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English 333

25 June 2018

Shattering the Looking Glass of Singularity

Thinking about the Victorian time, a few phrases will come right to mind: corsets, pretty skies, waiting for the husband, making money, spending money, shopping sprees, etc. The ideal picture from this period of history is neatly packaged in the words “domestic bliss” and “self-made man.” However, the ideals were more a shattered mirror than the perfect looking glass sitting above a polished bureau. On the one hand, people questioned the systemization that came with industrialization. Others questioned the idea that good begat good, while bad begat bad. Others tried to figure out how women figured into the whole thing because women were no longer a man’s handbag. The authors of the period picked aspects of the Victorian ideals and shattered them to bits through experiences that force a character to compromise and the downfalls of characters that pick one over the other.

It is critical to understand how each piece fits into the space of singularity. Each piece starts with a firm decision at a critical point in the plotline: one of the two presented choices is much more *proper* than the other. One of the first things we learn about the world Dickens has set up is that the people in the town “want nothing but Facts, Sir; nothing but Facts!” (2). Jane Eyre reflects that “sense would resist delirium: judgement would warn passion” (Brontë 152). Meanwhile, Dr. Jekyll reflects that his evil and cruelty had “been much less exercised and much less exhausted” than his good and kindness had been (Stevenson 1811). Each contends with a choice of morality. This difference between social morality (facts, sense, judgement, and a good disposition) and a perceived individual morality (imagination, delirium, passion, and cruelty) offers the chance for these characters to metaphorically fall from social graces. They have a clear-cut path to follow. To deviate means to become the epitome of the fallen of society. This is the beginning of the end of idealized Victorian morality in literature. The moment the pages turn, the looking glass begins to shatter, fracturing into thousands of tiny pieces.

The first hit comes when the characters in these pieces of literature are forced to compromise. Louisa Gradgrind, Jane Eyre, and Dr. Jekyll are all forced to pick one over the other or compromise in their situations. To compromise in this era is to compromise the integrity of society a little bit. The stalwart and proper Victorian in each of them says to society to “let it be so” and takes the propriety (Dickens 75). So, Louisa marries Bounderby, further saying that if “Mr. Bounderby likes to take me thus, I am satisfied to accept his proposal” (Dickens 75). In utter contrast to Jane Eyre’s marriage dilemma, the marriage becomes the base of the hit. Fact won, but fancy will have its say. And, so it does with Jane Eyre. Propriety dictates that Jane does not marry Rochester and leave Thornfield when it is revealed that “Mr. Rochester has a wife now living” (Brontë 289). Somewhere, a proper Victorian shuddered reading these scenes. For all that is proper, what are these young women doing!? The answer is quite simple, but it is simplified even more by taking into consideration the choice that Dr. Jekyll must make. He had to choose between standing “committed to a profound duplicity of life” with no outlet for his darker wishes, or to “assume, like a thick cloak, [the identity] of Edward Hyde” (Stevenson 1809, 1811). These moments all lead to a single answer to “what are these people doing for all propriety?”: they are embarking on a journey to add something unknown to their lives. The only place they can turn to for it happens to be the duality that Victorians pose as a singularity in everyone: either one is all good or all bad, all fact or all fancy, but never, never somewhere in between. Thus, the looking glass begins to shatter from early in the consciences of the characters.

How does one continue to shatter the looking glass? One finds a way to become the exact opposite of what society wants them to be. Next comes the upside-down moment. This is the most important decision these characters make, as it forces them to find a compromise in the next section. In the case of Louisa Gradgrind, it comes with the “mighty Staircase, with a dark pit of shame and ruin at the bottom” that Mrs. Sparsit sees her descending as she becomes closer to James Harthouse (Dickens 151). Jane’s comes with her telling Mr. Rochester that she is “a free human being with an independent will, which I now exert to leave you,” and Dr. Jekyll’s comes when he realizes that “Hyde struggling after freedom” is a sign of becoming something worse than he had thought possible (Brontë 253; Stevenson 1814). In a lifetime, compromise is necessary. A life of extremes leads to pressure. These situations have turned the pressure up so intensely that the only *conceivable* way for Louisa, Jane, and Dr. Jekyll to save some face without making the situations a thousand times worse. The phrase “to save some face” is the key here. Society is so set on these singularities (all good, all reason, all fancy, etc.) that to turn to some compromise is to become the moral degeneration that these singularities are meant to avoid. It makes sense that turning to the other side is going to make it all better in the long-run, or at least for the short-term. Right?

