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The Rippers of fin de siècle London: Depolarizing the Urban Landscape in Stevenson’s Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde and Marsh’s The Beetle

Daniel Persia ’14

The place is fin de siècle London. The name is “Jack the Ripper.” From the crowded streets of the East End to the wealthy homes of the West, London was seething at the sight of five brutal murders committed in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The autumn of 1888 brought with it a tempest of fear and anxiety, as the Ripper defiled the Whitechapel area while tearing apart the social fabric. Published just two years “before ‘Jack’ made his own spectacular appearance,” Robert Louis Stevenson’s The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde has become the subject of sustained criticism in relation to London’s unknown killer (Bloom et al. 126). Richard Mansfield’s stage production of the tale reached London’s Lyceum Theater only weeks before the death of Mary Ann Nichols, the Ripper’s first victim. Moreover, Mansfield himself was accused of the crime, perhaps because, as Hubbard states, “[he] depicted, with horrible animal vigour and with intense and reckless force of infernal malignity, the exultant wickedness of the bestial and frenzied Hyde” (54). Mansfield was not alone, however, as more than a thousand London residents were either arrested or questioned during the investigation (74). As London desperately sought to unveil the Ripper’s identity, the case penetrated all sectors of society, reaching lower-class prostitutes, wealthy elites, journalists and authors alike. Rance notes, for instance, “the Jack the Ripper case was preoccupying Stoker as he contemplated writing Dracula” (440). Thus, Ripperologists have linked the case to Gothic fiction both before and after the killings, searching for representations of London and manifestations of fin de siècle anxiety that may have influenced, or been influenced by, the Ripper’s crimes.

I should affirm that the purpose of this essay is not to identify the Ripper, nor to suggest that Mansfield, or any other member of the accused, had any part in the crimes. Harrington asserts, “Jack the Ripper has only a tenuous connection with the Whitechapel murderer. He is more a Gothic monster than a real person” (5). I treat the Ripper as such, briefly exploring existing connections to the Gothic canon before hypothesizing several that have yet to be delineated. For over a century’s time, the critical lens has maintained its focus on the two aforementioned texts, Jekyll and Hyde and Dracula, while excluding another prominent work of the fin de siècle period: The Beetle. Published in September 1897, just two months after Dracula, Richard Marsh’s The Beetle initially garnered more popularity than Stoker’s now critically acclaimed tale. Although they have yet to surface in critical discourse, the parallels between Jack the Ripper and the Beetle—touching on notions of landscape, naming, and the objectification of the human body—abound. My goal is to establish The Beetle’s place in the discourse, paying careful attention to the intricacies of London and the changing social composition of the time.

To establish these parallels, I progress along a fairly linear path. First, I construct the fin de siècle urban landscape and argue that the polarization of London into east and west ends, a common practice employed by cultural critics, is counterproductive when examining the Ripper case. I frame my argument in the context of Jekyll and Hyde, a text that helps to explain why the dichotomization of London, though an easily identifiable approach, ultimately fails to address the nature of human existence. The landscapes of Jekyll and Hyde and the Ripper case prove to be one and the same. Moreover, in recreating Victorian London as it existed during the terror of 1888, I establish an atmosphere that lends itself to a more conscious analysis of The Beetle. Free to roam the streets of London, entangling the Holts of the East End with the Athertons of the West End, the Beetle establishes her/him/itself as a danger object, or a representation of fear, that closely resembles the Ripper (see a synopsis of Marsh’s novel below). In identifying the similarities between these two figures, I show that both the Ripper and the Beetle are “simultaneously nobody, somebody, and everybody,” consuming the state of London by controlling the Victorian mind (Lonsdale 98). After constructing such a comparison, I explore a simple question: why does the Beetle remain utterly absent from critical discourse on the Ripper? The answer, by no means complete, draws on an overarching philosophy of language, applied to the identities of the Beetle and Jack the Ripper in the broader cultural context of fin de siècle anxiety.

