

Labyrinths of the Uncanny – A Study of Urban Minotaurs

Călin D. Lupițu*

University of Oradea

Abstract:

This paper is part of a larger effort to investigate the concept of man's ontological and ideological liminality – chiefly between Nature and Civilisation; beastly and divine; and private and public. We are interested in the cognitive and aesthetic tensions and in the resulting characterisation devices found at the contact of each of the above-mentioned cultural and ontological opposites. Such tensions are best expressed through exacerbated visualisation, as typically found in flights of epic fancy, where 'monstrous' hybrids personify the uncanny and haunting individuals and their societies, as exemplified herein via forays into Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula*.

Keywords: Minotaur, Labyrinth, liminality, Victorian, uncanny

In the natural kingdoms, creatures are well adapted to their environment, to the point where all changes affecting the former will influence or be reflected in the latter. On the other hand, we argue that civilisation, as a shift from the presumed prehistoric natural order towards a state defined and enforced by social contracts and arrays of normative abstractions, inevitably induces a sense of the arbitrary, of the uncanny and sometimes of the absurd. We have learnt to cope with that uncanny by socially conditioning ourselves to un-see it, but on occasion, sudden or violent changes in our daily habits create a lagging breach between our social-cognitive self-programming and our perceived reality, wide enough for the uncanny to burst through.

One such occasion is present towards the end of the Victorian age. Whether through wars of increasing magnitude or the adjusting to new demarcations between the private and public spheres via by the boom of overcrowded metropolises, cohabitation and civilisation

* Călin D. Lupițu has obtained his PhD in Intercultural Humanities from the English-taught international private Jacobs University in Bremen, Germany, where he had also earned his BA in Literature and New Media in 2008. His MA, in Creative Writing, is from the University of Southampton, UK. His research and teaching interests include: the construction, relativity and manipulation of identity; mythology, theatre and cinema as mirrors of collective imagination and apprehension; human liminality, coupled with the aesthetics and power articulation of the uncanny and the monstrous; popular culture and cultural trends; literature, visual arts and esotericism. Email: calin.d.lupitu@gmail.com

paradigms were fundamentally challenged before the turn of the twentieth century. In turn, such domestic challenges fueled new or revisited anxieties, which translated – by personification and allegorical exaggeration – into a range of abnormal characters haunting the emerging genres of the Gothic, the horror, the science-fiction, etc. Their monstrosity (i.e. most often their liminality), whatever its contemporaneous meaning, may be read therein as both the terrifying product, as well as the most conspicuous symptom, of the uncanny at the heart of modern civilisation – particularly when painstakingly hidden behind layers and rules of private and public interaction.

By pursuing such classical monsters, we are compelled to not only analyse in each case a modern Minotaur hiding in a re-imagined urban labyrinth, but often the labyrinth itself – as indicative of moments and processes in the development of that Minotaur, in the same way the study of a cocoon provides information on its hatchling. In our doing so, the truth found in the recent adage of “the things you own end up owning you” is logically coupled with its obverse, the understanding that urban personal habitats are often a matter of individual choice, even if just by coping with a lack of choices. Therefore, if popular wisdom claims the devil to be in the details, we shall similarly argue that monstrosity – whether early, subtle, hidden or not – may well be discerned by insightful reads of the suspected monsters’ habitats, especially in such places of tension where the intimately twisted meets the publicly sanitised.

Such crossroads – liminal spaces – within the urban Minotaurs’ labyrinths will shed light on what warranted the monstrous label at the end of the nineteenth century and, thereby, clarify what the experience of the uncanny consisted of for the individuals of the time and their society at large. It should likely come as no surprise that the answers we will find follow such patterns as the dichotomy of Self and Other – packaged as West vs. East, or civilised vs. exotic and/or barbarian – or express urban society as perennially locked in a tug-of-war between the natural and the unnatural, the private and the public.

The case of the original Minotaur in Greek mythology narrates about the creature having been placed inside a labyrinth against his will. The image of the bovine-headed humanoid has been successfully used throughout the ages to illustrate – with increasing sympathy – man’s liminality, as a blend of lofty and base, sacred and beastly. The latter is already evident from his

conception, a tragic story of Minos' avarice and Poseidon's jealous pettiness resulting in the sea god afflicting Queen Pasiphae with lust for the unsacrificed bull. Thus the morally grey connection between deity, woman and animal produces the *unnatural*, truly the monstrous as reuniting the nature-defying, law-breaking (the institution of marriage) and supernaturally warning connotations of the term. Furthermore, the example of the original Minotaur is enhanced by the presence of another major human liminality pair – Nature and Civilisation – by having Daedalus' technology assist Pasiphae's mating with the bull. The genius architect thus finds himself as something of a reluctant godfather to the Minotaur, ultimately – via the labyrinth he builds for him – more present in his life, even symbolically so, than any of his parents. Daedalus' forever reshapes the Minotaur's world, dividing it into 'in' and 'out', 'safe' and 'hostile', as well as the inevitable 'self' and 'other' – all relative categories.

