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## Hope And Tragedy: Ideas Of Evolution In The Imagination Of Two Popular Fiction Writers

Robert Louis Stevenson and Kurt Vonnegut use ideas of evolution to imagine — respectively — horrific and satiric future scenarios of humanity. Stevenson’s secondary intent is to use Edward Hyde in order to find a literary language for the emerging findings of evolution. I will first examine evolution in great detail in *Jekyll and Hyde*, then do the same for “Unready to wear,” interspersed with a comparison and contrast to *Jekyll*. The analysis of *Jekyll and Hyde* will necessarily be longer because it is the longer work.

Prominent Soviet dissident Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote that the “line between good and evil runs through the heart of every person” and that one cannot tear away a piece of themselves. Doctor Jekyll tries to do exactly that and fails miserably. His duality kills him. Carl Jung wrote that one must integrate his shadow (one’s own Hyde) to improve the psychological quality of their life. To put this insight in Hylian terms: man is dualistic, with both human and beastly features. This seems banal, until one considers that later psychological research and events proved Stevenson’s writings about the evil potential inside every human. Namely, psychologist Stanley Milgram’s experiments, and the Soviet, Chinese and Nazi atrocities demonstrated the evil lurking in “ordinary people,” to paraphrase Christopher Browning.

At least, that is the picture from what we understand today. Back in Stevenson’s day, Charles Darwin’s work was challenging Victorian beliefs on religion, morality and humanity. The idea that evil lurks under the surface of every polished Victorian person was disconcerting. Victorians were also concerned with evolution leading from uncivilized (animal) to civilized (human) behavior. Comparisons between civilized and uncivilized behavior were often linked through evolution. Stevenson’s *Jekyll and Hyde* was a way for them to work through this challenge. It was a means for them to understand the massive scientific changes reshaping their society. They mediated on what their culture really meant as new findings emerged to challenge what was once dearly and closely held; and explored the future as science suggested new possibilities. Darwin’s theory of evolution also raised the spectre of “devolution.” According to Martin Fichman, Victorians believed “devolving,” or going backward, was at least as likely as evolving. Hyde is that belief manifested.

Before proceeding further, a very quick note on evolution. What is it and how does it work? Simply, evolution is how creature change in response to changes in their environment. The creatures best suited to a given environment survive and procreate. Less well adapted creatures die and do not pass on their genes. Over time, creatures can change dramatically. For

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instance, reptiles eventually evolved into humans (and other animals). Despite such dramatic change, evolution also leaves vestiges of dormant genes and inactive/nonfunctional body parts. Hyde can be seen as the vestige of baser human nature in a prim and proper Victorian gentleman as Jekyll. However, evolution does not create perfect beings. For example, prominent evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins has discussed how the Laryngeal nerve in the giraffe takes a very suboptimal, roundabout way. The giraffe was/is well adapted to its environment in that it has continued to reproduce successfully, but not “perfectly designed” by evolution in that there was a better way of connecting that nerve. Similarly, Jekyll fails to perfect his nature. He is unable to split Hyde from his personality.

Victorians would have seen Hyde as less evolved. Of course, today, we know that humans are a living creature like so many others and how we have evolved. Scientists have traced our evolutionary lineage and are suggesting hypotheses and theories as to how our aggression and other natural traits evolved as well as the utility of these traits from an evolutionary perspective. Given the Milgram experiments, one could reasonably argue that we are becoming more and more aware of our dualistic nature. It is curious that this aspect of human psychological phenomena described in great literature, myths and religious teachings is finding scientific support.

On the other hand, some of what the Victorians believed does not stand up to scrutiny in the face of modern findings in evolution research. One common belief was that evolution has humans as its pinnacle; that evolution tends to create more complex creatures over time. Neither of these beliefs is true. In fact, the dominant form of life on Earth right now remain simple, single celled organisms, as was the case millions and billions of years ago. In some sense, humans are not special at all. Let it be noted, however, that this does not take away from human beings’ consciousness, intellect, nobility and potential for good.

