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Dirty London: How Victorian Filth Formed the Urban Detective

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Foreword

This year I have been fascinated with the layer of grime that seemed to cover Victorian London. During a course at Skidmore last Fall, I began a study of Charles Dickens. During this course, I was struck by the author's descriptions of the city streets, specifically the dirt, dust, and filth that existed there. Dickens's characters seemed constantly covered in this filth. Once Oliver Twist is captured by Fagin and his gang of pickpockets, he is forced to participate in that life of crime on the streets. In *Hard Times*, Josiah Bounderby never ceases to brag about his growth from being abandoned in a ditch to a wealthy businessman. Also in *Hard Times*, Stephen Blackpool spends his days working in a filthy warehouse until he ultimately dies in a mine shaft accident. In *A Christmas Carol*, the dirty children Ignorance and Want represent Victorian orphans abandoned on the streets. Some of these characters tried to escape it, others embraced it, but no matter their specific positions, filth was everywhere. It filled the streets, made people ill, and contaminated every part of the city. The more I read Dickens' work, the more I began to sense a connection between physical dirt and moral darkness. The characters who were exiled to live on the streets became more sinister after prolonged exposure to this dirty world. The darkness and dirtiness they inhabited seemed to very quickly become a part of them.

The connection between dirt and crime came easily to me, but I then started to wonder whether the dirt and grime were separable from any of the Victorian characters I studied. Yes, the pickpockets and criminals were morally corrupt, but what about the well-to-do Victorians? Those who turned a blind eye to the poor masses huddled on the streets can't have been much better than the pickpockets. What about the Victorians who lined the streets to watch the procession of a murderer's dead body and cheered when it went past? Something must have driven them towards those actions. What if the grime on the streets of London made these dark

activities more acceptable? Amidst this atmosphere of filth and crime, suspicious morality could not have stood out as unusual. In fact, I believe these dark morals became normal.

Introduction

The color of life is grey and drab. Everything is helpless, hopeless, unrelieved, and dirty. Bath tubs are a thing totally unknown, as mythical as the ambrosia of the gods. The people themselves are dirty, while any attempt at cleanliness becomes howling farce, when it is not pitiful and tragic. Strange vagrant odours come drifting along the greasy wind, and the rain, when it falls, is more like grease than water from heaven.

Jack London, *The People of the Abyss* (1903)

The Victorian Era is often romanticized. Take a moment, reader, and try to picture the Victorian era in your mind's eye. What images came up? Did they include lace? Tea? What about dirt and disease? No? What is often left out of a romanticized view of the Victorian era is the fact that London was built on a foundation of filth. During the Industrial Revolution in England, the country saw a major “shift from a way of life based on the ownership of land to a modern urban economy based on trade and manufacturing” (Christ 1043). This era saw the advent of technologies like steam power, faster railways, looms, printing presses, the telegraph, and many others that fundamentally altered English cities. Carol T. Christ writes that this “rapid and unregulated industrialization” caused a “host of social and economic problems” for cities like London. While Queen Victoria was championing motherhood and British expansion into India and Africa, filth hovered over London like a disease. In his book *Dirty Old London*, Lee Jackson writes of how one Victorian lady's train accumulated “2 cigar ends; 9 cigarette ditto; A portion of pork pie; 4 toothpicks; 2 hairpins; 1 stem of a clay pipe; 3 fragments of orange peel; 1 slice of cat's meat; Half a sole of a boot; 1 plug of tobacco (chewed); Straw, mud, scraps of paper, and miscellaneous street refuse” while she walked along the streets of Piccadilly (4). This filth extended to the waterways of London as well as befouling the streets. During the summer of 1858, the Thames became so contaminated with refuse and human excrement that the river was reduced to “a bubbling vat of stinking filth” (Bibby). The smell was so foul that those few

months are referred to as The Great Stink.¹ Throughout the Victorian Era, there were many attempts to clean up the streets and waterways of London, most notably by one would-be reformer Edwin Chadwick, architect of the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. Although he campaigned for reform of sanitary standards, he received largely negative responses to his proposals. Victorian people frequently complained about their filthy living conditions, but were often unwilling to provide the money for necessary sanitary work. This behavior is no doubt incongruous but can be explained by mentioning how certain people profited off of the filth. Lower-class men in particular collected this filth and sold it to brick makers, for example. Cleaning up the streets would mean a loss of income for many poor families. In addition to these dirty jobs, even darker forces began to emerge from this haze of filth. Jackson writes, “the veil of soot contained a multitude of sins” (237). In addition to providing income for some, the darkness in the air provided a convenient cover for criminals to carry out their crimes.

