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The Spirit of Perverseness and Central Gothic Irony

According to the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, the definition of perverse is “showing a deliberate and determined desire to behave in a way that most people think is wrong, unacceptable or unreasonable”. Many forms of gothic literature carry out this theme of the spirit of perverseness, which is an idea first introduced to us in Edgar Allen Poe’s *The Black Cat*. This same notion can be found in Robert Louis Stevenson’s story *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll And Mr. Hyde*. In this essay I will be discussing how Dr. Jekyll and the narrator from *The Black Cat* both go through a cycle with the spirit of perverseness where they do wrong for the sake of wrongdoing, break that cycle, and then return to doing wrong until it gets out of hand, fulfilling the central gothic irony, which is a return (to the protagonists definitions of) normalcy.

The last chapter of the story *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll And Mr. Hyde* is the letter Dr. Jekyll writes, describing his perspective on all of the instances that were believed to be conducted by Mr. Hyde. In Dr. Jekyll’s letter, he explains his wealthy background and the “grave countenance” he had to put up in order to maintain a proper and sophisticated image that matched his social status. This did not equate to his true feelings and fondness of the dark natures of life. Jekyll speaks of having to conceal this side of himself for the sake of how people perceived him in his early career. Similarly, the narrator of *The Black Cat* also comes from a decent and happy upbringing where his early life was content, until the instance with the black cat. This is when (in *The Black Cat*) the narrator first mentions the spirit of perverseness.

Dr. Jekyll speaks of how all men have been at fault for doing wrong, but himself more so than others. Jekyll states, "... with even a deeper trench than in the majority of men, severed in me those provinces of good and ill which divide and compound man's dual nature" (Stevenson, ch.10, 1). Jekyll is aware of man's evil nature and is conscious of the fact that he harbours more guilt than the average man, which is what separates him and his story from others. Dr. Jekyll uses this guilt to try to push down this ill intended feelings he possesses. Although this may be abnormal to the general population, it is normal to Jekyll because that is his true nature.

After it is brought to Jekyll's attention just how different he is, he comes to a conclusion that this is a part of his dual nature. "I saw that, of the two natures that contended in the field of my consciousness, even if I could rightly be said to be either, it was only because I was radically both ... I had learned to dwell with pleasure, as a beloved day-dream, on the thought of the separation of these elements" (Stevenson, ch.10, 2). It can be inferred that Jekyll's interpretation of his own personal execution or expression of the duality of man is exaggerated to an extent that possibly allows him to believe they are two separate entities. This can be perceived as Jekyll's attempt to alleviate some of the guilt from himself. The idea of separating the two physically will allow one to function independently without interruption of the other, therefore removing responsibility from the good to correct the wrongs of the bad. After performing experiments and perfecting one that allows him to separate both identities into two separate beings (still sharing the same body, just at different times), Jekyll is now able to switch between being Henry Jekyll and Edward Hyde; the embodiment or Jykell's purely evil side. This helped alleviate the guilt from Jekyll because "It was Hyde, after all, and Hyde alone, that was guilty. Jekyll was no worse; he woke again to his good qualities seemingly unimpaired; he would even make haste, where it was possible, to undo the evil done by Hyde. And thus his conscience slumbered"

(Stevenson, ch. 10, 5). Again, by separating the two versions of himself, Jekyll is able to take away the guilt of pursuing evil acts because his conscious wakes up in a different state than the one that performed the acts.

Splitting two entities, using science and mysticism to interrupt the natural order of things eventually came back to bite Jekyll. He states after waking up one morning, “Now the hand of Henry Jekyll … was large, firm, white, and comely. But the hand which I now saw… was the hand of Edward Hyde … I had gone to bed Henry Jekyll, I had awakened Edward Hyde.” (Stevenson, ch.10, 6). A lot of the time in literature, white is often a symbol of purity, so it is no surprise that Jekyll has white hands, as he is the more pure version of himself. In this scene, Jekyll wakes up as Hyde and realizes he has no control over the switch between being Jekyll and being Hyde. Because they are two separate individuals instead of two sides of the same person (even being given a different identity) it is natural that one will begin to gain power over the other or act and think for itself; this includes when they choose to use the vessel they are sharing.

