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Describing the Indescribable: Repressive Regime and Discourse Productivity in *Jekyll and Hyde*

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Abstract

This paper investigates the paradox of language and repression in Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, focusing on how the narrative persistently avoids describing Edward Hyde in precise, objective terms. Despite Hyde's centrality to the plot, characters repeatedly fail or refuse to articulate his physical appearance. Drawing on Michel Foucault's "repressive hypothesis," the study argues that the narrative's avoidance of descriptive language constitutes a form of discursive repression, a regime that limits what can be said, yet paradoxically stimulates more discourse. Using close textual analysis grounded in narratology and Foucauldian theory, the paper identifies a formal pattern in which descriptions of Hyde emerge only in vague, affective terms followed immediately by disavowal or narrative deferral. These moments of muteness and subsequent verbal excess suggest that repression does not silence but incites discourse. The study further argues that this dynamic is not a narrative flaw but a structural feature serving both the detective and gothic genre conventions. The repression of descriptive language sustains suspense while reinforcing thematic concerns about the limits of rationality and the boundaries of the knowable self. Ultimately, Hyde's indescribability is not a gap in the story but the engine of its discourse. His mystery is not maintained by silence, but by the repeated failure to describe him.

Keywords: Foucault; *Jekyll and Hyde*; narrative discourse; repression;

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Introduction

One striking contradiction in the characterization of Hyde in *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* lies in the narrator's ambivalence toward describing him. The

entire story hinges on Jekyll's ability to change his appearance as easily as changing clothes: "I had but to drink the cup, to doff at once the body of the noted professor, and to assume, like a thick cloak, that of Edward Hyde" (Stevenson, 2005, p. 82). This

transformation enables him to commit crimes while preserving the respectability of Jekyll. And yet, physical descriptions of Hyde are surprisingly rare. Readers are told repeatedly that he is “devilish” and “repulsive,” but these are the moral judgments made by other characters, not objective descriptions. In fact, this kind of vague yet loaded language is abundant throughout the narrative, raising a question: what exactly is the basis of this moral revulsion? Why does the narrative so carefully avoid detailing Hyde’s actual appearance?

To some degree, the narrative strategy is consistent with the general rule of mystery novels, where the allure often lies in the enigma of certain characters (Goldman, 2011, p. 262), a connection hinted at by the phrase “strange case,” where key information is saved for the big reveal at the end of the story. A joke from the magazine *Punch*, a contemporary to the novel, pokes fun at this contradiction by explaining that the characters cannot detail Hyde’s actual countenance: “Mr. R.L. Stevenson says I mustn’t,’ was the weary response; ‘for if I did, I should spoil the last chapter’” (Stevenson, 2005, p. 141). The essential information mocked in this joke is the fact that some characters already know, or at least some evidence, that Hyde is in fact Jekyll. But they cannot describe Hyde’s face because it might reveal too early that Jekyll is in fact Hyde. That is the point of this joke: because the author follows the mystery novel rule faithfully, albeit using somewhat artificial means, to keep the mystery until the last chapter.

If not read as a mystery, the novel also fits within the Gothic tradition, in which “strange circumstances,” again recalling the word “strange” in the title, offer an escape to “never-land, where his mind will be released from the common sense of his neighbors and the truths of the sociologists” (Eigner, 1966, pp. 17–18). Providing factual, concrete descriptions of Hyde would betray this imperative and signify surrender to “common sense” and “truths of the sociologists.” Fantasy instead of rationalism, mystery instead of sociological truth, the pursuit of dream and truth (Coelho, 2023, p. 62), these

are the narrative strategies the narrator seeks to uphold.

The genre constraints Stevenson must navigate are what I refer to as the “repressive regime” in this article. This term does not refer to a literal political government but to the network of moral and aesthetic norms that governed Victorian culture. It is a system that promoted restraint and the regulation of desire. Under this regime, certain subjects, such as sexuality, violence, degeneration, and moral corruption, could not be represented directly but only through indirection. This may be considered an artistic choice, though the term “choice” might seem counterintuitive when we typically imagine what a repressive regime entails. However, this “regime” exerts a tangible force that prevents a straightforward description of Hyde’s physical features, effectively turning it into a repressed discourse.