As the streets of London reached peak levels of filth, crime rates also rose to new highs. Murder specifically gained new notoriety during this period. When murderers were caught, Victorians were capable of celebrating with considerable excitement. Judith Flanders writes of one such celebration in her book *The Invention of Murder*. In 1811, after the murderer John Williams “tried to escape justice by suicide,” the London police held a parade of sorts to prove the opposite (10). During this macabre parade, “crowds lined the route, more watched from windows and . . . rooftops. Shops were shut, blinds drawn” (11). As the murderer’s body passed, the crowd “howled to see the last of the man” who had caused so much suffering (11). As gruesome murders became more common, some Victorians, however, longed for a solution. Not

¹ The Great Stink was remedied in record time. Members of Parliament signed a bill concerning the smell of the Thames in only 18 days. I am afraid that the speed of this reaction is not due to a surging desire for sanitary reform, but merely because the Houses of Parliament were very close to the Thames and were plagued by the foul odors emitting from it.

only were their streets filthy, but they were dangerous as well. Murder and other gruesome grimes started to appear in literature and other forms of popular entertainment. Although Victorians consumed this media, they were far from endorsing it. They learned to escape into the world of fiction where criminals were caught and crimes were stopped.

The rise of the detective novel grew out of this rise in crime, as well as from a general dissatisfaction with the London Police Force. Caroline Reitz, author of *Detecting the Nation*, writes, “London was host to an increasing number of criminals, and this crisis inspired [citizens] to urge the British government to replace medieval systems of policing with a centralized and systematic force” (xiv). Once introduced, the new police force was not effective.² Because they were a centralized force, they did not have the knowledge of London that would allow them to invest in local affairs. Because the force was systematic, it was too aggressive and handled cases with unnecessary force. Enter the fictional detective, a perfect combination of gentleness, intelligence, and power. During this period, detective stories saw a rise in popularity because the public craved a different kind of authority in their criminological systems. The detective stories were equal parts “critique of the [Victorian] legal system” and illustration of how that system could be used to support the English people (8). In these stories, detectives relied on information from English citizens to solve their cases, often bypassing the overly aggressive policemen. The English people soon came to identify with these detectives, partly because they wanted more consideration from the real police forces, and partly because detectives were very English.

In a country where criminals roamed the streets and citizens felt undervalued by the police, fictional detectives became heroes. These figures listened to the English people and

² Charles Dickens was another author who explored detective work in his writing. In *On an Amateur Beat*, Dickens writes of walking the “beat” of a London police constable. In this work, Dickens muses on the inefficiency of the London police force and wonders why he is out patrolling the streets instead of the real police.

solved the crimes that pestered their lives, satisfying a need for intelligent authority in their real lives. Even the structure of the novels was satisfying to the public. Reitz writes that detective fiction begins with “a mysterious event or crime . . . at first concealing the solution from the reader but finally revealing it through the successful investigations of the detective” (xvi). For many, these novels were delightful because the fictional detectives were making progress towards cleaning up the city. Each crime could be logically thought out and solved using intelligence and cunning. Unlike the real police, the detectives in these works use their knowledge of the streets of London and its inhabitants to solve crimes. They do not shy away from the dirt and darkness hidden within London, but use it to their advantage in their investigations. In these novels, Victorians found a restoration to the social and moral order the filth and crime were threatening. If only on paper, detectives were healing London.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Robert Louis Stevenson, two authors writing at the end of the 19th century, rose to prominence in the midst of this darkest London. In their works *A Study in Scarlet* and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, they explore the dark underbelly of London through detection of gruesome crimes. Their illustrations of the dirty streets of the city underline the ways in which the streets became critical for detective fiction during that period. In essence, I argue that the filth covering the city of London was essential to the creation of the Victorian detective. The dirty streets of London are what draw the detectives in these works, Sherlock Holmes and Mr. Utterson, into conversation with these darkest aspects of London. Their work becomes intertwined and inseparable from the streets and, ultimately, the dirt itself. The dirt is often actual dirt—the by-product of industrialism; however, it is also almost always a marker of a more metaphoric dirt: a moral filth, or contamination.

Stevenson and Doyle wrote these novellas in close proximity. *A Study in Scarlet* was published in 1886 and *Jekyll and Hyde* appeared in 1885. Although these two authors were not writing these works in tandem, they were undoubtedly staring out at the same city streets from their writing desks.³ This similar setting helps to explain how the two authors managed to describe the streets of London in an eerily similar way. Through their eyes, London is dirty, dark, and grim. The streets are dangerous, and criminals prey on unsuspecting victims. The Victorian reader was all too familiar with this grim reality. Christ writes that in this era, “industry was being paid for at a terrible price in human happiness, that so-called progress had been gained only by abandoning traditional rhythms of life and traditional patterns of human relationships” (1044). The aforementioned filth that covered their streets coupled with the rising crime rate led to a life that was dark and dirty. In their novels, Doyle and Stevenson do the necessary work of cleansing those streets of dirt. The dirt takes many forms, not all of which are physical. Every form of dirt, murder, crime, filth in the streets, fear, or deviance played a prominent role in the Victorian cultural imaginary. This dirt created the Victorian detective.

