☯ The Battle of Civil and Savage ☯

Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde

Can a rattlesnake and a mouse survive in the same cage? Can gasoline co-exist with fire? Can a weight float above gravity? When opposing forces meet, it is redundant to say that only one can win. These opposing forces of nature are showcased in the story, Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Dr. Henry Jekyll is a scientist who acknowledges the existence of both his civil and savage being within but has for most of his life favored the civil. He creates a potion designed to separate these two sides of his character so he may more effectively act on behalf of each character. In this process, he discovers the savage being within in him: Mr. Edward Hyde. Slowly, as the story unravels, Hyde goes from being a part of Jekyll, to Jekyll being a part of Hyde. This reveals the conflicts between a man’s duel personalities. In the novella, Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Robert Louis Stevenson discusses the many conflicts of human nature through exploring the natural intention to be civilized, the constant struggle with temptation, and the undeniable reality that savagery is powerful.

Humanity strives to be civilized; civilization is a way of life. It is how things *should* be, and it is our definition of what is *good* and *proper*. Dr. Jekyll is the very profile of a civil man; he is kind and social, and does good deeds for all his friends. When he withdraws from this persona, his friends wonder if he is not mad in the head. Midway through the novella, Jekyll returns to his normal nature and everyone is content. As Utterson puts it, “He came out of his seclusion, renewed relations with his friends, became once more their familiar guest and entertainer; and whilst he had always been known for charities, he was now no less distinguished for religion,” (31) indicating that this nature was common for him, and reveling that it was respectable behavior. Furthermore, Jekyll describes himself as the “elderly and discontented doctor, surrounded by friends and cherishing honest hopes,” (64) inferring that although he is surrounded by friends and good deeds, he is still unhappy. Jekyll longs to have this image and embrace the good side that everyone loves, but he goes on to admit, “I chose the better part and was found wanting in the strength to keep to it,” (64) making obvious his feelings of powerlessness. Although he knows it is expected of him to be this civil side, he lacks the motivation to keep trying to maintain it. Unlike Hyde, who is solely evil, Jekyll is human and possess both civil and savage qualities. For this reason, he is unsatisfied acting on behalf of just one side. Being civilized is an expectation of society, but also one placed upon people by friends, and even themselves. Maintaining this *proper* character is a struggle, and thus there is a battle against the savage side.

Whether predominately civilized or predominately savage, all humans face temptation. To be tempted is to find a desire to go against a person’s moral convictions. When temptation occurs, two opposing forces are meeting, and in the end, one will either resist or give in. When Hyde is on the loose, he is easily angered, and when angered, tempted to act brutally. However, because of his lack of civilization he has nothing to hold him back, and subsequently, he acts out. This happens numerous times in the story; initially with the girl he tramples, then again when he murders Sir Danver Carew. These are things that Jekyll would never do, but that Hyde has no problem doing. Jekyll also faces temptation. He attempts to choose between Jekyll and Hyde, but then realizes, “To cast in my lot with Jekyll, was to die to those appetites which I had long secretly indulged and had of late begun to pamper,” (64) reveling that he is tempted by the pleasure he finds in his savage side. However on the other hand, “To cast it in with Hyde, was to die to a thousand interests and aspirations, and to become, at a blow and forever, despised and friendless,” (64) explaining his reluctance to become solely Hyde. Jekyll desires to be Hyde and enjoys all the freedom that comes from anonymity, but this keeps him from being the good, civil doctor he knows he should be. Jekyll eventually gives in and chooses to become Hyde yet again. It is like two people trying to pull each other to their level, but one person is standing on a chair. Jekyll is more easily swayed to become Hyde than maintain his image as Jekyll because it is easier to pull one down than to pull one up. Therefore, temptation is a leading factor in the battle between one’s civil and savage characteristics.

The savage side of nature is domineering. A person who is domineering is persuasive, controlling, and often will find it easy to establish power. Hyde is extremely domineering. All who look upon Hyde are filled with hatred because he is so hideous and evil, but to Jekyll, Hyde does not look repulsive or deformed because he is a part of him and has power over Jekyll. The more Jekyll embraces Hyde, the more power Hyde is able to grasp. This is first realized when Jekyll goes to bed and wakes up as Hyde. Then further on, Hyde gains complete control over when he is present, and as Jekyll states, Hyde would “commit temporary suicide,” (71) when he wished to go into to hiding, indicating that at this point Hyde was the only one with a choice. Hyde’s immense hatred for Jekyll leads to what Jekyll calls, “the ape-like tricks that he would play me, scrawling in my own hand blasphemies on the pages of my books, burning the letters and destroying the portrait of my father,” (71) illustrating the dominating power of Hyde. Over and over Jekyll is tormented by the power that Hyde has claimed. In the conclusion of the story, Jekyll realizes that he must either surrender to Hyde or commit suicide. He admits, “ I saw my life to be forfeit,” (66) when he comes to this realization of hopelessness. This demonstrates that the savage side of nature is evil and dominating, and consequently, breeds conflict in the human being.

Stevenson uses Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde to explore the conflicts of a person’s savage and civil characteristics. Although humans strive to be civilized, temptation leads them to be consumed by their domineering, savage side. Like pushing a boulder up a mountain, or shoving an elephant down a toilet, taming the savage side of nature can be nearly impossible. This is the tale of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Jekyll chooses to play with fire when he chooses to get in closer proximity with his inner savage being. Every time he surrenders to temptation and transforms himself into Hyde, he takes another step closer to the edge of a cliff, preparing himself to fall, which consequently he does. Jekyll dying in the form of Hyde is symbolic of him getting defeated. Throughout this novella, Stevenson develops the idea that all humans possess a duel personality. There is both a civil and a savage element to human existence, but in the end one will dominate. Humans are doomed to wallow in their own savage nature, and while for a time they will battle it, in the end, as Jekyll discovered, it is impossible to defeat the very thing you are crafted of, and thus, it will consume you.