Not exactly. There is a gap between what is considered right and considered good for each situation, and what people end up doing. Through all three of these shattering arcs, there is the voice of society attempting to bring them back into the “proper” singularities of life, and this voice allows the balances to come together to shatter the looking-glass. Louisa’s singularity that keeps her from completely betraying her husband is the love she has for her father. Upon deciding not to run with Mr. Harthouse, she asks her father, “What have you done, O father, what have you done, with the garden that should have bloomed once, in this great wilderness here?” (Dickens 161). With nothing left of goodness in her life, it looks hopeless to her to continue on the same path that her father started her upon. Voicing that is the beginning of her personal healing, but it cracks the looking-glass even further. Upon realizing that neither complete fact nor complete fancy will do her any good, Louisa struggles to bridge the gap. Likewise, Jane struggles to bridge her gap after finding out that Mr. Rochester has been hiding a wife from her. As she leaves Thornfield for presumably the last time, she notes to herself that she “knew what [she] had to do, and [she] did it mechanically” (Brontë 320). Leaving someone close to the heart is difficult. Society dictates that Jane must do it, so she does, but there is more to it than simply the society aspect. This is Jane’s attempt to reason her passion away. Despite her ultimate failure in forgetting to temper the passion for Mr. Rochester, she reasons it away enough that she can heal and allow society to think the better of her for it. Finally, there is Dr. Jekyll’s attempt at balance. Unlike Jane or Louisa, he does not find the happy ending. Instead, he remarks in a letter to Utterson that “if I slept, or even dozed for a moment in my chair, it was *always* as Hyde that I awakened” (Stevenson 1817; emphasis mine). This is the most powerful blow to the looking glass thus far; if the singularities can’t be balanced and a compromise wastes away in the land of improbability, people go mad trying to stand to the perfections expected of them.

This inability to balance the singularities of all good and all bad, to learn how to make man “truly two” is the fall of someone who couldn’t bridge the gap (Stevenson 1809). This is the final way that Victorian writers attempt to shed some light on the absurdity that is Victorian morality. While in Stevenson’s work, this character is in the forefront and the title of the piece, in the other pieces analyzed thus far, this person is a background character. Dickens gives his readers the character of Stephen Blackpool, while Brontë gives her readers the character of St. John Rivers. Stephen is so loyal to the Victorian ideal of working through toils that he’s described as having “become possessed of the same somebody else’s thorns in addition to his own” and is, at one point, ostracized by his coworkers for refusing to bite the hand that feeds him (Dickens 47, 108). Mr. Rivers, as named in the book, is described as “inexorable as death,” being as stubborn as red wine on a wedding dress (Brontë 366). These three characters refuse to bend their moralities for anything. In this singularity mind-set, they bring about their downfall. Rigidity under pressure causes things to snap, which is an unintended side effect of the all-or-nothing mindset of a proper Victorian.

