ideologies and representations of gendered monstrosity. Both Stoker and Stevenson exhibit these anxieties about the colonial other in their texts. Studying these works provides insight into the connections between gender, sexual normativity, and the colonial other that continue to be relevant in contemporary media.

The genre of the Gothic novel has been endlessly adapted from its emergence in the eighteenth-century with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*. Each subsequent period has adapted the tropes of the supernatural, mysterious, and grotesque to reflect contemporary social anxieties. Victorian Era Gothic novels apply the obscure aesthetic of traditional Gothic texts, which ground themselves in vague temporal and geographical locations, to the modern and enlightened city of London (Arata 621). Utilizing the Gothic genre's potential to evoke social critique, urban Gothic texts of the late nineteenth-century reflect cultural anxieties about the ever-expanding and increasingly unknowable city (Kent, *The Sign of the Four*).

This period is particularly suitable for Gothic interpretation due to the immense social change occurring in England at the time. During the nineteenth century, the physical and cultural landscape of England rapidly shifted due to the industrial revolution, advancement of the British Empire, and women's rights movements. These factors altered the everyday lives of English people. The city became a place of uncertainty, therefore the perfect setting for Gothic tales. Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* present differing perspectives on the darkness that has infected the urban landscape.

In this paper I will explore the representations of gendered monstrosity and consider how they signify the texts' respective social critiques. This analysis takes two extremely popular literary works that have been adapted continuously, and forces a critical consideration of the historical social changes occurring during their creation. Initially, I will describe the gendered monsters in *Dracula* and subsequently in *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, drawing on several scholars who consider the socio-cultural implications of these representations. To extrapolate from these literary texts and understand how Victorians visualized monstrosity, I will discuss the monstrous renderings of Salomé, the titular heroine of Oscar Wilde's one act production, created by Aubrey Beardsley to accompany a print version of the play. These images employ the visions of monstrous women as depicted in Stoker's text to subvert gender-normativity in similar ways to Stevenson's text. Beardsley's work also demonstrates visible associations between gendered representations of monstrosity and colonialism. I will conclude my paper with a discussion of how imperial ideology, unwaveringly present in nineteenth century British literature, plays into the gendered representations of monstrosity in each text. Both the *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and *Dracula* evoke monstrous beings as interior others; beings that are a part of everyday life in England who threaten to compromise its stability. While Stoker illustrates the dangerous potential of sexually liberated women, Stevenson questions the internal nature of the Englishman. Though each text engages with gender differently, they both identify monstrosity through imperial distinctions of colonial otherness.

Bram Stoker's infamous 1897 novel *Dracula* evokes colonial and heteronormative anxieties about the threats of social change contemporary to the novel's release. The titular villain is introduced through a series of letters written by Johnathan Harker, an English lawyer who travels to Transylvania to finalize a real estate interaction with Dracula. Harker soon realizes that his host is a vampire who feeds on blood to maintain his immortality. Even though Harker is able to return safely back to his loving fiancé Mina in England, Dracula soon follows.

This monster penetrates English society through its most susceptible subjects: women. Stoker uses his depictions of young English women, Lucy Westenra and Mina Harker, being turned into horrific demonic figures to emphasize the Count's corruption of domestic innocence. Lucy's fiancé Arthur describes her as a "nightmare" once she has been transformed by Dracula, with "pointed teeth, [a] bloodstained, voluptuous mouth – which it made one shudder to see" (Stoker 234). However, by making nearly all direct victims of this ancient evil force female, Stoker reflects cultural anxieties around women that have been and continue to be prominent in literature. Representations of the female monster, spanning from classical mythology to contemporary horror films, have culturally inscribed the threat independent women pose to patriarchal order (Holte 164). The male characters in the novel emphasize the "sweetness and purity" (Stoker 237) of Mina and Lucy. This is particularly notable in Van Helsing's descriptions of Mina as being "[s]o true, so sweet, so noble, so little an egoist" (Stoker 206). However, these women were also associated with social anxieties surrounding the dangers of women participating in non-domestic roles. This becomes evident as the party of men attempting to slay Dracula exclude Mina from their meetings due to her gender, emphasizing their need to protect her (Stoker 266). Women are most susceptible to corruption from evil forces because of both their innocence and, conversely, their naturalized association with otherness and monstrosity if they are not controlled.