The Filth of Nations – Dirt and Detection in *A Study in Scarlet*

In his Sherlock Holmes writings, author Sir Arthur Conan Doyle explores every facet of the gruesome crimes that so captivated the attention of the London public. In Doyle’s first Holmes novella, *A Study in Scarlet*, Holmes uses his remarkable skills of observation and deduction to solve two murders and catch the criminal responsible. These skills are the result of years of meticulous and specific study. They allow Holmes to glean clues from the smallest details of a person or crime scene. When Holmes first meets Watson, he immediately guesses the doctor’s former station in Afghanistan just from looking at his skin, facial expression, and the

³ Another similarity between the two authors is their shared birthplace of Edinburgh, Scotland.

way he holds his left arm. Although Holmes' methods are extraordinary, he seems unaware that his skills present as fascinating or groundbreaking. To him, observation and deduction are "second nature" (Doyle 11). To Watson, Holmes' blasé attitude is incredible. The job comes so easily to Holmes that other detectives pale in comparison. Holmes was the fictitious detective the real London Police needed.

By making Holmes the ideal detective for the fictional government, Doyle endows Holmes with skills the real government doesn't possess. When Watson initially meets Holmes, he is working on creating an "infallible test for blood stains" (7). Holmes explains the need for such a test with a hypothetical situation: "A man is suspected of a crime months perhaps after it has been committed. His linen or clothes are examined, and brownish stains discovered upon them. Are they blood stains, or mud stains, or fruit stains, or what are they? That is a question which has puzzled many an expert" (7). With this statement, Doyle illustrates an existing problem in the real investigation of criminal cases. To better understand the realities of this problem, some historical context is necessary. In her book *The Invention of Murder*, Judith Flanders discusses the unreliability of using bloodstains as evidence. Months after the murder of the Marr family in London, a jacket supposedly belonging to the murder suspect was found in a nearby inn. Flanders writes, "it was reported that the inside pocket was marked, 'as if a bloodstained hand had been thrust into it'. But the bloodstains could not definitely be identified until the twentieth century—what the witness meant was that the stain was brown" (9). Without a reliable way to test blood stains, it was impossible for detectives to use that type of evidence in their investigations. The need for a reliable blood stain test was very real. By having Holmes invent such a test, Doyle highlights the need for more advanced technology in the investigative

field. In other words, he uses the fictional world to imagine a solution to a real-world problem. And the filth—or the brown stain—summons the detective, the source of the solution.

In addition to his much-needed inventions, Holmes' incredible deductive skills make him invaluable in his role as a consulting detective. As Holmes tells Watson, he is “the only one in the world” who holds this position (Doyle 11). As a consulting detective, Holmes “enlightens” both government and private detectives when they need help cracking a case (11). Throughout *A Study in Scarlet*, Doyle compares Holmes with government detectives Lestrade and Gregson. Soon after meeting him, Watson notes that Holmes “appears to have a passion for definite and exact knowledge” that sets him apart from these other men (6). Although both gentlemen work at Scotland Yard, the headquarters of the London police force, Holmes calls them a “pick of a bad lot . . . quick and energetic, but conventional” in the methods of deduction (13). With this description, Doyle turns Lestrade and Gregson into untrained puppies. Conversely, Watson describes Holmes as “a pure-blooded well-trained foxhound” when he investigates a crime scene (16). Though all three men are likened to dogs, they are not equal. One dog tracks down its prey with skill and finesse, while the others trip over their own feet while chasing after a ball. By comparing the men to dogs, Doyle makes it clear which detective should be put in charge of murder cases. In the hierarchy of London detectives, Doyle places Holmes firmly at the top. His talents are unmatched by even the best from the London police force.

According to Holmes, and by extension perhaps Doyle himself, there are a great many faults with the criminal system. Throughout the novella, Holmes picks apart the methods of Lestrade and Gregson, questioning them at every turn. However, it is not only the detectives Holmes despises. During one conversation with Watson, Holmes exclaims, “there are no crimes and no criminals in these days . . . what is the use of having brains in our professions[?]” (12).

