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Classroom and Courtroom across the Curriculum: *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*

Jason Goldsmith

The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde draws on Robert Louis Stevenson's intimate knowledge of Victorian legal culture, knowledge Stevenson acquired while studying law at the University of Edinburgh. (Although he was called to the Scottish bar in 1875, he abandoned the legal profession and never practiced it.) Its trace can be found in the work's title, main characters, and narrative structure: the title suggests a legal action; Mr. Utterson is the legal representative of Henry Jekyll, who is himself both a doctor of law (LLD) and a doctor of civil laws (DCL); and the final two chapters function as depositions. So powerful is this aspect of the novel that it has led at least one criminal defense to cite Dr. Jekyll's plight in court (see Stern). This legal context provides me the occasion to engage students in a collective act of close reading and reasoned argumentation. Turning the classroom into a courtroom, the students place Henry Jekyll on trial for the crimes committed by Edward Hyde.

The Writing Class

Although the legal approach to the novel can be applied to classes at various levels of the curriculum, I have utilized it most frequently in the first-year seminar, a general humanities course that introduces all incoming students to critical thinking and academic writing. In the version of the class I offer, which takes drug culture as its theme, a large number of pharmacy and business majors enroll. Taking the course to satisfy a requirement, these students are often uncomfortable interpreting literary texts. I schedule *Jekyll and Hyde* early in the semester, as they get ready for their first essay assignment, which inevitably elicits worry. Before our scheduled discussion of the text, I prepare the students for the exercise by asking them to consider, as they read, to what extent Jekyll is guilty of the crimes committed by Hyde. On the day of our class discussion, I divide the students into three groups: prosecution, defense, and grand jury. Prosecution and defense are tasked with combing the text to gather evidence that supports their argument for Jekyll's innocence or guilt. The grand jury has access to all the evidence and will question each team, so it too needs to examine the "case file." The teams have fifteen minutes to prepare and four minutes to present their case. After both sides have made their initial arguments, the grand jury poses questions for two minutes. Following this phase of the trial, each team has five minutes to prepare a two-minute rebuttal in which students respond to the opposing argument and offer a summation. Although the work is collective, each team elects one student to present its case.

The trial format brings the argumentative process to life. There is an immediate and obvious goal in sight—exonerating or incriminating Henry Jekyll—so

the students feel invested in the outcome. The exercise excites them about the novel as they pool their resources and try to outmaneuver opposing counsel. At the same time, they are thinking critically, questioning the nature and limits of both accountability and personal identity. What is more relevant to my immediate pedagogical aims, the exercise forces the students to argue a position, to build their case through a logical presentation of reasons, and to draw on specific textual evidence to substantiate their claims.

As the teams begin to prepare their case, I visit each to offer encouragement. I urge students to locate places in the text that support their case and suggest how they might begin to organize their evidence into a compelling argument. Charged with convincing the jury that Jekyll is accountable for the crimes committed by Hyde, the prosecuting students are quick to point out that Jekyll confesses to the murder of Sir Danvers Carew in the first person: "I mauled the unresisting body" (*Works* 5: 67). This admission of guilt is a fine place to begin. However, I suggest that they should not rely on the confession alone—the letter is not signed—and push them to consider other evidence as well. As the students point out, Jekyll not only confesses to the crime but also admits both explicitly and implicitly that he and Hyde are one and the same. Recalling his transformations, for instance, Jekyll maintains, "I was once more Edward Hyde" (69–70). Someone might point out that Hyde, too, collapses the distinction between himself and Jekyll. Before he drinks the transforming draft prepared by Lanyon, Hyde invokes the professional bonds that Lanyon and Jekyll, both doctors, share: "[W]hat follows is under the seal of our profession" (55). Although Hyde is physically present, this is Jekyll speaking.

