

Fatma Oukili

Professor Scanlan

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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 their own 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 the whole situation. 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 darker nature 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 this story) the narrator first mentions the spirit of perverseness.

Dr. Jekyll speaks of how all men have been at fault of 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.

The narrator of *The Black Cat*, contrary to Dr. Jekyll, obtains this attitude only after several years of having his cat for a couple years. "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.