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# The Baser Urge: Homosexual Desire In The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde

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## Hydden Homosexuality

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As novella from the late 19th century, Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* struggles with and embodies many of the anxieties and apprehensions that plagued the changing Victorian society. In fewer than 100 pages, the narrative explores traditional class assumptions, prevalent colonial theorizations, the rapidly expanding fields of psychology, evolution and medicine, Western philosophies of human nature, and countless unspoken fears of sexuality and eroticism. Its text reveals the fissures and dissonances, the paradoxes and ironies, the inconsistencies and contradictions that are often cited as structuring this unstable time of social change. In spite of its often historically contextual interpretations, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* should not function exclusively as "a material product to be understood in broadly historical terms" (Murfin 318); rather, its entangled insinuations about homosexuality, desire, morality, and Darwinian evolution are applicable to both ancient and contemporary societal norms and taboos. Mr. Hyde's "undignified" pleasures and his erotic, almost Sadeian indulgences coupled with his repeated characterizations as "ape-like", "troglodytic", and "savage", link him to a complex

characterization of deviant homosexuality that is still prevalent today (Stevenson 60, 22, 16, 15). By casting Hyde, the novella's only expression of overt homosexuality, as an animalistic and violent "deformity" of the moral Jekyll, the narrative subtly shades the entirety of same-sex desire as innately brutal and amoral (10). Though Hyde's bestial descriptions are often derogatory and degrading, exposing his character as "evil", this unilateral interpretation is complicated by the fact that the very animalism that degrades him also makes him more natural (58). He is tied to nature, bound to it by his homosexual desire which paradoxically signals both abnormality and naturalness. Thus, the text's social commentary is multi-layered, revealing the psychological justifications and assumptions of many social disgraces (most prominently homosexuality) while simultaneously emphasizing the contradictions that trouble these assumptions.

Even from Edward Hyde's first appearances on the pages of *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, his physical and mental character are described in almost exclusively animalistic terms. Upon first sight, the observers feel that there is "something wrong with his appearance";

"he gives a strong feeling of deformity" that can neither be verbalized nor located on his face or form (10). Physically, he has a small stature, "pale" and "dwarfish", reminding one of something "hardly human"—somehow lower on the evolutionary scale and more "troglodytic" than any properly evolved and morally conscious man (16). Psychologically, he is a "damnable man", "inherently malign and villainous" with a "devilish fury" and a "murderous mixture of timidity and boldness" (9, 60, 67, 16). The interpretations and descriptions provided by the characters that surround him, Hyde is not only reduced to animalistic appearances and behaviors, but is, through this bestial coding, tied to religious sin and amorality. Playing into Darwinian assumptions about the hierarchical nature of human evolution, the simian and "ape-like" Hyde is assumed, from his very looks, to be evil. His physical looks cast him as someone lower on the evolutionary scale, thus prompting observers to subconsciously link him to the ideas of primitiveness and savagery associated with the animal world. This type of evolutionary mindset, which works both with and against traditional morality, posits that



contemporary moral thinking is “the latest and highest product of mental evolution”, thereby making its human possessors hierarchically superior to other forms of “primitive” life (Maudsley, Henry qtd. in “Introduction” xxiv). Hyde, then, “is the physical expression of moral lowness according to post-Darwinian thought” (“Introduction” xxiv). His evil is that of the unthinking beasts and reptiles that indulge every whim and desire, every selfish impulse, without regard to their surroundings.

