

# Books That The World Calls Immoral

## *Moral Doubling in Gothic Fiction*

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## Abstract

The Victorian Period was one culturally dominated by strict binarily opposed categories of permissible identity stemming from a long Christian tradition, but was simultaneously marked by great change as the British Isles settled into the era of post-industrialization. The city of London grew to be the world's first metropole and a loss of individuality and identity was prominently expressed in literature and felt in society at large. Increased interest and understanding in scientific fields of technology, biology (spearheaded by Charles Darwin) and psychology resulted in a rise of discussion around the human psyche and aspects of personality. The Gothic genre thrived in the Late Victorian Period, and in it, perhaps more so than in any other genre of literature, the human mind and experience take centre stage. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, an increasingly grotesque reflection of a man's soul is contrasted by a beautiful, physical embodiment of the same man. In *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* a doctor eventually succumbs to the struggle to suppress his dark second nature.

At the heart of these works' Gothic doubles lies the push and pull of good and evil, which I in this thesis aim to explore. To this end, I will assess the ways in which this Moral Double is written into *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, and analyse to what aim and to what effect Wilde and Stevenson have done so. This thesis will be accompanied by a piece of original creative writing that will serve as a form of practice-based research, providing insight into how this theme of the Moral Double is conceptualized, created and incorporated into a written work.

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## Introduction

It would be rather inaccurate to claim that the Gothic genre finds its origin in the Victorian Era, as authors such as Ann Radcliffe and William Thomas Beckford wrote works of fiction we would nowadays consider as belonging to the Gothic genre long before Queen Victoria's reign. In fact, Horace Walpole is generally accredited with laying the foundations of the Gothic literary tradition. His novel *The Castle of Otranto* was first published in 1764, ninety years before Oscar Wilde was born. It is in this novel that one of the most characteristic elements of Gothic fiction, the juxtaposition of fantastical romance and solemn reality, takes centre stage (Allison "The Castle of Otranto: The Creepy Tale That Launched Gothic Fiction"). Matthew Lewis played a key role as well with his work *The Monk*, which influenced Radcliffe directly. Lewis arguably took the genre further in the direction of the supernatural than Walpole did, by incorporating more tangible and explicit accounts of supernatural activity and magic (Birkhead 69).

To many nowadays, the connection between romantic poetry and Late Victorian Gothic fiction might seem unlikely. It should, however, not be underestimated how John Keats, Lord Byron and Samuel Taylor Coleridge influenced the development of the genre. Keats' narrative poem *Isabella, or the Pot of Basil*, for example, drew directly from the work of Radcliffe, whereas Byron's romanticism would go on to influence Edgar Allan Poe (Skarda and Jaffe 297). The Romantic's approach to the Gothic was perhaps more akin to the psychological uncanniness of Walpole, rather than the visceral morbidity of Lewis, which translated in a similar way to the Female Gothic tradition engaged with by the likes of Emily Brönte and Elizabeth Gaskell (Moers 93).

The Late Victorian Gothic is, however, likely the most iconic and enduring. The fin de siècle presented itself, in many ways, as a turning point. It would not be until then that the

Gothic genre would emerge in the form it is most recognizable as today. Anxieties felt by the British people around the turn of the century revolved primarily around uncertainty as the world changed faster than what the minds and hearts of its people seemed capable of keeping up with. Darwin's radical theory of evolution and the rapidly developing fields of medicine and psychological interest in the inner workings of the human mind seemed to some irreconcilable with the Christian tradition that had been firmly and unquestionably embedded in the dominant culture for centuries (Maxwell 13). It is in this shift from faith to psychology that Late Victorian Gothic fiction differs from the Gothic of Byron. Whereas the Romantic Gothic was drenched in tropes of divinity and God's natural creations, the Late Victorian Gothic dealt instead with the terrors of the human psyche. Nicholas Shrimpton, furthermore, found that a disproportionate amount of scholarly writing in the Late Victorian Period was to do with waves of pessimism that permeated the decade (Shrimpton 51).

Although *The Picture of Dorian Gray* opens in a deceptively romantic setting, both it and *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* are explicitly Urban Gothic fiction. Wilde and Stevenson eerily brought romantic and classical motifs and themes into their present-day context, beautifully capturing the frightening way in which scientific and technological developments changed the way in which people lived their lives.

These conditions of degeneration, isolation and introspection of the fin de siècle provided the fertile soil from the Gothic genre grew and flourished. The precise way in which that Late Victorian Gothic manifested itself, too, is a direct consequence of these conditions under which it was conceived. Duality, doppelgangers and schizophrenia are words commonly associated with the Late Victorian Gothic specifically, and for good reason. This cultural landscape asked of not only common people but of authors too, to reconsider the human experience and to reassess religion, morality and identity. It was in the cities that the feeling of isolation and loss of individuality was experienced most intensely, and it is in these foggy

streets that the concept of moral duality is most poignant as people felt the need to binarily oppose what they knew in an effort to make sense of the changing world around them, precisely at the time that these oppositions were being challenged.

Through analysis of Wilde's and Stevenson's works, this thesis will aim to provide insight into how morality and doubling are incorporated in these works not only separately but also in relation to each other. Further analysis of the concept of doubling will be done through practice-based research in the form of an original work.

## Morality In The Victorian Period

Morality is not entirely unambiguous. Firstly, what exactly does one mean by morality? It is perhaps most frequently used in a manner synonymous with *good* or *just*, and carries a certain theological weight. In *the moral of a story*, the moral refers to a lesson to be learned or some manner of wisdom or truth. In historiography, and historical literary analysis, it is, however, more appropriately understood descriptively as “certain codes of conduct put forward by a society or a group (such as a religion), or accepted by an individual for her own behaviour” or normatively as “a code of conduct that, given specified conditions, would be put forward by all rational persons” (Gert and Gert “The Definition of Morality”). In other words, morality for the purpose of this thesis can be understood as a code governing acceptable and unacceptable behaviour.

Immorality, evidently then, is that which is in opposition of this moral code, either in the form of a behaviour explicitly deemed condemnable under this code (e.g. murder, theft), or the body of behaviours and attitudes (i.e. a lifestyle) of a certain individual or group not amounting to an acceptable collective. A prostitute could, for example, be deemed immoral by virtue of his or her profession and through association with a certain social group regardless of his or her actual behaviour as it is known to others.