The first step to their downfall, and the next blow to the looking glass, is their refusal to see how a compromise could help them accomplish their goals of indulging evil appetites, getting through their work, and finding a wife (respectively). To Jekyll’s credit, he attempts to temper Hyde but fails completely when he finds that he “was slowly losing hold of [his] original and better self, and becoming slowly incorporated with [his] second and worse” (Stevenson 1813). At this point, he choses to further indulge Hyde, much as Stephen refuses to stay in Coketown after being ostracized, saying that “’Tis better, onnyways [sic]” if he goes this way (Dickens 122). The final stroke is made when Rivers refuses to take ‘no’ as Jane’s answer to his proposal, even going so far as to tell her that she was “formed for labour, not for love” (Brontë 403). These choices take one of the ideals of Victorian society – all good vs. all bad; loyalty vs. rebellion; and reason vs. passion, respectively – to the extreme left of each pairing. In doing so, these authors create a commentary on how only *one* of them is not enough. Each of them fall into a trap of half-contentment. This half-contentment is the culmination of a “proper” Victorian’s behavior. Whether the society wanted to say it or not, these authors say it, which leads to the next step in their downfall. This second step – a second half, really – is their final state in the situation. They have a variety of reasons behind their final state, but it can all be boiled down to their refusal to compromise on the situations they were placed in.

However, these traits become irrelevant when considered in addition to the way that the compromises happen. With her decision to follow Harthouse, to become involved with him in many ways, Louisa further cracks the looking glass. Fact is no longer enough for her. In fact, she says as much to her father, stating that “your philosophy and your teaching will not save me. Now, father, you have brought me to this. Save me by some other means!” (Dickens 164). If complete facts can’t save her, and complete fancy brought her to this breaking point, what *can* save her and bring her back to the proper morals of a Victorian married woman? Meanwhile, Jane tells her readers that “if I had but a prospect of one day bringing Mr. Rochester an accession of fortune, I could better endure to be kept by him now,” speaking of the fortune her uncle plans to leave her if she wants it (Brontë 268). With money, the marriage can happen no problem, but if the engagement breaks, Jane will have something to fall back on. She marries passion and reason in her intentions to marry Mr. Rochester. However, her reasoning wins out because for all her hesitancy to break that societal constraint in the moment, she notes to the readers that she “forgave him at the moment and on the spot” (Brontë 298). What can society argue to her that will make sense, that will make her give up the passion and the reasoning behind her marriage to Mr. Rochester? Once Dr. Jekyll enters the picture, he notes that he “hesitated long before [he] put this theory to the test of practice” and that he “knew well that [he] risked death” (Stevenson 1810). Hesitation is key to compromise. Especially in the case of Dr. Jekyll’s compromise. His compromise is to the *core* of his being: all good, or all bad, and why does it have to be either or?

With all of this to consider, it should also be considered that Jane, Louisa, and Jekyll haven’t finished their shattering blows to the looking glass of singularities. There are two final blows to be delivered. The first is the moment that finally forces the compromise to happen. Not one of them – Jane, Louisa, or Jekyll – is *willing* to make that compromise without being pushed to it. This push is the bond of society’s will asking them for something they cannot do. Jane remarks that “to prolong doubt was to prolong hope” in search of her beloved Mr. Rochester (Brontë 423). Though she tries to keep her passion in line with her reason, her reason and her passion eventually align. The same goes for Louisa’s fact and fancy dilemma; at the end of the book, she is described as being childless and that having her own children was “such a thing… never to be” because she had compromised on her marriage, while Jekyll was pushed to feel he “had to choose” between Jekyll or Hyde (Dickens 223; Stevenson 1813). Singularities shatter under pressure – an explosive ending. They could not, would not, allow themselves to completely fall apart at society’s call. By refusing the standards, Jane Eyre, Louisa Gradgrind, and Dr. Jekyll become the standard for deviation from the societal roles that had up until now dictated everything that people did.

So, the looking glass completely shatters. With the glass tinkling to the floor of the luscious middle-class home, Victorian society’s ideals of singularity instead of duality have ended. Louisa Gradgrind provided the ability to have fact and fancy in one person after being brought up with only facts, while Jane Eyre provided the Victorians with the ability to marry passion and reason in her most passionate and her most reasonable hours. Finally, Dr. Jekyll shattered the idea that one had to be *all* good or *all* bad. When they were forced to compromise, they did it without grumbling and with hesitancy. This hesitancy to break singularities, their singularities, is the blow to end the looking glass of singularities – leaving one last question for the Victorians to answer: does a rebel shatter the looking glass before they’re sure that there will be no repercussions?

No. They don’t.

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