Carefully tangled within the animalistic and moralistic connotations of Hyde, and his originary counterpart, Jekyll, are the unspoken homosexual and erotic desires that the characters (and the reader) draw from the text regarding both Jekyll and his chemically created counterpart. Though references to Jekyll’s (and consequently Hyde’s) homosexual inclinations are never explicit, they are certainly alluded

to and hinted at, often through Jekyll’s own self-reflective declarations. In a posthumous letter, Jekyll confesses to Mr. Utterson, his friend and the narrator of the story, that his desire to create and maintain Hyde, his alter-ego of sorts, developed because Hyde allowed Jekyll the freedom to, “like a schoolboy, strip off these lendings [the social conscious and morality that plagued Jekyll’s mind] and spring headlong into the sea of liberty” (Stevenson 60). Not only does this confession describe Jekyll’s desire to be free of social restraint --restraint that would surely prohibit any type of deviance from a standard sexually hetero-normative model-- but his allusion to an adolescent “schoolboy” only makes his homosexuality more explicit. Jekyll confides to Utterson:

“The worst of my faults was a certain impatient gaiety of disposition, such as made the happiness of many, but such as I found hard

to reconcile with my imperious desire to hold my head high, and wear a more than commonly grave countenance before the public . . . I concealed my pleasures . . . Many a man would have even blazoned such irregularities as I was guilty of; but from the high view that I had set before me, I regarded and hid them with an almost morbid sense of shame” (55).

Although homosexuality and similar sexual “perversities” are not mentioned strictly as being those “concealed . . . pleasures,” those irregular guilts, that Jekyll suppresses out of social conformity, the ambiguity of the language only enhances their decidedly erotic significations. Confessions of shameful and secretive sexual abnormalities rarely appear in explicitly descriptive language. Rather, out of some psychological desire to preserve the full horror of the transgression from the light of harsh and critical judgment, confessors often

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speak only in vagaries, trying to simultaneously divulge and protect their secrets. Jekyll never names his indulgences, but does recount that his "pleasures were (to say the least) undignified" thus leading him to seek out a "disguise" through which he could fulfill them without incurring any of the public disgrace (59, 60).

Eventually, Jekyll discovers this "disguise" in his own pharmaceutically altered form, Edward Hyde, who is the living embodiment of "the evil side of [Jekyll's] nature" entirely uncaged and released to transform while Jekyll's "virtue slumbered" (58, 59). In Freudian terms, Hyde was Jekyll's pure id, selfish, impulsive, and uninhibited by his learned super-ego. If Hyde is the embodiment of Jekyll's every repressed desire, his every unacceptable impulse (most of which are assumed to be homosexual), then it follows that Jekyll makes arrangements for Hyde to live in a "dismal quarter of Soho" that looked "like a district from some city in a nightmare" (23). Not only is the area itself portrayed as nightmarish and foreboding—two characteristics that often accompany descriptions of Hyde—but Soho is culturally known for its associations with "seediness and criminality" and is still a leading sex entertainment district in England (Mighall, 164). Jekyll logically hides Hyde in a place where he will have 'easy access' to those evil indulgences that comprise his nature, a place where those types of indulgences would never be subject to suspicion.

The immoral and animalistic interpretations of Hyde's character, which often describe him as "evil," "black," "hellish," and "monstrous," are, according to social Darwinian

Theory, really are inextricably linked to one another (Stevenson 57, 18, 69, 60). They arise from both his violent crimes and from a larger social fear of his homosexual and perhaps even sadistic desires. Because the ethical concerns of religion and Social Darwinism overlap so thoroughly in these circumstances (they both, after all, do serve the same purpose of societal regulation), the narrative's layered coding of Hyde as both Satanic and savage makes perfect sense. His character is socially transgressive in the most extreme ways: homosexual, violent, sadistic, uninhibited, and unabashedly indulgent. He conforms to no standard of Victorian utility or respectability. His designation as both the "lower side" of Jekyll and a "secret sinner" speak to the extent to which previously religious devaluations of non-procreative sexuality influenced contemporary scientific ideology (65). Hyde serves, within the novella, as an archetype for homosexuality more generally and is seen as both animalistic and amoral because of his selfish desire to satisfy personal pleasure instead of catering to more productive or transcendent values.