Stevenson’s Jekyll and Hyde begins with the narrative of Mr. Utterson, a sensible London lawyer whose client, Dr. Jekyll, writes a will to transfer his property to the mysterious Mr. Hyde. Utterson discovers the will shortly after hearing a story about Hyde from his good friend Enfield, in which Hyde tramples a young girl, vanishes from the scene, and returns with a check signed by Jekyll as compensation for his misdoing. Upon meeting Hyde for the first time, Utterson remarks on his deformed, curious appearance: “God bless me, the man seems hardly human! Something troglodytic . . . the mere radiance of a foul soul” (42). Nearly a year later, “London [is] startled by a crime of singular ferocity,” as a servant girl witnesses Hyde beating to death Sir Danvers Carew, a high-ranking official of Parliament (46). Suspecting Hyde to be the killer, Utterson visits Dr. Jekyll, who claims to have disconnected himself from Hyde and soon isolates himself within the confines of his laboratory. Utterson later breaks into the laboratory and discovers “the body of a man sorely contorted and still twitching . . . dressed in clothes far too large for him,” which appear to belong to Jekyll (67). Reading Jekyll’s “full statement of the case,” we find out that he was “not truly one, but truly two,” as he had concocted a potion
to transform himself into Hyde but ultimately lost control (78-79). The end of Jekyll’s letter marks the end of his life and brings the novel to a close.

Given Sir Danvers Carew’s high position in society and the brutal nature of Hyde’s crime, Stevenson transforms London into a state of complete disorder. Curtis states, “the protagonist in this neo-Gothic tale personified both the genius and the depravity of this great city, wherein a much-respected West End doctor could degenerate into a monster acting out his malevolent fantasies in the East End with “ape-like fury”” (35). In utilizing the phrase “ape-like fury,” a phrase that Utterson employs to describe the murder of Carew, Curtis attributes his thought to the second, more apparent crime of the novel (which he locates in the East End) (Stevenson 46). However, before Hyde “[hails] down a storm of blows” to Carew after clubbing him to the ground, he stomps on an innocent girl “like some damned Juggernaut” in the West End of London (46, 33; italics mine). In relating the first incident to Utterson, Enfield reveals, “my way lay through a part of town where there was literally nothing to be seen but street lamps . . . street after street, all lighted up as if for a procession” (33). Curtis notes that streetlights were absent in the East End of London at the time, thus locating the first incident amidst the wealth represented by Carew (34). Consequently, Hyde, the degenerate, East End incarnation of a “much-respected West End doctor,” commits his atrocities on both sides of the city; his name truly does “stink from one end of London to the other” (Curtis 35; Stevenson 33). Thus, we see the crime and darkness associated with the lower classes merge with the wealth and lightness of the upper classes. We must not view London as a polarized city, split into West and East by a definitive boundary, but rather as a unified city, in which both ends are inextricably linked, each holding the potential to influence the other.

Jack the Ripper walked the same streets that Jekyll and Hyde did only two years after the publication of Stevenson’s novel. The Ripper committed his first crime on August 31, 1888, cutting the throat of Mary Ann Nichols, a prostitute working the streets of Whitechapel, from ear to ear, and then disemboweling her body. Within a ten-week period, the Ripper replicated his crime against four other women, all (but one) middle-aged prostitutes working in the Whitechapel area: or, “daughters of joy,” “unfortunates,” and “sisters of the abyss,” as the common euphemisms ran (Hubbard 10-11, 67). Coville and Lucanio question whether the Ripper “plunged his knife into five, seven, ten, or twenty ladies of the evening,” while Cullen notes the dispute over “eight, eleven, or as many as fourteen victims” (21; qtd. in Hubbard 66). The exact number of victims is unclear, yet those who study the case agree that at least five women suffered the Ripper’s brutality. The last of these women, twenty-five-year-old Mary Kelly, was not found on the street like the others, but rather in her own home. She was “horribly dissected, [her] internal organs laid out by the bedside, blood and flesh on walls, furniture and floors,” and police took quick note that it was, “by far, the most violent and grisly murder” of them all (Tropp 116; Hubbard 67).

