Subversion in *The Strange case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and *Frankenstein*

–Harriet Crawford

The marginal and marginalised play an important part in fantasy and supernatural literature. Supernatural literature is itself marginalised, often 'dismissed…as being an embrace of madness [and] irrationality' (Jackson 1981), which makes it an ideal environment in which to explore the marginal. Supernatural literature concerns itself with the marginalised, knowingly or not, as it strives to represent a world different from our own, and in striving towards that, it inherently provokes questions and critical thinking in regard to the marginalised, even if the text fails to subvert the dominant system and give power to the marginal. As we will see in Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, this subversion may not be blatant in the text, as opposed to the more forthright *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, but the creation of a world different to our own invites these ideas of subversion whether or not they are overtly present in the text.

George Boas believes the fantastic to be associated with the 'Woman, the Child, the Folk (rural), and later the Irrational or Neurotic' (Ashitagawa 2009); a group of characters, I argue, that are firmly under the umbrella of 'the marginal'. Rosemary Jackson speaks of the marginalised as being 'outside of the law' and 'the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made absent' (1981), this is the main definition that will be used in regard to the 'marginalised' or 'the other' for the purposes of this paper. Looking at this definition it is easy to see the
people and characters who fall into the realm of this denigrated other. In contemporary society we constantly face issues of people being 'made invisible' and 'absent' by the media and our dominant value system, but it is hardly a contemporary issue. This essay aims to demonstrate how the treatment of the marginalised, and the dominant value system is unintentionally questioned in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (hereafter Jekyll and Hyde), and how Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* provides a broad and powerful critique with Victor as the flawed dominant system and the monster as the marginalised articulate voice.

Supernatural literature has great opportunities for utopian visions and bold-faced critiques of contemporary society afforded to it by its inherent nature of the fantasy world being necessarily removed from reality. This allows for almost limitless worlds to be created, a limitless plethora of varied characters. Why then does this literature, with its many avenues of opportunity, so often shy into the dominant value system and fail to address issues of the marginalised that fantasy literature is, arguably, best suited to address? Perhaps in fact they may not be as shy as they appear. The interesting thing about supernatural literature is that the marginalised other is almost always there, and because the world of the supernatural must differ from the world of reality, there are often subtle shifts in the representation of the marginalised. Rather than necessarily giving them a voice, or dominance, the supernatural can, and does, at the very least open other avenues of perspective upon the marginalised. This allows the reader the ability to 'play out the meanings of Otherness' (Betz 2011), opening up a conversation about the perception of the marginalised, even if the position of the marginal is not challenged directly in the text. As Jackson states, 'fantasy in literature deals so blatantly and repeatedly with unconscious material', and it is within this unconscious material that 'social structures and
'norms' are reproduced and sustained' unquestioned (1981). Jackson argues, as I do, that only by bringing attention to these unconscious norms can we begin to understand and question the relationship 'between society and the individual' (1981).

In *Jekyll and Hyde*, Hyde represents the marginalised, the degeneration of the civilised self, and by being in direct opposition of everything Jekyll is also represents the feminine as he is excluded from the dominant masculine world Jekyll inhabits. Though the novella is more concerned with the preservation of the civilised self from 'the evil side of [one's] nature' (Stevenson 2003), in the Victorian age, in the face of drugs, drink, and emotional repression, the mere existence of Hyde as the other, by definition, positions him as the marginalised. In this particular text it is interesting to note that while Hyde is one of the titular characters, the story is never told from his perspective. Hyde is 'the unseen of culture' (Jackson 1981) and despite his actions his existence is 'covered over and made absent' (Jackson 1981), silenced by the dominant value system that Jekyll believes in but cannot uphold. Jekyll, as belonging to the dominant value system, must take responsibility for his own actions which resulted in Hyde – the feminine, the uneducated other. First by physically marginalising him by acquiring a house in Soho, an area populated with similarly outcast members of society, and then, by ending his own life to destroy Hyde with him. In this way Hyde, who is meant as the villain and the unarguable darkness to Jekyll's questionable light, plays the role of the marginalised, the mistreated minority, and it is in this way that the reader is positioned to ask questions about the treatment of what is perceived to be the monstrous other. This novella also poses the question: what responsibility does the majority have to the marginalised? Jekyll's idea of responsibility has an air of colonialism about it, secluding Hyde out of sight in Soho and turning a
blind eye. Other texts, such as Frankenstein, explore this idea of responsibility to the marginalised other more openly and extensively.

Richard Mathews gives an outline of what is considered three of the oldest written fantasy stories, the third of which 'involves the control of life and death' (2011). The control over life and death has long been a theme of fantasy and supernatural literature, tapping into humanity's basic fear of mortality. However, the importance here is found with those who lie outside of the cycle of life and death. In Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, the monster created by Victor Frankenstein lies outside this mortal framework, having been created from death (and seemingly unable to die of old age). Therefore the monster is cast out of the cycle of life and death which every other living being is inherently a part of. He is marginalised by his mere existence, because his existence is not recognised by the structure of life. Was the monster always destined to be such an outcast? Here we must look to Victor and his responsibilities, not only as representative of the dominant in society but also, as a paternal figure to the marginalised monster.