It is also fitting that the notion of a repressive regime dominates the story level of the novel, which has been the primary focus of most previous studies. Stephen D. Arata (1995), representing one of the most influential critical perspectives, sees Hyde as a “throwback to humanity’s savage past” (p. 233). In this reading, the Victorian gentleman experiments with ending the repression of the savage other within himself, something Jekyll explicitly acknowledges. Along similar lines, Martin A. Danahay (2013) argues that Hyde’s body signals that he is “working class,” marked by signs of degeneration (p. 29), thus implying the return of repressed working-class or degenerate identities.

This type of reading has inspired a multitude of interpretations based on the same logic, though with a variety of possible double others (Olson, 2003, p. 333). For instance, Antonio Sanna (2012) reads Jekyll as a homosexual double (p. 27), while Melissa J. Ganz (2015) interprets Hyde as a figure of alcoholic and impulsive insanity (p. 385), and Wai Wong Hiu identifies him as an urban double representing criminality (p. 86). In many ways, these studies frame doubleness as the dichotomy between the repressive and the repressed self: the sane and the insane, the rational and the irrational, the gentleman

and the criminal. Even scholars who argue for a unitary self (Cook, 2020; Jackson, 2013; O'Dell, 2012) must still contend with the fact that the story presents a narrative of duality, which they often reinterpret as symbolic rather than literal.

While these studies have offered valuable insights into the content of what is being repressed, whether it be savagery, sexuality, class, or urban criminality, they often leave underexamined the form and mechanism of repression within the narrative structure itself. This paper addresses that gap by shifting focus from what is repressed to how repression operates narratively, particularly in the way that the text simultaneously withholds and multiplies representations of Hyde. Unlike previous analyses that focus on the symbolic meaning of Hyde, this study highlights the productive nature of repressive discourse as a formal strategy.

This paper further examines the dynamic between repressive regimes and discourse productivity, focusing specifically on how the narrative both represses and paradoxically proliferates representations of Hyde. At the center of this discussion lies a key question: in what specific ways is the narrative repressed? The text repeatedly withholds direct descriptions of Hyde's physical features. Yet this very avoidance generates an excessive proliferation of discourse surrounding him. This dynamic recalls Michel Foucault's argument in *The History of Sexuality*, in which he challenges the assumption that repression results in silence; instead, he argues that the mechanisms of repression actually produce more discourse. Similarly, in *Jekyll and Hyde*, the repression of Hyde's physical depiction does not marginalize him from the narrative but instead intensifies his textual presence.

Methodology

This research adopts what Catherine Belsey calls "textual analysis," as outlined in her article aptly titled "Textual Analysis as a Research Method." She demonstrates the method by closely analyzing a text to generate understanding under the assumption that interpretation is "the effect of a relation between a reader and a text" (Gabriele, 2005,

p. 166). While this phrasing might be construed as emphasizing the reader's role in constructing meaning, Belsey's focus is instead on establishing a "dialogue" between the text and its readers. Consequently, any attempt to study a work of art becomes an effort to examine how the work itself strategically invites interpretation, that is, how it constructs a "dialogue" with its audience. In this particular case, the question becomes: what narrative strategy does the narrator employ to tell the story, particularly in relation to the repression of Hyde's description?

In this study, the primary data consist of narrative passages from *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* that explicitly or implicitly reference Hyde's physicality, moral character, or visibility. This novel is chosen because it demonstrates the Victorian moral and narrative constraints that constitute what this paper refers to as a "repressive regime." Its persistent tension between silence and revelation makes it an ideal text for examining how repression operates formally within narrative discourse. The textual data were identified through close reading and thematic identification, focusing on moments where the narration either withholds, distorts, or multiplies descriptions of Hyde. Secondary data include relevant critical essays, theoretical texts, and historical materials that provide the interpretive and conceptual framework for analysis.