I bring up the victims not to position them as passive objects of the Ripper’s aggression, but rather to search for their voice, long lost in the discourse surrounding London’s unknown killer. Lonsdale observes, “the most glaring omission in representations of the Ripper’s murders is the scarcity of the victims”—of women’s—“stories altogether, stories overshadowed by repeated exhibition of their bodies through photographs, diagrams, and courtroom testimony describing their mutilations” (103). Likewise, the most glaring omission in Jekyll and Hyde is the voice of women, for their presence is virtually nonexistent in the novel. In both cases, women are treated as extras in a play. The girl “screaming on the ground,” trampled by Hyde, transforms into the prostitute lying on the streets, silenced by the Ripper (Stevenson 33). Lonsdale further notes that the media’s portrayal of the “sexually promiscuous female body . . . [within] the labyrinthine city, including the illicit and squalid Whitechapel setting,” diminished the voice of women during the Ripper investigation (104). The image of women as lower-class sex objects forced their socially constructed identity onto the streets of the East End, where they met with a conflagration of other influences and quickly became lost in the crowd.

After 1880, Jewish refugees fleeing pogroms in Russia and Eastern Europe flooded the streets of London. The population grew from 1.8 million to 4.5 million people, and the gap between the rich and the poor steadily widened (Curtis 33). Fish-curers, slaughterhouses, skinners, and furriers began to occupy the East End, “urine and blood . . . running out of the front doors . . . onto the pavement and into the gutter” (qtd. in Hubbard 62). Prostitutes, loosely defined as women who “transgressed the bourgeois code of morality,” frequently worked the streets (Nead 349). Moreover, after the serial killings began, the wealthy disguised themselves and took “field trips” to the slums of Whitechapel “to view with horror and fascination the lower classes” (11). Curtis describes what they may have seen—and smelled—in vivid detail: “the daily deposit of tons of animal and human excrement and the presence of open sewers, cesspools, pigsties, and the remnants of carcasses of over thirteen thousand animals slaughtered every week in knackers’ yards combined to infuse London’s air with a noxious stench.”

Curtis further notes, “few East Enders could avoid the sight of prostrate bodies—dead, half-alive, or dead-drunk—lying in the streets or wynds” (42). However, the precision of the crimes suggested that the Ripper murders were “the work of a depraved doctor,” expanding the focus from London’s impoverished East End to the West End, a shift from internal to external conflict (Bloom et al. 122; Walkowitz 362). Thus, we have a landscape similar to that found in Jekyll and Hyde; both ends of the city are inextricably linked, with no definitive boundary separating the crime and pollution associated with the East from the wealth attributed to the West. Although the “multicultural mix” of East End London was the setting of the
Ripper’s crimes, we should not polarize the city and place a divide between the social classes (Dimolianis 15). The same holds true in Marsh’s London, where crime touches all classes of society and London transforms into the true fin de siècle city that it became after the terror of Jack the Ripper.

Richard Marsh’s The Beetle takes the form of an epistolary novel, similar to that of Stoker’s Dracula and the sensation novels of Wilkie Collins. The novel begins with “the surprising narration of Robert Holt,” a starving “office worker turned house-breaker” who enters an empty home on London’s West End (Marsh 41; Wolfreys 26). Holt becomes mesmerized into subjection by a strange creature, the Beetle, who is later revealed to be a priest of the cult of Isis. The Beetle, seeking revenge upon Paul Lessingham, a Radical politician who desecrated the cult’s desert temple, entangles Holt in his ploy against Marjorie Lindon, the woman to whom Lessingham is secretly engaged. The Beetle soon encounters “Sydney Atherton, Esquire,” an upper-class experimental scientist who designs devices for “legalized murder”—what we now refer to as weapons of mass destruction (Marsh 91, 102). In love with Marjorie and thus hostile toward Lessingham, Atherton plots to eliminate the politician but is continually outmaneuvered by the Beetle, who ends up abducting Marjorie. Stripped to her skin and dressed as a man, Marjorie, under mesmeric trance, accompanies the Beetle through the streets of London. Atherton and Lessingham, with the aid of “the honorable Augustus Champnell,” a “member of the aristocracy turned ‘Confidential Agent,’” are able to track them down, leading to a train wreck that apparently obliterates the Beetle while allowing them to recover the traumatized Marjorie (Marsh 235; Wolfreys 26). Marjorie follows through with her engagement to Lessingham and Atherton marries a rich heiress named Dora Greyling, but the mystery of the Beetle remains unsolved. Champnell is not convinced that “the Thing is not still existing—a creature born neither of God nor man,” and thus, although The Beetle comes to a close, the uncertainty of the Beetle remains (Marsh 322).