Although Hyde does commit violent and despicable crimes, the "horror" he incites in all those who see him is more clearly understood as resulting from the socially constructed fear of and abhorrence for homosexuality itself. Society feared (and still fears) the homosexual "taboo" and so automatically assumes it to be an innately violent desire, linked to both the animalism of self-indulgent pleasure and the animalism of violence. By stigmatizing Hyde and his homosexuality as not just sexually "deviant" but also as dangerous and violent, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*

seems to support the normative opinion that homosexuals are dangerous. I would argue, however, that the novella's emphasis on Hyde's animalistic and "wild" nature along with the text's almost parabolic tone works to subtly challenge this cursory judgment of "mere animal" inclinations, revealing the latent self-contradictions and ironies of these views (44). Though the novella does cast Hyde's homosexuality in an undeniably amoral light by describing his bestial inclinations, this ostensibly derogatory connection actually troubles a simplistic reading of this form of "deviant" sexuality by aligning homosexuality with nature. By repeatedly characterizing Hyde as animalistic—a lower form of existence only from a Darwinian perspective—the text subversively (but subtly) questions the validity of these theories by suggesting that homosexuality is a natural (and normal) desire that only becomes problematic if suppressed. Thus, in a complex and ironic twist, the naturalness and animalism that make homosexuality the "lower" and more base orientation also make it a completely natural and authentic one.

It is, then, just this type of social inconsistency, both historically relevant and a-temporally applicable, that the text of Stevenson's work brings to light and exposes through its characters and contrasts. Regardless of the text's intention, Hyde's character simultaneously reinforces and deconstructs the homosexual stereotype, painting the picture of animalistic homosexuality just to show the viewer all of the logical cracks.

by Carolyn Laubender

# queering marriage

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*"Love, the strongest and deepest element in all life, the harbinger of hope, of joy, of ecstasy; love, the defier of all laws, of all conventions; love, the freest, the most powerful moulder of human destiny; how can such an all-compelling force be synonymous with that poor little State and Church-begotten weed, marriage?"*

Emma Goldman, "Marriage and Love," p 236

Queering marriage is not a single act, it is a deviant attitude. In the United States of America, marriage is a social, legal and religious institution available for heterosexual couples. For those outside the norms of heterosexual relationships, marriage is an alienating force that marginalizes other gender expressions by binarizing gender. Deconstructing and reconstructing marriage to undermine its restrictive conventions will allow a diversity of practices, traditional and queer, to replace the monolith. In this way, our culture will change from one of compulsory heterosexual marriage to one where varying expressions of unity are accepted. In this essay, I argue that traditional marriage perpetuates a culture of impossible and undesirable social standards by privileging heterosexual relationships. I also address the possibility of a redefinition of marriage to include same-sex couples and discuss alternative unions.

For the purposes of this investigation, I define "queer" as an intentionally broad term used to subvert norms. Vital to an understanding of queer studies is the acknowledgement that gender is nonessential characteristic of personhood, but rather an

acquired attribute imposed by the culture particular to one's upbringing. Queer theorists recognize the differences between biological sex, gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation, and often place these concepts on a continuum. Queer expression is nonessential and fluid; assuming all people fit into the category of either 'man' or 'woman' is unrealistic and incomplete. Identifying as queer "implies a self-conscious deconstruction of heteronormativity and a breaking down of arbitrary boundaries based on sex, gender, and sexual orientation" (Bernstein and Reimann 3). The term 'queer' can be ambiguous, but it is strategically so in the face of the oversimplification of gender and sex. According to this definition, queer marriage is one that moves beyond rigid categories.

Traditional marriage involves the legally, socially, and often religiously recognized union between one man and one woman. The definition of marriage proposed by traditional marriage advocates relies on an essential understanding of gender, which prevents those who do not identify with the stereotypical definition of 'man' or 'woman' from engaging in the socially validating practice of marriage.