The analysis follows three main steps. First, key passages were identified where the narration withholds or distorts Hyde's description, marking instances of narrative repression. Second, these passages were examined to determine how such silences or evasions function within the story's broader discourse. Third, the findings were interpreted through a Foucauldian lens to reveal how repression, rather than merely limiting expression, produces new and excessive forms of discourse.

Although this method emphasizes the text's internal structure, Belsey notes that close reading is never entirely self-contained; interpretation always involves extra-textual knowledge. This is because evidence drawn

solely from linguistic understanding is insufficient to grasp the broader narrative meaning (Jacke, 2014, p. 133). This is where Foucauldian concepts of discursive formation become relevant. Michel Foucault's work is essential to this analysis because of the strong parallels between repressive regimes and the productivity of discourse. In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault argues that nineteenth-century bourgeois society did not suppress discussion of sexuality; rather, it intensified and proliferated discourse about it. This occurred not in spite of repression, but because of it; resisting repression is itself pleasurable and generative: "If sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, nonexistence, and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression" (Foucault, 1978, p. 6).

It is this very dialectic of repression and production that Foucault calls the "Victorian regime," the origin of what he describes as "our restrained, mute, and hypocritical sexuality" (1978, p. 3). This is precisely the cultural context in which *Jekyll and Hyde* emerged, a novel produced under the Victorian regime that exposes the era's hypocrisy. Stevenson himself admits that "the story was a study in hypocrisy, not sexuality" (2005, p. 21). But this very disavowal of sexuality while emphasizing hypocrisy ironically underscores his entanglement within the repressive framework Foucault describes. Stevenson's denial, then, becomes evidence that he is both a participant in and a product of the Victorian society that *Jekyll and Hyde* so powerfully critiques. In addition, the Foucauldian approach to sexuality resembles the unstable identity of Jekyll and Hyde: sexuality is constructed by the upper class to 'stabilize a putatively unstable self' (Dean, 1994, p. 272).

In building his case, Foucault emphasizes the suppression of sexuality at the level of language. As he writes, "It had first been necessary to subjugate it at the level of language, control its free circulation of speech, expunge it from the things that were said" (Foucault, 1978, p. 17). Language, then, emerges as a primary mechanism of control, imposed not only externally but also

internalized through self-regulation. This restriction of the "free circulation of speech" becomes a key point of comparison in this study, particularly in how such limitations give rise to "instances of muteness which, by dint of saying nothing, imposed silence" (Foucault, 1978, p. 17). These moments of muteness are evident in the narrative's silences and evasions.

Importantly, this muteness is not enforced through overt coercion, neither through legal authority nor, in the case of *Jekyll and Hyde*, the threat of violence from Hyde himself. Rather, as Foucault (1978) notes, "new rules of propriety screened out some words: there was a policing of statements [...] if not utter silence, at least of tact and discretion" (pp. 17–18). This study does not focus on drawing a direct parallel between the discourse of sexuality and Hyde's physical appearance. Instead, it interrogates the strategy of "screening out" and the effects this has within the narrative.

While Foucault's theory serves as the conceptual foundation, the study employs narratology as its primary methodological approach, given that the mechanisms of silencing are enacted through the very language of the narrative. This study adopts Monika Fludernik's flexible approach to narratology, which considers both the content of the story and the way it is represented, emphasizing the interaction between narrative form and its contextual function (Darby, 2001, p. 840). The latter, known as narrative discourse, is central to this analysis. This study explores why, at the level of narrative discourse, characters refrain from directly describing Hyde's appearance, resorting instead to evasive maneuvers that attempt to articulate what, within the world of the story, is rendered indescribable.

Results and Discussion

This section is divided into two main parts of analysis. The first concerns the theme of repression, which emerges most clearly in moments where characters explicitly struggle to articulate Hyde's appearance, often stating outright that "he is difficult to describe." This part of the analysis will also demonstrate the

pattern of such silences in relation to their narrative cues. The second part of the analysis explores moments when this repression gives way to what can be termed explosive or excessive discourse, when language momentarily bursts through its own constraints. These instances, far from being accidental, appear to be motivated by a particular kind of textual or narrative pleasure: the thrill of subversion. Through this pleasure, the text permits what it otherwise censors, allowing Hyde to erupt into language in strange and indirect ways.

