Unable to create a meaningful life for itself, the personality takes its own revenge: from the lower depths comes a regressive form of spontaneity: raw animality forms a counterpoise to the meaningless stimuli and the vicarious life to which the ordinary man is conditioned.

—Lewis Mumford

Everyone has heard of *The Strange Tale of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson.¹ The story is usually thought to be a creepy science fiction account of a terrifying creature run amok or a psychological drama depicting the monster lurking in the heart of every man and woman. The reality is both more complicated and more terrifying. The tale depicts the consequences of our collective refusal to encounter ourselves. Like Klaus Mann and Patricia Highsmith, Stevenson thinks that masochistic and sadistic acts are symptomatic of a deeper evil—our profound ignorance of who we are. Science fiction monsters are rare; deluded, self-evading people are common. We are more like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde than we suspect.

Mann and Highsmith focus on the role individuals play in their self-delusion. Stevenson builds upon and extends such insights by exposing the way in which societal hypocrisy prevents us from becoming self-aware. From childhood on, society teaches us to repress certain feelings and notions. As a consequence, each of us has a dark side, a part of ourselves
that we have not expressed and so do not know. The feelings and images we have suppressed do not disappear. Vaguely aware that we are not living fully, we become filled with dread and melancholic. Every pop psychologist knows this much. What Stevenson understands is that anxiety is not just the individual’s problem. The social collective contributes to our melancholia by demanding that we conform to certain personas. Then, when we rebel against these strictures, our oppressors vicariously live through the outbreak of our animal spirits. Morality settles for blaming deviance; Stevenson shows how morality is the hypocritical engine behind the deviance.

Most people know only the movie or folk version of Stevenson’s tale. As a result, they do not realize that the story is as much about other people’s reactions to Hyde as about the dual nature of Dr. Jekyll. Therefore, before I consider how society’s moral hypocrisy contributes to Dr. Jekyll’s personality split, I want to summarize the tale’s plot.

A Brief Plot Summary

Dr. Jekyll, a well-respected physician and scientist, finds himself increasingly dissatisfied with existence. From youth, Jekyll has practiced a strict regimen of self-denial. His “morbid sense of shame” does not permit him to indulge the high spirits of his youth or to do anything that might be construed as the least bit undignified or unrespectable. Jekyll begins to fantasize about how wonderful it would be if he could separate his “good” part from his lower, undignified, and “evil” portion. After years of reflection and experimentation, Jekyll discovers that the natural body is merely an “aura and effulgence” of the powers of the human spirit. He compounds a drug that shakes the prison door of his personality. In Jekyll’s own words, this drug is “neither diabolical [n]or divine.” The drug merely overcomes Jekyll’s inhibitions and allows for the expression of “a second form and countenance.” According to Jekyll, this alternative form bears the stamp of the “lower elements” of the soul. The discovery enraths the doctor, and soon he is regularly assuming the form of Edward Hyde, his alter ego, in order to indulge his hitherto suppressed fantasies. As Hyde, he takes a separate set of rooms in Soho where he lives out his second existence, returning to Jekyll’s home and laboratory when he feels the need to take the drug and to revert to his professional self.