In many ways it is Victor's own fault that his creation turned into such a monster. Upon his creation Victor not only refused to name the creature, thereby giving it no true identity of its own and therefore cutting him off from society, he also refused to nurture, or even truly recognise and accept the monster. He, as the dominant system, perpetuates the demonising of the other based on fear and ignorance. Even when Victor and the monster meet two years later, Victor at no point offers consolation, he does not offer to educate him further, or to teach him social interactions; he does not take on any responsibility as creator, father, mother, or even god, and name his creature. He shirks every responsibility to his creation that could have prevented the creature's distress and therefore kept him from killing anyone. Victor, in fact, does not even adhere to his lawful responsibilities in turning
the monster in to the police once he discovers it was he who killed his little brother, not Justine.

*Frankenstein*, unlike *Jekyll and Hyde*, does manage to challenge the dominant value systems of society. Indeed, Shelley's novel provides a metaphor applicable to any marginalised figure or group in the form of the monster. The outcast monster is a symbol so powerful that it speaks to every kind of marginalised – the uneducated, the feminine, the foreign, the colonised, the abandoned, the homeless – and because of this the novel is able to challenge the dominant system of its own time as well as contemporary society as well. Shelley's novel is a statement to the fact that the rejection and neglect of the marginalised never results in success. Victor's inability to accept the marginalised in the form of the monster causes the death of everyone he loves. His successful creation of life brings about only death. Victor is given a chance by the monster to redeem himself for abandoning him when the monster requests of that he 'create a female...with whom I can live' (2012). Here the monster's needs and wants mimic Victor's own – the monster wants to create but all he can do is destroy, and now he wants a wife to spend his life with just as Victor to looks forward to his marriage to Elizabeth. Victor's refusal of the monster's request on the basis that he will not allow the monster to make him 'base' in his own eyes shows that he considers the monster as base, but more importantly, his very creation as base. This suggests that he has come to the realisation that his desire to dominate the world with a male created race, further marginalising the role of women, is a base and unnatural act, and therefore could only have ever resulted in the creation of a monstrous and marginalised other.

This scene is crucial in our understanding of the interaction between the dominant society and the marginalised, as Victor – who, like Jekyll – represents a weakened version of the dominant value system that deigns to
address the marginalised – and the monster have a chance to settle
differences and bridge the chasm between them. The monster blatantly says
he is 'content to reason' with Victor, despite the fact he knows Victor would
'tear [him] to pieces, and triumph' (2012) – he recognises his position as the
marginal and asks for a chance to be a part of society in some small
capacity, and Victor denies him outright and completely. As Victor later
reflects on all his misdeeds in his story to Walton – his ill-conceived
creation born out of self-education, his lack of conviction to take
responsibility for the monster, his neglect leading to the death of his family,
and refusal to show compassion to, or bargain with, the monster because he
sees him as an inherently lesser being – we are led to the conclusion, if
Victor represents the dominant values of society, then societal values need
to be reassessed as they allow for this vindictive kind of behaviour which
creates and perpetuates the monstrous other.

'Shall I respect man when he condemns me?' asks the monster. This
is the struggle of the marginalised, summed up perfectly. How can the
marginalised become empowered – if they respect the dominant value
system that marginalises them they are accepting their fate, if they challenge
it they are the monster demanding the right of human compassion.
Supernatural literature is itself perceived as the domain for the marginalised,
as the embracing of madness (Jackson 1981) and a degeneracy that is
outside the comfortable walls of a contemporary value system. Todorov
states that whether in a social or narrative context 'the intervention of the
supernatural element always constitutes a break in the system of pre-
established rules' (1975), therefore, I argue that supernatural literature is, in
itself, a challenge to the dominant value system, as its existence must
always constitute some kind of break or alteration of the pre-established
rules or system that governs our non-fantasy world. Therefore the
marginalised are able to, by mere existence, challenge the dominant value
system of which they are a part of, as the fact of their being constitutes a break in the rules of that society, and demands justification (1975).

Vike quotes Stableford's theory that 'there is no thought without fantasy' (2009), I would counter that there is no fantasy without thought. Fantasy does 'enable us to enter worlds of infinite possibility' (Mathews 2011), and in this way also allows readers to create endless possibility within a text. While some supernatural texts may not directly challenge or subvert the role of the dominant value system and the marginalised, the fact of it being supernatural literature allows for a distance to be placed between the world of the text and reality, and in a genre that is heralded as the marginal within literature itself, it encourages readers to understand the weight of the decision to treat the marginalised as they are in dominant society, or to give them voice against that society.

References

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