Because the crime rate during the Victorian era was unparalleled, he cannot mean there are no crimes at all. Instead Holmes seems to have a problem with the type of crimes he is constantly asked to unravel. He feels that he is overqualified for the low caliber crimes that come his way and longs for a crime that is worthy of his prodigious intellect. The case of the murders of Drebbler and Stangerton, the focus of *A Study in Scarlet*, is one such worthy crime. Holmes relishes the intricacies and abnormalities of the investigation. When Holmes ultimately cracks the case of the murders, he berates Lestrade and Gregson for their lack of skill. He boasts, “the things which have perplexed you and made the case more obscure, have served to enlighten me and strengthen my conclusions” (30). He even apologizes to Lestrade and Gregson for leaving them out of the investigation, protecting their feelings like an adult might protect a child’s. Holmes has too much fun investigating his cases to be slowed down by incompetence such as theirs. He enjoys a complicated crime like other men might enjoy a fine wine. For Holmes, detection is a delicate and intricate undertaking, requiring all the care and concentration he can give. The success of Sherlock Holmes and the reason he is the top detective lie in his delicate treatment of his cases. He is methodical in his investigations and uses every part of a crime scene to help him uncover the stories left behind.

In his description of Holmes’ detective work, Doyle illustrates the need for methodical investigation by making the most overlooked parts of the crime scene the most valuable. As Holmes and Watson arrive at the first crime scene on Brixton Road, Watson expects the detective to rush straight to the crime scene inside the house, but Holmes does not. Instead, he methodically inspects the muddy ground outside the front door. He gleans his first clues from the impressions of footsteps in the “wet clayey soil” of the path leading to the door (14). He is shocked when Gregson insists that the area has been left untouched before his arrival. Holmes

compares the policemen to “a herd of buffalos” that trampled the pathway and obscured the murderer’s footsteps with their own (14). He finds it maddening that they did not think to inspect the mud before barreling into the house. Amazingly, Holmes is able to distinguish between the footsteps of the policemen and those of the murderer and victim. From the mud alone, he discovers the height and clothing of the murderer, as well as the type of vehicle they drove. He even distinguishes between the footsteps of the horse, noting that one of the horse’s feet was more newly shod than the others. When Holmes enters the room, he is met with the situation that has stopped Gregson in his investigation. Upon discovering that the murdered man does not have a wound on his body, Gregson reached an impasse and did not know where else to turn. Upon encountering the same problem, Holmes is not fazed. He inspects the soles of the dead man’s shoes, his lips, and then turns to “the thick layer of dust which coated the whole apartment” (14). By inspecting the patterns and disturbances left in the dust, Holmes deduces what happened in the room in the moments leading up to the murder. By “gather[ing] some scattered ash from the floor,” Holmes discovers the type of cigar smoked by the murderer (18). These three substances, mud, dust, and ash, provide Holmes with enough information to accurately describe the murderer’s physical appearance. Holmes himself says, “it is just in such details that the skilled detective differs from the Gregson and Lestrade type” (18). The two bumbling detectives overlook the value of these base substances and instead turn to the obvious clues that will lead them in the wrong direction. Consequently, they miss the information that is right in front of them, or more accurately under their feet.

After exploring the filth of London in the first half of his novella, Doyle’s narrative takes an unexpected turn when he transports his readers to an even dirtier setting, the wild plains of the American West. Because the filth of London becomes integral to Holmes’ investigation, I myself

wondered why Doyle made this structural choice. Upon first glance, the Alkali Plain in central North America could not be more different from the urban city streets of London.⁴ Doyle's secondary setting is a bleak one. He describes it as “an arid and repulsive desert” which has “the common characteristics of barrenness, inhospitality, and misery” (35). It is desolate and deadly to cross. The one marker on this great plain is a single solitary road. This pathway, “rutted with wheels and trodden down by the feet of many adventurers,” is where Doyle introduces the reader to John and Lucy Ferrier, two travelers lost and resigned to their imminent death on the plains (35). Weary from traveling, John is the sole adult survivor from his party. He is haggard, weak, and emaciated from lack of food or water.

No matter how far the novella has travelled geographically, however, Doyle's initial description of the plains mimics his opening description of Watson's arrival in London. Like Ferrier, Watson begins the novella similarly weak and emaciated from his tour as an army doctor in Afghanistan. He calls London a “great wilderness” when he arrives, as well as a “great cesspool into which all the loungers and idlers of the Empire are drained” (5).⁵ Just as the Alkaline dust covers the American plains, Watson believes that this cesspool of filth has settled over the landscape of London. In the “wilderness” of London, Watson feels as lost as John Ferrier. Like Ferrier, Watson is alone and has no family. He notes, “I had neither kith nor kin in London” (5). Although London is not an arid wasteland, it has the same desolate quality that Doyle gives the Alkali Plains. Although Watson initially attributes this detachment to his sense

⁴ The name “Alkali” comes from the presence of grey dust that covers the desert floor. This dust is not simply a figment of Doyle's imagination, but an actual presence on these American plains. The substance can cause respiratory problems if inhaled in large quantities, and chemical burns if left on the skin for extended periods of time. On the Burning Man website, the authorities advise all festival goers to take proper precautions to avoid getting what they call “playa foot,” an uncomfortable affliction caused by this alkali dust.