The Beetle is an object of indefiniteness, a figure of catachresis that has no proper identity. Julian Wolfreys suggests that one read the Beetle as a “hieroglyphic writing . . . irreducible to any particular meaning” (33). In doing so, we must first examine the characters, or the textual features, that compose the hieroglyph:

There was not a hair upon his face or head, but, to make up for it, the skin, which was a saffron yellow, was an amazing mass of wrinkles. The cranium, and, indeed, the whole skull, was so small as to be disagreeably suggestive of something animal. The nose, on the other hand, was abnormally large; so extravagant were its dimensions, and so peculiar its shape, it resembled the beak of some bird of prey. A characteristic of the face—and an uncomfortable one!—was that, practically, it stopped short at the mouth. The mouth, with its blubber lips, came immediately underneath the nose, and chin, to all intents and purposes, there was none. (Marsh 53)

So how do we read this saffron yellow, birdlike, blubber-lipped creature? Shortly after Holt provides the above description, he falls victim to the Beetle’s mesmeric advances and, in accordance with the creature’s command (“Undress!”), exposes his white body (55). Hurley observes that, although the novel later “relieves” the reader of the fear associated with male homoerotic desire by asserting the oriental’s femininity, the creature’s “sadistic, quasisexual attacks on Marjorie” become even more disturbing (203). Thus, Luckhurst constructs a playful title for the hieroglyph: “the liminal man-woman-goddess-beetle-Thing,” a name that merits closer attention (“Trance” 160).

Luckhurst’s choice of the descriptor “liminal” establishes a motif that we can trace to position the Beetle within the city of London. Margree classifies Holt as a “liminal” figure as well, “a man on the brink of social and legal categories” as a result of his unemployment and subsequent spiral into destitution (65). Holt, a self-proclaimed “penniless, homeless tramp,” should remind us of London’s East End during the 1880s (41). Luckhurst expands on this connection to the landscape of Jekyll and Hyde by asserting that Stevenson’s work is a “liminal text on the threshold of a Freudian age,” connecting Hyde to the id—the raw, untamed portion of man (185; Coville and Lucanio, 19). Likewise, Lonsdale deems Jack the Ripper a “liminal figure,” exploring the “unknowability” that surrounds the killer’s identity (102-103). Such unknowability allowed for possible copycat crimes and wrongful accusations, giving Jack the “amorphous ability to inhabit more than one physical body,” a capacity that mirrors the Beetle’s shape-shifting ways (Bloom et al. 124-125). Thus, Jack the Ripper, like Jekyll/Hyde, Holt, and the Beetle, occupied a position on both ends of London; no boundary prevented him from crossing from East to West, and no boundary prevented the fear that he represented from penetrating society in the opposite-most corners of the city. Furthermore, Hyde crosses the boundaries of human science and existence; Holt shatters the stratification of social classes as his naked body runs amok through the streets of Victorian London; and the Beetle writs her way into private spaces, including the human mind, with complete disregard for personal boundaries. Each character traverses the landscape, making a polarizing approach that splits London into East and West utterly inadequate.

Thus far, I have shown that Jack the Ripper and the Beetle each represent “somebody”: a liminal figure existing within the fluidity of Victorian London. I have yet to show how they are simultaneously “nobody” and “everybody”; with that task in hand, I now proceed. While the East/West dichotomy in Jekyll and Hyde manifests internally, primarily within London, the East/West dichotomy in The Beetle manifests externally as well, recreating itself into a dichotomy between the Orient and the Occident. This polarization is again ineffectual, as the very notion of
foreignness rests on a socially constructed perception of one’s relationship to society at large. Hurley invokes Said’s Orientalism to deconstruct the binary: “the East, defined by the West, in terms of all those qualities the West rejects for or denies in itself, serves as a ‘surrogate or even underground self’ for the West.” Although the Beetle is presented as the “barbaric other,” she establishes a permanent link to the “highly civilized Westerner” that cannot be ignored (195). Thus, in regard to the East and the West, one cannot be understood without the other. In order to fully apply Said’s model to the landscape of The Beetle, we first need a more detailed glimpse of London society at the end of the nineteenth century.