The New Woman, a liberated re-definition of the female sex that started to develop in the nineteenth century, is both explicitly and implicitly referenced in Stoker's novel. Mina, though intelligent as evidenced by her ability to use the new technology of the typewriter (Stoker 379), expresses discomfort regarding the liberal sexuality of the New Woman. She makes her conservative beliefs known as she disapproves of a couple seeing each other asleep before marriage (Stoker 98). The subjective sexuality of the New Woman is the primary target of critique for Stoker through his representations of desirous female vampires. Carol Senf claims that in "responding to the sexual freedom

and reversal of roles which were often associated with the New Woman, Stoker uses the ancient superstition of the vampire in *Dracula* to symbolize the evil that can result" (39). This is particularly evident through Stoker's association between Lucy's sexual promiscuity and her eventual demise. Lucy's sleepwalking, which causes her to contract the vampiric disease, can be likened to prostitutes or nightwalkers contracting sexually transmitted diseases like syphilis that mark their promiscuity and immorality. Once she becomes a vampire, Lucy exhibits sexual desire, passionately asking her fiancé to kiss her (Stoker 176). As a result, her innocence is turned into "heartless cruelty" (Stoker 231). The naturalized domestic role of motherhood that she is expected to embody is inverted as she becomes the treacherous "bloofer lady" (Stoker 193) who attacks children rather than caring for them. She is effectively no longer human; instead likened to animals and the infamous female monster Medusa (Stoker 231-232).

Senf and Eric Yu emphasize the distinction between the vampiric versions of Lucy and Mina. Mina, unlike Lucy, is a rational thinker who plays a crucial role in the destruction of Count Dracula. Yu notes that Mina does not "degenerat[e] into an animal-like existence as in Lucy's case" (156) and instead "surpass[es] even Van Helsing in intellectual power, but not without the anxious warning that the professional woman armed by modern technology is necessarily evil" (159). Although Mina does not descend to the beastliness that Lucy does, Stoker's ideal virtuous woman is still predisposed to monstrosity; she is feared by her male companions until the threat of her transformation has been completely neutralized. This is made evident when Mina becomes a mother at the end of the narrative (Stoker 418). She no longer poses a threat to the patriarchal order as Lucy did through the increased sexual drive caused by vampirism. Instead, Mina fulfills her pre-conscripted domestic role. In its representations of monstrous women, *Dracula* clearly identifies females that do not embody a traditional domestic role as a threat to English society and English masculinity.

Rather than emphasizing the cultural anxieties surrounding women in the nineteenth century, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* removes them almost completely from its narrative. In turn, the story focuses on the corruption inherent within the masculine self. Like *Dracula*, this narrative has countless adaptations and a well-known story of an overambitious doctor who takes things too far in his attempt to perfect the human form. However, grounding this text in the historical specificity of its original publication in 1886 reveals the cultural anxieties being expressed in the story at its moment of conception. Mr. Hyde is coded primarily as masculine throughout the text, subverting the common association between monstrosity and femininity. Compared to the seductive and effeminate Dracula, Hyde is physically repulsive. However, like Dracula who elides binary distinctions between human and beast or man and woman, several scholars note the fluidity of Hyde as a critique of culturally inscribed masculinity. Janice Doane and Devon Hodges acknowledge the readings of Hyde that emphasize his masculinity but argue that his small stature and hysteric tendencies also align him with feminine monstrosity. These authors emphasize this reading with the assertion that the only female characters in the entire story are described as being as "wild as harpies" (Stevenson 7), emphasizing their association with monstrosity (Doane and Hodges 69). Doane and Hodges also apply Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject, which transgresses the boundaries of the subject, to the character of Dr Jekyll / Mr Hyde. They argue that the abject Hyde threatens heteronormative social order by evoking the rise of two powers (comparing his dual identity to an evocation of both sexes) rather than the domination of one over the other (Doane and Hodges 73). This ambiguity can also be extended to homosexual readings of the text, particularly with respect to Utterson's concern for the closeness and true nature of the relationship between Henry Jekyll and Edward Hyde (Stevenson 15).

E. D. Cohen is another scholar who emphasizes the link to gender identity present in the text but focuses solely on masculinity. He determines that Jekyll and Hyde represent idealistic/normative and villainous/

transgressive versions of masculinity respectively, and thereby confuse traditional understandings of male identity (159). While I agree with the determination that Hyde creates questions around gender and sexual norms, I disagree with the assertion that he is a representation of the monstrous female as argued by Doane and Hodges. I would align with Cohen's claim that Hyde represents a duality within masculinity. While his character can potentially be read as embodying feminine features, as Doane and Hodges attempt, this is highly extrapolated whereas the text itself explicitly discusses the duality of masculinity. Jekyll delineates these versions of masculinity, stating "[m]en have before hired bravos to transact their crime, while their own person and reputation sat under shelter... I was the first that could thus plod in the public eye with a load of genial respectability and in a moment like a schoolboy, strip of these lendings and spring headlong into the sea of liberty" (Stevenson 117). Jekyll points out the freedom his persona-changing potion enables as he escapes the role of a conventional respectable man and embraces the deviance of a young boy. He identifies with a masculinity associated with both control and order, and another aligned with corruption and degeneracy. He also claims that he is not the only member of civil society to commit crimes, but that he is the only one who can wholly inhabit both personas simultaneously. Knowing that he, like everyone else, exists as two, Hyde's body is just as "natural and human" (Stevenson 114) to Jekyll as his other form.