Returning to Jung for a second, it seems that had Jekyll been alive today and privy to contemporary psychological findings, he would have strived to integrate his shadow. He may have “integrated” his Hyde, instead of casting him out, and been better off for it. Ultimately, Jekyll chooses to be good by ridding society of himself. By the same token, we can choose to be good even as we become more aware of our evil traits.

Attitudes toward evolution have changed. Consider the way Dawkins discusses evolution. He quivers with excitement when he describes the way nature sculpts her creatures. No longer something disgusting or associated with “lesser” creatures, evolution is very well documented and substantiated by multiple lines of evidence. Among scientists and researchers, evolution has been widely accepted since the 1920s. Among the public, one poll from 2012 found that some 69 per cent of British people believe that humans evolved. Views of evolution have evolved, so to speak.

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In *Jekyll and Hyde*, Stevenson seeks to give the scientific language underlying the theory of evolution a poetic twist. Evolution was a prominent topic in Stevenson's day, having captured Victorians' imaginations. Be they for or against evolution, Darwin's research was being discussed everywhere. These discussions made their imprint in literature. Stevenson uses the character of Hyde to interpret and present evolution in linguistic and visual terms. In its state of disfigurement and devolution, Hyde's body does more to viscerally describe evolution than dry scientific language.

One can also see Hyde as embodying the sculpting powers of evolution. Stevenson's work expressed this struggle in part through the repulsion each character experiences toward Hyde. Stevenson strives to make evolution comprehensible by having it animate a being recognizable — if barely — as human. *Jekyll and Hyde* makes corporeal the abstract findings of Darwin's research by presenting the various forces of evolution in Hyde's character. Namely, variability, inheritance and competition come to the fore.

Evolution was also seen a way of explaining criminal behavior. For example, the criminal was seen as less evolved than respectable members of society. Hyde is described similarly — he is less than human, a beast, cannot speak, wears baggy clothes like a child — he is not an orderly, “evolved,” developed, mature human adult. Thus, the less than human was depicted in evolutionary terms as being less evolved than humans and perhaps even devolved as if a higher creature had degenerated. Hyde fits all of these descriptions. In this sense, evolution posed a threat to Victorian order. Certainly, Hyde's grotesque appearance is in stark contrast to Jekyll's polished exterior. If man is related to the beasts, came from them, is one himself, then the idea of evolution poses a major challenge to the seemingly civilized and ordered Victorian society. Just like Hyde emerges from the respectable Jekyll, evolution reveals the hypocrisy of Victorian society. Hyde's bestial and devolved nature, and criminality make him a foil for Victorian preoccupations with crime, new ideas like evolution, social decay and moral degeneration.

And yet, even as Stevenson portrays Hyde as being a threatening, destructive force, one can also see Hyde as generating new life. Hyde himself is a pulsating creature, writhing as he emerges from the womb. Stevenson paints a picture of the struggle and competition for existence that Darwin also described. Taking advantage of the imaginative powers of literature, Stevenson provides a way to visualize Darwin's findings that evolution was constantly at work. He dramatizes the process of natural selection and creates a visual for what can be a difficult idea to grasp. As he creates this visual, Stevenson speeds up the forces of evolution which normally operate on grand scales of millions of years. *Jekyll and Hyde* manifest the forces, conflicts and tensions in evolution in real time. Moreover, the battle between Jekyll and Hyde symbolizes the conflict between humans shaping their environment until the later is beyond recognition and nature's immense forces that change the shape of its creatures also beyond

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recognition over time. Jekyll and Hyde's conflict is one of self control and forces that defy control.

