



Reading Monstrosity: Transgender Identity in the Victorian Era and Gothic Literature

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Abstract

In recent years the erasure and criminalisation of transgender identities have increased on a global scale, making the historical validation of transgender identities paramount within literary discourse. While explicit mention of gender divergence and transgender identities are few and far between, there exist numerous characterisations in Victorian literature which lend to transgender possibilities, as we would define them today. Thus, this article asks: Are transgender identities either explicitly or implicitly explored in Victorian gothic literature, and if so, how do representations of gender divergence impact a societal understanding of transgender histories? This project finds its footing in new historicism alongside queer and gender theory, evaluating transformation and monstrosity within *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Keywords

Transgender, Gender Divergence, Monstrosity, Socio-bodily Dysphoria

Introduction: The Case For Transgender Coding In Victorian Gothic Literature's Human Monster

Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are timeless classics within the literary canon which initially appear to explore moral corrosion in the pursuit of pleasure. Both the characters of Dr. Henry Jekyll/Mr. Edward Hyde and Dorian Gray are characterised by their indulgence in pleasure, subsequent shame and continued attention to their public image. It's this latter theme, the impact of one's public image on the self, from which undertones of queer liberation and possible transgender identity arise. While literary scholarship has previously framed Jekyll and Gray's actions as being in pursuit of pleasure, such framing has concentrated on homoeroticism rather than *monstrosity*.

Monstrosity is itself a well-known theme of gothic literature and is a theme of particular importance when analysing the bodily experience of transgender individuals alongside the, often scientifically altered or created, "unnatural" body of an assumed monster (Marotta 2024, p. 342). Focusing on monstrosity as implied *gender divergence* is critical to transgender-literary studies as "contrast to overt and explicit depictions of transness, tacit representational strategies are found in works that do not label themselves as trans literature" (Joubin 2024, p. 33). Nixing monstrosity from the discourse in favour of homoeroticism only serves to erase the already hardly visible transgender narratives present during an era where gender transition was merely seen as sexual deviance, or otherwise transgender identities were conflated with homosexuality. After all, historically society has favoured a "metonymical relationship between skin (as visible sex) and gender" (Koch-Rein 2018, p. 161); which is to say that the external body dictated how individuals are perceived and what gendered expectations they ought to abide by.

This so-called "metonymical" relationship has resulted in the perpetuation of the misconception that transgender identities are a relatively new social phenomenon, rather than a long oppressed and underrepresented group. By linking sexuality and gender identity, heteronormative assumptions imposed a binary categorisation rooted in racism which persists today. Notably, what was previously "multiple, flexible categor[ies] of sexuality [is now] a stringent and rigid singularity of a gay act" (Appleman 2011, p. 1005). Though Victorian English society cited acts not considered part of the biblical tradition as sinful, effectively othering those whose identities were

marginalised, progress has been slow. Still, transgender identities have shown themselves in literature throughout history, often by way of metaphor and allegory during times of queer criminalisation; and both Stevenson and Wilde offer prime examples of the way authors may have weaved transgender narratives into fiction. Understanding the historical context of queerness in Victorian England and allusions to transgender identities through monstrosity via internal conflict and transformation within the texts is critical to meaningfully engaging with discourse surrounding transgender visibility, since “historians tend to interpret people from the past as, effectively, cis until proven otherwise” (Heyam 2022, p. 19). Thus, in uncovering the transgender narratives heavily shrouded by homoeroticism within Stevenson and Wilde’s texts, a new, diverse literary canon emerges.

Looking at each author’s protagonist, Jekyll and Gray offer unique explanations of the internal turmoil transgender individuals face as a direct result of their place in society, and the performance of their assumed identities from which respect is garnered. The characters of Henry Jekyll and Dorian Gray are individuals struggling with the dichotomy between the public perception of their performed selves and their innermost selves, producing an allegory for transgender identity as “monsters” to society. As Susan Stryker points out in her now famous essay “My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix,” “The transsexual body is an unnatural body. It is the product of medical science. It is a technological construction. It is flesh torn apart and sewn together again in a shape other than that in which it was born” (Stryker 1994, p. 238). It is not the internal difference which constitutes the perceived monstrosity of transgender individuals, but rather the alteration of the flesh. Just as Stryker once tackled Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, we must look beyond the explicit and towards the implicit words of both Stevenson and Wilde to prove that literature shares a common history with the transgender community.

Hence the critical role the motif of transformation plays within both texts’ constructions of monstrosity. How do personal transformation and physical transformation collide with themes of pleasure and shame? For what reason is it important to delineate moments of transformation and identity in relation to the conflation of gender and sexuality? The answer to these questions will become clear once we recognise that queer narratives are already being explored by both Stevenson and Wilde. Therefore, the physical transformations within *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* serve to enhance the respective narratives as allegorical or extended metaphors for the transgender experience during the Victorian era.

Transgender Identity in The Post-Modern Era

Though we must recognise that past narratives cannot be wholly judged outside of their spatiotemporal relevance, when assessing transness within past narratives there must still be a firm grasp of the current discourse. Such a task can be difficult, as even in 2011, English schools didn’t formally discuss transgender identities, “and more widely than school settings, being trans was generally not as known in the same way being LGB was” (Raines 2023, p. 31). This lack of visibility has prevented transgender individuals from finding community, resulting in young people suppressing their emotions related to gender. Though it has been argued that repression is necessary for a functioning society, repression of “those instinctual drives and the conscious desires they instigate and to mold aggressive and sexual impulses as well as an initially grandiose sense of self to the demands of life with others” (Rivkin and Ryan 2017, p. 567). While Rivkin and Ryan focus on aggressive and sexual impulses here, their ideas can be applied to other impulses, including an individual’s sense of self. Repression of one’s gender identity leads to feelings of socio-bodily dysphoria, a form of gender dysphoria which highlights one’s feeling as though their body is out of place societally. Because transness is who you are, not what you do (Heyam 2022, p. 3), the rejection of one’s internal self can be detrimental to their mental health.