1. Repressive Hypothesis: Hyde That Is Difficult to Describe

Traces of a repressive regime in the narrative discourse of *Jekyll and Hyde* are pervasive. We see this from the very first encounter with Hyde. Enfield recounts an incredible story to Utterson about a man who trampled a young girl. In this instance, Enfield serves as the witness, while Utterson takes on the role of a detective. Enfield uses vague and inadequate similes to describe Hyde: “It wasn’t like a man; it was like some damned Juggernaut” (Stevenson, 2005, p. 35), and “really like Satan” (Stevenson, 2005, p. 36). Such descriptions are unsatisfactory for a man of law like Utterson, who demands something more precise. He presses Enfield with a pointed question: “What sort of a man is he to see?” (Stevenson, 2005, p. 37). Utterson’s emphasis on “to see” is significant because it underscores the narrative’s self-awareness about the importance of visual description for a character so central to the plot, making it all the more paradoxical that the figure most anticipated and most crucial remains the least clearly described.

These moments of narrative withholding can be understood as the novel’s enactment of the broader Victorian repressive regime discussed earlier. The regime’s function here is not merely to conceal but to preserve the appearance of moral order. By restricting what may be said or seen, the text reproduces the cultural framework of restraint that governed Victorian respectability.

Enfield’s direct response to Utterson’s question about what he saw reinforces this

pattern: “He is not easy to describe... No, sir; I can make no hand of it; I can’t describe him. And it’s not want of memory; for I declare I can see him this moment” (Stevenson, 2005, pp. 37–38). The issue here is not one of memory or recognition, as Enfield insists he can picture Hyde clearly, but rather a failure of language. His inability to translate that mental image into words points to a larger narrative tension: how do you describe what resists description? While one could read this as a symptom of repression, it is also possible to see it as a reflection of Enfield’s personal limitations; he may simply lack the verbal precision expected of a reliable witness.

But the difficulty does not stop with him. When Utterson later encounters Hyde himself, he too struggles to define what makes the man so disturbing. Hyde leaves “an impression of deformity without any nameable malformation” (Stevenson, 2005, p. 43), as he puts it. The fact that both men fail in similar ways suggests that this is not just an individual shortcoming. It is a structural feature of the narrative.

At the very least, this difficulty is structurally intuitive because they occur early in the story, when the characters are not yet able to reveal much about the criminal. But even this intuitive quality can be seen as part of the narrative structure’s repressive regime. It nonetheless withholds information to build the reader’s curiosity and offers a reason to keep reading. This repressive regime operates at the level of narrative discourse.

The repressive regime of narrative discourse becomes even more apparent in the depiction of the only female witness to Hyde’s violence. As Charles Campbell (2014) observes, women in the novel “define the cityscape, inhabit the city’s streets and receive all the violence of Hyde either as direct victims or shocked witnesses—the little girl, the angry women who accuse Hyde of hurting the girl, the housekeeper, the match girl and the maidservant at the window” (p. 310). This portrayal reflects the gender ideology of the Victorian regime, which idealized women as virtuous, passive, and confined to the domestic sphere while reserving rational authority and public life for

men. Within such a patriarchal order, sustained by religion, education, and social convention, women's voices were considered morally significant yet intellectually and socially subordinate (Blommestein, 2011). This positioning frames female characters as passive receptors of violence or as emotionally overwhelmed spectators, rather than as agents capable of interpretation or resistance. Their function is largely observational, and their testimonies are filtered and often diminished by the surrounding narrative structure.