Setting also speaks to ideas of evolution. Consider the passage where John Utterson and Richard Enfield are taking a Sunday walk. The market street they encounter is small and quiet, but bustling during the week. Stevenson describes the street as affluent and having laid out its goods in public for viewing, hoping to attract even more sales. The street stands out even on quiet Sundays "like fire in a forest." Here, as in Darwin's theory, the idea of competition figures prominently. Per Darwin, creatures compete with each other for resources and mates. Similarly, the shopkeepers are competing with each other for sales. Stevenson suggests the ornate street is like a cleansing fire amid its dingy surroundings. Having also likened the surroundings to a forest, Stevenson underlines the tension between human forces and the forces of nature. Other elements of the London setting come into play. For instance, the fog, ever present, glows like a light. Where the fog slows other creatures, it enlivens Hyde. Stevenson describes Hyde in terms that would be appropriate for fog — "shifting, insubstantial mists," (37). The fog cloaks London in a dim, brown murk, depleting London's strength. By the same token, Hyde gains in strength the more Jekyll weakens (91). In evolutionary terms, Hyde is a better fit for the environment and is able to overcome other characters. If evolution is competition, Hyde emerges the victor when he clubs Sir Danvers Carew to death. Carew, being a respectable gentleman, was seemingly well adapted to the Victorian environment. Yet he loses to Hyde in their nighttime encounter. Notably, Carew's murder occurred on a foggy night.

Hyde's ape like appearance suggests humans' forebears. Today we know that both apes and humans are descended from a common ancestor, but that ancestor would have appeared much more like an ape than a human. For the purposes of Stevenson's work, this simplification is close enough. Stevenson describes Hyde as "hardly human" and "savage," clearly linking Hyde to ideas of humanity's evolutionary past.

Finally, a major preoccupation for Victorians: if evolution can lead up, can it also lead down? And if it can, does that imply science needs boundaries? Witness Jekyll choosing to restrain Hyde only after the latter murders Carew, motivated by Jekyll's fear of the law. If new scientific developments can drastically alter society, society must have appropriate safeguards in place. Good intentions are not enough. Jekyll starts with good intentions, but things "devolve" quickly. Jekyll believes the next step of human evolution "up" will be to permanently sever the good and evil in each person. Just as Hyde murders and maims, one can see that misguided endeavours can cause fatal devotion. If evolution can free us from some of our restraints, then devolution leads back to bondage as Jekyll is threatened with permanently transforming into Hyde.

This is a good segue into a discussion of the second work of this comparison essay. Vonnegut uses ideas of evolution in a satirical way to parody excessive optimism in technology. "Unready

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to Wear” is a satirical account of evolution gone the “right” way, freeing people from constraints of their bodies to become “amphibians.” Konigswasser, the scientist responsible for this breakthrough, is infatuated with his rented cowboy body despite his view that bodies represent an earlier, inferior stage of evolution. This reminds readers of Jekyll partaking in Hyde’s pleasures despite the disgust everyone else feels toward Hyde. In contrast to Jekyll’s experiment that temporarily frees him from moral qualms and quiets his inner good versus evil conflict, “Unready to wear” eliminates the problem of bodies entirely. The moral progress is merely a byproduct of this biological revolution.

However, there is a dark side to this supposed improvement in the human condition. Those members of society who do not wish to become amphibians accuse the latter of shirking their human responsibilities. Moreover, there is a moral dimension as well, condemning the amphibians for belittling human qualities such as dignity and love. For instance, Herb and Madge improved their relationship after they abandoned their bodies. Instead of accepting him as he is, Madge always picks an attractive shell for Herb to wear whenever the two rent bodies.

Herb is not thrilled with Madge’s body either, saying it “wasn’t anything to get excited about” (367). “Unready to wear” provides a more nuanced, if more satirical take on the implications of evolution for society. Strife and negative human emotion are gone, but so is a certain element of humanity. And yes, the amphibians, despite their calm, cool, collected nature won at the cost of sacrificing their bodies, are less than human. Their identity literally specifies this.