⁵ It's interesting that Doyle chooses the word “drain” here. In fact, the drains of London were one of the only things in Victorian London that were not dirty. In *Dirty Old London* Lee Jackson notes that, in 1838, the “authorities had tackled the one category of filth most intimately connected to epidemic disease . . . they had cleansed the capital's drains” (238).

of newfound freedom, he soon finds that it causes him to lead a “comfortless and meaningless existence” (5). Watson is rescued from this lonely existence when he meets Holmes and begins to share in his exciting life of detective work.

Like Watson, Ferrier is also rescued from his lonely desert by a group of migrating Mormons. The church members agree to take John and Lucy with them on the condition that they assimilate fully into their belief system. The leader of the Mormons, Brigham Young, decrees, “We shall have no wolves in our fold. Better far that your bones should bleach in this wilderness than that you should prove to be that little speck of decay which in time corrupts the whole fruit” (38). The language Doyle chooses here references dirt that can corrupt purity, but not in a literal sense. The “little speck of decay” that Young fears is a type of dirt that could infect someone’s morals. The Mormons in this tale pride themselves on being morally pure, but soon prove that they are anything but moral. Once Lucy Ferrier comes of age, the Mormon leaders force her to marry a Mormon man, even though she is already engaged to a man outside of the church, Jefferson Hope.⁶ When John Ferrier resists the demands of Lucy’s Mormon suitors, they threaten his life and begin a chilling countdown until the day Lucy must decide. When John and Lucy escape with Hope, the Mormon suitors go so far as to kill John Ferrier, kidnap Lucy, and force her into marriage, resulting in her death. The saintly churchgoers not only participate in these scare tactics and sinister activities, but they are encouraged to do so by the leaders of their church. It is ironic that the first words we hear from Brigham Young, the Mormon leader, include fear of moral corruption, because his own morals are suspect. This dark undercurrent in the Mormon community is doubly terrifying because these men believe they are

⁶ Here, Doyle combines part of Thomas Jefferson’s name with Hope, a core American value, to create the most American name he could. Hope is a cowboy and meets Lucy for the first time when he rescues her from a stampeding herd of cattle.

doing God's work. Blackmail, murder, and forced marriage all become acceptable acts in their eyes because they have been blessed.

The only man who isn't under the spell of the Mormons is Jefferson Hope; however, he takes on a moral darkness of his own once Lucy Ferrier dies. Hope becomes obsessed with getting revenge and begins pursuing her two would-be suitors across the world. As he gets closer to catching his prey, Hope physically gets closer to the landscape of London. By bringing Hope and his revenge plot from America to London, Doyle invokes a very real fear the British population harbored—a fear of invasion. Joseph McLaughlin writes, “the Holmes tales [of *A Study in Scarlet*] are precisely about two phenomena in late nineteenth century London: the recognition of urban blight; and its connection to an awareness of the colonies as an invasive source of new and even more menacing dangers” (29). Here, McLaughlin references both the urban, industrial dirt and that other kind of dirt—a dangerous invasion from overseas. A growing fear during this era was that the (former) American colonies would grow stronger than England and start exerting their own influence on British soil. This fear of reverse-imperialism made England want to keep Americans far away. American contamination receives the same treatment as common dirt—both have the power to infect the English people. In *A Study in Scarlet*, this strong and contaminating American force is actualized in the figure of Jefferson Hope. Hope uses his frontier-tracking skills to pursue his prey across the world. Once he reaches London, he disguises himself as a cabdriver and blends into the landscape of the streets. It is ultimately there among the “cesspool of filth” that Hope accosts, confronts, and kills his victims. However, London turns its back on the American murderer. Once blood has been spilled because of an American grudge, the city gives up the secrets it was holding for Hope. Holmes is then able to

discern all the clues he needs to solve the case.⁷ In the dirt outside of the house, in the dust, and in the ash, London exposes the American crime and leads Holmes to Hope. Through solving the crime, Holmes cleans up the American dirt that threatened to infect London. Holmes represents his nation, and England triumphs over America once again.