These moral codes are not fixed and can change drastically through time or by location. These changes frequently come about through social reform. The Victorian Era saw tremendous social change in terms of the rights of women with the suffragette movement gaining momentum, culminating in the right to vote through the Representation of the People Act 1918. This shift in the balance of power between men and women coincided with men’s *pater familias* authority in the household, stemming from the Christian tradition, being weakened as the Church’s influence in the cities cracked under the pressure of the emergence of Darwin’s theory of evolution, which led to masculinity being tied to physical power,

ruggedness and rigidity (Newsome 227). The traditional division of labour in the private sphere started to become less self-evident as women fought for agency in the public sphere, rather than being limited to the care of the household and while women were still discouraged from working some heroines and female authors did make a lasting impression on the literature of the era with the emergence of the New Woman (e.g. Mary Wollstonecraft and Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna). This New Woman figure radically challenged Christian moral values and had a dramatic impact on the position of the woman in Victorian morality. Richard and Willis point out in “The New Woman in Fiction and Fact Fin-de-Siècle Feminisms” how the New Woman did not only challenge that what was morally acceptable for women to engage in, but this literary phenomenon, on a more fundamental level, also challenged the very heteronormative foundations of Victorian society:

The New Woman was by turns: a mannish amazon and a Womanly woman; she was oversexed, undersexed, or same sex identified; she was anti-maternal, or a racial supermother; she was male-identified, or manhating and/or man-eating or self-appointed saviour of benighted masculinity; she was anti-domestic or she sought to make domestic values prevail; she was radical, socialist or revolutionary, or she was reactionary and conservative; she was the agent of social and/or racial regeneration, or symptom and agent of decline. (Richard and Willis 12)<sup>1</sup>.

The New Woman was, then, inherently enigmatic in a fashion very similar to Victorian morality as the Victorian’s front of sobriety and equity contradicted a bitter reality for the lower classes, as prostitution, child labour and petty crime were all too frequently ignored in order to keep up appearances (Wood 43).

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<sup>1</sup> For a more comprehensive analysis of Victorian heteronormativity see “The Love That Dare Not Speak Its Name: Challenging Late Victorian Heteronormativity”.



It should be noted that developments such as these on the axis of gender do not exist in a vacuum but rather have a profound effect on how society at large functions. The Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885 under which Oscar Wilde was prosecuted for gross indecency, for example, is clearly a product of its time and was conceived on the intersection of rugged masculinity, legal rights of women, the protection of children and sentiments regarding sex and sexuality in general.

A period's moral code is a vicious cycle of cause and consequence. It is made by people who have subjected themselves to it before even went into force. The Victorians made theirs a code of rigidity and conservatism, yet through the cracks of centuries of tradition, modernity was starting to show.

## In The Picture of Dorian Gray

*There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book.*

*Books are well written, or badly written. That is all.*

Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was published in Lippincott's Monthly Magazine in 1890 before being released as a novel in its own right, albeit substantially amended, in 1891. The work was widely criticized upon publication for offending Victorian sensibilities through its depiction of the fulfilment of taboo desires such as lust and violence. The Moral Double is evident even in the title of Wilde's magnum opus as it is shown primarily through the juxtaposition of Dorian Gray, the man, and his portrait. Through what resembles a Faustian bargain, Dorian begets everlasting youth at the expense of a picture painted of him by his friend Basil Hallward, which depicts an ever more aged and decrepit subject.

The very origin of the picture speaks to how the concept of morality and its inherent oppositions is of vital importance to Wilde's work. Basil is persuaded to paint Dorian's image precisely for such reasons not in line with the Victorian moral code. Dorian is to Basil, and indeed is arguably intended to be to the reader, an embodiment of physical beauty, the reverence thereof and of sensual or sexual fulfilment. Dorian and Basil are, even in the very earliest pages, juxtaposed on not only a physical level, but on a moral and intellectual level, too:

He is a brainless, beautiful thing, who should be always here in winter when we have no flowers to look at, and always here in summer when we want something to chill our intelligence. Don't flatter yourself, Basil: you are not in the least like him.' 'You don't understand me, Harry. Of course I am not like him. I know that perfectly well. Indeed, I should be sorry to look like him. [...] The ugly and the stupid have the best of it in this world. They can sit quietly and gape at the play. If they know

nothing of victory, they are at least spared the knowledge of defeat. They live as we all should live, undisturbed, indifferent, and without disquiet. They neither bring ruin upon others nor ever receive it from alien hands (Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* 5-6).

Prior even to the Faustian bargain, Dorian is written to be an *other*, a person not quite like everyone else, and in doing so Wilde has established the aesthete that scarcely differentiates moral and immoral acts. Herein lies evidence of how *The Picture of Dorian Gray* approaches morality from several angles and on more than one level. The novel's plot deals primarily with moral versus immoral acts and the consequences thereof, whereas the overarching narrative of Dorian's character resembling the aesthete shows Wilde's poignant critique of this philosophy as well as of the Victorian Period's stifling cultural rigidity (Duggan "The Conflict Between Aestheticism and Morality in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*").

On a rather basic level, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* tells the story of a young man's descent into madness after being liberated from societal constraints. Dorian's transformation from a curious, sensible young man in the novel's early pages to whatever monstrosity it is that the picture portrays towards the end, is rather a striking one. The connection between the picture's changing appearance and the decay of Dorian's soul as he transgresses has been made frequently and has arguably become widely regarded as truth. In the context of Moral Doubling, however, it is of interest to note that the connection between this decay and Dorian's actions' irreconcilability with Victorian morals extends beyond the mere condemning of these actions. It is, after all, only by the grace of the picture absolving Dorian of any culpability that he is compelled to undertake these actions:

Even those who had heard the most evil things against him (and from time to time strange rumors about his mode of life crept through London and became

the chatter of the clubs) could not believe anything to his dishonor when they saw him. He had always the look of one who had kept himself unspotted from the world. Men who talked grossly became silent when Dorian Gray entered the room. There was something in the purity of his face that rebuked them. His mere presence seemed to recall to them the innocence that they had tarnished. (Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* 159).

Wilde employs morality as the tide's push and pull that keeps the novel's story from ever standing still. The picture, first, is created by virtue of Basil distancing himself from Dorian both physically and morally. The picture then allows Dorian to defy Victorian sensibilities by extirpating the immorality from these acts through the expunging of accountability. Morality, thus, functions in the novel in much the same way as it does in society at large; a cycle of cause and consequence.

This inherent incompatibility of aestheticism and morality shows, too, in Dorian's relationship with Sybil. Dorian's attraction to her at first is merely superficial and predatory, based merely on her theatre performances; in a very unambiguous sense he falls for art itself and seeks to possess it. After Sybil leaves the theatre, Dorian quickly becomes disinterested as the mere hedonistic thrill seeking that was the nexus of their relationship dissolves. It is at this point, when Dorian's superficial love for Sybil drives her to kill herself, that Wilde's novel first passes judgement on Dorian's actions, by way of having the picture reflect an altered reality.