Since living as one’s gender stems from desire, desire being defined as “a craving or affinity that is infused with both the pleasure of investment...and the pain of irremediable lack” (Varnado 2020, p. 13), when an individual is unable to live as their internal self, they can experience “at various times and to varying degrees, deeply embodied anxiety, discomfort and worry” (Todd 2024, p. 2). Research has further uncovered that transgender individuals often feel “negative, antagonistic and otherwise hostile gazes directed toward them in everyday spaces that produce feelings aligned with ‘out-of-placeness’” (Todd 2024, p. 8) which contributes to “quasi self-othering and conformity paradoxically [which] reinforces cis privilege in particular spaces” (Todd 2024, p. 10). Ironically, this means that transgender individuals must conform to heteronormative expectations and perform either their sex assigned at birth or gender identity in alignment with a heteronormative gender binary if they are to feel safe within some community spaces. However, this also reinforces mental exhaustion (Todd 2024, p. 11), as transgender individuals are constantly masking and/or code-switching.

Though one of the ways transgender individuals combat gender dysphoria is by transitioning, it is important to recognize that the fluidity of transitions means some transgender individuals experience *spatio-bodily dysphoria* during their transition, as well as before their transition. Transitions can be social, medical, or both. For the purpose of this discussion, *social transition* refers to “the process whereby a trans person begins living and presenting socially (and privately) as their true gender” (Raines 2023, p. 119); this is reminiscent of the way Jekyll/Hyde cultivates his identity as Hyde by renting and furnishing an apartment, and how Gray maintains

acquaintances who partake in his supposed moral depravity while also maintaining more traditionally upstanding friendships.

Social transitions can include changing one's name, pronouns, clothing, etc. Meanwhile, a *medical transition* is when one seeks medical assistance, which can include surgical intervention or hormone replacement therapy (HRT) (Raines 2023, p. 142). Notably, the research has shown that marginalised bodies are "subtly and overtly societally, socially and spatially reinforced as disruptive, as bodies that disturb structural power regimes" (Todd 2024, p. 4). The transitioned transgender body rejects heteronormative culture in its transgression of the gender binary. It demands of the cisgender body the very co-equal dignity the female demands of the male (Irigaray 1995, p. 8).

The Human Monster

The term "monster" evokes grotesque, often inhuman, imagery. We think of Greece's Medusa, *Beowulf's* Grendel, the werewolf of Marie de France's *Bisclavret*, Ireland's Dullahan, the Norse *Trollriður*, Bram Stoker's Dracula, and The Creature in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. These beings, anthropomorphic in description, left us uncomfortable as children because of their uncanny nature. Their vague reflection of humanity spurred on fear precisely because their imitation of humanity exposes our most existential concerns. But this difference of skin, as Stryker puts it, does not define the monster. Rather than supernatural intervention, man-made conflict and violence separate man from monster.

Take the earlier example of Medusa, a mythological being who serves as the embodiment of feminine rage and the wrath of sexual assault survivors. Medusa terrifies and turns countless men to stone. It is these actions that result in the demi-god Perseus' battle with her. Upon her decapitation, Perseus is hailed a hero. But Medusa's monstrosity does not stem from the serpents which replace her hair, her appearance merely isolates her. It is her paralyzing gaze, her ability to enact such finite violence, which renders her monstrous. Such is true of Grendel, Bisclavret, the *Trollriður*, Dracula and Dr. Frankenstein's Creature. Their bodies, the skin in which they move through the world and society, provide an initial fear of difference. Their solitude is a product of human society's refusal to accept and welcome them. However, it is only once violence is enacted that their personhood is revoked, and the label of "monster" replaces it.

The human monster, then, is the most fearsome of all precisely because of the divergence from societal norms. A human being who is deemed dissimilar enough from general society that their isolation renders them inhuman. For Victorian England, humanity meant living within the confines of a carefully constructed definition of masculinity and femininity. Men and women were expected to marry, raise children, and care for their spouse, all while adhering to the fashions of the times. While much of literature reflects this heteronormative portrayal of humanity, gothic literature routinely de-stabilizes notions of what it means to be human, with monstrosity embodying a disruption of gender norms (Weaver 2018, p. 121).

As Stryker aptly notes in the forward for *Transgothic in Literature and Culture*, literature is autoethnographic. Just as writers narrate themselves into existence, they "may narrativize and give meanings to others' lives" (Joubin 2024, p. 32). Be it due to the author's personal history and identity or the narrative being written, "Trans studies has been gothic all along, it seems, and gothic studies implicitly trans" (Stryker 2018, p. xiii). It is not simply because of the theme of monstrosity which has deeply embedded itself within gothic literature, but ever-present bodily transformation or metamorphoses. Such bodily transformation is not only found in folklore, mythology, and literary history. As the forward notes, human society has a long history of bodily transformation, with such techniques "becoming more accessible, and more widely employed, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, precisely when new medicojuridical discourses of biological racism and scientific sexology were being promulgated" (Stryker 2018, p. xiii). Bodily transformation was not exclusively portrayed in literary fiction throughout history, but in individuals' daily lives.