Investigating Impurity in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*

In *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson, the physical and metaphorical dirt within London becomes even further connected. Throughout the novella, Stevenson alludes to and directly relates the dirt in the city streets with the moral dirtiness of his characters. The first of these connections is revealed through the story of Mr. Hyde's first crime when he tramples an innocent little girl in the street. In this passage, the reader doesn't get a full description of the streets themselves, but certain details can be extrapolated from the picture Stevenson does provide. The event takes place at “three o'clock of a black winter morning . . . through a part of town where there was literally nothing to be seen” (Stevenson 7). From this description of the season we can imagine that the ground is blanketed with white snow. However, Stevenson tells us that it is a “black morning,” not a winter wonderland. More likely the ground on which this event takes place is covered in a slush of mud, snow, and general London filth. Because Stevenson tells us these streets contain no landmarks of great importance or quality, the reader can imagine that this part of town has no high standard of cleanliness or safety. The story's narrator, Mr. Enfield, even says that he “long[ed] for the sight of a policeman” (7). Hyde's first crime takes place here, beyond the reach of the law, among filth that blackens both the victim of his crime and his reputation.

⁷ Holmes is ultimately able to track down Jefferson Hope by enlisting a gang of London's “street urchins.” These urchins are young boys who spend their days out on the filthy streets of London. Holmes knows that they know the streets better than anyone, even himself. By using this aspect of the streets to his advantage, Holmes demonstrates full mastery of his dirty surroundings.

The telling of this dark tale is prompted by the sighting of the door to Hyde's house. This door is ordinary and filthy. Enfield remarks that the door bore “the marks of prolonged and sordid negligence,” was “blistered and distained” (6).⁸ Utterson does not note the door on his own; it is only when Enfield mentions it that he takes any notice of it at all. After listening to the story of Hyde's first crime, Utterson’s interest is piqued and he asks many clarifying questions. His curiosity gets the better of him until he finally forces himself to stop. “I am ashamed of my long tongue,” he admits to Enfield (10). This word “ashamed” implies that Utterson has some part of his character that he wishes to hide, some dirty secret that he can’t admit. The presence of shame when he asks too many questions is the first instance where we see evidence of Utterson’s moral dirtiness. He knows there is something wrong with his pursuit of this knowledge, but he is unable to forget the filthy door and the dark mystery it hides. A man of pure morals would recognize this red flag and walk away, but Utterson cannot. Instead, he metaphorically steps through Hyde’s dirty door and continues his exploration of the mystery.

This first instance of shame is the catalyst for a deluge of moral darkness that stems from many characters including Utterson. Once Utterson makes the choice to investigate the darkness surrounding Hyde, what was initially an exploration of his own curiosity morphs into an obsession. When Utterson makes his first expedition to what he believes is the house of Mr. Hyde, he confesses, “If he be Mr. Hyde . . . I shall be Mr. Seek” (14). He fixates on the mystery and decides that he must be the one to unravel it. Once he enters the dark world of the mystery, he becomes addicted to it. It infects him and “besiege[s]” his mind (13). He cannot sleep because

⁸ Enfield also calls the door an entrance to “Blackmail House” (9). This description is a possible reference to the Labouchere Amendment of 1885, popularly called the Blackmailer’s Charter. This law was used as a tool to blackmail homosexual men in cases where actual sex acts could not be proved. For more information on the homosexual undertones in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, please read Elaine Showalter’s *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle*.

Hyde haunts his dreams. He admits that the case initially “touched him on the intellectual side alone, but now his imagination was engaged or rather enslaved” to thoughts of Mr. Hyde (13). Stevenson’s use of language of enslavement turns Utterson into an addict. These words taint Utterson and his motives for pursuing this case. As he grows closer to discovering the secret of Jekyll and Hyde, the darkness surrounding the mystery infects Utterson; however, the infection of Utterson does not compare with the darkness within Stevenson’s protagonists: Dr. Henry Jekyll and Mr. Edward Hyde.

With these two characters, Stevenson contrasts the light parts of Victorian society with the dark. Dr. Jekyll represents the ideal Victorian gentleman. He is a respected physician who is well-liked by his friends and patients. Conversely, Mr. Hyde is a common criminal who physically embodies moral darkness. In a physical description of Jekyll and Hyde’s hands, Stevenson contrasts the gentlemanly Jekyll with the lower-class Hyde. Stevenson writes,

Now the hand of Henry Jekyll (as you have often remarked) was professional in shape and size: it was large, firm, white and comely. But the hand which I now saw, clearly enough, in the yellow light of a mid-London morning, lying half shut on the bed clothes, was lean, corded, knuckly, of a dusky pallor and thickly shaded with a smart growth of hair. It was the hand of Edward Hyde. (61)

