

The Distribution of the Sensible in Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*

MERCEDES VERNET

*Centro de Literaturas y Literaturas Comparadas
Instituto de Investigaciones en Humanidades y Ciencias Sociales
Facultad de Humanidades y Ciencias de la Educación
Universidad Nacional de La Plata
mervernet5@gmail.com*

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This article explores the concept developed by the French philosopher Jacques Rancière, the distribution of the sensible, and applies it to the analysis of the construction and perception of one of the best known monsters in literary history: Mr Hyde. As the distribution of the sensible refers, broadly speaking, to who is allowed to speak, what is visible and what remains invisible within a perceptual framework, this article offers an analysis of narrative voices that allow readers to get a glimpse of Mr Hyde's mysterious identity and his relationship with respectable Dr Jekyll. Their silences also speak of the true nature of this monster, special attention being given to the reasons why narrative voices fail to provide a full account of events. Consequently, what is said by various characters in *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and what is left unsaid guide the study that ultimately attempts at determining the aesthetico-political regime the novella —written by Robert Louis Stevenson in 1886— belongs to.

The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, written by Robert Louis Stevenson in 1886, portrays one of the best known monsters in English literature. Mr Hyde is capable of committing hideous crimes against children and adults alike and some of them seem so sordid that their detailed descriptions are omitted. It might be said that the novel's appeal lies in the perceptions of the monster's atrocities and the way the mystery of his identity is unravelled by the different narrative voices present in the novel.

It is interesting to distinguish between the voices that are given the space to provide their account of the mystery and the voices that are silenced or lack enough space to develop their view in depth. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to provide a study of what becomes visible and what is invisibilized by the workings of the novel. In order to do so, the analysis will be based on the concept of the distribution of the sensible developed by the French philosopher Jacques Rancière. In his book entitled *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, this is defined as follows:

A distribution of the sensible therefore establishes at one and the same time something common that is shared and exclusive parts. This apportionment of parts and positions is based on a distribution of spaces, times and forms of activity that determines the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution. (2004: 12)

First, Rancière's concept will be briefly discussed within the framework of the three regimes he proposes: ethical, representative and aesthetic. This will be followed by the in-depth analysis of the different narrative voices that become audible in the novel. The study of their words and silences will shed light into the world created in Stevenson's novel. Finally, our analysis will attempt at determining the particular aesthetico-political regime *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* belongs to.

Jacques Rancière's Distribution of the Sensible

Before developing this concept, it is necessary to highlight that Jacques Rancière's view of aesthetics is not restricted to art works but is inextricably linked to politics, i.e. to the life of a community. It helps shape a perception of the world which is created by a partition of the sensible.

According to a certain partition of the sensible, some sensory data are allowed to appear within a perceptual framework and some other data become invisible or inaudible; some subjects are allowed to designate such data and other subjects are silenced (10). This configuration is the distribution of the sensible, which establishes "boundaries that define, among other things, what is visible and audible within a particular aesthetico-political regime", as stated by Rancière's translator, Gabriel Rockhill (1).

As mentioned above, literature takes an active part in a certain distribution of the sensible, which in turn determines the regime a given work of art belongs to. Rancière prefers to use the term "regime" to refer to different aesthetic moments. He distinguishes, based on art's role and purpose in the world, among three different regimes: ethical, representative and aesthetic.

The ethical regime is characterised by Rancière as the regime in which the matter is "knowing in what way images' mode of being affects the ethos, the mode of being of individuals and communities" (2011: 16). As such, art is valued if it illustrates truths or unmasks untruths which affect the character of a people.

Within a representative regime, the principle of mimesis becomes art's end and it organises ways of saying, doing and judging. Here, imitation is liberated from the constraints of ethical utility (Rockhill, 2004: 4) as mirroring reality becomes the only concern of art.