Despite copious evidence that masculinity and femininity are not biological characteristics of humans, traditional marriage advocates continue to enforce the different gender requirement of marriage. From this evidence, it seems any marriage law based on the genders of its participants cannot apply universally. When the definition of marriage depends on an incomplete picture of human identity, it violates basic human rights to self-expression. The existing marriage laws in the United States appeal to religious and outdated conceptions of identity and invalidate the love shared in nonnormative relationships. Queering marriage, then, is deconstructing the rigid definitions of institutionalized marriage in order to allow for multiple interpretations and expressions.

## **A Straight Situation**

Marriage is a regulated, pervasive cultural characteristic of American society. Patriarchal norms, which place the man at the head of the heteronormative family, flourished mostly unquestioned in the United States until the women's suffrage movement in the late nineteenth century. These practices limited both the sexual and gender expressions of men



and women by expecting particular behavior as individuals and as a married couple.

Some of these expectations include the rearing of a family, women's deference to men, and a husband's ability to lead and support his family. Emma Goldman provides an account of traditional marriage in her 1911 essay, "Marriage and Love". She argues that, while marriage parades as an expression and result of love, it really is an unhealthy power structure that places women far below men, keeps married couples under the control of the state and church, and supports exploitative economic practices. Her account is an interesting reflection on the complex role of marriage.

This unfairness is also shared in the workplace. Women face sexism and make less money than their men counterparts. Meanwhile, men are still expected to hold steady lucrative careers in order to provide for their families. They are to leave domestic duties to their wives and head the household. These examples illustrate the problems implicit in traditional marriage.

Traditional weddings are emblematic of the various pressures and expectations of marriage. Young girls are still raised to marry the ideal masculine man and dream of a fantasy wedding. Goldman adds, "From infancy, almost, the average girl is told that marriage is her ultimate goal; therefore her training and education must be directed towards that end" (240).

There have been some important movements to personalize weddings and redefine marriages in the past decade, but these reformations remain in the minority.

Thus far we have considered the effects of traditional marriage on those who are in marriages. Marriage also has a large effect on those who are not, do not want to, or cannot participate in it. Socially, marriage is still obligatory, complete with a set of religious and political expectations that reinforce gender inequalities. Staying single or unmarried is perceived as a social failure that comes with legal disadvantages: "Laws that treat married persons in a different manner than they treat single persons permeate nearly every field of

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Since 1911, marriage has certainly expanded its liberties for women; American women can vote, they are no longer bartered like property, and they have a much larger stake in family decisions. However, these achievements are underdeveloped. The most prevalent image of the family is still one man and one woman married with children in the same household, where men are the primary decision makers and financial supporters and women are homemakers and child raisers. Contemporary wives now have the choice to work outside the home, but often only as long as they continue to raise children and take care of the home even while their spouses' role remains the same.

These desires are enforced by the media and are encouraged by the commodification of weddings. Commercialized images of couples show models of masculinity and femininity. Images focus on the wedding day, indicating that this single day will determine the marriage's success. Wedding traditions in the United States vary, but most include conventions that symbolize outdated patriarchal ideas such as a white dress signifying the bride's premarital sexual purity and the bride's father giving her away to the groom, indicating a passing of ownership of the woman from one man to another. These traditions do not always signal the start of an unhealthy marriage, however, they reinforce underlying, exclusionary norms.

social regulation in this country --taxation, torts, evidence, social welfare, inheritance, adoption, and on and on" (Chamers 306). Even with ever-increasing divorce rates, single parent families and general acceptance of unmarried cohabitation, marriage is still the paradigmatic life goal of the American person (Popenoe). Modern marriage, though constantly evolving, is still problematic in its perpetuation of unhealthy traditions and in its marginalization of those not married. While it sometimes represents the choice to live a committed loving life with another person, the conventions that guide it are entrenched in patriarchy and sexism that can be harmful for all involved.

