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Strangeness as Moral Hypocrisy

In both texts, “strange” describes a contradiction: in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, the contradiction is between an upstanding member of society (Dr. Jekyll) and his support of vice in private; in *The Sign of Four*, the contradiction is between a killer’s cheerful and righteous demeanor and his crimes so horrible they take away any sympathy mild-mannered Watson might have afforded him. *The Strange Case* is literally extraordinary, since metamorphosis from a drug is a supernatural occurrence, but most of the strangeness derives from more “ordinary” facts, presented in the detective novel genre. Like Holmes in *The Sign of Four*, Mr. Utterson goes on a path of discovery which starts with a mounting number of inexplicable facts. First amongst these is the story of the door.

“The man trampled calmly over the child’s body and left her screaming on the ground. . . it was like some damned Juggernaut. . . [on the check was] a name at least very well known and often printed.” (Stevenson 6-7) Utterson is originally alarmed by the clear disconnect between Jekyll’s upstanding reputation and Hyde’s immoral and unhealthy nature. He believes their link to be because Hyde is coercing Jekyll, which is why he repeatedly interviews Jekyll, but, as revealed later in the book, Hyde is Jekyll, and Jekyll is being entirely honest when he shuts down the line of questioning with “My position is a very strange—a very strange one.” (24) The case would be less strange if it were chronologically revealed from Dr. Jekyll’s perspective because, although supernatural in nature, none of the apparent sinister contradictions would be contradictions.

The buildup to Jonathan Small’s strange story is comparable. It has some innate strangeness and contradiction, but the progressive development of evidence that Small is guilty of grand theft and felony murder makes it all the more surprising that Small believes he is justified and treats his own misdeeds that have resulted in his capture as mere bad luck. Small’s story is so strange

by another matter of contrast. Small is a very energetic and upfront man (implying he is healthy and moral), which contrasts with his sheer immorality—evidenced by his killing of the merchant Achmet: “the thought of his treasure turned me hard and bitter. I cast my firelock between his legs as he raced past, and he rolled twice over like a shot rabbit.” (Doyle 46) The social aspect of the immorality of this man is obvious in Watson’s reaction to him: “I had now conceived the utmost horror of the man, . . . even more for the somewhat flippant and careless way in which he narrated it. . . I felt that he might expect no sympathy from me.” (46)

Both of these cases are really rather similar in that they contrast the immoral with the moral to form a “strange” contradiction. While the modern sense of morality has strayed from the explicit condemnation of vice, the Victorian morality that these stories apply is in no way implicit. Health is tied to morality, and morality is tied to restraint from vice. Despite Holmes’s cocaine’s use to show his dedication, Watson appealing to Holmes’s sense of better nature (i.e. health/morality) shows that vice, although casually accepted, is frowned upon. Jekyll’s attitude to vice shows this sort of casual distaste: “My life [had been] nine-tenths a life of effort, virtue, and control” (Stevenson 78). The conflation of health and morality is evidenced in Watson’s pleading, “it is a pathological and morbid process. . . why should you, for a mere passing pleasure, risk the loss of those great powers with which you have been endowed?” (Doyle 3) Mr. Hyde emphasizes the belief that immorality implies unhealthfulness. “Edward Hyde, alone in the ranks of mankind, was pure evil,” which is why he is unhealthy and “gives a strong feeling of deformity” (Stevenson 78) (10). The hypocritically unhealthy characters of these stories are abnormal, given the implicit assumption that most people follow mores, and they are therefore surprising, difficult to explain, and “strange.”

Works Cited

Doyle, Sir Arthur Conan. *The Sign of Four*. Feb. 1890. [Web](#).

Stevenson, Robert Louis. *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Jan. 1886. [Web](#).