Taking depictions of bodily transformation into consideration, the parallels between those deemed inhuman and fictional monsters proves eerily similar to the experience of the transgender community. This is particularly true as sexuality and gender identity were frequently conflated under the same umbrella of "sexual perversion." Notably,

Extreme, perverse, violent, excessive, and masochistic desires find home in the Gothic, and violently oppose and undermine the sexual status quo...Gothic literature and culture embody these anxieties, and necessarily depict gender variance as violent, monstrous, and demonic. (Zigarovich 2018, p. 3)

Make no mistake, Wilde's novel certainly masked homoeroticism under the guise of artistry; Basil's infatuation with Dorian is evident. However, Dorian shifts from human to monster via violence towards those who view him romantically, Sibyl Vane and Basil Hallward. This is the very same kind of violence transphobic individuals use both in the past and today to instill the public with fear of the transgender community. This fearmongering of the

transgender community will be explored in greater depth in the next section; what is critical to recognize at this point is that the human monster is only rendered as such due to a physical difference of skin, followed by acts of violence.

So, if assumed monstrosity stems from the skin, and true monstrosity from violence, then it stands to reason that the path away from monstrosity is understanding, which necessitates language. In Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the creature resists the isolation and hostility thrust upon him by mastering human language, claiming "a position as a speaking subject and enact[ing] verbally the very subjectivity denied it in the specular realm" (Stryker 1994, p. 241); so too does the human monster. It is why the transgender community clings to terminology, both old and new, in efforts to establish historical precedence and legitimacy. There is, however, an

inability of language to represent the transgendered subject's movement over time between stably gendered positions in a linguistic structure. Our situation effectively reverses the one encountered by Frankenstein's monster. Unlike the monster, we often successfully cite the culture's visual norms of gendered embodiment. This citation becomes a subversive resistance when, through a provisional use of language, we verbally declare the unnaturalness of our claim to the subject positions we nevertheless occupy. (Stryker 1994, p. 241)

Though scholarship could examine the linguistic gendering of fictional characters through constructions of masculinity and femininity for the text's respective era, language which explicitly names the transgender community is relatively new.

Considering the Latin roots *cis*, "on the same side of" and *trans*, "across," the concept of gender is relational (Joubin 2024, p. 32), spatial, in a state of aspiration turned being. Incidentally, the term "monster" also stems from Latin. More specifically, it comes from the noun *monstrum*, "divine portent," which itself was derived from the verb *monere*, "to warn." "Monster," then, referred to

living things of anomalous shape or structure, or to fabulous creatures like the sphinx who were composed of strikingly incongruous parts, because the ancients considered the appearance of such beings to be a sign of some impending supernatural event. Monsters, like angels, functioned as messengers and heralds of the extraordinary. (Stryker 1994, p. 240)

In reflecting on where the term's Latin roots, a divine messenger, one must conclude that somewhere throughout history, the term "monster" strayed from its original meaning. The hijra of India were once, prior to British colonial rule, worshipped and revered as apostles of the gods. Indigenous tribes held Two-Spirit individuals with a similar level of venerability. Ancient cultures hailed gender divergence as sacred, *monstrum*, a monster was not to be feared, but treasured.

European colonialism was justified "through assertions of white racial superiority [and...] European colonizers interpreted Indigenous forms of sex/gender as incompatible with and inferior to their own rigid categories of male and female" (Sharp 2024, p. 176). In other words, what we would now call transgender identities were erased alongside other aspects of cultures experiencing European colonialism. This is why transgender literary scholarship must disrupt the conceptualisation of transness as monstrous either through displacement, "shifting who or what is considered monstrous" or reclamation (Sharp 2024, p. 179). Post-European colonialism, gender divergent bodies have been portrayed as scientific experimentation, if not scientific oddity. The nineteenth century saw white people exhibit

bodies (and pre-served remains) of Black and Brown women such as Khoisan Sarah Baartman and Indigenous Mexican Julia Pastrana. Baartman's hypersexualized hips and Pastrana's facial and body hair exceeded the bounds of acceptable femininity: their supposed monstrosity lay not only in their racial difference, but also in their deviation from white European ideals of femininity. (Sharp 2024, p. 176)

While these women did not align with white European norms, and subsequently their bodies were placed on display to be criticised. When monstrosity is determined by an imperialist body, we cannot reconcile with the lost history and representation of minority communities. And if gender divergent bodies are viewed as products of scientific experimentation, such that transgender academics like Stryker find kinship in Frankenstein's creature, then what does that say about Henry Jekyll and Dorian Gray's transformations?

Just as Harlan Weaver traces the "monstrous anger and intense feelings that move, wave-like, through" Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Susan Stryker's "*My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix*," we too must "identify points of constructive interference that demarcate the emergence of difference between them...in reading them through their proximity" (Weaver 2018, p. 120). The emotional strain experienced by Jekyll/Hyde and Gray as they transform from man to monster is within such close proximity to their implied

gender divergence that their narratives are prime examples for transgender representation through monstrosity via displacement and reclamation.

Medicalism And Criminalisation of Transgender Individuals

The year was 1967, British parliament passed the Sexual Offences Act, decriminalising sexual relations between consenting males 21 years and older. Male homosexuality had been criminalised in England since 1885 (Appleman 2011, p. 988). This was a step forward for queer rights, and yet many felt the incomplete justice which had been issued. The 2010 Equality Act garnered a more joyous reception, as parliament firmly decided that sex-based discrimination laws applied to members of the transgender community. Though it continued to be the unfortunate reality that

a lot of evidence we have for gender-nonconforming lives comes from legal and medical contexts. These are the kinds of records in which gender-nonconforming people overwhelmingly become visible. But law and medicine aren't neutral contexts in which people give objective narratives of their experience: they're high-stakes environments. (Heyam 2022, p. 10)

Between the criminalisation of queer lives, and the conflation of homosexuality and gender divergence, transgender lives have largely been recorded in medicojudicial contexts which show the invasion of their privacy and dignity by cisgender officials who target them under the assertion of monstrosity.

