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## The Monsters in Our Closets

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## Introduction: Naming the Beast

The literature of nineteenth century Britain is stereotypically characterized by images of societal repression. Characters suffer from an unfulfilled need to express their true desires, which may be at odds with social expectations. The result is masked sexuality or damaging psychological rifts. The twenty-first century has witnessed a reemergence of texts that make use of similar themes in Neo-Victorian adaptations. A quick channel surf or scan of recent film debuts attests to the popularity of these works. Whether it's Showtime's mash-up of iconic nineteenth century characters in *Penny Dreadful* or the 2009 revision of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* to include a zombie infestation, Neo-Victorian adaptations abound. Defined in 2008 by *The Journal of Neo-Victorian Studies* as a "cultural happening," a "reinvigorated historical consciousness," and a "critical interface between the present and the past," Neo-Victorianisms are adaptive works based on source material from nineteenth century Britain (Kohlke 1). The popularity and persistence of these adaptations suggest a thematic or socio-cultural connection between the Victorian era and contemporary culture. A Cultural Studies approach holds that cultural artifacts, including adaptations, exist to fill a social need. In the case of these Neo-Victorian adaptations, that need is fueled by the modern audiences identification with the dual nature of man as portrayed through the monstrosity of the divided-self popular in nineteenth century literature.

Originally born as a consequence of the Victorian era's strict codes of propriety, a divided-self mirrors in fiction the way in which an individual presents a public façade to society, hiding his true self underneath. This trope has regained popularity with contemporary audience because of the emphasis placed on virtual identity in modern culture. The tendency of individuals to carefully construct and protect social media profiles mimics the masking of identity performed by Victorians to hide their improprieties. This desire to pretend to be other than what one really is for the sake of social acceptance was commonplace in the nineteenth century but not isolated in it as it is obviously still occurring in contemporary social media, resulting in renewed interest in Victorian themes and imagery as represented in Neo-Victorian adaptations.

The characters in Neo-Victorian adaptations are often gleaned from nineteenth century novels and serials that frequently portrayed monstrosity in the form of the divided self. This phenomenon plagued not only literature, but other areas of popular culture as well. In his book *Doubles*, Karl Miller says that by the nineteenth century, both literature and psychology were “in love with duality” and “collaborated in spreading the gospel [of] ...plurality of the mind” (329). These dualistic stories explore the consequences of pushing the boundaries of self too far in response to what Walter Houghton refers to as “Victorian hypocrisy” (146). The Victorians, he says,

Concealed or suppressed their true convictions and their natural tastes. They said the “right” thing or did the “right” thing: they sacrificed sincerity to propriety...they pretended to be better than they were. They passed themselves off as being incredibly pious and moral; they talked noble sentiments and lived quite otherwise...They shut their eyes to whatever was ugly or unpleasant and pretended it didn’t exist. Conformity, moral pretension, and evasion—those are the hallmarks of Victorian hypocrisy. (146)

This practice of carefully constructing a public identity while continuously denying one’s true desires scars the psyche. In fiction, characters either intentionally or accidentally create a division of themselves that can act freely without tarnishing their reputation. In Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Henry Jekyll directly cites this desire as the reason he endeavored to sever his personality:

If each, I told myself, could but be housed in separate identities, life would be relieved of all that was unbearable; the unjust might go his way, delivered from the aspirations and remorse of his more upright twin; and the just would walk steadfastly and securely on his upward path, doing the good things in which he found his pleasure, and no longer exposed to the disgrace and penitence by the hands of this extraneous evil. (49)

Constructed under the restrictive influence of nineteenth century British society, texts like *Jekyll and Hyde* explore what happens to the mind when individual desires are stifled by societal conventions, and when individuals attempt to construct separate identities for public and private spheres.

Whether conscious or unconscious, this practice of duplicity leads to a psychological rift, paralleled in fiction through the literary double. These stories tell what it is for someone to “be two things at once where these things are...incompatible. This is the literature which...tells the tale of the cultur[al] escape” which is doomed to fail (Miller 25). They take root in highly moralistic eras like the nineteenth century because they reflect “an organisms efforts to live...[and survive under a] different system of values,” even if they don’t personally agree with its moral and social codes (Miller 34).