Beyond the scope of mere plot, attention must be paid to how Wilde employs the novel to criticize Victorian morals at large. At publication, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was met with criticism as Victorians claimed it was written with the intent to promote a hedonistic lifestyle, Wilde himself, however, later refuted this in written letters (Wilde, *The Letters Of Oscar Wilde*). It should nevertheless be evident to readers that rather than a celebration of, *The Picture*

*of Dorian Gray*, could and indeed should be read as a criticism of this very lifestyle. That is not to say, however, that the Victorians did not touch on some degree of truth. The aesthetic and hedonistic ideals that Lord Henry tries to cultivate in Dorian are those that holds dear vastly different values than the Victorian sensibilities and many of the passages of dialogue specifically appear at first glance to celebrate this idea. It is however only when Dorian succumbs to Lord Henry's influence that his descent and degeneration begins. In other words, aestheticism and hedonism ultimately lead to Dorian's death.

Wilde's work being condemned for being immoral was influenced heavily, too, by the time's views on homosexuality and sexuality in general. The Victorian moral code left little room for the exploration of sexuality in any form, in the sense that moral pathos and non-procreative sex were mutually exclusive and binarily opposed in the same way homosexual desire and heterosexuality were. Dorian exploring sexuality in a way that is not explicitly heterosexual and marital shows how Wilde challenged Victorian morality in a way that is not limited to any single axis of difference. Gender, sexuality and class are inseparable when it comes to the way a society's moral code views any one of the separate axes, and by drawing these issues of gender and sexuality into his work, Wilde struggled not against a single aspect of Victorian morality but rather against the system as a whole.

Wilde, again, employs duality and opposition to provide these actors of gender and sexuality with a stage. Sybil Vane is arguably the one true innocent Wilde aims to portray and much of Dorian's sexuality is mediated through the way in which it is incompatible with Sybil's life and, perhaps, her anatomy. Wilde juxtaposes Sybil and Dorian by establishing Sybil as *the unspoiled* whom Dorian aims to collect:

"Dorian, Dorian," she cried, "before I knew you, acting was the one reality of my life. It was only in the theatre that I lived. [...] You came -- oh, my beautiful

love! -- and you freed my soul from prison. You taught me what reality really is. [...] You had made me understand what love really is. My love! My love! Prince Charming! Prince of life! I have grown sick of shadows. You are more to me than all art can ever be. What have I to do with the puppets of a play?"

(Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* 90)

It is because Dorian has a morally pure, conventionally feminine and heterosexual, double in the form of Sybil Vane that the way in which Dorian deviates from this norm himself becomes so clear. Sybil is safely unapologetic and explicit in the way she acknowledges her relationship with Dorian as being legitimate and sincere, whereas Dorian is decidedly more aloof and reluctant to acknowledge it, showing the disparity between their attitudes towards the morality of romance.

The most significant duality in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is, however, easily identified as the living Dorian Gray on the one hand and his picture on the other, precisely where these dual identities lie on the spectrum of morality, however, is perhaps somewhat more ambiguous. It is commonly accepted that the changes in Dorian's portrait reflect changes in his soul as Dorian commits immoral acts. It would follow then, that whatever force governs the relationship between Dorian's acts and the appearance of the portrait, judges whether or not those deeds being carried out justify a change of appearance, or in other words, whether those deeds are moral or immoral. Dorian's picture, then, could be seen both as Dorian's immoral doppelganger showing the consequences of acting in conflict with Victorian Morality, but alternatively Dorian's portrait presents Victorian Morality itself that through a Faustian bargain observes Dorian and judges and punishes.

The Victorian code of morality, thus, is manifested as a very real power that forces Basil's hand to set in motion a chain of events comprised of links all associated with morality, be that through facilitation, degradation or arbitration.

## In The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde

*Man is not truly one, but two.*

*The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* was Robert Louis Stevenson's fourth novella and firmly established Stevenson as a respected author after the success of *Treasure Island*. Stevenson's novella was truly a product of its time, and few works from the period permeate modern culture and language today to the same extent. Gabriel John Utterson is the focus of the novel's narration, though much of the story is driven by Dr Henry Jekyll, whom develops a serum which allows him to transform into Mr Edward Hyde. Whereas Wilde uses a minor character, Basil, to establish the immorality of the main focal point of moral doubling, in the form of Dorian Gray, Stevenson does so through a more explicit juxtaposition of Dr Jekyll and his medically induced counter-part, Mr Hyde.

Dr Jekyll is planted firmly at the centre of Victorian morality and etiquette before the issue of moral doubling arises explicitly in the novel. Stevenson describes him as "a large, well-made, smooth-faced man of fifty, with something of a stylish cast perhaps, but every mark of capacity and kindness—you could see by his looks that he cherished for Mr. Utterson a sincere and warm affection" (Stevenson 21). Mr Hyde, on the other hand, is rather unequivocally established as immoral, evil and perhaps inhuman:

There is something more [...] God bless me, the man seems hardly human! Something troglodytic, shall we say? or can it be the old story of Dr. Fell? or is it the mere radiance of a foul soul that thus transpires through, and transfigures, its clay continent? The last, I think; for, O my poor old Harry Jekyll, if ever I read Satan's signature upon a face, it is on that of your new friend. (Stevenson 19)



The way in which the moral double is created in *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* is distinctly different from how this is done in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In Wilde's work, a Faustian bargain is struck seemingly without Dorian's express desire or permission, whereas in Stevenson's work, this doubling does not occur as a result of some divinely granted wish, but rather intently through scientific experimentation with this doubling as the express purpose. There is, then, an important connection in Stevenson's novel between science and morality.

Sigmund Freud would make what is arguably the largest contribution to psychology a mere decade after *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* was published. Some of Freud's influencers were, however, already making strides in the field that Freud would later spearhead. A dominant medical and psychological theory, of which some core sentiments remain to this day, in the Late Victorian Era was that the two halves of the brain represented the two halves of an individual that did not only govern different areas of, for example, a person's motor skills, but also "contrasting desires and moral inclinations" (Stiles 882). Stevenson goes so far as to explicitly cite this as a driving force behind Jekyll's experimentation:

With every day, and from both sides of my intelligence, the moral and the intellectual, I thus drew steadily nearer to that truth [...] that man is not truly one, but truly two [...] It was on the moral side, and in my own person, that I learned to recognise the thorough and primitive duality of man; I saw that, of the two natures that contended in the field of my consciousness, even if I could rightly be said to be either, it was only because I was radically both; [...] If each, I told myself, could be housed in separate identities, life would be relieved of all that was unbearable [...] It was the curse of mankind that these incongruous faggots were thus bound together—that in the agonised womb of consciousness, these polar twins should be continuously struggling. How, then were they dissociated? (Stevenson 49)

It is, then, with the express purpose of escaping the stifling rigidity of Victorian morality that Jekyll seeks to split his “polar twins”.