From these images of the men’s hands, we can see an inherent difference, both in physical and abstract qualities. The hand of Dr. Jekyll is large and firm, which leads the reader to imagine that it is strong and competent. The hand is clean, and the skin is unblemished. These characteristics suggest that Jekyll is responsible and takes care of himself. All of these qualities make for a good doctor and inspire others to have confidence in him and his abilities. By contrast, Hyde’s hand does not summon any of these positive qualities. Instead of competence, his descriptors indicate

negligence. His hand is lean and corded, which signals weakness instead of Jekyll's strength. The pallor of his skin is dusky rather than white which calls attention to Hyde's general lack of personal hygiene and cleanliness. Finally, Stevenson notes that Hyde's hand is covered in a thick mat of hair. Hyde's hand is not only physically darker than Jekyll's, but it is also dirtier. This physical dirt is an outward indicator of the moral darkness of Hyde. When contrasted with the firm, strong hand of Dr. Jekyll, Hyde's hand seems untrustworthy, even dangerous. In fact, his hand seems less like that of a man and more like that of an ape. If Dr. Jekyll is a gentleman, Hyde becomes a beast.

Throughout Stevenson's novella, Hyde's physical description evokes animalistic and beastly qualities that further reveal his moral darkness. Upon meeting Hyde, Utterson notices that Hyde walks with an "odd, light footstep" unlike that of a man (14). During that same meeting, Hyde makes a "hissing sound" when he breathes, "snarl[s] aloud" when he laughs, and moves with "extraordinary quickness" for a man (14-15). These three activities, hissing, snarling, and moving inhumanly fast, turn Hyde from a man into a strange amalgamation of snake, dog, and cat. Jekyll himself describes Hyde as living "caged" like an animal within his body (69). Utterson confirms Hyde's metaphorical transformation from man into beast: "the man seems hardly human! Something troglodytic, shall we say?" (16). To further unpack the word, "troglodytic," I turn to author Stephen Arata and his work in *Fictions of Loss in the Victorian Fin de Siècle*. Arata argues that this mention of Hyde's "troglodytic" physicality references an earlier theory coined by Cesare Lombroso, an Italian criminologist. Lombroso believed that "criminals were throwbacks to humanity's savage past" (33). These throwbacks, Lombroso argued, were evident in the anatomy of criminals. Criminals possessed certain "features [that] were all signs of a form of primitive existence . . . which the criminal[s] were] condemned to relive" (34).

Although I would not go so far as to say that Hyde comes from a long lineage of criminals, I do agree with Lombroso that Hyde's physiognomy compares him to a more primitive form of human. I argue that Hyde's beastly and primitive appearance influences his morals and darkens his thoughts. Utterson re-enforces this theory when he wonders, Hyde "must have secrets of his own: black secrets, by the look of him" (18). Here, Stevenson directly connects Hyde's beastlike appearance with his dark behavior. Hyde's dirty hands and beastly figure merely hint at the moral darkness within him.

By placing this lower-class beast inside of the body of Dr. Jekyll, Stevenson illustrates an even deeper Victorian fear of hidden dirt and moral impurity. This fear was rooted in the possibility that beasts like Hyde could hide in the bodies of Victorian gentlemen. In the novella, Jekyll is able to conceal his physical connection with Hyde for months, only revealing the truth in a letter after his death. Arata writes, "it is in fact a prime source of horror in the tale: not that the professional man is transformed into an atavistic criminal, but that the atavist learns to pass as a gentleman" (39). Here, Arata makes the fears of the Victorians known. The fear is not the transformation of man into beast, but rather that a respectable man could be a criminal in disguise. In this novella, Jekyll is the very gentleman who is the disguised criminal. He has all the same vices as the criminal Hyde does, but Jekyll has the faculties to restrain himself and conceal his dark desires. Yet he is impure because he possesses these dark desires. This fear of impurity is illuminated at the end of the novella when Jekyll is unable to brew the potion to reverse his transformation into Hyde. Although he has the intelligence to make the draft, his ingredients are not pure. They are dirty and, consequently, Jekyll is trapped in the beastly body of Hyde. This instance of impurity refers to the dirt that contaminates Jekyll's potion, but it is Hyde's dirty morals that create the impurity in Jekyll's mind.

Detectives in Conversation

Hyde's dirty morals reflect a similar impurity within Utterson which sets him apart from other detectives like Sherlock Holmes. Unlike Utterson's addictive nature, Holmes's motivation for solving crimes is a pure love of investigation. In her book *Detecting the Nation*, Caroline Reitz cites a moment where Holmes makes his purer morals clear. He tells his brother Mycroft, "I play the game for the game's own sake" (71). Reitz notes that "this emphasis on the game, on detection as sport, might seem to make light of [his] work," but it only serves to highlight his commitment to his craft. The difference between the two detectives lies in the ways in which they use the moral darkness. Holmes sees the evidence of a dark and malicious undercurrent and uses it to his advantage.⁹ When Utterson is exposed to the same dark undercurrent, he allows it to dirty his motivations. Although both men work among dark subjects and sinister characters, Utterson's morals become tainted while Holmes's stay pure.