Knowing this, it is no wonder an 1886 Stevenson and 1891 Wilde would be hesitant to write explicitly queer narratives, especially narratives which may have focused on transgender identities; not to mention post-modern literature's limited transgender visibility. Even when a person or character meets the current criteria for identifying as transgender, "we get anxious if the person we're dealing with lived before the advent of terminology that we use to talk about trans identities today" which often leads to the dismissal of the possibility of transness (Heyam 2022, p. 2). The issue then becomes that "our narratives of trans history are *recent*, avoiding challenges of terminology or evidence" (Heyam 2022, p. 14). In doing so, the representation of transgender narratives in literature remains problematic. This is why gothic literature's transitory monstrosity, which is notably present in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, lends to transgender possibilities which "simultaneously exist outside of and shed light on hegemonic constructions of staid, natural orders" (Haeftle-Thomas 2018, p. 99).

A commonality between transgender narratives, within both past literature and contemporary media today, is the villainisation of transgender individuals. Worse than the panic which reveals "the resonances between the paranoid affective machinery of the witch hunt and that of homophobia" which presents itself through depictions of queer desire (Varnado 2020, p. 197) is the issue of assumed monstrosity. When reading literature through a queer lens, scholars must focus on "what happens to sexed, gendered, and classed bodies—how they're rendered monstrous, other, and inhuman, and they're crushed in the machinery of a paranoid patriarchal order that projects its own worst content onto them" (Varnado 2020, p. 148). Gender divergent bodies are not only stripped of their humanity, they're criminalised and erased. The result of erasing transgender narratives within literature is the marginalisation of transgender individuals when they do appear within modern media.

However, the relatively recent invention of language now used to describe the transgender experience means previously written literature which codes individuals as transgender must be re-examined with the understanding that transgender identities have historically been conflated with queer sexual orientation through monstrosity. This conflation of gender and sexuality may be due in part to the fact that "[t]ransphobia is recycled homophobia" (Raines 2023, p. 83). Just as black bodies were dehumanised and criminalised, so too are transgender bodies; and medicojudicial use the same playbook in both cases. If characters were previously read as queer, they were thought of as "impersonators" and "have often been scrutinised for their sexuality" (Heyam 2022, p. 105). This idea of impersonation has been viewed as somewhat akin to what one might recognize now as the drag community, but in Victorian England, male homosexuality, drag culture and transgender identity were all considered one mode of impersonation: a blight against women.

However, this conflation neglects the nuanced internalised feelings which code individuals as transgender, rather than homosexual or drag artists. Still, between the explicit criminalisation of queerness, and Havelock Ellis' publication of *Sexual Inversion* in 1896, it was Victorian England's stance that "homosexuality was a way of life, albeit a neurotic one, that hopefully could be cured by the wonders of medicine and science" (Appleman 2011, p. 992). Individuals who might today align themselves with the transgender community did not have the language to describe gender dysphoria, socio-bodily dysphoria, or other aspects of their queerness. The most critical in determining whether one is transgender instead of homosexual, or another sexuality, is the feeling of one's performed self, one's gender, aligning with their internal self and physical self. When one's body, sense of identity, and identity as perceived by the public are in alignment, they are cisgender, rather than transgender. However, when an individual is not cisgender, historically they have been assumed to have an inversion of gender traits, and

are labelled as homosexual, regardless of how they saw themselves. This medicalisation of queerness led to the belief that gender and sexuality were one and the same, and therefore a malady in need of a cure.

This conflation often led to the assumed monstrosity of transgender individuals. As Stryker says in “My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix,” “I am a transexual, and therefore I am a monster” (1994, p. 240). On behalf of the transgender community, Stryker proclaims, “*monstrum sum*.” She asserts her worth “in spite of the conditions [her] monstrosity requires [her] to face, and redefine[s] a life worth living” (Stryker 1994, p. 250). And that is the crux of it; transgender authenticity is overcoming obstacles, often in the form of criminal law or medical invasiveness, in an effort to prove that transgender lives have value.

Take the case of Stella Boulton and Fanny Park, whose entry in Wikipedia describes them as male homosexual cross-dressers. Despite press clippings from the time which may lead readers to believe otherwise, legal proceedings affirm that Boulton and Park were transgender women, though the word “transgender” was not yet in vogue. Legal documentation and witness accounts prove both Boulton and Park presented themselves as women in their daily lives. In other words, they lived full-time as their self-affirmed gender. After a year under police surveillance, Boulton and Park were arrested and subjected to degrading treatment. Their monsterisation began with judicial targeting, as the prosecution argued their clothing choice/cross-dress was tantamount to indecent behaviour, and the intrusive examination both women endured by examining police surgeon James Paul (Joyce 2022, p. 202). Of all the indignities the two women faced, the medical examination conducted by Paul, who proved to be an unreliable witness and whose testimony was dismissed, was certainly the worst. Paul testified to stripping Boulton and Park and performing an exam which was so invasive that he is recorded as saying he could “see right through to the rectum” (Joyce 2022, p. 202). To say that Boulton and Park were dehumanised is an understatement.