While the previous two gentlemen struggle with language themselves, the next witness is not even given the opportunity to speak directly. The maid who witnesses the murder of Danvers Carew is mediated entirely through the narrator's summary, which notes only that "she was surprised to recognise in him a certain Mr. Hyde" (Stevenson, 2005, p. 47). If there were ever a moment for a fuller description of Hyde, through the testimony of a direct witness to a brutal, high-profile crime, this would be it. Yet the narrator withholds her voice. The only glimpse we get of her account comes indirectly through the police: "Particularly small and particularly wicked-looking, is what the maid calls him" (Stevenson, 2005, p. 49). This brief and secondhand quotation offers little substance, and the narrative does not establish the police as a reliable or neutral conduit. Thus, the production of discourse is once again repressed by the narrator, reinforcing the text's broader strategy of withholding information and controlling access to truth. This dynamic illustrates how the repressive regime operates at the level of narrative form. The narrator's control over who speaks and what may be described mirrors the broader Victorian mechanisms of surveillance and moral containment. Repression, in this sense, functions as both a narrative necessity and an ideological imprint of its cultural moment.

In sharp contrast to the maid, whose voice is almost entirely silenced, the main narrator grants significant narrative space to Dr. Lanyon, in the section titled "Dr. Lanyon's Narrative." This part of the novel offers another key encounter with Hyde, one in which the narrative is once again compelled

to present a new impression of him. Unlike previous witnesses, Lanyon comes close to offering a full description, but ultimately retreats from it. After encountering Hyde and witnessing his transformation, Lanyon experiences a severe physical reaction, what he describes as a "marked sinking of the pulse," suggesting that Hyde's horror cannot be fully conveyed through language. Lanyon concludes that the true nature of what he witnessed lies "much deeper in the nature of man" (Stevenson, 2005, p. 72), signaling a withdrawal from the possibility of full narrative disclosure.

Dr. Lanyon's retreat from description mirrors the earlier narrative handling of Mr. Utterson's response to Hyde. The narrator, speaking of Utterson's feelings, notes: "but not all of these together could explain the hitherto unknown disgust, loathing and fear with which Mr. Utterson regarded him" (Stevenson, 2005, p. 43). In both cases, language falls short; the horror of Hyde defies articulation, leaving only the residue of emotional and bodily reactions. For Dr. Lanyon, this failure to describe Hyde derives not merely from narrative limitation but from moral shock. Hyde represents a transgression of scientific and natural boundaries that Lanyon's worldview cannot accommodate. To name or describe what he has witnessed would mean acknowledging the collapse of the scientific order he depends on. If the maid's account is externally censored, omitted or mediated through the voice of the police, Dr. Lanyon's narrative is a form of internal, self-imposed censorship. Yet this self-censorship occurs within a larger framework of narrative control: it is the main narrator who chooses where and how to insert Lanyon's testimony into the novel's sequence of events. Thus, even when speech appears to be granted, it is carefully staged and constrained by the overarching narrative logic, a logic that continually withholds, defers, or fragments knowledge of Hyde.

There is a clear and consistent reiteration throughout the novel of language's failure to capture the essence of Hyde, suggesting that his evil is too deep, too unknowable, to be represented by words. This failure is not incidental; it serves a purpose within the

story's logic. Hyde is positioned as something beyond human, what Dr. Lanyon implies exists at the fringes of legitimate science. What he witnesses is so far beyond conventional knowledge that Jekyll refuses to explain it, insisting it must remain secret. In contrast to legitimate science, which is assumed to be communicable and representable through language, Hyde belongs to a realm where language falters. The narrative seems to imply that such fringe phenomena resist verbal articulation. They are, by design, outside the domain of reason and linguistic clarity.

This insistence on Hyde's indescribability maintains the quality of a mystery. If he could be neatly captured in words, his horror would be diminished, reduced to a comprehensible, and therefore containable, figure. But the novel deliberately resists such containment. This repression of representation becomes especially apparent in situations where description would be both expected and necessary. For instance, when Enfield recounts his story to Utterson or when the maid reports the murder to the police, both encounters offer opportunities for direct, factual descriptions of Hyde. Yet in both cases, language is withheld or distorted, and the witnesses are either unwilling or not permitted to offer clear depictions. Even simple descriptive acts become sites of narrative repression.