Late nineteenth century psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud considers the consequences of these conflicts in his *Studies on Hysteria* in which he identifies repressed feelings and as foreign to the mind, creating psychological trauma that can have physical impact on the body. In his 1995 text, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*, critic Jack Halberstam references Freud’s theory noting that long after a physical event, the memory of trauma remains “foreign to the body and the mind but active in both” (129). In an effort of self-preservation, these memories are pushed into our conscious mind and when they cannot be reconciled with what remains unconscious, the individual experiences mental and physical

distress. The process is exemplified more acutely during the Victorian period, which Houghton describes as one of rapid transition that made individuals feel torn between the security of the past and the promise of the future. He says that an age of transition itself has a dual nature; it is by default both a period of destruction and reconstruction on all levels, including identity.

Houghton says, “the conscientious man was faced by the cruel alternative of either suffering the extreme penalties of confessing his real opinions or else of living a life of concealment and deception” (399). He describes a sense of haste that made individuals feel trapped within the whirlwind of society and being dragged along with it. He argues that the breakdown of the mind expressed in the literature of the period mirrors that of the society that produced it (8).

Houghton asserts the idea that conformity is traumatic to the individual. He says that societal conventions of the period “assume[d] enormous force,” placing the individual in apposition to be “only too eager to...avoid any ideas or behavior which...might make him look like an outsider” (395). He also says that the drive to conform is so ingrained in society that “it might very well be unconscious or half-conscious: a conforming to the conventions out of sheer habit” or worse, “an understandable piece of self-deception” (413). He marks this self-deception as pardonable because to refuse to conform is an act of “sheer terror” because if one were not accepted by society, they might not “be able to hold a job or support [their] family”

(146-7). In this way, duality is a “recourse” – a reaction that aids in survival (Miller 23). Victorians became very good at “saving-face” by perfecting the ability to *appear* to say or do the right thing while denying their actual wants. This continuous repression of true desires or acts of internal secret keeping creates an irreparable rift in the personality, as the unconscious demands that it be known.

In his 1919 essay “The Uncanny,” Freud describes these secrets as “something which is secretly familiar which has undergone repression and then returned from it...something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light” (526-8). When we experience something uncanny, the misplaced sense of familiarity causes us discomfort. In the nineteenth century, this sensation is rooted in what Houghton refers to as “evasion,” which he says is a “process of deliberately ignoring whatever caused discomfort, which lead in turn to the further insincerity of pretending that this happy view of things was the whole truth (148). According to Freud, this evasion is never actually successful. The remnants of discomfort remain within the psyche, pushed into the unconscious, which feeds a potential schism. “The unconscious,” he says, “has no other endeavor than to break through the pressure weighing down on it for its way either to consciousness or to a discharge through some real action” (“Pleasure” 19).

For Victorian authors, the unconscious discharge was in exploring social freedom through doubling. Second selves were created to perform

actions denied to the original self. Miller says, “one self does what the other self can’t. One self is meek while the other is fierce. One self stays while the other runs away” (416). The discontinuity amplified in the human psyche during the nineteenth century was ample fodder for the persistence of the double in its literature. The portrayal of protagonist and antagonist as one being who is at war with itself is an expression of the frustrations created by the desire to express themselves freely and the understanding of their social limitations.

Contemporary interest in these divided selves suggests that, whether due to the social constraints of Victorian England or the modern saturation of social media presence, individuals feel compelled to hide their true wants and desires from public view for fear of judgment. Research shows that as a social group, millennials are the first generation who see social networking behaviors such as Tweeting, texting, and Facebook, YouTube, and Google usage, as commonplace parts of their everyday social lives, rather than modern innovations (Keeter, “The Millennials” 1). Millennials are “history’s first ‘always connected’ generation” (Keeter, *Millennials* 1). It’s not just their use of technology that makes them unique but the way that they’ve infused it into their lives (Keeter, *Millennials* 5-6). Most millennials, over ninety-four percent, carry cell phones at all times – even to bed – and over seventy-five percent have profiles on a social networking site, with one-third of those checking their profiles daily (Keeter, *Millennials* 28).



This immersion in a digital network creates the feeling of a social “place” where individuals build a sense of community; however, once the user disconnects from their device, the loss of that “sense of home” is detrimental to identity formation (Yust 134). As they’ve constructed their identity based on their role in that digital community, seclusion from that community leaves them identify-less, or feeling as if they don’t know themselves. The feeling of confusion and isolation from community draws modern audiences to the construct of the divided self as it is represented in Neo-Victorian works. The characters can be branded as misfits, or outcasts-all seeking to hide some “ugly” part of themselves from others. In a study on the effects of social media on children’s spirituality, one respondent mirrored this sentiment, stating that “it’s easier to pretend you’re someone amazing [online] than to face the reality that you have issues. It’s easier to make friends online who don’t know you than to go out in the real world and let everyone see who you really are” (Yust 136). This contemporary desire to avoid the risk of discomfort and rejection by creating another version of one’s self mirrors the evasion Miller describes in the Victorian era.