This same passage shows how Stevenson’s exploration of duality is connected to its theological and scientific context, as he specifically employs language related to the emerging Darwinian theory of evolution (e.g. *primitive, natures, consciousness, mankind, womb*). Hyde is presented, then, paradoxically as both abnormal and natural. This shows that Stevenson would have been aware of at least some of the progress being made in the fields of psychology and biology. David Ferrier published “The Brain of a Criminal Lunatic” four years prior to the publishing of *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, and it having influenced Stevenson to some degree is more likely than the alternative (Stiles 886). Ferrier argued that personal duality disorders could be caused by an imbalance of moral attitudes between the brain halves, causing physical deformities in the brain itself. Most relevantly, the right hemisphere of the brain might become enlarged as a result of increased criminality or moral degradation. Jekyll’s reasoning falls in line with this theory in that he recognized that both morality and immorality were inherent aspects of every personality, and physical deformation in connection to Mr Hyde runs throughout the novel:

The evil side of my nature, to which I had now transferred the stamping efficacy, was less robust and less developed than the good which I had just deposed. [...]  
And hence, as I think, it came about that Edward Hyde was so much smaller, slighter and younger than Henry Jekyll. Even as good shone upon the countenance of the one, evil was written broadly and plainly on the face of the other. 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. (Stevenson 50)

Hence it follows that Hyde can not only be seen as an embodiment of Jekyll's immoral desires, but in a more abstract sense, as a symptom of Jekyll's own moral imbalance. Hyde, through Jekyll's own doing, becomes the tumour that grows from Jekyll's own moral disorder. Even in the Victorian Era, doctors realised that the left side of the brain governed the right side of the body and vice versa. In other words: "Bodily left-sidedness (like left-handedness or left-leg predominance) signalled right-brain hemisphere dominance" (Stiles 888). In the novel, Jekyll purposefully presents Hyde as being left-handed when he is required to sign a document in Hyde's name, sloping the writing backwards to give it a left-handed appearance, solidifying the idea that Hyde embodies immorality in the light of scientific discovery in the way the world had not quite seen before.

The assumption that Hyde is nothing but a one-dimensional incarnation of evil is, however, too simplistic. It is, after all, with intent that Hyde is initially created. He serves as a vessel for Jekyll's deepest desires to be freely expressed without repercussion, whatever those may be, whereby Stevenson arguably implicitly acknowledges the requirement of such release. In "The Baser Urge", Carolyn Laubender argues that Hyde can be seen as the moral half of the double rather than the immoral on the basis of the idea that Hyde is the facet of Dr Jekyll's persona free of the corruption of Victorian Morality. In accepting a reading of the novel in which Stevenson actively criticizes the Victorian's strict moral code, Laubender strikes at the heart of what the Gothic Moral Double does, it asks its reader to question what constitutes morality and whether or not it should be blindly accepted.

## Conclusion

A look at the moral code of a literary period can be remarkably enlightening when it comes to the way in which the dominant culture of the period shapes not only its people but also the literature they produce. Morality extends beyond custom and its ever changing chain of cause and effect permeates the written word on a fundamental level. The Gothic genre is by no means an exception, and few, if any, other genre of literature quite so enthrallingly captures what it meant to be Victorian. The reality of industrialization, of Darwinism, of feminism and of psychology are all tangibly and unnervingly presented through the prism of morality.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a prime example of how a society's moral code is not something that can be escaped or ignored. It is engrained in its subjects quite so deeply that it seemingly governs even what might appear as free will. *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* shows us how Stevenson employed rather than shied away from the emerging sciences and makes his readers ask fundamental questions about their very nature even to this day.

Through creating Moral Doubles, these works of Urban Gothic Fiction show us not only the way in which morality is established but also the way in which it might be challenged. In both works doubling is employed as a method of escaping morality through supernatural means, allowing their characters as well as their readers to gaze into a world ungoverned by these moral codes, to whatever dreadful end. In doing so it becomes even more clear how fundamentally connected duality, morality and identity are.

## Exegesis

The purpose of my original short story was to establish through practice-based research how a dual identity is created in a work of fiction. The concept that first came to mind was that of public image as constructed through cultural morality versus private identity. I wanted to stay true to the gothic theme of the works I analysed (i.e. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*) mostly in terms of imagery and tone. Additionally, I wanted both works to have recognizable influence on my short story to people that have read both works.

I wanted to retain the Gothic aspect of the supernatural without it being immediately obvious what that supernatural aspect was to be, in a way similar to *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, in which the reader is kept guessing until the conclusion, rather than how Wilde makes it unequivocally clear early on. The nexus of this supernatural element is my nameless main character, whom can change appearance at will in order to fulfil whatever role society asks of him. The character changes faces halfway through the story, which should not only be noticeable through the actual description of it, but also through the story's symbolism and tone. Additionally, the first half reads considerably more like *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, whereas the latter half reads more like *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.

In the first, *Dorian Gray*-esque, act, the tone is light and airy but still incorporates the eeriness of the Gothic genre through the establishment of certain plot elements. I tried to capture an ambiance reminiscent of the scenes in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* where Basil, Dorian and Lord Henry discuss philosophy in the garden, amidst fragrant blossoms. In this act, two of the most important motives in this work are established: the key and the tongue. I incorporated these in an effort to underline the overarching theme of identity as performance. The tongue is related to speech and therefor associated with how we present ourselves to the

outside world. The key signifies how these differing persona's we put on can allow us to move in various social groups or on different occasion. These support the reading of the *performed* self as the double.

In the second act, tone is similar and the predominant usage of imagery is still that of the natural world. There are, however, references to the fragility of these tropes that signify a darker edge to the story. The anatomy class is my version of a marriage of Wilde's and Stevenson's work, juxtaposing the medical and natural world through morbidity in the context of dramatic aestheticism.

The more sinister side of this work is established mostly in the third act, in which the nature of the main character's supernaturality is revealed. He carries with him a satchel of interchangeable body parts by way of which he can adjust his appearance to meet any situation necessary. The imagery and symbolism in this act is considerably darker than it was in the first two acts. The colour scheme changes to brown, red, black and white and sentences are shorter in an effort to establish a different sense of pace, being considerably faster than before. This frantic, electric passage of time should convey the main character's almost erotic excitement. This is the act in which my main character is revealed, without a chosen face to cover him up, revealing the second half of the double: the true self, rather than the performed one.