There is a different distribution of the sensible in the aesthetic regime since literature lacks an ethical purpose and its exemplary mimetic function, as highlighted by Hellyer and Murphet in their book *Rancière and Literature* (2016: 6). Literature here becomes independent from life and an equality of represented subjects can be perceived. The arts can represent anyone or anything as there is not a subject matter unfit for art. In the case of literature in particular, as a primacy of language becomes evident, writers show their concern with style and this is acknowledged by Rancière's highlighting the importance of the 'sonorous and imagistic power' of language in *Mute Speech* (2011: 43).

Visibility in *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*

The overview of this central concept developed by Jacques Rancière frames the analysis of the perception of the monster in Stevenson's novel. *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* follows Mr Utterson's search for Mr Hyde, who puzzles and disturbs his quiet life since the moment he hears his name for the first time. Utterson, a respectable lawyer in Victorian society, is turned into an amateur detective given his urge to find Mr Hyde.

It is his own voice that can be heard louder than others in the narrative despite the fact that Stevenson resorts to a third-person narrator. This anonymous narrative voice can be identified with the attorney's since he is involved in all the events narrated. Mr Enfield first informs him of Hyde's villainous assault of a little girl. He is friends with Jekyll and worries when the doctor signs a cheque to help Hyde and when he includes Hyde in his will. He is also concerned with Dr Lanyon's deterioration and death —he is even the addressee of his confession. Poole, Jekyll's butler, comes to him when his master's ill health has become critical. Utterson even serves as the attorney for Sir Danvers Carew, one of Hyde's victims. As shown, the rest of the characters confide in him and turn to him, allowing him glimpses of the mystery from different perspectives and the possibility to give his analysis of events. It is precisely the fact that his own interpretation is visible in the text that allows the identification of the narrative voice with Utterson's perception of the monster.

The consciousness and ideology of the narrator seems to be affected by the character's personality and influences the information given to readers about the nature of the relationship between respectable Dr Jekyll and cruel Mr Hyde. Therefore, it seems profitable to study his personality in more depth. Utterson is introduced as "the last reputable acquaintance and the last good influence in the lives of down-going men" (Stevenson, 1994: 9). He shows himself as a gentleman who is willing to remain friends with someone whose reputation has suffered. Jekyll, whose name appears tainted by his association with Hyde, is not the first one to be helped by Utterson. In spite of his respectability and loyalty, this trait may show a furtive curiosity about more sordid ways of life, which in this case triggers Utterson's search for sinister Hyde. This is acknowledged by the character's determination to become "Mr Seek" (20).

Another trait that affects what becomes audible in the novel is his devotion to reason and common sense as he is constantly looking for rational explanations for the disturbing events narrated. According to the lawyer, blackmail explains Jekyll's decision to make Hyde his heir and forgery explains the similarity between Jekyll and Hyde's handwritings. Though logical, the lawyer's explanations sometimes appear to be improbable, even fantastic. For example, Utterson astonishingly believes that a serious illness which deforms the sufferer might be the reason for Jekyll's isolation, the alteration in his voice and his desperate need of a drug during his last days. Utterson himself acknowledges that his explanation is perfectly rational: "There is my explanation; it is sad enough, (...) but it is plain and natural, hangs well together" (52).

Therefore, the events that prevail in this account – the ones that are minutely narrated – are those which can be reasonably explained. The narrative voice records Utterson's conversations with Mr Enfield, Dr Lanyon and Jekyll himself. They all hint at the mystery but it is never accounted for by the narrative voice. This factual record at times reveals a lack of personal involvement which surprisingly contrasts Utterson's obsession triggered by his furtive curiosity. However, it might be argued that his attempt to preserve some orderliness and rationality is stronger and influences the form and tone of the narrative given that the discovery of bizarre events is informed with a rather factual and dispassionate tone.

This is also perceived in the book title and the chapter headings that structure the novel. In particular, the last two chapters make the omniscient narrative voice's withdrawal evident as there are two more voices that become audible in the novel and help to unravel the mystery.