The discovery of their male sex-assignment at birth was met by British law, which “entirely subsume[d] gender presentation into (homo)sexuality and in doing so [sought] to punish indiscriminately all forms of gender nonconformity” (Joyce 2022, p. 192). During the legal proceedings, Boulton was subject to dehumanizing references as “he, she or it” by Francis Cox, a witness for the prosecution who admitted to flirting with her (Joyce 2022, p. 197). In ascribing both masculine and feminine pronouns to Boulton before ultimately landing on object pronouns, Cox rendered Boulton inhuman in a legal context. His use of “it” is an example of “how language affects social actions in overt ways through explicit descriptions of gender change” (Joubin 2024, p. 30). Similar to Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, which asserts that if gender is the repeated stylisation of the body, then transformation is subversive gendering (2006, p. 45), Cox’s use of language to render Boulton inhuman during these proceedings places her in the role of sexual aggressor. If she had been found guilty of engaging in trickery to engage in sexual activity with men, she’d be rendered monstrous through an act of sexual violence. In this way, the Victorian criminal justice system probed a “relationship between animality, which was previously used to withhold] Black and Brown people from the status of being fully human” (Sharp 2024, p. 176), to gender divergence. This application of scientific monstrosity, initially constructed by racism, is recycled and repurposed as transphobia.

Moreover, gender as a social practice develops and evolves over time and space (Joubin 2024, p. 31), and as the proceedings unfolded, it became more and more evident that Stella Boulton and Fanny Park adhered to the feminine practices of their time. Boulton’s mother testified that she, Stella, enjoyed wearing feminine dress as early as 6 years old and “before [s]he could well speak” (Joyce 2022, p. 201). It remains clear that Boulton was not a cross-dressing male homosexual, but deeply identified with femininity and womanhood to the point of living much of her life passing as a woman. Her gender identity persisted from childhood, and her friendship with Park was itself evidence of a kinship found in likeminded company.

As the “longstanding critical consensus that Fanny and Stella should be read as homosexual contains an awkward echo of Victorian jurisprudence, in essence siding with the prosecution against the evidence of gender nonconformity that was presented in their defense and that led to their acquittal” (Joyce 2022, p. 191), to discuss these women as anything other than transgender is to ignore the defence’s argument and the court’s findings. When we take into consideration what medical professionals and social scientists now know about transgender identities and revisit the testimonies and lives of Boulton and Park, there is enough evidence and similarity with the past treatment and expressions of gender identity that we can read them as transgender *a posteriori* (Joyce 2022, p. 227).

Across the sea was no different, as Frances Thompson discovered in 1876. Thompson was a freed African-American transgender woman arrested in Tennessee. She was charged with the misdemeanour of “masquerading; the popular local press and the authorities rushed to the conclusion that the ‘shapeshifter’ lied about her gender” (Haefele-Thomas 2022, p. 97). The press publicly accused Thompson of lying about her gender and being sexually assaulted during the Memphis riots a decade prior. Thompson, who once walked proudly through Memphis, “was rendered monstrous because she transgressed several ‘normal’ societal boundaries...Suddenly, the African-American trans woman [became] the devil in the public imagination” (Haefele-Thomas 2022, p. 98). Her intersectional identity as a disabled black woman became monstrous under public scrutiny, despite the acceptance and support of her community at the time, due to her transgender identity. She was marked as inhuman for

transforming her appearance to live amongst society as her authentic self, which others deemed the perverse cross-dress of a black man.

A prime example of monstrosity at play in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* is the way Edward Hyde is described by Utterson, among others. One of the first descriptions of Hyde references the uncanny, exploring a deep sense of discomfort associated with inhumanity resembling humanity. Enfield tells Utterson that Hyde “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” (Stevenson 1886, *Story of the Door*). Here, the phrasing “deformed...he gives a strong feeling of deformity” is rather telling. Though his appearance showed no malformation of man, Enfield was uncomfortable as he recognised in Hyde something which made him appear less like a man. Not to mention that Utterson is suspicious of Hyde simply for Jekyll’s will naming Hyde as his beneficiary in the event of either his death or unexplained disappearance (Stevenson 1886, *Search for Mr. Hyde*). Hyde’s very existence is subject not only to visual discomfort, but legal suspicion, a narrative which closely resembles the transgender experience in Victorian England to begin with.

This monstrosity is further explored in Hyde’s characterisation when Utterson first encounters him. When Utterson addresses Hyde, “Mr. Hyde shrank back with a hissing intake of the breath” (Stevenson 1886, *Search for Mr. Hyde*), and their interaction ends after Hyde “snarled aloud into a savage laugh” (Stevenson 1886, *Search for Mr. Hyde*). In both moments, Stevenson utilizes loaded language in the form of “shrank,” “hissing,” “snarled” and “savage” for the explicit purpose of characterizing Hyde as not only displeasing to look at, but to be around. He is savage, othered, and made into a social monster. Notably, this is also a moment in which Hyde is actively making himself smaller by shrinking back. Hyde is repeatedly described as a short, dwarf-like, young man, which implies that despite already being small, he intends on making himself smaller, rather than more imperious. Hyde is attempting to become somewhat invisible, an action often employed by transgender individuals to avoid social pariahhood, if not legal consequence.

Transgender individuals tend to feel pressure to wear specific things (Raines 2023, p. 53), if not act in certain ways, be it in an effort to pass or to avoid conflict. In cultures where gender roles are heavily ingrained, breaking cultural norms “can lead to treating those rule-breakers differently” (Raines 2023, p. 81). Jekyll creates his elixir, which allows him to act as his internal self, to enact a different gender expression, while mitigating othering and stigmatisation within social contexts. Within the transgender community, such social isolation which related to their gender identity is referred to as *socio-bodily dysphoria*, describing “dysphoric experiences emergent from social interactions, encounters and atmospheres that produce young trans people as ‘out-of-place’ and reinforce their exhaustion” (Todd 2024, p. 11). While social isolation is not experienced by transgender individuals alone, the resulting feelings of being out-of-place and mental exhaustion stemming from performing both an internal self and a perceived self are uniquely queer experiences.