Although Holmes and Utterson approach their investigations differently, neither would exist without the influence of the dirty London streets that captivated the authors of these works. London's streets in both novellas possess the same dirty moral corruption. Stevenson and Doyle even describe the streets using the same language. In *Jekyll and Hyde*, Stevenson writes, "through the muffle and smother of these fallen clouds, the procession of the town's life was still rolling in through the great arteries with a sound as of a mighty wind" (28). In *A Study in Scarlet*, Doyle explains, "I have seen death in many forms, but never has it appeared to me in a more fearsome aspect than in that dark grimy apartment, which looked out upon one of the main arteries of suburban London" (15). The word choice of "arteries" is an interesting one. In the

⁹ Even when Holmes completely immerses himself in a morally dark and dirty place, he doesn't become corrupted. In another Holmes tale, *The Man with The Twisted Lip*, Holmes disguises himself as a drug addict and lives in an opium den in order to gather information for his case.

human body, the arteries are the tubes that carry blood from the heart to all other parts of the body. If the streets of London represent the arteries of the city, then the blood of London is very unclean. The substances that run through those arteries are made up of mud, filth, and spilled blood. Sherlock Holmes declares that “there’s a scarlet thread of murder running through the colorless skein of life, and [his] duty is to unravel it, and isolate it, and expose every inch of it” (20). Murder, he believes, is the life blood of London; however, it was not the most infectious form of darkness running through the streets.

Perhaps Holmes believes that murder is the life force of London because detectives could read the evidence it left behind. Holmes can read murder in the mud and the dust, while Utterson reads it in letters, hands, and doors. In both of these novellas, we see English detectives work independently from the police force to solve crimes and clean the streets of this murderous thread. Although crime rates were high during this period, with the help of detectives criminals could be caught, and cases could be solved. What was harder to trace was the more abstract form of dirt and darkness that started to take hold of the populations. Both Stevenson and Doyle recognize the presence of a moral darkness and dirtiness in their characters, although they disagree on what it means. Doyle writes of a national source of filth, while Stevenson writes more on filth of character and class distinction. In these works, filth contaminates people both physically and morally. Stevenson writes, “all human beings, as we meet them, are comingled out of good and evil” (58). This darkness is surely more pronounced in some characters than in others, but traces of darkness exist in most characters. I cannot claim that all Victorians were evil based solely on the dirtiness of their living conditions in London, but in the works of Stevenson and Doyle, there is a connection between moral darkness and physical dirt. By investigating the physical dirt, the detectives uncover the real moral darkness that is often the reason behind the

criminal actions. Through their work, the detectives can then begin to cleanse the darkness from the people of London.

Afterword

I never expected that I would be finishing up my capstone in the midst of a global pandemic. I certainly never thought that my chosen topic of dirty morality would feel so relevant in the current COVID-19 world. We are living in the midst of a disease that is contaminating both our bodies and our society. This pandemic is exposing the dirt in our society and the dirty morals we all have. This dirt shows up in different forms. For some, moral dirtiness is revealed in tendencies to hoard toilet paper and hand sanitizer. Others reveal their suspect morals by heading to re-opened beaches because they don't think the disease will affect them personally. Still others feel a greater sense of darkness coming from a sense of paralyzing uncertainty over when this will all end.

Although our situation does seem bleak, I believe that the pandemic is exposing the flaws in our system for what they are—unnecessary filth that is causing irreversible harm to our society and our planet. Yes, this disease is contaminating the way of life we once knew, but it is also showing us that our way of life was unsustainable. Through our relentless industrialization of the earth we have destroyed natural habitats of many animals, depleted our precious natural resources, and effectively ignored our relationship to the ecosystem. This pandemic is evidence of humanity's failure to protect and nurture our planet.

When Jack London wrote *The People of the Abyss*, his descriptions of Victorian filth were shocking and unflattering. I wonder how future historians and authors will write about this current pandemic? I hope that when this historical moment is written into fiction, there will be more aspects to focus on than the misguided people who broke quarantine because they wanted haircuts. I hope, instead, that we can take this opportunity to clean up our own world, physically and morally. In addition to Holmes's criminal cases, we have the courageous work of scientists

and medical experts to study. In a way, they are serving as modern detectives investigating the causes of this disease. Through their efforts, we can continue the work that Victorian detectives began and cleanse our own society of this darkness.

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