Just like many Victorians were wary of evolution, so are many in Vonnegut’s fictional society. At the time of writing, the global population was under 3 billion. Vonnegut writes that over a billion people have become amphibians — a substantial number, albeit still a minority. He suggests most of the rest were opposed to abandoning their bodies and are under the impression they are fighting a war against the amphibians. Fortunately, the amphibians are so far ahead that they are well protected from the humans without needing to fire a single bullet. This is an interesting contrast to Hyde’s destructive, deadly devolution. On the surface, it is an optimistic take and one that aligns with decades worth of techno optimism: that humans will overcome petty squabbles once the technology is good enough. However, Vonnegut shows that the “human factor” continues to assert itself. The amphibians still experience pangs of nostalgia for bodies. Not to mention they fall to the usual human flaws when they return to bodies. Despite their evolved status, they are right back to square one in human bodies, raising the question of just how advanced they truly are. Herb acknowledges the vestiges of humanity when he says he is human (368).

Humans in Vonnegut’s society feel threatened by the amphibians just like Victorians feel threatened by evolution. One curious similarity between the amphibians and Victorians is that both try to push against the quirks of the human body. The Victorians suppress sexual urges

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and excessive emotion, while the amphibians innovated their way out of it. Both cases produce discontents. On the other hand, the drivers of each respective case of evolution are different. Jekyll is of high society, but his meddling in the process of evolution makes it go backwards. Herb and Madge, meanwhile, are likely much nearer the bottom of the food chain and in desperation with Madge ill and about to die.

Just like Jekyll wants to free his good side to walk upright in peace, freed from its base instincts, Konigswasser also had a good side that was obscured by his body prior to evolving. The unifying thread is that both characters see the lack of evolution as restraining the good in them. In the same vein, Madge's personality vastly improved when she left her old body. Like Jekyll, Konigswasser is intoxicated with his discovery and shows off in the best body during the amphibians' annual parade. He is also prideful like Jekyll, as evidenced by his retort that describing his invention as significant as the discovery of fire is "faint praise" (370). He achieves great fame, unlike Jekyll, who hides shamefacedly. Hyde and Konigswasser are similar in that both wear baggy clothes and both are described as children. Even though the latter drives evolution and humanity — supposedly — upward, he is perhaps also "devolved" like Hyde. Certainly, his hideous appearance make him comparable to Hyde. Just like Konigswasser may be a hidden "devolution" type, so is his new technology that returns people to the sea. In their time, creatures emerged from the sea and later evolved into mammals and humans; and now, amphibians are returning to the sea — devolution? Further, Hyde's physical deformity (and physical prowess) is his single most recognizable identifier that everyone is able to agree on. The physical deformity is symbolic of his moral degeneracy and deformity. Exactly the same is the case for amphibians: "(...) I haven't met one [amphibian] yet who didn't turn a little sour when he got into one [body]" explains Herb. His people — species? — are trying to get away from their animalistic needs, urges and instincts. After all, "nobody but a saint could be really sympathetic or intelligent for more than a few minutes at a time in a body – or happy either, except in short spurts" (372). This mode of being is akin to Jekyll and the Victorians seeking to suppress excessive human emotion and urges. Hyde, on the other hand, embraces his physicality. "Unready to wear" could just as easily be an ironic poke at an oaf "unready to evolve."

In terms of personality, Koenigswasser is the exact opposite of Jekyll. The — presumably — German scientist is absent minded and deeply unpresentable. But this is only a surface level distinction. Both wish to escape the clutches of their circumstances: the terrible body and repressive society, respectively. Both are sharp minds and researchers. Jekyll is not what one would call physical, either. Both "did all their living with [their] mind" (369). One notable parallel is that both Hyde and the amphibians defy description. The characters of Jekyll and Hyde struggle to explain Hyde's appearance. The amphibians have no body to speak of. Hundreds, maybe even thousands, can fit on the head of a pin. They can fly. But Vonnegut leaves it up to readers' imaginations to come up with an image of these disembodied souls. On some level

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this makes sense because evolution has changed creatures beyond recognition over the years. Humans, for instance, share a common ancestor with all other living creatures (as do all other life forms with each other). Even humans and trees had a common ancestor if one were to go back far enough. One wonders whether Hyde and the amphibians had a common ancestor. Perhaps it was Jekyll.

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