Making this monstrous character of Mr Hyde male rather than female, although he exhibits some resemblance of feminine monsters, defines men as no less monstrous than women. The text identified monstrosity itself as an innate internal quality. Revealed through the modern work of science rather than evoked through the ancient evil force of Dracula, Stevenson's monster questions normative gender roles. Jekyll/Hyde reveals that everyone, regardless of gender, is confined to a performative social role that is not reflective of their true complicated selves. Everyone is capable of embracing the monstrosity that already exists within them.

Salomé is a primary example of a female character that has been reimagined as a monster in the Victorian era by illustrator Aubrey Beardsley. The original story of Salomé comes from the Biblical books of Matthew and Mark. Oscar Wilde's play version retells the historic tale of the seductress Salomé, stepdaughter of Herod, who demands that Jokanaan's head be brought to her on a silver charger because he has refused her affections. Beardsley's illustrations of Salomé, the sexually subjective heroine of Oscar Wilde's play, evoke a female monster who is seductive and evil as Stoker's female vampires. However, Beardsley reflects a similar social critique to Stevenson's novel through grotesque humor. These images make the complex dynamics between gender and monstrosity in Stoker's and Stevenson's text visible.

Linda Zatlin provides an in depth and useful analysis of the interaction between the grotesque, voyeurism, and Japanese influence that underpin Beardsley's renderings of Salomé. She recognizes both the humorous and socially critical elements of the grotesque. The illustrations are akin to Gothic monsters in literature marked by exaggeration that is simultaneously funny and disturbing. According to Zatlin, Beardsley himself thought that all people were grotesque, and used his grotesque imagery to "expos[e] the unacknowledged sexual tension in the 1890s" (175). Zatlin claims that Beardsley "seems to have understood that for many Victorian sexuality was based on the claim that they did not lust" (175). Rather than attempting to reform repressive sexual behavior, Beardsley acts as an "ironic social critic... employ[ing] the grotesque to examine virtue and explore the logic of the virtuous" (Zatlin 175). Elliot Gilbert notes the similarities between the play itself and Beardsley's renderings of the sexually subjective. This includes the monstrous Salomé who demands the head of her unrequited love (133). This femme fatale, unlike many others, is read by Petra Dierkes-Thrun in her analysis of the play as transgressing patriarchal roles: "Salomé does not offer a reassuring re-ordering of the moral universe and restored sense of safety and comfort" (46). The illustrations that accompany the play's print version echo this sentiment.

Beardsley's provocative images of a hypersexualized female monster are more reminiscent of the promiscuous female vampires in *Dracula* than the repulsive Mr. Hyde. However, this monstrous woman is not corrupted by external influence. Like Hyde, Salome is an embodied evil being. This monster is not defeated or diminished by male patriarchal power or the purity and innocence of women as the vampires are in *Dracula*, but relishes in her monstrosity. In *The Stomach Dance* (Zatlin, fig. 124, p. 259), Salome confronts the viewer with a piercing direct gaze and an aggressive expression with downturned eyebrows and a straight mouth. Similarly, in *The Climax* (Walker, fig. 13), Salome smiles viciously at the head of Jokanaan as her hair curls into snake-like forms that are reminiscent of Medusa. Zatlin also details the androgyny in Beardsley's depictions of Salomé, such as the Peacock feathers she wears in *The Stomach Dance* (Zatlin, fig. 124, p. 259) which represent male power. This is also illustrated in the lines of her clothing that create phallic shapes (Zatlin 260). Beardsley presents instability of heteronormative gender and sexuality like Stevenson's representation of Mr. Hyde. However, Beardsley allows the female figure, who is left almost completely out of Stevenson's novel, to gain subjectivity by mocking the restrictions of social ideals.

Zatlin emphasizes the Japanese influence on Beardsley's work as integral to their social critiques, drawing on the grotesque humor often displayed in Japanese woodcuts. However, Beardsley's representations of monstrosity that are invariably associated with an exoticized other reflect the imperial ideologies which underpin British art and literature of the late nineteenth century. Though Stevenson's and Stoker's monsters engage with gender in diverse ways to reflect their critiques of English society, both draw on imperial ideologies in their representations of otherness.