Popular theories have suggested that Jack the Ripper, like the Beetle, was a foreigner.

A description circulated in the September 11, 1888, issue of the London Times advised London residents to be on the lookout for a man who “spoke with a foreign accent,” having a “rather dark beard and moustache. Dress-shirt, dark vest and trousers, black scarf, and black felt hat” (Coville and Lucanio 133-134). This statement coalesced with the belief that the Ripper “could not have been English by birth or heritage because . . . no Englishman could reasonably have been guilty of such barbaric acts” (133). Moreover, the social composition of London reinforced the possibility that Jack was of foreign descent: “the steady flow of impoverished European Jews into the East End reinforced the West End view of the district as populated by people of a darker skin and/or swarthy complexion, and therefore primitive qualities.” Jewish immigrants were accompanied by “thousands of Irish-born residents . . . [and] smaller numbers of Germans, French, Italians, Lascars, Africans, Chinese, and Malays—all of whom gave the East End its reputation as England’s main port of entry for destitute ‘passengers’ from all over the world” (Curtis 41). Some theorists even pointed the finger at Russian immigrants, claiming that their close ties to nihilism and frequent participation in secret societies made them more viable candidates for the Ripper (Bloom et al. 121). And it was not only mainstream West London that noticed the influx of foreigners; Queen Victoria herself suggested inspecting the crews of foreign ships when she heard that the Ripper was thought to be an outsider (Tropp 112-113). The entire state of London was being sucked into a vortex of anti-foreign agitation, and not a single person was immune to its effects.

No other “thing” in nineteenth century British literature serves as a closer parallel to Jack the Ripper’s amorphous identity than the Beetle. Expanding on Holt’s earlier observations of the creature, Atherton notes, “his costume was reminiscent of the ‘Algerians’ whom one finds all over France . . . he wore a burnoose, — the yellow, grimy-looking article of the Arab of the Soudan, not the spick and span Arab of the boulevard” (Marsh 103). However, Atherton questions the Beetle’s origin when noting that the creature, “oriental to the finger-tips,” was “hardly an Arab, . . . [and] was not a fellah,—he was not, unless I erred, a Mohammedan at all. There was something about him which was distinctly not Mussulmanic.” Thus, Atherton classifies the Beetle as a foreigner, “whatever his race may be,” but he cannot make up his mind “as to the exact part of the east from which he came” (140). In contrast, Miss Louisa Coleman, the Beetle’s neighbor and an informant to Lessingham and Champnell while on the chase, is more direct in her approach. Unwilling to be hollered at, she denies Atherton entrance to her home before sharing some remarks about her curious new neighbor with the others. She refers to the mysterious presence as “Mr. Arab,” a foreigner with “one of them dirty-coloured bedcover sort of things . . . wrapped all over his head and round his body” (273). Although their personalities clash, Atherton and Miss Coleman agree that the Beetle’s strange ways are “oftener found, thank goodness, in the east than in the west” (105). The characters of Marsh’s novel are unable to identify the origin of the Beetle, just as the inhabitants of fin de siècle London were unable to identify the origin of the Ripper. By constructing the image of the Ripper as a foreigner terrorizing the streets of the city’s East End, the people of London essentially created the Beetle nearly ten years before Marsh did.

To corroborate this statement, I return to the urban landscape and Said’s theory of Orientalism. We know that Marsh’s Beetle lives on the West End, for Holt reveals that “only Hammersmith was left” in his search for food and shelter. However, the Beetle’s neighborhood is poorly lit, its roads “rough and uneven,” and its cottages “crumbling to decay” (Marsh 45). Thus, we see the qualities the West denies for itself on a micro scale, with London’s West End serving as a microcosm of the Western World. The Beetle is as much an embodiment of London’s decaying high society as she is the sexually perverse and occult other. Like Mr. Hyde, who lives in Soho, one of the more fashionable parts of London until a mid-century influx of immigrants and an 1854 outbreak of cholera, the Beetle brings out the degeneracy of her environment (Danahay 18). Similarly, if “only a cultivated intellectual run amok” could have committed the Ripper killings —what some have referred to as the “upper-class maniac theory”—, then the Ripper surely would have inhabited London’s West End, representing such degeneracy alongside the Beetle (Walkowitz 364). Thus, both the Beetle and the Ripper are foreign, live on London’s West End, and embody the decadence of fin de siècle London, becoming the underground self for the city’s upper echelons. We now have a description of these two indeterminate figures, prompting us to explore the names that accompany it.