Similarly, Gray’s connection to monstrosity stems from the separation of his internal self, his soul, and his performed self in public. Like Hyde, the portrait takes the brunt of the socio-bodily dysphoria in Gray’s place. Gray himself views the portrait as disgusting, wondering if it was “to become a monstrous and loathsome thing, to be hidden away in a locked room, to be shut out from the sunlight that had so often touched to brighter gold the waving wonder of its hair?” (Wilde 1891, p. 102). This distaste for his internal self is both reflective of internalised transphobia, where the socio-bodily dysphoria and societal assertions of transgender identities as monstrous or sinful begin to tear away at the individual’s self-worth. Gray does lose pride in himself, going so far as to reveal what society deems as his evil influence on young people to Basil Hallward (Wilde 1891, p. 144). It is a moment of weakness where his mask slips in front of his closest friend. Yet it is also a moment of manic villainy, since queercoded Gray is depicted as nothing more than a heartless man from whom only cruelty, death, and rumour can arise.

The Strange Case Of Dr. Jekyll And Mr. Hyde

Reviewing Raines and Freud, it is clear that *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* not only showcases the duality of man as an internal conflict between the internal and performed self, but the use of medical intervention in order to bring forth the internal self, both being emblematic of transgender narratives. Stevenson’s portrayal of transformation within the novel alludes to a social transition, as well as what might now be called medical interventions, or a medical transition, with particular attention to symbolism placed on the elixir Jekyll concocts.

During a medical transition, the impetus for physiological changes is the intervention of hormone replacement therapy. HRT not only provides the body with a higher concentration of the hormones of one’s internal gender, but changes one’s secondary sex characteristics as well. Those taking estrogen may notice breasts develop, body hair becoming finer, skin becoming softer, and a change in fat distribution. Meanwhile, those taking testosterone may notice their voice deepening, body hair growing and becoming coarser, the development of facial hair, a change in fat distribution, and, though rare, an increase in height. This is where the elixir that Jekyll concocts comes into play, as it acts as a mythologised dose of HRT while simultaneously highlighting feelings of dysphoria.

According to Raines, “symptoms of gender dysphoria culminated in feeling trapped. Trapped in a body that made me unhappy, and trapped with people seeing and treating me as someone I wasn’t. I was desperate to live as who I truly am” (Raines 2023, p. 102). While his assertion here pulled from his own experience as a transgender man, he does go on to explain the findings of his own research and share stories from other transgender individuals. Raines is backed up by research centring transgender youths which highlights experiencing distress related to being perceived as their assigned gender, rather than their true gender (Todd 2024, p. 10). Thus, transgender individuals may opt to seek medical transition, with the most common form of medical intervention being HRT. Thus, when it is revealed that Jekyll has been drinking an elixir which results in physiological changes to his body, the connection between today’s medical intervention and what may have been a pipe dream in the past opens the door to further evaluation of Jekyll/Hyde as representing a transgender narrative, more specifically that of medical transition.

During his visit to Lanyon, Jekyll/Hyde comes out to his friend. He is terrified of the result, but feels a sense of urgency given his increasing mental distress. He appears on Lanyon’s steps in the form of Hyde, and reveals himself as Jekyll by drinking his hastily prepared elixir; “he seemed to swell— his face became suddenly black and the features seemed to melt and alter...like a man restored from death— there stood Henry Jekyll!” (Stevenson 1886, *Dr. Lanyon’s Narrative*). The features of Hyde shift as he grows into Jekyll. This transformation alters Jekyll/Hyde’s secondary sex characteristics, as well as his mental state. As Jekyll, he is calmer, whereas as Hyde he is impulsive. This can also be attributed to the way sudden changes in hormones impact both the body and mind, as many parallels have been noted between Jekyll’s elixir and the premenstrual hormones within female bodies. Interestingly enough, “Like Jekyll’s elixir[produced in his Victorian-era laboratory], the hormones of the menstrual cycle are said to have the power to turn a normally placid and nurturing woman into an enraged menstrual monster” (Chrisler and Caplan 2002, p. 275). Hyde’s monstrosity is continually mentioned throughout the novel, and the elixir is the point of origin in that it changes Jekyll/Hyde’s body and maturity. With menstruation signifying transformation of the girl’s body into the life-granting woman’s body, Jekyll’s elixir could be read as a metaphor for medical transformation, especially when considering that HRT comes with the warning that patients may experience irritability or changes in mood.

Notably, pre-menstrual hormones have also been tied to moral monstrosity in the same capacity as Jekyll’s elixir: murder. Two murder trials in England accepted pleas of diminished responsibility regarding female bodied defendants’ pre-menstrual syndrome, introducing the idea that pre-menstrual hormones could turn women into dangerous criminals (Chrisler and Caplan 2002, pp. 283-4). This is much like how the gentle Jekyll turns into the “particularly wicked-looking” man who, “with ape-like fury” beats a man to death until his “bones were audibly shattered and the body jumped upon the roadway” (Stevenson 1886, *The Carew Murder Case*). Hyde is characterised by his moral departure from Jekyll, one which comes from his transformation upon the almost magical elixir and marks him as monstrous.