Yu argues that Count Dracula, who attacks English women and turns them into monsters in highly sexualized manners as they exchange bodily fluids (Stoker 311), evokes imperial anxieties about sexual politics. Dracula represents the virile colonial other who undermines

British masculinity and preys on British women. Yu associates the feminized persuasive representation of Count Dracula directly with British Imperialism, claiming that "[v]ampirism, thus, threatens through subverting proper gender definitions and behavioral expectations which keep the imperial subject in place" (148). This identifies both the gender and colonial relationship dynamics which involve subjugation of one party to another, and their inextricable link to each other. The colonizer is a masculine figure that is able to act out his masculinity in a colonial space through violence. A figure like Dracula simultaneously subverts the authority of the colonizer by invading England – uprooting the colonial center of power – and by challenging traditional notions of masculinity. Brenda Hammack further emphasizes the imperial leanings by denoting the specificity of the Count's origins: "[b]ecause Dracula springs from a realm known for its polyracial and political conflict, he seems the ultimate threat to racial purity from the standpoint of his British and American opponents. By infecting female victims, Dracula seeks to propagate a race of vampires" (891). The anxieties about women's mobility and sexual subjectivity are interwoven in the narrative with this ancient foreign being entering into English modernity and spreading the vampiric race within the population. Women who act on their sexuality and risk the patriarchal hierarchy of English society are conflated with the colonial other, who has come to England to return the violence of the colonizers. Together, these subjugated individuals pose the ultimate threat to the stability of English society.

These complicated colonial ideologies underpin the gendered representations of monstrosity in *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* as well. Though Hyde's countenance is indefinable, he is described as "apelike" (Stevenson 138), "troglydytic" (Stevenson 25), and "like some damned juggernaut" (Stevenson 6). This terminology evokes social Darwinism: the belief that certain groups like the British become powerful because they are innately better. It reproduces orientalist language that villainizes non-Christian religions, specifically Hinduism and the deity Jagannath (Kent, *Jekyll*). As noted by Patricia Comitini, Hyde can also be read

within imperialist discourse as representing England's consumption and reliance on goods like opium from imperial external non-English sources (126). Hyde is still a secondary embodiment of Jekyll, not a completely separated and racialized other; he therefore represents the imperial conquests and consumption of the English regressing them into a so-called primitive state that they use to define colonial others.

This also intertwines with representations of gendered monstrosity in the text. Hammack claims that "the female of the human species was always closer to simian animal type than her male counterpart" (886). The representation of Hyde as androgynous and associated with non-English cultures undermines not just masculinity, but specifically English masculinity which is tied to colonialism and imperial ideologies. In his analysis of the text, Yu cites Homi Bhabha's notion of mimicry which entails the colonized other, who the English colonizer defines himself against, as reflecting a distorted version of the colonizer (163). This disrupts English identity by returning the imperial gaze to the colonizer himself. In the cases of both texts, this distorted version of the colonizer is linked to the disruption of traditional masculinity, either through the feminized Dracula or the unreserved and therefore un-English monstrosity of Hyde. Though the relationship between colonizer and colonized is not explicitly cited in these texts, the Count and Hyde both represent these monstrous mirror-images of English society, reflecting imperial anxieties implicitly through their representations of gendered monsters.

Gender as a center of cultural anxiety is essential to consider in literary representations of monstrosity. The Gothic genre allows authors to engage in social critique through its representations of darkness, penetrating societal insecurities of specific temporal and geographical locations. Reading these Victorian texts with a critical consideration of their historical background brings important insight to their importance outside of their endless contemporary adaptations. Dracula identifies not only the dangers of female promiscuity, but also defines the ideal domestic

roles of women through its representations of dark and demonic female vampires. *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* evokes anxieties around masculine identity to question internal corruption of Englishmen. Aubrey Beardsley's monstrous depictions of Salomé reflect some aspects of monstrosity presented in each text to illustrate the subversive potential of the female monster. However, all these representations are heavily influenced by imperial ideologies. While I have discussed the potential for the representation of monstrosity to transgress repressive social norms, texts in all genres from utopian to New Woman novels in the nineteenth century perpetuate colonial perspectives. These cultural critiques cannot be wholly separated from the deeply entrenched imperialism and racial/cultural subjugation in the history of English literature. Nonetheless, this paper has explored the productive potential of studying monstrous representations through a gendered lens that simultaneously recognizes the significance of colonialism. These methods reveal how different texts define the darkness lurking in English society.

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