

A BRIEF
NOTE ON
"JEKYLL AND
HYDE" AND
MPD

Emanuel E. Garcia, M.D.

Emanuel E. Garcia, M.D., is a psychiatrist in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

For reprints write Emanuel E. Garcia, M.D., 2120 Race Street, Logan Square, Philadelphia, PA 19103.

ABSTRACT

Robert Louis Stevenson's macabre and riveting tale, "The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," perceptively displays critical psychological mechanisms at work in the development and maintenance of MPD, namely, 1) the naturally fragmented and chaotic state of the mind, 2) the yearning for unity, 3) the wish to disavow responsibility for certain impulses, 4) the delight taken in the gratification of forbidden desires by an alter, and 5) the inevitable failure of dissociative attempts to dispel psychic conflict. These observations find corroboration in clinical material presented.

Robert Louis Stevenson's chilling tale, "The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," is known as the fictional account par excellence of so-called "split personality." The phrase "Jekyll and Hyde" has entered common parlance as a description of two utterly contrasting and contradictory sides of an individual's character. Through fiction, of course, telling psychological truths may be represented, and Stevenson's masterful story contains several passages that reveal certain illuminating insights about the psyche and its operation in multiple personality disorder (MPD) and dissociative disorders in general.

Dr. Henry Jekyll writes a confessional letter in which the genesis of the nefarious alter Edward Hyde is described. Jekyll has discovered for himself that:

man is not truly one, but truly two. I say two, because the state of my own knowledge does not pass beyond that point. Others will follow, others will outstrip me on the same lines; and I hazard the guess that *man will be ultimately known for a mere polity of multifarious, incongruous and independent denizens* (Stevens, 1969, p. 515; my italics).

Through his fictional character, Stevenson seems in essence to be acknowledging the psyche's fundamental disharmony, composed as it is of conflicting impulses, affective states, and other elements, which harbor the potential for the coalescence into and splitting off of discrete personae.

Unable to bear the pain of psychic conflict, Jekyll yearns for relief:

I had learned to dwell with pleasure, as a beloved day-dream, on the thought of the separation of these elements. If each, I told myself, could but be housed in separate identities, life would be relieved of all that was unbearable; the unjust might go his way, delivered from the aspirations and remorse of his more upright twin; and the just could walk steadfastly and securely on his upward path, doing the good things in which he found his pleasure, and no longer exposed to disgrace and penitence by the hands of his extraneous evil. It was the curse of mankind that these incongruous faggots were thus bound together—that in the agonized womb of consciousness, these polar twins should be continuously struggling (Stevenson, 1969, pp. 515-516).

Jekyll's remedy is to concoct a chemical elixir that would shake the fortress of identity, induce dissociation and transform him into the evil Edward Hyde. As if to emphasize the dramatic completeness of the dissociation, Stevenson has Jekyll's transformation occur not only mentally, but physically as well.

Jekyll's initial response to his novel form is of great interest:

This too, was myself. It seemed natural and human. In my eyes it bore a livelier image of the spirit, it seemed more express and single, than the imperfect and divided countenance I had been hitherto accustomed to call mine (Stevenson, 1969, p.518).

But the dissociative solution fails:

Hence, although I had now two characters as well as two appearances, one was wholly evil, and the other was *still the old Henry Jekyll, that incongruous compound of whose reformation and improvement I had already learned to despair*. The movement was thus wholly toward the worse (Stevenson, 1969, p. 519; my italics).

Jekyll enters a tumultuous decline. Hyde commits murder, and ultimately dissociation occurs completely outside his control.

Stevenson's macabre and riveting parable, in the passages I have reproduced above and elsewhere, trenchantly displays a number of critical and perhaps universal mental mechanisms at work in the development and maintenance of MPD; to wit, the naturally fragmented and chaotic state of

the mind, the yearning for unity, the wish to disavow responsibility for certain impulses, the delight taken in the gratification of those same forbidden impulses by an alter, and the inevitable failure of dissociative attempts to dispel conflict. It is also worth mentioning that both Jekyll and Hyde are aware of each other's presence, as many of our MPD patients confirm when they freely describe their primary personality's knowledge of other personalities, and vice versa.

In my own work with a patient suffering from MPD (a young woman with a history of incestuous sexual abuse) I was struck by the patient's validation of Stevenson's observations about the primary (or base) personality. My patient said in essence that the splitting of her psyche into various personae did not suffice to relieve her of the agonizing travail caused by intrapsychic conflict. She lamented that "Susan" was left to struggle with the same impulses that were expressed discretely and in extremis—embodied, as it were—by the other personae.

No matter whether or not one ascribes to actual external trauma the etiologic force in the development of MPD, the scenario set forth by Stevenson seems eminently applicable: Dissociation is a defence against the painful presence of unwanted psychic elements, an attempt to rid the mind of them by forcible ejection. It is yet one more example of how the creative artist has anticipated science.

There is a danger, however, in reading Stevenson's tale too literally. Whereas Jekyll consciously set about his dissociative "remedy," in MPD patients the process is unconscious—a vast difference. The misattribution of conscious intent to fundamentally unconscious processes has created severe difficulties in attempts both to treat and understand MPD and allied conditions. It was Josef Breuer's great achievement not to stigmatize Anna O. as a malingerer, but instead to proceed with the humane and painstakingly time-consuming investigation of a mysterious disorder, the fruit of which was the dawn of a new era in psychology. We would do well to keep his and Freud's example in mind. ■

REFERENCES

Stevenson, R.L. (1969). The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. In C. Nader (Ed), *The complete short stories of Robert Louis Stevenson* (pp. 458-533). Garden City: Doubleday & Co. (Original work published in 1886.)