## Guardians of Tradition

The common criteria of a traditional family include a heterosexual couple that is married, intends to procreate, and lives in the same household. This definition invalidates the already-existing, accepted marriages of those who decide to marry beyond the ages of fertility, infertile couples, couples living apart together (LATs), those in commuter or long distance marriages, as well as same-sex partnerships and alternative relationships. These relationships challenge the traditional family in unique ways, yet, it is the queer relationship that is cited as the main threat to marriage. Robert Knight, a strong voice in conservative journalism, finds a variety of excuses in order to accommodate these other non-traditional marriages: “even childless marriages are a social anchor for children, who observe adults as role models. Besides, childless couples can be ‘surprised’ by an unexpected pregnancy, and they can adopt, giving a child a mother-and-father-based family. Single parents can eventually marry. And marriage is a stabilizing force for all. Even when a couple is past the age of reproduction, the marital commitment may keep an older man from fathering a child with a younger woman outside wedlock” (“Talking Points”).

Knight does not provide an equally arbitrary argument for including the queer community, implying that queers cannot adopt or provide a healthy family. The increasingly narrow definition of marriage proposed by traditionalists specially excludes same-sex relationships. The rationale for this exclusion is that same-sex marriages are seen as a gateway to normalizing queer people, which will lead to the crumbling of the foundation of society, as we know it. This critique seems more a fear of same-sex marriage than a credible prediction.

The strongest critiques of queer marriage come from conservative Christians. Many cite the Bible as evidence that homosexuality is unnatural and immoral, and expect the American government to enforce these beliefs. In his first public address of 2008, the Catholic Pope Benedict XVI defined family as strictly between a man and a woman,

then cited the nuclear family as “the primary place of ‘humanization’ for the person and society; and a ‘cradle of life and love’” (“The Human Family”). He stated anything else “constitutes an objective obstacle on the road to peace”. Neither the Pope nor the Catholic Church explains why heterosexual parents are best for society or why they are obstacles to peace. The Catholic Church’s has allowed the exclusion of queers from families and has supported the continued legal and social battle to prevent same-sex marriage and other non-heteronormative lifestyles from gaining equal standing in the United States.

In an interview for [www.protectmarriage.com](http://www.protectmarriage.com), Massachusetts citizens Robb and Robin Wirthlin worried that, after gay marriage was legalized, “rights would be infringed, particularly if you disagreed with gay marriage” (“Rob and

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self-expression

Robin”). Neither individual commented on historical denial of queer citizens’ basic rights to education, jobs, housing, etc. The couple found it “shocking” that their son, who attends public school in Massachusetts, was taught about gay marriage as an acceptable lifestyle and felt their religious freedom was violated. The Wirthlins took their case to court, hoping to either stop public schools from teaching children about non-heteronormative lifestyles or force them to contact children’s parents when any conversation about homosexuality took place, formal or informal. They lost their case on the grounds that public schools are allowed to discuss diversity issues as long as they do not target the beliefs of a particular religion or force students to agree with the ideas (Thurston).

According to the Wirthlins, homosexuality is an “adult issue”. Eve Sedgwick, a prominent feminist and queer theorist, critiques this viewpoint citing “queer teenagers are two to three times likelier to attempt suicide, and to accomplish it, than others” and “up to 30 percent of teen suicides are likely to be gay or lesbian” (Sedgwick 1). Preventing educators from mentioning queer lifestyles is another way of reinforcing narrow norms and could cause damage to queer adolescents. By excluding mention of queers’ role in society, educators are indicating queers are abnormal and not worth recognition, despite the fact of their existence. According to Sedgwick, “The complicity of parents, of teachers, of clergy, even of the mental health professions in invalidating and hounding kids who show gender dissonant tastes, behavior, body language” is appalling

(Sedgwick 2). Those who wish to “protect” their children from an education that includes knowledge of the existence of queers are denying their children basic truths about our world and human history.