The fourth and final act is very different from the first in terms of style: this is the urban gothic that is home to Mr Hyde and Dorian Gray's opium dens. The imagery in this is at times almost satanic (e.g. the forked tongues of incense, the fallen angelic candles) amidst which a blond, cherubic man is made prey. The main character kills with a chip of bone from his own shoulder. This, to me, was an important point to drive home. Identities are products of circumstance and my main character is no exception. He is who he is because of how, where, with whom and when he lives his life. Yet, our ability to speak and act gives us some agency

over how we present ourselves to the world. This may, however, not always be true to who we are. My main character kills the man and harvests his face with a piece of himself, not with whatever he presents himself to be, whatever morality he portrayed with a stolen face is gone.

# What Lurks Beneath the Skin

Dirk Versluis

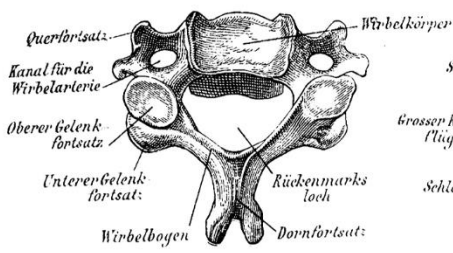


Fig. 5. Halswirbel von oben gesehen;  $\frac{2}{3}$  der nat. Größe.

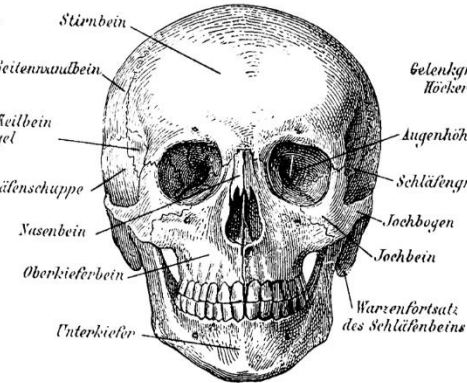


Fig. 1. Vorderansicht des Schädels.

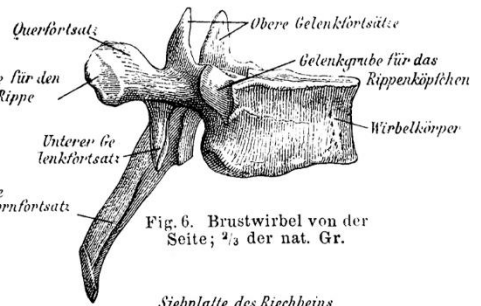


Fig. 6. Brustwirbel von der Seite;  $\frac{2}{3}$  der nat. Gr.

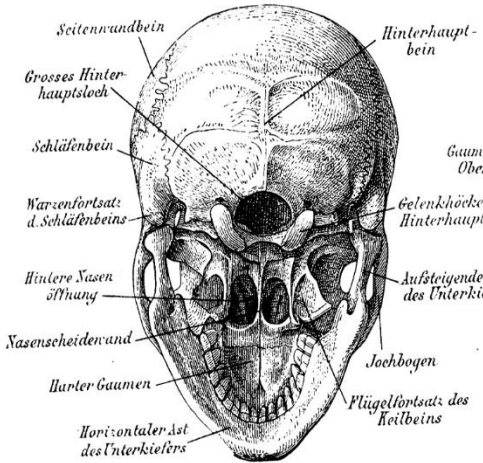


Fig. 3. Schädel von unten gesehen.

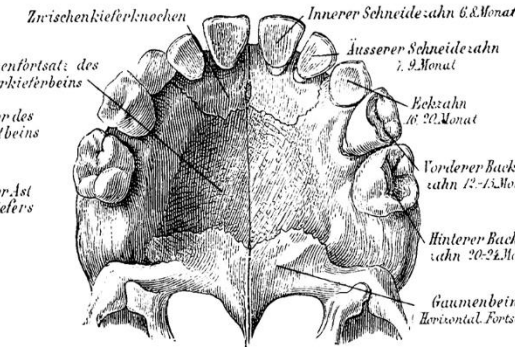


Fig. 17. Die Milchzähne des Oberkiefers.

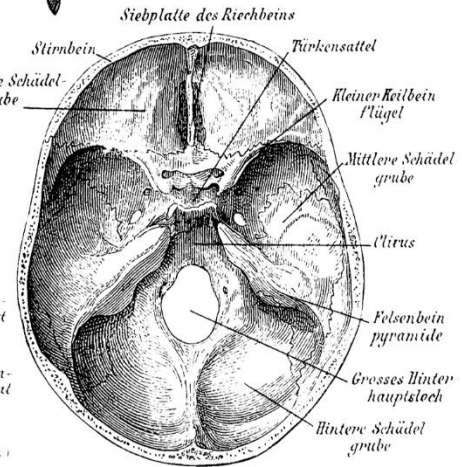


Fig. 4. Basis der Schädelhöhle.

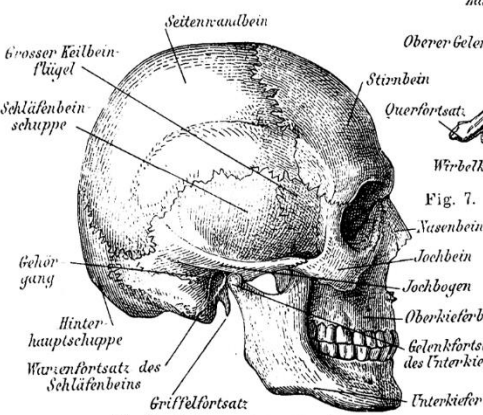


Fig. 2. Seitenansicht des Schädels.

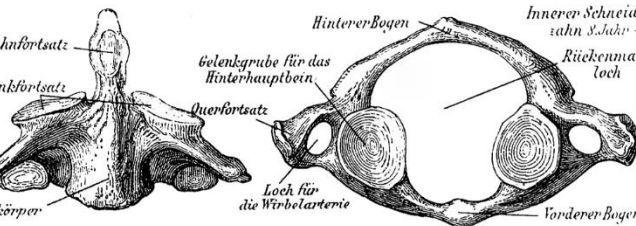


Fig. 7. Zweiter Halswirbel (Epistropheus) von vorn.

Fig. 8. Erster Halswirbel (Atlas) von oben.

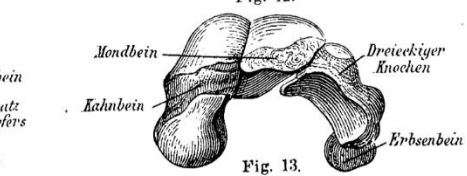


Fig. 12.