When the students note that the walking stick used to beat Sir Danvers and found in Hyde's apartment belongs to Jekyll, I ask them to identify other moments in the tale that corroborate Jekyll's assertions. For example, in order to confirm Jekyll's claim that "[his] two natures had memory in common" (66), one of the students will point to Hyde's behavior when first accosted by Mr. Utterson. "[H]ow did you know me?" Hyde inquires of the lawyer (12). When Utterson claims that Jekyll described him, Hyde cries out, "He never told you . . . I did not think you would have lied." The boldness of Hyde's reply, delivered "with a flush of anger," is telling, and his accusation suggests he knows that Jekyll did not provide such a description (13).

Given Jekyll's confession and the preponderance of evidence linking Jekyll to Hyde, the defense has a more difficult case to make. Nevertheless, the novel provides a wealth of information that can be used to distance Jekyll from the criminal acts of Hyde. The students might, for example, dismiss the confession as the product of a diseased imagination. Indeed, Jekyll's two oldest friends repeatedly question his sanity: Utterson thinks Jekyll's behavior "pointed to madness" (32), while Lanyon is convinced that he "was dealing with a case of cerebral disease" (52). Or students might suggest that Jekyll is at most an accessory to Hyde's crimes. Although Jekyll prepares the apartment in Soho, tells his servants that Hyde is to have full liberty of his house, and establishes a will

to transfer his assets to Hyde, eyewitnesses identify Hyde, not Jekyll, as the perpetrator.

The existence of the will, a legally binding document, implies that the two men are distinct entities, at least in the eyes of the law. At this point, the defense might demonstrate that Jekyll and Hyde are physically dissimilar. Hyde is "smaller, slighter and younger than Henry Jekyll" (61). His footsteps "fell lightly and oddly, with a certain swing," in contrast to the "heavy creaking tread of Henry Jekyll" (43). Even two symbolic markers of personal identity—the hand, associated with writing, and the voice, associated with speech—differ. Jekyll's hand is "large, firm, white and comely," while Hyde's is "lean, corded, knucky, of a dusky pallor, and thickly shaded with a swart growth of hair" (64). When Hyde locks himself in the lab and tries to pass himself off as Jekyll, Poole declares, "[W]as that my master's voice? . . . Have I been twenty years in this man's house, to be deceived about his voice?" (39). The only evidence linking Jekyll to the crimes beyond an association, which in itself is no crime, is his confession.

In fact, the defense will often open its case by trying to undermine the legitimacy of the confession. They will suggest, for example, how in the very act of his confession Jekyll wishes to distinguish himself as a knowing, active agent from Hyde. "It was Hyde, after all, and Hyde alone, that was guilty," asserts Jekyll, who would attempt to "undo the evil done by Hyde" (63). The confession concludes in a similar vein, as Jekyll declares, "[T]his is my true hour of death, and what is to follow concerns another than myself" (74). A particularly astute student may observe that throughout the confession Jekyll syntactically resists conflating himself with Hyde: "he sat," "he dined," "he set forth," "He, I say—I cannot say, I" (71). Such examples are doubly significant, because they demonstrate that the students are attending closely to the novel's language.

Having presented its case, each group has five minutes to prepare a response to their opposition. The rebuttal is an important phase of the exercise, because it asks students to consider the argument presented by opposing counsel and to respond to it in such a way as to minimize its effect on their own. If the prosecution enters into evidence Mr. Guest's testimony that Jekyll's handwriting bore "a rather singular resemblance" to Hyde's "murderer's autograph" (29, 28), the defense might argue that this evidence does not prove that Jekyll and Hyde are the same individual. Although Mr. Guest is "a great student and critic of handwriting" (28), it could be argued that Jekyll wrote the note for Hyde out of fear, loyalty, or some other motive, as Utterson argues. Throughout the novel, handwriting is presented as an unreliable indicator of personal identity. Pursuing this line, the defense could cast doubt on the authenticity of the confession by reminding the jury how Hyde scrawled blasphemies in Jekyll's own hand in Jekyll's books (73). If Hyde can forge Jekyll's handwriting, the authority of the confession is in doubt. It may be one more of Hyde's tricks intended to blame an innocent party.