In "Dr Lanyon's Narrative" the nature of the Jekyll-Hyde relationship is finally made explicit when Lanyon witnesses Hyde's transformation into Jekyll. However, as Lanyon is also devoted to reason, he remains unwilling to speak of the supernatural. The tone of Lanyon's account of events contrasts Utterson's as the doctor—a man of science—has had the shock of his life, which has destroyed his worldview. His contact with transcendental medicine has horrified him so much that all his narrative is full of passionate and vivid descriptions. Lanyon's language as he approaches the partial unravelling of the mystery becomes more and more melodramatic, which shows that his self-control is fading, a fact he seems to be aware of when he states: "a coolness that I was far from truly possessing" (67). Language mirrors his shaken worldview as his writing style verges on the unhealthy: incomplete sentences, constant interruptions and changing focuses of attention evince his anxiety. At the climatic point of the transformation, readers feel the immediacy to supernatural events, thanks to Lanyon's detailed and intensely vivid description and imagery.

He put the glass to his lips and drank at one gulp. A cry followed; he reeled, staggered, clutched at the table and held on, staring with injected eyes, gasping with open mouth; and as I looked there came, I thought, a change – he seemed to swell – his face became suddenly black and the features seemed to melt and alter – and the next moment, I had sprung to my feet and leapt back against the wall, my arm raised to shield me from that prodigy, my mind submerged in terror.

‘O God!’ I screamed, and ‘O God!’ again and again; for there, before my eyes – pale and shaken, and half fainting, and groping before him with his hands, like a man restored from death – there stood Henry Jekyll! (68)

Through the astonished and terrified voice of Lanyon, this scene is masterfully drawn. These short clauses and sentences give the narrative a rhythm that conveys the character's urgency and despair. His search for specific words overwhelms him, which is clearly shown in his constant need for paraphrasing. Language becomes powerful enough to depict Hyde's features swelling, melting and altering in order to let readers know that the moment is extremely hideous. This supernatural process is violent and ravaging, causing the metamorphosing body to "reel", "stagger" and "gasp" while his injected eyes stare at the doctor. This passage exemplifies the primacy of language, whose words bear the ugliness and brutality of the scene.

The last chapter, "Henry Jekyll's Full Statement of the Case" is told by another guest narrator, Dr Henry Jekyll, whose letter finally allows readers to glimpse the events from the inside. As it is of a confessional nature, it is written in the first person and it contains an account of facts, emotions and, most interestingly, philosophical beliefs about the dual nature of man. As readers learn that Hyde is Jekyll's alter ego, they can understand why he becomes Jekyll's heir and why their handwriting is so similar. This also elucidates the reasons for Jekyll's changing state of physical and emotional health, Hyde's visit to Lanyon and Jekyll's bizarre disappearance from the window. And finally, Jekyll's own death is clarified.

By the end of the novel, after gaining access to the other, parallel narrative, readers may get the feeling that everything has fallen into place. However, despite Jekyll's attempt at

explaining the dual nature of man, his voice remains quite inaudible due to language's failure to fully acknowledge it.

The analysis so far can show that although a few subjects are allowed to speak in the text, the sensory data that make their way into the narrative are restricted for different reasons as it will be shown later. The distribution of the sensible produced by the information revealed challenges the narrative conventions of realism and the omniscient narrator. The perception of the world is also upset through the use of the fantastic, and the double in particular, as John Pennington argues (1994: 204).

Invisibility in *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*

Although, as mentioned above, different voices shed light into the narrative, the presence of darkness is undeniable. Darkness is present throughout the novella not only as part of the eerie atmosphere created by night time but it is also perceived around the creation and description of Hyde. Though frequently referred to, Hyde's facial features remain in the dark. His is "a face that, in its singularity, refuses to yield to the totalising and unifying functions of vision, language and representation itself" (Townshend, 2019: 288). Like the lamp lights which partially illuminate the streets, the narrative voices can only provide vague information about Hyde's countenance. For instance, Mr Enfield's description is characterised by the insistent repetition of "something" which results in the alluded lack of precision as regards what makes Hyde so disgusting.