Fig. 13.

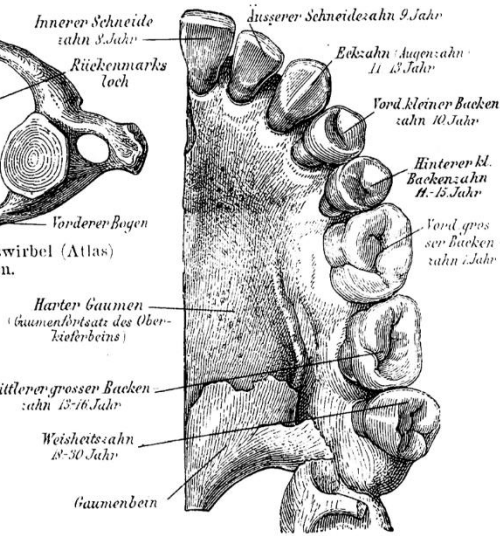


Fig. 16. Bleibende Zähne des linken Oberkiefers.

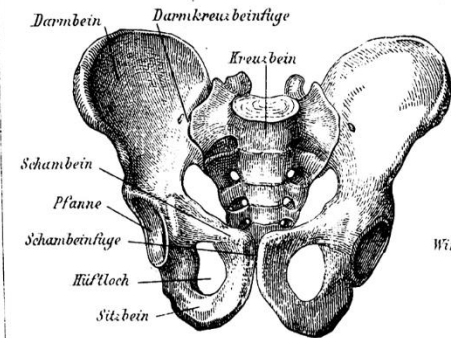


Fig. 10. Männliches Becken von vorn.

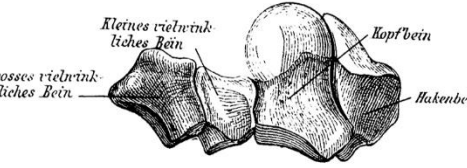


Fig. 12 u. 13. Erste und zweite Reihe der Handwurzelknochen. (Linke Hand, Ansicht vom Handrücken her.)

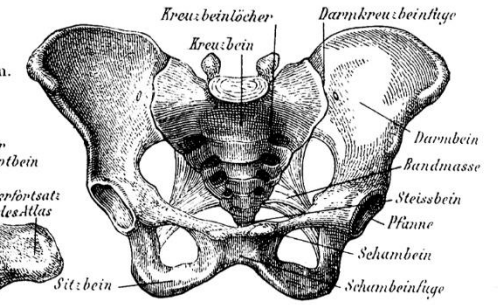


Fig. 11. Weibliches Becken von vorn.

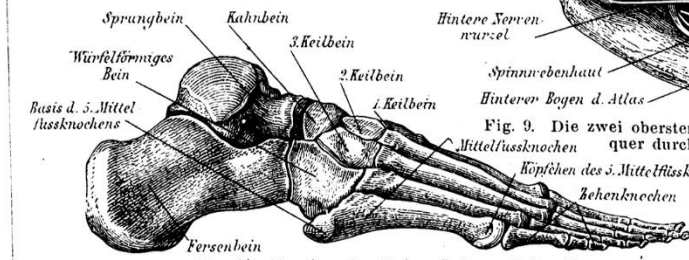


Fig. 14. Knochen des Fußes, äußerer Fußrand.

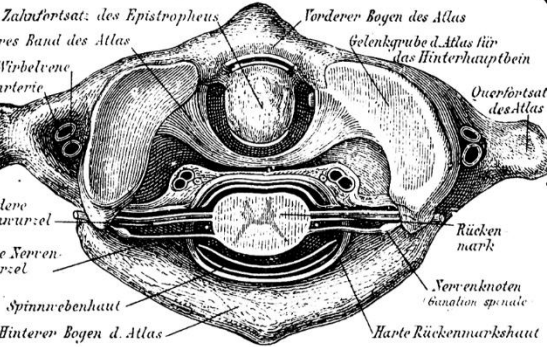


Fig. 9. Die zwei obersten Halswirbel von oben gesehen, mit dem quer durchschnittenen Rückenmark.



Fig. 15. Knochen des Fußes, innerer Fußrand.



## Creative Work

### What Lurks Beneath the Skin

#### ACT I

That day, I believe it was a Thursday in the spring of July, was just as any other day. Perhaps the sun was shining a bit more brightly, or maybe the open window had allowed a summer wind smelling somewhat more intensely of honeysuckle to blow into my room. Perfectly ordinary, in fact. Whatever fancy might have moved me, that day I wore my favourite face. It stood on a narrow, transparent rod that made it appear as if it was freely suspended mid-air under its glass bell. Whenever I looked away I was certain I saw it mockingly move from the corner of my eye. It was a soft, round face that most would consider handsome, with full cheeks and big, velvety lips. The sockets did not house eyes but were set below a sculptured brow the colour of hay.

The cabinet that held my faces had originally served as a china cabinet in the kitchen downstairs, but now stood across from my window, where the sun directly hit it so the faces could look outside. I did not take to counting my faces but there must have been at least eleven or twelve. The ones I rarely used were somewhere in the back, with scruffy beards and glassy eyes looking at the back of other faces from under their dusty, opaque bells. The face I had chosen for today was on the second shelf from the top, second left from the middle. No one ever came into this room but nevertheless I locked the cabinet securely every night by wrapping a large chain horizontally and then vertically around the leaded glass, twisting the chain around itself in the middle where I then secured it with a silver padlock.

I took the key from underneath my tongue. In spite of the warm weather, the lock was pleasantly cool to the touch and for a moment I considered holding it up to my neck. As I unhooked the padlock from the links, the chain cascaded down the cabinet into a puddle of cool steel on the floor. The glass doors opened wide enough for me to reach inside and wrap both hands around the bell, carefully hooking my ring fingers under the base. My vanity was untidy and I had to cradle the bell in one arm as if holding an infant so with my spare hand I could clear a surface for it to stand on. I lifted off the cover and set it aside on the cushioned marble column bearing intricately carved detail in Corinthian fashion that stood perfectly within arms' reach. As I did any other morning, I positioned my magnifying glass directly in front of my face and peered through the glass, tweezers in hand, to examine every minute detail. Quickly and efficiently I pruned the skin of any wandering hairs, brushed off any that had fallen out, picked, pulled, poked and prodded until the skin turned red. I then set the magnifying glass aside and lifted the face, by the ears, off its pedestal and held it against my head. Starting at the nose, then under the eye sockets, in between the brows, under the mouth and working my way ever outward I ran my fingers over the smooth skin, pressing down carefully yet forcefully. Satisfied, I opened my eyes to look in the mirror and found a semi-strange face looking back at me, the sides of the mouth curled upward. My familiar, grey eyes appeared somewhat more blue in such shallow sockets.