Each of these examples --targeting queers as the only group for which the definition of marriage has no flexibility, citing hypocritical religious reasons for excluding queers from our world family, and preventing the education of children about the basic existence of queers-- follows a similar logic: “Marriage is a critical social institution; stable families depend on it; society depends on stable families; gay marriage will break that connection” (Kurtz). This argument is based on an essentialized picture of human sexuality that ignores multiple



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> 248 to the 243rd power


COURTESY OF 248<sup>(243)</sup> FALL08

VPL'S

(VISIBLE PAN-TY LINE) --- PEEKING HOLE

VBC'S

(VISIBLE BUTT CRACKS)

SPANDEX 

UNIBROWS

PIT STAINS

(ARM PIT)  
OR POOP STAINS (AKA TRACE MARKS)  
--- OR THE MORE FAMILIAR: SKID MARKS

heterosexuality has been  
observed as a form of heterosexuality  
permitted to masquerade so  
fully as History itself, when it has not presented itself as the  
totality of Romance.”

Eve Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, p 10

expressions of identity. The restrictive values of one group of people should not rule the lives of others. As evidenced by the stable divorce rate in those states with legal same-sex marriage, it seems same-sex marriage will not prevent, invalidate, or break apart traditional marriage (religioustolerance.org). Extending the benefits of marriage to committed parties of all kinds will begin to correct a case of institutionalized discrimination in America.

### **Queered Marriage**

Some feminists and queer theorists bring a different perspective to the debate. According to Ann Ferguson, “the issue of gay marriage thus highlights a contradiction in American national identity: if gay marriage is supported, the normative status of the heterosexual nuclear family is undermined, while if gay marriage is disallowed, then the individual freedom and the civil rights of homosexuals are undermined” (Ferguson 40). Either way, one group of Americans will end up either normatively or legally challenged. Defenders of traditional marriage, as discussed, support a heteronormative picture of humanity that supports a historical norm, yet denies queers equal footing as citizens. Although both sides

have a substantial stake in this debate, one is socially and legally at a disadvantage, while the other is not. From a civil rights perspective, extending marriage to same-sex couples seems a matter of granting entitlements. This act would confer social and legal benefits to a group of Americans while not removing any from traditional marriage supporters. However, could a legal change result in a cultural shift towards a more accepting society?

Paula Ettelbrick believes legalizing same-sex marriage will not further the goals of the queer movement. Instead “it will constrain us, make us more invisible, force our assimilation into the mainstream, and undermine the goals of gay liberation” (Ettelbrick 637). It could be that same-sex marriage is not a large enough change to alter the norms associated with marriage, many of which are harmfully, or at least inappropriately, old-fashioned. Ettelbrick also argues same-sex marriage is at risk of reaffirming the power of marriage as the only legitimate type of union and thus, continuing to marginalize groups of Americans. She recognizes that legalizing same-sex marriage could be a step in the right direction, but hopes to deinstitutionalize marriage altogether (Ettelbrick 637). This calls into question the

role of the state. The government’s role is to provide protection for its people, especially those who have been denied rights for centuries, not to protect one group’s religious freedom over the rights of others. Ettelbrick calls for an American culture that “respects and encourages choice of relationships and family diversity”. This is the culture a queered marriage encourages. These are complicated problems are at the core of the same-sex marriage movement.

Eve Sedgwick asks, “What if instead [of a monolith] there were a practice of valuing the ways in which meanings and institutions can be at loose ends with each other?” In our case, a queered view marriage, inclusive of all plural traditions, participants and beliefs, can lead to this practice. If marriage is defined by its diversity and inclusiveness rather than its selectivity, marriage will become an obsolete distinction. In this new framework, traditional marriage will need to integrate with new conceptions of marriage. I leave you with Emma Goldman’s words, “If the world is ever to give birth to true companionship and oneness, not marriage, but love will be the parent.” This is the culture I wish to live in.

by Deborah Strehle