One study found that women “adopted a ‘dualist discourse’ that parallels the Jekyll and Hyde or ‘me[and]not me’ presentation [with one interviewee speaking] of herself as being possessed by a sort of menstrual madness...that causes her to lose control of her emotions and actions” (Chrisler and Caplan 2002, p. 287). If Hyde’s consumption of the elixir is emblematic of a medical transition via HRT intervention, then Hyde is experiencing pre-menstrual syndrome. Jekyll himself seems to hold this dualist view, as he notes that “It was Hyde, after all, and Hyde alone, that was guilty. Jekyll was no worse; he woke again to his good qualities seemingly unimpaired” (Stevenson 1886, *Henry Jekyll’s Full Statement of the Case*). He sees his preformed self, Jekyll, as innocent, free of the evils his internal self, Hyde, has committed. However, his consciousness while transformed as Hyde shows he does have awareness and control of his actions as Hyde. Hyde’s completed suicide is proof of that last point, given he was aware of the danger Hyde posed by society’s standards and chooses to prevent further harm from coming to anyone else.

Which brings us to the topic of de-transition: Jekyll’s desperation to remain as his original, performed self, rather than transform into Hyde, can be read as a metaphor for *de-transitioning*. De-transitioning is when a person stops or reverses their gender transition. Because coming out is a continuous process (Raines 2023, p. 68), when someone comes out is dictated by who they’re coming out to and whether they feel safe to do so (Raines 2023, p. 66). Stevenson presents the audience with a moment of vulnerability as Hyde appears before Lanyon and confesses his identity, transforming into Jekyll. This is Hyde’s coming out, which Jekyll/Hyde later addresses as regrettable given that the stress of the secret led to Lanyon’s death. Jekyll/Hyde internalises the way he sees his internal self as a result, stating of his appearance as Hyde,

Evil besides (which I must still believe to be the lethal side of man) had left on that body an imprint of deformity and decay. And yet when I looked upon that ugly idol in the glass, I was conscious of no repugnance, rather of a leap of welcome. This, too, was myself. It seemed natural and human. In my eyes it bore a livelier image of the spirit, it seemed more express and single, than the imperfect and divided countenance I had been hitherto accustomed to call mine. (Stevenson 1886, *Henry Jekyll’s Full Statement of the Case*)

In this statement to Utterson via posthumous letter, Jekyll/Hyde acknowledges the monstrosity which others saw in his appearance as Hyde, while also stating that he had initially not viewed himself as evil. However, his desperation to remain as Jekyll shows a change in mindset, an internalised desire to return to the version of himself who was accepted by society. Though the number of transgender individuals who de-transition is miniscule, “The sad truth is that a lot of people who do de-transition do so because it’s unsafe for them to live as their true gender” (Raines 2023, p. 219). Jekyll represses Hyde because it is unsafe for him to live freely.

Returning to the resurgence of monstrosity within the text as related to a dual nature, Jekyll/Hyde himself states that “It was the curse of mankind that these incongruous fagots were thus bound together that in the agonised womb of consciousness, these polar twins should be continuously struggling. How, then, were they dissociated?” (Stevenson 1886, *Henry Jekyll’s Full Statement of the Case*). Jekyll/Hyde asks himself how his moral self, Jekyll, can be tied so deeply to his immoral self in Hyde, but what he is really identifying is his performed self being more and more difficult to perform now that he has lived as his internal self, now that he has lived as Hyde. Jekyll/Hyde writes, “At all hours of the day and night, I would be taken with the premonitory shudder; above all, if I slept, or even dozed for a moment in my chair, it was always as Hyde that I awakened” (Stevenson 1886, *Henry Jekyll’s Full Statement of the Case*). Jekyll/Hyde is not awakening as his performed self, but rather his internal, unmasked self. Rather than masking, his subconscious is bringing Hyde out, similar to how once aware of their transness, transgender individuals find it more difficult to pretend they’re cisgendered.

The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde wouldn’t be the first of Stevenson’s work to raise up queer narratives either. *Prince Otto* is described by Oliver Buckton as showcasing Otto’s “‘hermaphroditism of the soul’” as Stevenson’s characterisation of Otto “combines masculinity and sexuality as he creates a portrait in political impotence that is matched by a failure of manliness” (Danahay 2010, p. xiv). Still, Buckton’s analysis phrases this “impotence” as a “sexual inversion” (Danahay 2010, p. xiv), a dated phrase which has historically been used to stigmatize transgender identities as a form of homosexual deviance. The term “sexual inversion” not only gives rise to the conflation of gender identity with sexuality, but it refers to the historical medicalisation and criminalisation of queerness. Stevenson was no stranger to such controversy, that much is evident in the body of his works.

The Picture of Dorian Gray

Just as Stevenson was no stranger to controversy surrounding the queerness of his writing, so too was Wilde, who, having been incarcerated for his sexuality, has had numerous written works make their way to the centre of queer literary discourse. Alongside *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which has been embroiled in controversy since its publication, *The Importance of Being Earnest* “was a gleeful celebration of the invert’s double life” (Appleman 2011, p. 997) and “The Canterville Ghost” involved “‘dissident’ use of narrative strategies, genre conventions, and literary modes typically associated with women writers to expose and disrupt patriarchal ideologies, particularly when addressing the theme of gender violence” (Ponciano 2025, p. 79). Wilde’s writing was widely known for its disruption of heteronormative ideals, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is just one text in the catalogue.