A gust of wind streamed into the room, carrying the sound of clamouring youngsters and school bells. I cast a last look into the mirror and leaned out my window. Three floors down, crowns of heads formed a line across the yard, forming a path that cut through the rows of honey-coloured blossom trees whose branches trembling in the wind seemed barely able to bear the weight of their own sweet

beauty. Beyond the wrought iron gate through which the students flowed, my university's campus grounds stretched out for what I had estimated to be roughly a mile and a half. School bells rang once again and immediately the students flooding towards the lecture halls started walking ever so slightly more quickly. A deep breath filled my lungs with warm, sticky-sweet summer air and for that day, I decided to keep my windows flung wide open.

A call of my name followed by three faint and two sharp knocks on my door alerted me that for me, too, it was time to walk that daily walk. I flung the sheer, yellow dress shirt that hung draped over the chair next to the cabinet over my shoulders and buttoned it starting from the fourth button from the top, leaving the skin on my chest above the sternum exposed. I did not take to counting my friends, but I would have estimated the group of students waiting on the other side of my door to be eleven or twelve men and women strong.

My door opened to the top floor and directly opposite the staircase. Connecting the ceiling to the papered walls were large Tiffany glass window panes that displayed a variety of paintings reimagined in glass, ranging from the classical to the contemporary. Directly in front of my door was Ophelia floating in her sheer dress. Every ending day the sun would set her dress on fire, eyes normally blankly staring upwards suddenly filled with terror and her open mouth seemingly screaming out for help, for the night to douse the flames and sink her back into the river.

## ACT II

Scattered rays of sunlight dazzled through the high, leaded windows of the grand hallway, the walls they bounced off of appearing as if precious gems had been crushed and flung across their surface. A mere few of these windowpanes were flung wide open, providing an unobstructed view of the lilac blossom tree in the courtyard, in whose shade stood a weathered bench with a peacock scroll back. Two were sat upon it, speaking of whatever unimaginable joy lovers are expected to express, I imagined. Purple leaves in groups of four were nestled in one lover's hair, which had fallen from the blossom tree in a rain of tiny deaths. As I passed one open window the wind carried one of these delicate lilac flowers and laid it gently against my chest.

Students stood gathered in front of wrought iron double doors that would let us into the lecture theatre. The crowd of indistinguishable peers dissipated as I approached, save two young men that pressed their shoulders firmly against the heavy timber and dug their heels to push the loudly protesting doors open just wide enough for me and my eleven or twelve filed in a line behind me to pass through them. We entered at the very bottom of the semi-circular, glass-domed theatre that held nineteen tiers of birch desks and chairs. In front of a large blackboard stood a long table on which glass jars filled with formaldehyde seemed randomly placed, suspended in every one of which some manner of critter, ranging from those we would see around our childhood homes to those who only appeared in our most bizarre of nightmares. I ran my right index finger across the cherry wood of the desk as I glanced briefly at a robin that floated perfectly centre in its container, its wings forever stretched outward as if it could at any moment choose to fly freely into the theatre and through one of the open windows, not comprehending the beautiful secret of its own immortality. Six jars away was something altogether different; not round but square, not clear but covered by a linen cloth. I took my seat directly in front of it as the mob of students eagerly awaiting my selection started to stream in.

The professor took his place in front of the linen cloth with his hands in the pockets of his waist coat, looking directly at me over his half-round spectacles with a glint of perverted curiosity in his eyes. He waited patiently for the murmuring and whispering to cease before he with his thumb and index finger lifted the cloth and flung it over his shoulder. Gasps and cries echoed, whereas my lips merely parted

without making a sound. Revealed now, lay a toad on its back with its extremities and the skin of its stomach pinned to a wooden slate, revealing its anatomy, its dimmed eyes and mouth wide open.

The professor asked for a volunteer and the handful of students holding their arms in the air quickly lowered them as I stood up from my chair and approached the table. I bent forward to look closely at the toad that lay there as an amphibious Vitruvian man, and as I did the lilac flower lain nestled against my chest danced down to caress instead the chest of the animal where its skin was stretched out away from its body.

From the corner of my eye, I could see the professor's lips curl upward as it landed, "Marvellous creature, wouldn't you say?"

"Indeed it is professor." I looked around the table and on the opposite end of it I saw a number of instruments laid out on a napkin; thin blades with handles that glistened in the sunlight pouring in through the domed roof, pins and needles.

"I did it myself, you know. Caught it in the pond under the lilac tree just this morning. A rather frustrating enterprise, I must admit, they are quite dextrous creatures, after all. Admirable, isn't it, leaping and squirming even in the face of death? Nature's humble servant until the very end, I suppose." The professor lowered his glasses somewhat and brought his head so close to mine that I could smell the cigars and brandy on his breath. "Grab one of the forceps over there, would you?"

I did as the professor asked but as I offered the tool to him, he stayed my hand.

"The heart is precisely behind the liver lobes, in betwixt both lungs, if you lift the central lobe you may reveal it." The professor pointed at three overlapping lumps of flesh, in both shape and colour not unlike the flower petals that lay besides it.

"I must admit I feel bad for the thing" I whispered, the forceps clasped firmly in my grasp. "To be plucked from the nurturing teat of life to amount to no more than this."

"Compassion can be a petrifying thing, young man. Are we never to act in fear of insulting one who does not deserve so? Should we keep to ourselves as to avoid hurting another? Passion may unmake the best of men and ever thus will it be for those like you who care too deeply."

"Better not to care at all, professor?"

The professor reached over to the array of instruments and took from it a long silver pin. He turned it round between his thumb and index finger, watching intently how the sunlight danced off it. With uncanny precision he then plunged the pin through the floral lobes and pierced the heart that lay beneath. Blood that had lost its former ruby vibrancy scattered across the lilac petals.

"So it would appear." The professor murmured as with his thumb he wiped a speck of blood from his bottom lip.