Hyde even makes a reappearance in the end after a two month hiatus for the murder of Danvers Carew which he committed. As all gothic stories end with the central gothic irony, Jekyll’s new reality could not continue and succeed in this narrative, returning to Jekyll’s normal state which is to live in one body without suppressing or separating himself from Hyde’s evil nature. If one dies, they both die because they are the same person, no matter how separate they may appear to be physically.

The narrator of *The Black Cat*, contrary to Dr. Jekyll, obtains this attitude only after several years of having his cat. “Our friendship lasted, in this manner, for several years, during which my general temperament and character...had (I blush to confess it) experienced a radical alteration for the worse. I grew, day by day, more moody, more irritable, more regardless of the

feelings of others. I suffered myself to use intemperate language to my wife. At length, I even offered her personal violence" (Poe, 4). The narrator overtime adopts this alternative or wicked persona rather than having it be a part of his original personality in the past. He even expresses his shock at this change in attitude with the language used to describe it like "suffered" and mentioning how he is embarrassed to confess such a development.

This shift in character began to build until one day he acted upon his low temperament. The narrator says that it was as though "The fury of a demon instantly possessed me. I knew myself no longer. My original soul seemed, at once, to take its flight from my body; and a more than fiendish malevolence, gin-nurtured, thrilled every fibre of my frame" (Poe, 4). Similarly to how Jekyll describes the way Hyde would talk over him, the narrator speaks of how this malicious feeling took over their own body as well; there was a physical shift felt within.

This take over lasts until the morning when the narrator wakes up to the violence they had committed. As the cat's eye recovers, the narrator states that their grief slowly turned to irritation and then perverseness. "Who has not, a hundred times, found himself committing a vile or a stupid action, for no other reason than because he knows he should *not*? Have we not a perpetual inclination, in the teeth of our best judgment, to violate that which is *Law*, merely because we understand it to be such?" In this context, the narrator is speaking about hanging the cat. Although the narrator speaks about doing wrong for the sake of wrongdoing, they also seem to try and justify their actions by saying it was in favor of the kitten. This act is done knowing it is a sin and that it will be met with the punishment necessary for committing such an act. Even though this is an evil thing to do, it is done with the intention of self torture in mind rather than self satisfaction the way Jekyll and Hyde would commit crime.

The narrator slowly starts to return to their sympathetic self and begin to once again feel guilt and remorse for their actions. One day the narrator spots another black cat and grows fond of it; they decide to take them home. What starts out as, “When it reached the house it domesticated itself at once, and became immediately a great favorite with my wife.” (Poe, 8) immediately turned to “...feelings of disgust and annoyance rose into the bitterness of hatred... I came to look upon it with unutterable loathing...” (Poe, 9). There is only a brief moment that the character feels guilt and remorse for their actions before being swallowed by these negative feelings again in a similar way to how Jekyll for two months lived normally as himself before his own feelings of annoyance began to come back. It seems as though suppression of negative emotion builds up and then takes over these two characters (the narrator and Henry Jekyll).

In parallel to Henry Jekyll, after their first crime of cutting out the black cat’s eye, the intensity of their actions only escalates. One day when visiting their old home, the narrator and their wife come to the realization that the cat had followed them. The narrator in an act of anger, annoyance and disbelief swings at the cat but strikes his wife instead. He states directly after the murder, “This hideous murder accomplished, I set myself forthwith, and with entire deliberation, to the task of concealing the body.” (Poe, 11). It is evident in this confession and admittance of their thought process the narrator here shows no remorse for their actions and does not have emotions to process. Instead of regret or sorrow after killing their own wife, the narrator’s first thought is how they will get rid of the body. Even the language used can suggest to the readers that he may even be proud of this; he says the murder was “accomplished”.

The representation and presence of the spirit of perverseness in each story compliments the other; while Jekyll always struggled between balancing his good and evil side, this is only something the narrator of *The Black Cat* begins to explore later on in their life. While Jekyll tried

to separate his good and evil side, they both came together at the end and what happened to one also happened to the other because they are one being and not two. The narrator returned to his unremorseful self that he tried to suppress after killing his first cat. In both stories there is a return to the characters own definitions of normalcy.