The Picture of Dorian Gray not only references a transgender narrative in showcasing a double life, but in the continued use of monstrosity and the supernatural. After making a Faustian bargain to retain his youthful beauty, Gray feels a sense of pride, though pities the portrait as it changes. A similar internalised feeling of pity for the internal self is also revealed by Jack in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which encourages the thought that Wilde utilised similar themes and narrative choices to highlight the queer experience. Wilde’s tendency to self-plagiarize in this capacity, to reuse existential narratives centred on man’s duality, reveals

a “stylistic engagement” with forms and modes traditionally seen as “feminine” – such as the ghost story, Gothic, and melodrama – and that this engagement, through parody and inversion of genre conventions, functions as a “deliberately dissident strategy” to disrupt the ways in which masculinist orthodoxy and patriarchal logics typically use comedy to mask their ideologies ...exposing the gender-based violence entrenched in the narrative (Ponciano 2025, p. 85).

His take on the Faustian bargain is no different. Gray is described as a beautiful young man, Hallward telling Lord Henry Wotton, and Gray himself, that Gray is his ideal, his muse. The two men encourage Gray’s vanity, accepting his performed self in valorising his beauty and youthful innocence, and unconsciously othering his true self. Gray’s delicate descriptions, his “finely curved scarlet lips, his frank blue eyes, his crisp gold hair” (Wilde 1891, p. 19) are emblematic of a sensuality often attributed to the romantic descriptions of women. Though it “has been widely recognised that masculinity and femininity in this period were subject to cross-cutting ideological forces that led to unstable and deeply contested representations of gender roles” (Danahay 2010, p. v), such descriptions of masculinity and femininity reveal Victorian society’s awareness of gender fluidity, particularly where gender expression is concerned. Masculine beauty is mythologised, such as Sibyl Vane and the old woman calling Gray “Prince Charming” (Wilde 1891, p. 180).

Meanwhile queerness is monsterised, as Gray refers to the portrait, to his internal self, as becoming “a monstrous and loathsome thing, to be hidden away in a locked room, to be shut out from the sunlight that had so often touched to brighter gold the waving wonder of its hair” (Wilde 1891, p. 102). He further states that the portrait depicted the “hideous corruption of his soul” (Wilde 1891, p. 118), which confirms his recognition that the portrait is acting as a conduit for his internal self. Just “As it had revealed to him his own body, it would reveal to him his own soul...when blood crept from its face, and left behind a pallid mask of chalk with leaden eyes, he would keep the glamour of boyhood” (Wilde 1891, p. 103). Gray notes not only the change in the portrait as a manifestation of how his body could be transforming, but that in having his portrait-self take on the brunt of society’s distaste for who he truly is, he is able to live as his performed self without incident.

This is confirmed in his interaction with Wotton after the incident in the theatre. Upon discussing his feelings regarding Sibyl Vane’s completed suicide with Wotton, Gray says, “I felt all that you have said, but somehow I was afraid of it, and I could not express it to myself” (Wilde 1891, p. 100). He realizes he has been masking his internal self, and it is through Wotton’s assessment of him that he accepts the reality of his soul, captured by the portrait. Gray questions himself, asking “Did it merely take cognizance of what passed within the soul? He wondered, and hoped that some day he would see the change taking place before his very eyes, shuddering as he hoped it” (Wilde 1891, p. 101). At this point in the narrative, he merely wants to acknowledge the shift within his mind, his internal self, and his growing inability to hide.

The instability Gray feels parallels that of Jekyll/Hyde. Where Jekyll/Hyde becomes desperate to cease transforming into Hyde, Gray occasionally is desperate to come out. This is why when Hallward confronts him about hiding the portrait, “He shuttered, and for a moment he regretted that he had not told Basil the true reason why he had wished to hide the picture away. Basil would have helped him resist Lord Henry’s influence, and the still more poisonous influences that came from his own temperament” (Wilde 1891, p. 115). Gray is worried that he will no longer be able to mask his internal self, that he will one day be forced to reckon with the different selves he’s enacted in society. This is further noted in his eventual coming out to Hallward which, as did Jekyll’s coming out to Lanyon, results in Hallward’s death. Similarities between the two novels as they depict coming out do not end there either, as Wilde’s conclusion to the novel centres on Gray’s destruction of the portrait, a metaphorical release which results in him permanently becoming his internal self for all of London to see.

Conclusion

Stevenson and Wilde may not have explicitly written their characters as being transgender, or queer, for fear of legal consequence. They lived at a spatiotemporal locus in which sexuality and gender identity were viewed as one and the same, negating the very real emotional complexity which differentiate the two. Jekyll/Hyde and Gray’s determination to live dual lives, to show Victorian society a performed self which is separate from their internal selves, is representative of a shift towards transgender advocacy and visibility. Jekyll/Hyde and Gray’s internal selves, the selves which deeply resemble transgender narratives, are portrayed through monstrosity. While such deeply negative depictions may have furthered the villainisation of queer individuals at the time of publication, as evidenced by Wilde’s own incarceration, there have always been literary scholars who analysed such texts beyond surface-level allusions. It remains critical to not only reimagine monstrosity as the result of a heteronormative hegemony, but acknowledge that conflation of othered identities with monstrosity are at the root of social inequality.

There is an urgency to this work; we are currently living through a period in which transgender rights, human rights, are being debated on a global scale, all under the assertion that transgender identities are a recent phenomenon. In recognising the transgender narratives within works of fiction, we acknowledge societal awareness of such identities at a time and place where our modern language may not be universal, but the internal feelings of the community are. By reading Victorian literature through a queer and transgender lens, there is created “a powerful, electrifying force to the resonance we feel when we realise someone else has felt our feelings before us” (Heyam 9), providing precedent for what our post-modern era is experiencing.

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