### ACT III

When the bell knelled I leapt to my feet and briskly paced out of the theatre, motioning with a simple gesture of a hand for my eleven or twelve not to follow. The two young men stood still at their post by the door, not quite asleep but hardly awake, looking to the heavy wood rather than their feet to support their weight. They jolted, however, the moment they heeded my approach and tugged feverishly at the brass knockers. I slowed my pace but for a moment and slipped through a crack only just wide enough for my slender shoulders to pass through. More quiet had I never seen the grand hall, nor the bench in the courtyard less occupied. A chill wind howled through the hallway as half the sun was eclipsed by wanton clouds, dimming the brilliant diamonds on the walls. The lilac tree trembled as its flailing branches were pushed and pulled by invisible vortexes, releasing a downpour of purple rain that

blew in through the open windows and fell austerely to the floor. Having glanced over my shoulder at the end of the hallway, I retreated into one of the lavatories and locked the door behind me. I hastily coughed up a match but striking it I broke it in two. The second match I with my thumb held close behind the garnet that dotted the wooden stick as I had rather I be singed by the flame than not to have a flame at all. Again I struck and a nascent fire sprung to life, sending embers across the nail of my thumb. The flame swayed one way and then curled another as I lifted it to a candle suspended on the wall. The flame greedily licked the wick and the narrow bathroom was bathed in flickering light.

I turned my satchel upside down over the sink, filling it to the brim with discoloured phalanges, carpals and tibias, and a flesh-coloured satin bag draped itself over the edge of the sink in its fall. I pinched the tip of my nose and tugged at the skin. I felt the tissue on my neck rip as it parted across my spine. Pulling further away from my nose, skin tore away around my jaw first and then around the temples and the cheeks until in my hand I held my favourite face. I folded it neatly and put it away safely in its satin bag which I laid back over the sink.

The mirror reflected a more pale and angular face now, with high and prominent cheekbones that, when looked at from the front, seemed to extend all the way down to the sides of a dimpled chin. My eyes were sunk deeper into this face, darkening their steely blue. These cheeks had none of their former fleshy depth but rather the skin was pulled taut across my skull. I licked my thin, ashy lips.

I unbuttoned my shirt and let it slide off my shoulders. I tore the skin off my clavicles and my ligaments sounded as paper being torn in half as I popped the two bones out of their sockets. I replaced the bones with two that I exhumed from the graveyard in the sink, then laid the skin back neatly on top. These branches of ivory were slightly wider and stuck out further from my chest, sinking the skin below my neck deeply into my body. I bared a ram's skull on my sternum, lengthened my fingers and removed two ribs. I narrowed my hips and broadened my shoulders. I stuffed the sheer shirt in my satchel followed by my favourite face and the left-over and discarded masses, huddled in the sink. The formerly brilliant white had been marred by ashy dust and fragments of bone had collected at the bottom of the basin. A sharp breath across the porcelain scattered specks of ground cartilage and chips of bone into the air, and as if frightened by my apathy, the candle's flame flailed wildly back and forth for a mere moment before resuming its solemn, inert watch. A single fragment, long and thin, lay in the basin still. I touched the tip of my fingers to my left clavicle and found a groove from which the shard had broken. Deeply I licked my neoteric thumb and index finger, taking every phalange into my mouth and swirling my tongue around and between. I pressed my saliva against the wick and hissed the flame to its death. In the dark I placed the ivory needle from my shoulder underneath my tongue.

#### ACT IV

The smell of cobble stones freshly dampened by summer rain somewhat stilled my racing heart as I navigated alleyways I would not hazard showing any other face. I walked slowly and let my eyes pass over every detail to pass judgement. A nose too narrow to my left, a jaw too wide on my right. As I passed, some of the creatures in their cages jumped up or stirred, whereas others acted as if they did not register my presence. Perhaps some of the fortunate souls truly did not. Only at the end of the street, behind the very last of the windows, did I find what I was looking for. Behind the ironed glass, a naked, blonde man sat on a cushion fashioned of red velvet with his legs crossed and his hands folded on his lap. His head was tilted slightly, his moonlit emerald eyes glistening with erotic excitement. I approached the glass and tapped the glass with my knuckles. The blonde man dropped onto his hands and

knees and crawled towards me until his nose was pressed against the glass. I watched him as he, with his left hand on his crotch, looked over me from the crown of my head to the bottom of my feet, his gaze passing considerably more slowly over some parts of me than over others. He licked his lips and then he licked the glass, carving a wet path through where the moisture in his breath had crystalized into a blanket of opaque droplets. I maintained eye contact with the man on all fours as I tapped three times slowly and then twice fast on the window. The blonde man bit the air thrice in the mere moment it took for a door to swing open.

Flickering lanterns lined the walls inside, one above each of the many doors from which sounded growling, hissing and roaring. The air was thick with strands of the smoke of incense, twisting and turning along their wayward paths upwards along the walls, licking the red and black wallpaper with forked tongues.

From beneath my tongue I plucked a small bronze key, tainted a mossy green through months of being kept in saliva. The key rattled in the lock. The blonde man had shut the blinds; the room was now lit only by a single candle. In a circle in the corner, melted seraphim watched the last of their covenant burn its final breaths. The man stood naked in the corner of the room, facing away from me. The walls were bare but for a long-forgotten mirror which reflected little more than shadows now, and a silver cross that hung above it.

“Come close, let me take a look at you” I said. The voice that came from my mouth was shrill and I did not instantly recognize it as my own.

The man took his place besides the candles. He reached out to touch me but I corrected him with nothing more than a single look. I brushed the line of his jaw, hooked my index finger and middle finger under his chin and moved his head to the right, the left and up, ran my hands over his shoulders and arms, down to his hands. I walked my gaze in a close circle around him. There were scratches on his hips, just above the crest, bruises in between his thighs and bitemarks dotted on his back.

“Let yourself down on the floor” I ordered the man with a whisper “on your stomach”.

He did as I asked without saying a word and laid himself down at my feet. I watched for a moment how the man’s shoulders and upper back moved ever so slightly in accordance with his slow, steady breathing. He turned his head away from me and looked into the flame. I dipped my tongue into the dimples at the bottom of his spine and ran it upward across his back, up to the nape of his neck, drawing a soft but guttural moan from the blonde man’s lips. A constellation of memories of past lovers lay willingly between my legs.

Onto his back I spit a sharp fragment of bone. I turned it for merely a moment between my fingers as the fading candlelight danced across the ivory. Calmly I retraced my tongue’s steps with the needle, the blonde man started moving sporadically, then straining more and ever more with every vertebra I passed. When I reached the space between the atlas and the axis, I lifted the shard from the skin only briefly before plunging it down through what little tissue protected the spinal cord. The man’s body went limp under me, collapsing into a heap of itself. I retracted the needle and ran it once across the dead man’s neck, exposing the underlying spinal column and allowing me to pull the skin away.

“In nomine Patris” the candle flickered to its death.

“Et Filii” the mirror shattered.

“Et Spiritus Sancti” the cross turned upside down.

“Amen” what a beautiful addition.

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