'He is not easy to describe. 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 can name nothing out of the way. No, sir; I 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 this moment.' (15, emphasis added)

However vague, the choice of words manages to create an accurate picture of Hyde given that Enfield's failure to articulate creates an impression of Hyde as an uncanny figure, whose deformity is intangible yet definitely perceptible. Despite his involuntary silence, Hyde's extraordinary monstrosity is acknowledged by the people around him, provoking both disgust and hatred. In addition, when Utterson first evokes Hyde's assault of the girl, the man is referred to as a juggernaut, which reinforces his power, mercilessness and identification with evil but fails to physically characterise the monster. Readers, then, are entitled to wonder whether language can represent him. As Ronald Thomas claims, the novel is "ultimately concerned with fundamental questions about (...) the power of language to represent human life" (1986: 158).

It is also reasonable to wonder whether language can describe Jekyll's youthful sins and most of the depravities Hyde engages in. However, it is also possible that this silence is voluntary, as it may be caused by a refusal to speak about taboo topics, which evinces the repressive tendencies of the Victorian society Jekyll belongs to. Jekyll's silence constitutes an asset, though: it maintains the eerie atmosphere and suspense that an explicitness of words would have destroyed. His unsaid words let readers create a monster whose cruelty and evil are unrestrained.

Although Jekyll's voice is given enough space to make his confession, the character fails to provide an accurate account of his actions. Thus, the true nature of the primitive duality of man that Jekyll discovers within himself is not described in enough detail and readers cannot fully understand how man's two parts interact: "It was on the moral side, and in my own person that I learned to recognize the thorough and primitive duality of man; I saw that, of the two natures that contended in the field of my consciousness (...) I was radically both; and from an early date" (70).

He acknowledges that he, as well as all human beings, is half virtuous and half criminal, half moral and half amoral. In his way to separate these halves, he eventually succeeds only in separating out Hyde, his evil half, his dark side, while Jekyll himself remains both good and evil.

Even though in the passage quoted above Jekyll recognizes to possess both natures, this idea is not maintained throughout his "full statement of the case". On several occasions, Jekyll distances himself from Hyde and on others, he identifies with him. These are the extremes of an identification-distance continuum. This complex, dynamic relationship between the two "sides" is reflected by the language Jekyll, the author of the confession, uses to refer to either of his sides.

The Jekyll-Hyde identification is explicitly acknowledged when, for instance, Jekyll looks at Hyde in the mirror after taking the drug for the first time and shows his awareness of his dual nature: "And yet when I looked at that ugly idol in the glass, I was conscious of no repugnance, rather a leap of welcome. This, too, was myself" (73).

The character's choice of first-person pronouns and possessive adjectives on several occasions support the Jekyll-Hyde identification as they make the barriers separating the two sides disappear every time Jekyll resorts to first person pronouns in order to speak of Hyde's "pleasures": "When I came back from these excursions, I was often plunged into a kind of wonder at my vicarious depravity" (75), "my adventures" (76). Surprisingly enough, Jekyll identifies himself with Hyde even when Sir Danvers is murdered: "my lust of evil", "my crime" (81), a fact that reveals a growing power of the dark side over Dr Jekyll. However, after this crime, which can be considered the worst of all, Jekyll's repulsion towards the murderer, gains more power.

The lexical choice at times evinces a great distance projected by both sides; Jekyll talks about Hyde as a creature, depriving him of a human status, as shown in: "Hyde in danger of his life was a creature new to me: shaken with inordinate anger, strung to the pitch of murder, lusting to inflict pain. Yet the creature was astute; mastered his fury with a great effort of the will" (84). Though mainly characterised as an animal moved by instinct or passion, Hyde, curiously, possesses a will which overrides his irrational behaviour. A few lines below, the distance grows as the narrative voice insists on characterizing him as devoid of humanity by comparing to a hellish creature "That child of hell has nothing human; nothing lived in him but fear and hatred" (84).

Similarly, Hyde does not consider Jekyll as a peer, but the doctor is used as a hiding place: "Jekyll was now my city of refuge; but let Hyde peep out an instant, and the hands of all men would be raised to take and slay him" (82). It is particularly interesting to emphasise that the distance here is also projected by both voices when they resort to the third person to talk about the other as if they were completely separate individuals: Jekyll speaks as if Hyde's death would not be his own. This passage evinces the dynamism in the narrator, constantly moving from one perspective to another.