By assigning a set of attributes to each figure, we are conforming to the descriptivist theory of naming. Although the theory is composed of a set of theses, I engage with only the first, as it will be the most useful in advancing the parallels between the Beetle and the Ripper within the scope of this essay. Saul Kripke summarizes the first thesis of the descriptivist theory in the following way: “To every name or designating expression X, there corresponds a cluster of properties Φ such that A (an individual engaged in naming a thing) believes Φ applies to X (71). In our case, “the
police in London [A] use the name ‘Jack’ or ‘Jack the Ripper’ [X] to refer to the man, whoever he is, who committed all these murders, or most of them [Ø]. Then they are giving the reference of the name by a description” (79-80). The cluster of properties Ø, as we have defined it above, might include the Ripper being foreign, upper class, or the murderer of five prostitutes in the Whitechapel area; a cluster for the Beetle would be similar, with the details of the crimes changed. As a causal theorist, Kripke identifies the proper name ‘Jack the Ripper’ as an exception to his thesis that a name’s referent is always fixed by the act of naming; or, in other words, the name becomes a rigid designator of that object (79). Without a fixed referent, Jack the Ripper is “nobody.” However, simultaneously he transforms into “everybody” who fits the description; “theoretically, the ‘Ripper’ could live next door,” so long as he displayed each property of Ø (a coincidence for Miss Coleman?) (Hubbard 82). This paradox sheds light on London’s anxiety during the investigation of the Jack the Ripper killings, but it also leads to a deeper question about the legacy of Marsh’s novel: why has Jack the Ripper become the “everybody,” and the Beetle the “nobody,” of critical discourse surrounding nineteenth century, fin de siècle British literature when both names are rooted in nearly equivalent descriptions?

Kelly Hurley offers a number of possible explanations for the Beetle’s absence in critical discourse. She identifies the novel’s “Gothicized version of rape,” “conflation of abject female sexuality with oriental barbarism,” and “oriental incursion, with white slavery and genocide as its end,” as central, though oftentimes unpalatable, aspects of the work (193-194, 197). I offer a different explanation: The Beetle is simultaneously behind and ahead of its time, a liminal text hovering in the Gothic canon. Using the descriptivist theory outlined above, we let X be the designating expression ‘fin de siècle Victorian London.’ Our cluster of properties Ø includes a wrongfully polarized city (as demonstrated through our discussion of landscape in Jekyll and Hyde) and an increasingly polarized world (as shown through our discussion of landscape in The Beetle), with Jack the Ripper as the link between the two. That leaves us as A, the individuals engaged in naming X. In order to attribute Ø to X, we need a full set of properties; without the East/West dichotomy in Jekyll and Hyde, the East/West dichotomy in The Beetle is incomplete, and vice versa. Moreover, without understanding the context of Jack the Ripper, we cannot deconstruct each dichotomy to create the liminal fin de siècle atmosphere. The Beetle often diverts the reader’s attention to after the turn of the century; Atherton’s occupation, for instance, hints at a world war, while the Beetle’s foreignness foreshadows the evolving global context of the twentieth century. But in ignoring the period before the turn of the century, namely the Jack the Ripper case, we do not have the complete landscape of Victorian London. Thus, the fin de siècle name has no direct referent but is rather the manifestation of anxiety as portrayed in Jekyll and Hyde, The Beetle, and the Jack the Ripper case. The Beetle deserves a place in the critical discourse surrounding Jack the Ripper, for without it, the discourse, as intended to reconstruct fin de siècle London, cannot function to its fullest extent.
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