Whether this repression stems from the implied author's manipulation of narrative to meet the expectations of the detective genre where withholding information is central to the formula (Martens, 2011, p. 200) or from a broader plot structure designed to preserve Hyde's supernatural ambiguity, the effect is the same: a deliberate withholding of discourse. This aligns with what Michel Foucault identifies as the "repressive hypothesis," particularly in his analysis of the discourse of sex after the 17th century. Foucault argues that repression operates not merely through silence, but through mechanisms that govern what can be said, who can speak, and where speech is allowed to occur. In the case of Hyde, a similar logic applies: the narrative censors him through two main mechanisms similar to those used in

the regulation of sexual discourse: the policing of language and the restriction of expression to socially acceptable spaces. Hyde can only be spoken of in fragmented, vague, or mediated terms, and his presence is confined to moments that are carefully managed within the text's structure. This strategic containment preserves his unknowability, while reinforcing the narrative's broader regime of repression.

In all three cases, the treatment of Hyde reflects two primary strategies that Michel Foucault identifies in the repression of sexual discourse. The first is the censorship of language. The repeated reluctance of characters to describe Hyde in concrete terms, phrases like "not easy to describe," "without any nameable malformation," and "lie much deeper (than what I have described)," signals a fundamental struggle to articulate his presence through precise language. In discussions of sex, such avoidance is often attributed to social taboos, concerns over appropriateness, or an implicit cultural consensus that certain things simply should not be spoken aloud. In the case of Hyde, however, there is no immediately visible taboo that would prohibit characters from describing him, yet the same evasiveness persists.

To understand this dynamic, it is useful to recall the context in which Foucault (1978) describes the taboo around sexual discourse: it stems from the belief that sex should be confined to the private, reproductive sphere, which is the parents' bedroom, where it serves as the "serious function of reproduction" (p. 3). Conversations about sex that fall outside this framework are deemed unnecessary, improper, or even dangerous. A similar logic appears to operate in the case of Hyde. Despite being a figure of transgression and violence, Hyde plays a productive role within the narrative structure. It is his presence, his "fertility," in a structural sense, that propels the plot forward. His crimes and his inexplicability generate the mystery, tension, and eventual revelation that give the story its shape.

Because of his narrative function, Hyde must be contained. Just as sexual discourse is

policed and restricted to certain acceptable contexts, discourse about Hyde is similarly confined until it becomes narratively necessary, specifically, at the story's climax, when a degree of coherence is finally (if temporarily) restored and the reader's questions are answered. At that point, the repressive regime of the narrative relaxes: Hyde's origins are revealed, the mystery dissolves, and language is finally permitted to function more openly. Until then, however, both the narrator and the characters participate in a broader discursive strategy of repression, withholding language and meaning in order to sustain the suspense and structural tension of the plot.

Yet, as Foucault argues in his critique of the repressive hypothesis, repression does not lead to silence but rather to the proliferation of discourse. The very act of withholding or controlling speech intensifies the desire to speak and multiplies the ways in which the forbidden subject circulates. In this sense, the narrative's repression of Hyde does not erase him; it amplifies his presence. The avoidance of description and the deferral of explanation contribute to a heightened discursive productivity. In this way, the novel translates the cultural norm of repression into narrative practice. What the Victorian regime silenced socially, Stevenson's narrator silences textually.

2. Describing the Indescribable: The Displeasing and Small Gentleman

While the repression and policing of language surrounding Hyde are evident, the effects are the opposite. As Foucault (1978) argues in the context of sexual discourse, repression often leads not to silence but to subversion, a proliferation of discourse that derives a kind of pleasure from resisting power (p. 6). Similarly, although characters repeatedly claim they cannot describe Hyde, they nonetheless produce a substantial amount of discourse about him. Utterson and Lanyon, while seemingly censored, still participate in a form of productive discourse. Their language, though indirect and fragmented, reveals other strategies for coping with the limits of representation.

Two main strategies emerge in how these characters circumvent the failure of language: the use of affective adjectives and the reliance on a singular, sanctioned descriptor. Instead of offering concrete or detailed physical descriptions, characters often resort to emotional responses; Hyde is described as inducing "disgust," "loathing," or "fear." These affective terms speak less to Hyde's appearance and more to his impact on others. In addition, a few terms, such as "small" or "deformed," circulate repeatedly and become the only descriptors the narrative seems to allow.