There are other instances in which the distance projected by Jekyll is even more considerable because the grammatical choice is reinforced by a lexical one. For example, when Jekyll refers to Hyde's monstrous pleasures, he states: "It was Hyde, after all, and Hyde alone, that was guilty" (76). Some lines below he accepts some responsibility with respect to Hyde's depravities, but he does not see himself as the perpetrator: "Into the details of the infamy at which I thus connived (for even now I can scarce grant that I committed it) I have no design of entering" (76). After the murder, the distance becomes irreversible: "Thenceforward, he sat all day over the fire in the private room (...). He, I say –I cannot say, I. That child of hell had nothing human; nothing lived in him but fear and hatred" (84).

Between the two extremes in the continuum mentioned above, Jekyll resorts to some nominal constructions that express a certain closeness between the two halves: "my disguise", "my double", "my second self", "my second character", "my other self" (75, 76, 78, 83, 86).

On the other hand, there are instances in which Jekyll refers to Hyde as "my devil", "the animal within me", "the brute that slept within me" (80, 82, 85). These nominal expressions show a curious phenomenon: whereas the first person possessive adjective and pronouns reflect closeness, the nouns unequivocally show Jekyll's utter disgust with Hyde.

The differentiation between Jekyll and Hyde reaches a climax towards the end of Jekyll's confession, when he cannot deny Hyde's increasing power taking over the doctor's body and, by extension, life. He becomes aware of his own death, which is prior to the darker side's death: "I am careless; this is my true hour of death, and what is to follow concerns another than myself. Here then, as I lay down the pen, and proceed to seal up my confession, I bring the life of that unhappy Henry Jekyll to an end" (88).

Writing has kept Jekyll alive, since he exists as long as he writes down his story, shocking as it might be. His carefully constructed discourse shows the truly dynamic nature of the Jekyll-Hyde relationship, and this is the reason why the readers' attempt at classifying or fully understanding the bond might not be successful, rendering the truth in the dark.

The aesthetico-political regime of the novella

The analysis of what the narrative voices say and omit, of the pieces of information revealed and withheld show how suspense is created in Stevenson's work as it is rather difficult for readers to gain access to Hyde's true nature. Stevenson provides readers with voices that remain in the dark either voluntarily or involuntarily despite the light shed little by little into the mystery of the fabrication of monstrous Hyde. Even when more sensory data are allowed to appear in the narrative as, for instance, the fact that Jekyll can become Hyde —and vice versa— by means of a drug, readers' intrigue is heightened by the supernatural status of the explanation and suspense is increased by their need for details or reasons.

Although different subjects such as Utterson, Enfield, Lanyon, Jekyll and Hyde are given some space to share their sensory and extrasensory perception of the monster, the distribution does not seem balanced and it would be difficult to claim the existence of an equality of represented subjects, a distinguishing feature of the aesthetic regime.

However, the work belonging to this regime may be argued given that this novella proves that there is not subject matter unfit for literature as ugliness, deformity, crime and evil, scientific experimentation and death are all addressed by means of detailed descriptions or ominous silences which can be as telling as – or sometimes even more than – an abundance of explicit words. Therefore, the primacy of language becomes evident in the study of the carefully selected words. As in many literary works belonging to this regime, every single word

is significant and worthy of analysis. This is also acknowledged by Robbie Goh who believes that “in this novel, narrative itself is the site of meaning, of textual process that operate prior to narrower thematic concerns and to simplifying social oppositions” (1999: 159). It is through the language chosen to make its way into the narrative that readers can find aesthetic, social and political meaning. This is crucial to determine that *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* belongs to the aesthetic regime.

This view does not contradict, but rather reinforces Jacques Rancière’s belief in the politics of literature which implies that “literature ‘does’ politics as literature – that there is a specific link between politics as a definite way of doing and literature as a definite practice of writing” (2004: 10).

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