While I am happy to let this debate unfold for most of the class, I set aside fifteen or twenty minutes to reflect on the nature of the arguments the students

have put forth. First we outline the two opposing cases on the board. Then I suggest to the students that what they have done in class resembles what they need to do in their upcoming essay assignment. Using the outlined cases, I identify the various elements of an effective argument: a debatable thesis that takes a stand on an issue, reasons that inform the reader why the thesis is valid, analysis of evidence to support that validity, and responses to potential objections to the main points. Backing into a discussion of academic argument from this lively exercise demystifies the writing process and allays the students' anxiety. In addition, the trial makes students comfortable using specific textual evidence to underwrite their assertions, a skill that challenges many students who pass through my first-year writing courses.

Science and Society

The courtroom exercise can easily be adapted to classes in which writing is not the primary focus. In an upper-division course titled *Technology and the Body in Literature and Film*, which enrolls both English majors and science, technology, and society majors, I use the courtroom exercise to generate discussion about the limits of the human subject. As the debate unfolds, students consider moral agency and the vexed nature of personal identity. Does identity reside in memory, which is notoriously unreliable? Is it somehow linked to the body, although the body can be modified and augmented? Is identity situated beyond the individual, interpellated through webs of social, legal, and legislative networks? To what extent are our identities mediated by new technologies? In what ways are our technologies already interior to and an essential part of us, legally, morally, biologically? The specific parameters of the exercise, set by time limits and the need to respond formally to opposing arguments, are less important here than the discussion it generates about what it means to be human.

The Undergraduate Research Seminar

One final course example suggests how the exercise may be used to develop specific disciplinary skills. In their junior year, English majors are required to take a seminar that introduces them to the research skills required for advanced study in literature. I offer a seminar on Victorian sensation fiction in which we approach literary works as cultural documents, situating them in the social milieu of the 1860s. Although published some two decades after the vogue for sensation fiction, Stevenson's novel builds on that tradition and allows students to consider the lasting effects of one particular genre. By the time we turn our attention to *Jekyll and Hyde*, they have read novels such as Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* and have learned to identify, locate, and access Victorian-era documents such as public health records, critical reviews, lithographs, periodicals and newspapers, diaries, and government records.

We devote two sessions to Stevenson's novel. In the first, we discuss *Jekyll and Hyde* in relation to the tradition of sensation fiction. Our conversation generally revolves around such issues as gender, evolution and degeneration, insanity, criminality, class, immigration, and nationalism, which have occupied us throughout the semester. At the end of this session I introduce a variation of the courtroom exercise described above. I ask students to supplement the evidence presented in the novel with "expert testimony" by tracking down other cultural documents of the time period to support their case. My goal in adapting the courtroom exercise in this manner is to deepen their investigative abilities.

Because the course deals with sensation fiction, we have spent much of the semester discussing the status of women in Victorian Britain. Not surprisingly, the students want to bring this knowledge to bear on the case at hand. Recalling that Hyde "was knit to [Jekyll] closer than a wife" (73), the prosecution might consider the relevance of the common-law doctrine of coverture, whereby a woman's independent legal existence was incorporated into that of her husband upon marriage. The defense might argue that changes in matrimonial law through which married women achieved greater legal status, such as the Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 and the Married Women's Property Acts of 1870 and 1882, suggest that a single legal identity for two distinct individuals was becoming increasingly untenable.

To cinch the relationship between Jekyll and Hyde, the prosecution might draw on the testimony of Victorian psychologists. Exploring pathological indications of personality, Frederic Myers's "Multiplex Personality" (1886) and Henry Maudsley's "The Double Brain" (1889) point to the duality of identity. The defense might find the Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso a useful witness. Adapting Darwin's biological theory to help explain criminal behavior, Lombroso's *Criminal Man* (1876) identifies the criminal as a distinct physiological type akin to primitive human beings. Calling attention to Hyde's "bestial avidity" (63) and "ape-like fury" (21), the defense could distinguish the civilized Dr. Jekyll from the atavistic criminal.

Although these expert testimonies often fail to convince, the trial encourages students to apply the literary research skills they have been learning throughout the course (Danahay's Broadview edition provides a starting point that whets students' appetite for more). In this respect, the trial is a success. Although we don't always come to a unanimous verdict, the exercise provides a satisfying sense of closure to our discussion of the text.