In her 2014 text, *It’s Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens*, Danah Boyd takes an analytical look at the impact of social media on the lives of contemporary teenagers. She argues that, by and large, the issues teens face haven’t changed but “what is new is the way in which social media alters and *amplifies* social situations” (13). Her research attests to the

persistence of duality as a social condition that has been magnified by the complicated era of digital connectedness. Some of this conflict is a result of teenagers ineffectively imagining their audiences. As individuals choose how to present themselves to an imagined audience, their identity construction is in a constant flux (Boyd 31-32). While the ability to reimage one's self is not always damaging, it does keep conflicts between true identity and a constructed persona close to the surface – as is the case in both nineteenth century literature and its Neo-Victorian counterparts.

In Karen-Marie Yust's article "Digital Power: Exploring the Effects of Social Media on Children's Spirituality," she says that "many everyday routines and rituals are developed alongside media use, and at the same time the media provides material for negotiating and defining social identities" (79). This digital emersion both complicates our construction of identity and provides the resources for our efforts to do so. Although the constant use of technology as a means of permanent connectedness is what defines millennials and the generations to follow, the connectivity does not breed trust; two-thirds report skepticism of other people (Houghton argues this is a holdover from Victorian feelings of doubt) and report some sort of privacy features that protect their social media profile. This tendency reflects the desire to protect one's identity in a very Victorian way, to hide one's personal profile from the prying eyes of those who may judge. Also, 39 percent of the

population says that this over use of technology makes people feel more isolated, further complicated identity construction (26).

Yust argues that social networking creates a digital third place where users can engage in communal activities like homes, churches congregations and schools. It is in these places that “identity is formed, memory is structured, and attitudes are formed” (134). Users construct a sense of home where they can “experiment with self, “highlighting certain attributes or hiding others, or even creating whole new personas” from the ones they portray in person (134). Research shows that one-third of teens prefer texting to face-to-face communication because it allows them to be more thoughtful in their chosen identities (136). Scholars are referring to the problem as “detachment attachment” (140). Users form emotional bonds under their assumed identities and through these digital spaces, when in actuality they are in an isolated physical environment, accessing these relationships through the screen of their personal computer or mobile phone. Yust describes this as a “crisis of identity” because digital relations are essentially dehumanized by removing the actual contact between individuals (140).

This disconnection from genuine human interaction experienced by millennials resembles that of the Victorians’ struggles with identity formation. While millennials aren’t faced with the same sort of moral pressures that cause them to conceal their true selves, the act of concealment through the careful construction of a digital identity forms the same sort of

mental frustrations as it seeks to hide its true nature. Houghton argues that there are more similarities between contemporary culture and the Victorian period than we readily acknowledge. He cites the nineteenth century as the birthplace of several characteristics that permeate the current era, including anxiety covered by a thin layer of optimism, a skepticism derived from Victorian doubt, and a lingering sense of loneliness and isolation. These tendencies weren't created by the connectivity of the millennial generation but they are enabled and amplified because of it. He says that "to peer through the darkness of a hundred years and turn even a flashlight on the landscape of 1850 is to see our own situation a little more clearly" (xv). The feelings of uncertainty rooted in nineteenth century society sow the seeds of doubt that are still evident in our social consciousness, affecting our identity construction and feeding interest in fictional representations like *Penny Dreadful* and *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* that draw on these sentiments because their insight reflects the internal struggles of contemporary audiences.

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, published in 1817, shows sentiments of frustrating social constraints in the early part of the nineteenth century. Although the characters don't experience a division of self, they express a constant pressure to keep up proper appearances. Jane Bennett even describes the Bingley sisters as "having a strong appearance of duplicity" even though she never confronts them about it (Austen 99).

Austen's characters are restricted by the constraining sense of decorum and propriety society imposes on them, but they do not experience the monstrous psychological break that affects the characters in later nineteenth century texts because the conflict is resolved. Elizabeth, the independent and often impetuous protagonist, is pressured by society to marry, but luckily finds a match in the prosperous Mr. Darcy who loves her for her differences, relieving her of the need to adapt to survive. Grahame-Smith's additions in *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* present an Elizabeth that is openly "more pleased to [be] on the front lines than at the altar" but is often chastised for her warrior ability to slip into "a kind of absence – as if her soul had taken leave, so that compassion and warmth could not interfere" (115, 58). Grahame-Smith's adaptation adds emphasis to the duality of Austen's characters and inserts an overt monstrous element by way of the "sorry-stricken" zombies which draw the concept of duality clearly to the surface as they are both human and not, dead and alive at the same time.