Even in narrative moments where a description of Hyde seems necessary, such as eyewitness accounts or investigative inquiries, the narrator, either through characters' direct speech or through an extradiegetic narrator accessing their consciousness, insists on the futility of describing him. And yet, it is often followed by a barrage of discursive productivity.

Take Enfield's account, for instance. He insists that Hyde defies description, yet immediately offers a long string of impressions that gesture toward a description without ever delivering one:

There is something wrong with his appearance; something displeasing [...] and yet I scarce know why. He must be deformed somewhere [...] although I couldn't specify the point. He's an extraordinary looking man, and yet I really can name nothing out of the way [...] I can't describe him. (Stevenson, 2005, pp. 35–36)

Utterson behaves similarly:

Mr. Hyde was pale and dwarfish, he gave an impression of deformity without any nameable malformation[...] but not all of these together could explain the hitherto unknown disgust, loathing and fear with which Mr. Utterson regarded him.[...] "There is something more, if I could find a name for it. God bless me, the man seems hardly human! (Stevenson, 2005, pp. 41–42)

Dr. Lanyon adds to the pattern:

He was small, as I have said; I was struck besides with the shocking expression of his face, with his remarkable combination of great muscular activity and great apparent debility of constitution [...] but I have since had reason to believe the cause to lie much deeper in the nature of man, and to turn on some nobler hinge than the principle of hatred. (Stevenson, 2005, p. 74)

At first glance, one might assume that when we struggle to describe something concisely, we compensate with a longer explanation; we assemble as many words as possible in an effort to approximate accuracy. However, what is notable in the narrative discourse of *Jekyll and Hyde* is the consistency and frequency with which this compensatory language occurs. Across multiple instances, the text establishes a dichotomy between surface-level description and deeper, ineffable meaning. Characters, either speaking directly or through the focalized extradiegetic narrator, often provide lengthy surface-level accounts, only to subsequently discredit them. Enfield claims his difficulty is “not want of memory,” suggesting that what his memory recalls are merely surface-level features that he considers inadequate. Similarly, Utterson admits, “there is something more,” and Dr. Lanyon concludes that the explanation must “lie much deeper in the nature of man.” The reliance on indirect language is attributed to the ineffability of the experience being described.

This pattern aligns with the Gothic genre. The suggestion of deeper meaning invites further inquiry and delays resolution, which in turn sustains the suspense essential to Gothic narrative. If surface description were sufficient, if, for instance, a character could simply say, “He looks like a criminal,” then Hyde would be no more than a conventional figure in a city crime story. Instead, the persistent suggestion of something beyond description maintains the supernatural or uncanny register that the genre demands. Stevenson himself repeatedly “pauses to consider the failure of scientific language to communicate the abstractions that undergird

its theoretical models of natural processes” (Manning, 2018, p. 181). Stevenson is aware that the narrative’s very structure is shaped by the limits of language, especially when that language tries to grasp what resists scientific or rational explanation.

While there is no direct evidence that *Jekyll and Hyde* responds to Stevenson’s disillusionment with scientific language, the narrative clearly offers an alternative to the scientific model. The inability to describe Hyde in precise, objective terms is not a flaw but a deliberate feature that supports the story’s structure. Jekyll’s account resists scientific description, privileging subjective perception over objective terms.

As a result, the language used to describe Hyde is deeply affective rather than objective. Narrated through Utterson’s consciousness, Hyde is said to give “an impression of deformity without any nameable malformation,” followed by a series of sensory and emotional responses: “a displeasing smile,” “a sort of murderous mixture of timidity and boldness,” and “a husky, whispering and somewhat broken voice” (Stevenson, 2005, p. 41). These are not clinical observations but visceral reactions. The repression of rational language gives way to emotional excess; characters struggle to articulate what Hyde is and instead describe what he makes them feel. Every adjectives I quoted earlier (wrong, displeasing, detestable, disliked) registers Hyde’s emotional impact, not his physical reality.