As the nineteenth century progressed, novelists explored the consequences that followed when these conflicts are left unresolved. The divided self is a literary product of societal repression, taboos, and incongruities. *Penny Dreadful* draws its characters primarily from these later texts taking characters from stories published over the course of the nineteenth century and integrating them into an entirely new plotline that retains and emphasizes their duality. With Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, first

published in 1818, the projection of an outward appearance that does not match internal identity has a disastrous impact on Victor and those around him. Throughout the text, Victor refuses to acknowledge his internal desires for freedom; furthermore, he may not even be aware of them. As Miller says, “one self does what the other can’t” (416). The Creature releases Victor of all the social ties that impede his freedom by killing Victor’s closest friends and family members. As Victor loses control of his own internal desires in the form of the Creature, so Shelley projects the internal struggle of the Victorians who risk losing control of their own repressed urges.

In *Frankenstein*, Victor hides his desires for intellectual freedom from everyone, even himself. Following his mother’s death, Victor says that his “mind can’t persuade itself” to fill “the void that presents itself to [his] soul” (Shelley 25). When he arrives at university, he throws himself into his studies as “his sole occupation” in an attempt to fill this void (Shelley 29). Forced to forge an individual identity apart from the security of his family, Victor chooses to focus on his work rather than acknowledging his feelings. He finds his “imagination much exalted” by his freedom to explore the boundaries of science uninhibited by familial obligation (Shelley 31). His frenzied experiments culminate in the birth of the Creature into whom he has unconsciously buried his secret desires for freedom. The Creature, unbound to any other, represents Victor’s secret desires to sever the social ties that threaten his autonomy. Freud believed that, like Victor, we all have

repressed wishes and fears that we want to keep hidden from everyone else (Richter 1107).

Born of Victor's attempts to construct a controlled identity, the Creature functions as an externalization of Victor's efforts to repress his emotions and his true self. The Creature is born in the rain, invoking images indicative of Christian baptism and the idea of an individual's rebirth (Shelley 35). The imagery of birth and baptism underscore the rebirth of Victor after his burdensome efforts to resolve his internal struggle by purging the Creature from his psyche. Because Victor created the Creature in an attempt to bury his feelings, the Creature is infused with them. The Creature, in turn, pursues a course of action that will fulfill Victor's secret desires.

The presence of the Creature may also reflect the self's desire to escape the social determination of identity by creating its own autonomy. It is a second self – produced to avoid the predetermined social obligations Victor inherits from his domestic obligations. Critic Jack Halberstam also notes that “while superficially [*Frankenstein*] seems to be about the making of a monster, it is really about the making of a human, it is also about the destruction of otherness, the unmaking of monstrosity” (38). By making the Creature a component of Victor's identity, it's people, rather than monsters, that are truly terrifying which suggests that monsters aren't some distant

other that can be used to make people feel more human, but a part of the human psyche created by attempting to ignore it.

As the Creature acts out Victor's hidden desires, it is Victor that is directly responsible for its actions. Miller asserts that dualistic fictions are both alibies and apologies (25). Hostile actions are performed by proxy, by some other self, that can be easily denied (Miller 25). Acting as a proxy, the Creature would not be monstrous if Victor's desires were not so. The Creature is Victor's attempt to create man in *his* own image, making any of its distortions reflective of him. The Creature's monstrous acts amount to the deaths of Victor's friends and family that serve to free Victor from his domestic ties. Although the Creature claims that these deaths "work at [Victor's] destruction," they actually provide him with the freedom and independence he initially lacked (Shelley 98). The loss of his domestic circle eliminates Victor's restrictions and by the end of the novel, he is free to pursue the Creature into the Arctic.