This affective mode aligns with the structure of detective fiction, which moves from obscurity to clarity, mystery to revelation, irrationality to rationality. The absence of factual description early in the narrative delays rational understanding, foregrounding how Hyde affects others over what he objectively is. In this way, the novel critiques rational discourse itself. Hyde becomes legible only when absorbed into the logic of science and confession, similar to how modern states regulated sexuality: not through silence but through the rationalizing tools of census, categorization, and population discourse.

However, there is one notably non-affective, factual detail consistently used to describe Hyde: his small stature. This objective observation stands out amid the otherwise affect-laden language. Enfield is the first to mention it, calling Hyde “a little man.” Utterson echoes this with the simple remark, “He was small.” The maid refers to him as “a very small gentleman,” Dr. Lanyon describes him as “a small man,” and Jekyll himself admits, “Edward Hyde was so much smaller.”

This consistency makes sense because physical size is among the few observable traits that remain discernible even through distorted perception, more reliably than, say, skin color, scars, or other markers common in detective fiction. Crucially, several witnesses explicitly state that their vision is impaired: Enfield encounters Hyde on a “black winter morning” (Stevenson, 2005, p. 33); Utterson sees him only “at that distance” (Stevenson, 2005, p. 40); the maid observes from a window at night; and Lanyon admits he didn’t “have a chance of clearly seeing him” (Stevenson, 2005, p. 74) at first glance.

Hyde’s smallness, then, becomes the one stable identifier that enables narrative continuity. It allows the story to link multiple sightings and testimonies. The narrative requires this balance, enough consistency to suggest a single figure behind disparate events, but enough vagueness to preserve suspense. If Hyde were entirely indescribable, no connections could be made; his size becomes the anchor that holds together a character otherwise shrouded in ambiguity.

What is particularly significant about the pattern of explosive discourse in *Jekyll and Hyde* is not just its content but its form. As noted earlier, the novel consistently accompanies the articulation of disturbing or transgressive ideas from with an immediate disavowal. This is not accidental; it occurs repeatedly and without exception, signaling the presence of tight narrative control. The very structure of the narrative enforces a repression.

This formal pattern mirrors the workings of a repressive regime structurally within the discourse itself. It reflects a narrative

apparatus that permits transgression only under carefully regulated conditions, allowing certain truths to surface while simultaneously containing or neutralizing their effects. Rather than offering a free exploration of Hyde’s nature, the text imposes a strict regime on how knowledge is produced, shared, and immediately constrained.

Conclusion

In *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, the narrative is shaped by a pervasive repressive regime that functions primarily through the failure or refusal to describe Hyde in precise terms. This failure is not incidental; it is structurally embedded in the discourse. From the first encounter recounted by Enfield to the more formal testimony of Dr. Lanyon, language repeatedly fails to capture Hyde’s physical appearance. Characters verbalize this failure and the narrative supports these moments by either denying direct speech to witnesses or redirecting the reader’s attention to affective impressions rather than concrete details. This mirrors the structure Michel Foucault identifies in the repressive hypothesis: that repression is not the absence of discourse, but the structuring of it through prohibitions and constraints, particularly in how language is policed and how speech is confined to certain acceptable channels.

Yet repression, as Foucault argues, does not eliminate discourse; it multiplies it. Despite the repeated claims of failure to describe Hyde, characters nonetheless produce lengthy and emotionally charged impressions that paradoxically say a great deal. What appears at first to be a linguistic dead end becomes an opening for a different kind of articulation: subversion, ambiguity, and affect. The pleasure of this subversive discourse lies in its circumvention of the very repression it is meant to obey. This proliferation of language around the figure of Hyde suggests that repression, rather than silencing discourse, intensifies it.

This study is limited by its focus on narrative form and linguistic repression within a single text. While this close reading reveals how discourse and repression interact

within *Jekyll and Hyde*, it does not account for broader variations across Stevenson's other works or within contemporary Victorian fiction more generally. Future research might expand this framework by comparing how repression operates across different genres, such as sensation fiction or detective narratives, or by examining how visual and theatrical adaptations negotiate the same limits of representation. Additionally, applying Foucauldian analysis alongside psychoanalytic or postcolonial frameworks could further illuminate how repression functions in literary texts.

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