In their quest to define themselves in relationship to each other, Victor and his Creature create divisions between human and inhuman, maker and made, that they cannot overcome as they push each other to an inevitable end. According to Halberstam, *Frankenstein* disrupts "the surface-depth relationship between the body and the mind...the entagl[ing] of self and other within monstrosity and the parasitic relationship between the two. The one is always buried in the other" (129-30). Divided selves inevitably destroy each



other in a fight for dominance, but, where one cannot exist without the other, the struggle always leads to the annihilation of both. Having pursued Victor to his death in the Arctic, his Creature says “I shall collect my funeral pier, and consume to ashes this miserable frame” (Shelley 155). Miller says suicide is the necessary end when one self destroys the other; “it is a dualistic act...and may indeed be duality’s best proof” (328). An individual could not pursue the destruction of itself as fervently as of another, unless that other is self-contained as in Victor and his Creature.

As the era progressed, the shared body of Jekyll and Hyde replaced the shared consciousness of Victor and his Creature. Published in 1886, Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* presents a more direct reflection of a divided self. Where Victor creates his Creature without realizing he is burying his desires inside of it, Jekyll admits to releasing Hyde as an effort to externalize his more base desires. He saw Hyde as “a solution of the bonds of obligation” to social conventions (50). However, as Jekyll spends more time being Hyde, he realizes that he enjoys these indulgences. When it becomes clear that Jekyll can no longer contain Hyde and has to choose between the separate parts of himself, he laments the loss of “those appetites which [he] had long secretly indulged and had of late begun to pamper” as Hyde (Stevenson 55).

In Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, published shortly after *Jekyll and Hyde* in 1890, Dorian’s second self is completely removed from his

body and physically concealable in a way that Hyde and Victor's Creature were not, reflecting the readers desire to see evil as something other than a portion of human nature. However, Wilde's character argues, even more forcefully than Stevenson's, that "the only way to get rid of temptation is to yield to it. Resist it and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden itself, with desire for what its monstrous laws have made monstrous and unlawful" (19-20). Not only does Dorian champion giving in to temptation, but he also blames societal constraints (in the form of law) for creating monstrosity. However, Dorian's debauched deeds are concealed by his painting and thus completely outside of himself. He is never forced to own them or suffer their consequences. Like Jekyll and Victor before him, Dorian's attempt to destroy the evidence of his second self ultimately destroys him too as the two are inextricable.

Although the doubles of Stevenson and Wilde reflect the same sense of danger as Shelley's, the characters in the later works begin to acknowledge the need to recognize the legitimacy of their true desires. By the end of the century, Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, published in 1897, reflects the realization that repressed desires are seductive. If his vampires reflect the darker underside of a repressively moralistic age, then the drawing in of Lucy and even Mina, the most virtuous characters, into their fold mirror the Victorian's desire to embrace these hidden parts of themselves. While Victor literally forces the Creature out of himself, Jekyll must transform into Hyde, and

Dorian's portrait conceals his monstrosity, Dracula's duality is simultaneous. He moves about the novel as a single character, rather than two separate consciousnesses, reflecting the internal duality of man but also giving more freedom to desires that had previously been denied. Dracula blends in. He is both entirely one of us and separate from us at the same time. He is adaptable. He can be at home in his Transylvanian castle and on the streets of London. His ability to adapt to any place or time contributes to the novel's increasing popularity throughout the last century. The relative wholeness Stoker bestows on Dracula implies that we are all divided in our natures, capable of both good and evil, which is what makes stories of duality so compelling, even over a century later, under different social circumstances and through different mediums. Its persistence also indicates its cultural significance.

In *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon asserts that "neither the product nor the process of adaptation exists in a vacuum: they all have a context – a time and place, a society and a culture...adaptations can and do have different functions in different cultures at different times (XVIII). In this way, the creation of such Neo-Victorian adaptations as Grahme-Smith's novel *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* in 2009 and its corresponding film adaptation in 2016 along with Showtime's television series *Penny Dreadful* airing from 2014-2016 is undoubtedly connected to the social conditions surrounding their conception. According to Hutcheon, the pleasure of an

adaptation is gleaned from its ability to provide the comfort of recognizable characters and themes with an element of surprise in terms of plot (4).

Contemporary adaptations are to be judged on persistence rather than fidelity to the original (VXVI). She analyzes the definition of *adaptation* in biological terms and notes that, in this case, these adaptations are considered successful if replication *and* change occur (XXVI). She says “biology does not evaluate the merit of organisms relative to their ancestors – for all have equal biological validity” and so too cultural adaptations should be measured only against themselves and considered for their own social value (XXVIII).

True adaptations are not meant to mirror, thus any similarity retains its own cultural significance. The persistence of duality and monstrosity, identity, and self-acceptance as motifs in Neo-Victorian adaptations is necessarily indicative of their meaningfulness among contemporary audiences.