The Labyrinth seems to have yielded multiple benefits. It covered up the past indiscretions of the royal couple, but remained mysterious enough to fuel the supernatural aura of the Cretan monarchy. It contained the Minotaur, preventing him from harming the local populace, while keeping him on hand for intimidation purposes (including political, viz. the tribute of youths demanded of the conquered Greeks). Philosophically, it remained a symbol of the necessity of self-knowledge and self-control, which may relate as much to the myth's readers as to the Minotaur (Asterion) himself. Despite having been a dangerous youth, he was not physically restrained within the Labyrinth, yet thus tantalised with the possibility of freedom, which remained forever unattainable. Could we then not entertain the possibility that, while the Minotaur was a monster by nature, he could have also become one by nurture? His Labyrinth, a gigantic combination of a home, a cavern, a hunting park, a mausoleum and a crypt lined with the bones of his past victims, would ultimately have been just a very large and solitary detention facility. Stuck inside it with little to do and deprived of any human interaction except violence (the hunt for the occasional sacrifice), his aggression would have augmented daily, to the point of truly dehumanising him.

His example can easily be transferred to other liminal monsters of more recent ages and of comparable cultural impact and persistence. Among such, perhaps the best representative for the end of the Victorian age is R. L. Stevenson's schizoid doublet of Jekyll and Hyde.

In *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, there is a multi-layered structure of labyrinths, starting with the narrative one - the epistolary format in which the short story is written, involving written confessions, letters and social anecdotes furthering and then solving the mystery. A level deeper into the maze of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, the reader notices an urban, i.e. architectural, labyrinth featuring the dark streets of London (although inspired by similar Gothic and eclectic background in Edinburgh) with their dilapidated dwellings on one hand and the cold impact of the wealthier edifices on the other. The architecture here thus reinforces the distinction – the social ‘walls’ – between the poor and the well-to-do. Here, the eclectic urban background reunites in its cold and isolated notes the majestic with the shabby, the grim with the grotesque towards signaling that, apart from the private monstrous, another even mightier monstrous dwells in the public space, in the divides we willfully raise between one another.

There are subsequent labyrinth levels in Stevenson's short story, such as the nightmare labyrinth – such as the one plaguing Utterson, a spectre he describes as “wider labyrinths of lamplighted city” – and the labyrinth of names. Several characters bear foreshadowing names, such as Jekyll (blending the shady sound of “jackal” with perhaps the visual play on “*Je + kill*”) and Hyde, but also Utterson as the voice of reason and the reflector linchpin and Denman (“*lair dweller*”), the previous owner of Jekyll's inconspicuous but ominous-looking laboratory, Hyde's birthplace. The black door of the small windowless lab building marks the entrance of the labyrinth casually stumbled upon by Utterson during his walk with Enfield. It is thus a significant plot device and an even more important liminal space, dividing the privately monstrous from the publicly banal. The other significant liminal space manifesting the monstrous in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* is represented by street corners, particularly the dark street corner where the relentless Hyde tramples the child, a scene multiplied to nightmarish proportions in Utterson's mind. Hyde's street corners and dark alleys are his hunting grounds as an urban Minotaur, being a clear and rich symbol of his ontological duality, but implicating by their social connotations as *street corners* – a place for those of ill repute, humble background and scarce economic means – an overarching theme of social and class tension.

Of course, Hyde is chiefly presented as ontologically monstrous from an evolutionary

standpoint, yet the biochemical notes are never more than a cover for the moral message conveyed. That message draws on Scottish Protestant ethics and folklore (e.g. devil tales and 'Springheel Jack' stories) but inevitably also reflects the ideologies circulating towards the end of the Victorian age, merging Darwinian social philosophies and an Anglocentric sense of the "white man's burden" with skepticism towards the much hailed industrial progress and insecurities concerning British power in the world. Let us bear that context in mind when we consider Hyde. His presence is decidedly uncanny, as he *looks* out of place and draws instant suspicion – if not outright disgust – in most instances, being dressed in the *ill-fitting* clothes of a gentleman. Furthermore, he is revealed to be a shorter hominid with gnarly hands, of a dominantly instinctual nature but yet capable of complex planning (as revealed with Dr. Lanyon).

The above reveal that, apart from being a 'Darwinian Minotaur' produced by scientific hubris in the story's diegesis, Hyde would have also been monstrous and uncanny outside it, to the readership of his time, by his being socially inadequate and, worse, what seems to be a social usurper. After all, he is just a *Mr. Hyde*, a (brutish) commoner, taking the place of a *Dr. Jekyll*, a learned gentleman. In fact, it is his description as being biologically monstrous on top of – as an expression of – being socially undesirable that clearly shows what constituted the Victorian uncanny along the lines of class, ethnic and economic insecurities around the turn of the twentieth century.

In Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, we see the same penchant of targeting outsiders as the monstrous usurpers, the more so as in this case the vampiric protagonist is indeed a menacing force for Britain and the world as they knew it. The labyrinths in Stoker's novel are once more multifold, beginning with the epistolary structure of the narrative, consisting of multiple diary entries, transcriptions of phonographic records, letters etc. meant to convey the illusion of real adventures. Secondly, a truly labyrinthine experience is the one evoked by the cultural clash of West and East, initially via Jonathan Harker's journey to Transylvania, recording various cultural bits including history, foreign words, dishes, customs and infrastructure - and particularly the vampire/undead mythos, which Harker, as an exponent of the rational and secularising Victorian Britain, ignores.

Alongside those, there are always elements of a natural labyrinth at work – many of which controlled or used by Dracula - made up of mountains, forests with wolves, heavy snow, fog, rivers, the sea etc. His supernatural arsenal also includes an architectural labyrinth, primarily featuring his own castle, strategically situated on a peak so as to be virtually inexpugnable and giving off various illusions, as well as fitted with locked doors, walls, ramparts, dungeons, crypts and the other Gothic trappings. He also gains access to such labyrinthine structures on English soil as the asylum, the crypts where he hides his coffins, the graveyard where he meets Lucy, even the busy streets where he can blend in with the crowd and disappear. The liminal spaces where his monstrous presence is revealed as such are entrances – some are locked by him physically, by means of bolts, so as to once again keep the privately monstrous away from the publicly prosaic, while some are locked from him magically, according to the concept popularised by Bram Stoker that vampires are unable to enter a house unless invited (see their sensual connotations below). Secondary liminal spaces allowing him to shape-shift or pose as a human and hide, while revealing his undead (thus liminal) nature are the forests (the wilderness in general, nature seen in the novel as pertaining to civilisation but ‘recovered’ from it) and the graves (where both the living and the dead are to be found, if not in Dracula's application of the concept). Time itself takes on liminal connotations in certain moments of the day, particularly around twilight, a paradoxical point revealing the vampire's own paradoxical condition, of being immortal but slayable, powerful and weak etc., as finally demonstrated by Harker and Morris' coordinated attack at dusk.

Adding to the above, there is also a mental labyrinth in *Dracula*. Namely, the vampire lord's mental abilities allow him to subdue and use some of the more susceptible humans around him, as he reaches the asylum inmate Renfield (obsessed with creating ‘food chains’ of animals he would then consume to absorb their vital force) and sleepwalker Lucy Westenra. He uses them to further his goals, such as distracting the protagonists from his pursuit, or gather information via them, or even attempt to set up a beachhead for an upcoming vampire nation. He wields elaborate schemes that bespeak his brilliant strategies as Vlad the Impaler, but which may also be foiled by very human (even childish, as per Van Helsing's comment on his post-mortem neural degeneration) traits like greed and selfishness. One such example is provided by

his telepathic link – like a distorted Ariadne’s thread through the Minoan Labyrinth – with Mina Harker after having bitten her, which allows her to remotely spy on the vampire's activity and whereabouts, a loose end he is eventually forced to cut free from, not without using it first to gain a momentary advantage.

The eponymous monster in *Dracula* is the vampire count whose description by Bram Stoker set the standards for the subsequent vampire genre with such items as cold, pale, bloodless skin but bloody lips, sharp teeth and pointed nails, grotesque wrinkles in full vampiric form, etc. Part of his (human) traits are drawn from historical portraits of Wallachian ruler Vlad the Impaler, such as the aquiline imposing features, the thick eyebrows etc. Others are exaggerations of general lifelike attributes eloquent in drawing particular kinds of a monstrous portrait, ranging from social to ethnic. At first glance, he is depicted as tyrannical and predatory, close to being sociopathic, and used to having his way both in dealings with other vampires (the castle ladies, Lucy) and humans alike, methodical and manipulative. The aspects described already reveal a double threat in his character, as he is a public menace due to his despotic history, but equally a private one by means of his powerful telepathic suggestions and seduction abilities. His public aspect is enough to raise much concern, as any looming invasion would, but it is mitigated by the knowledge that it is a public threat and therefore specialised public forces could handle it. On the other hand, his private insinuations are a much more personal, and thus more frightening, matter. If Hyde is the kind of Minotaur one only needs to stay away from mainly by avoiding dark and disreputable streets (i.e. contact with his social milieu), Dracula is a contagious kind of Minotaur, truly a monster potentially lurking within anyone and everyone.

Dracula is indeed not so much a violent menace to the public order but a subtle and pervasive foe that threatens to undo it. He is a cultural assailant of the very values espoused by the Victorian age. Firstly, on a public level resonating with Britain’s geopolitical concerns at the time of the novel’s writing, he represents the wild and backward East (as opposed to the ‘Pax Britannica’ paradigm of the western protagonists, whether actually British, Dutch or American). That is easily noticed in the way the two opposed voyages are construed: Dracula travels westward for his new property and subjects, staging a one-man invasion of Britain, whereas the Harkers & Co. travel eastward in order to ‘cleanse the land’ of the bane that is Dracula

(celebrated complete with the villagers' gratitude), in what is no less than a modern crusade. In fact, the struggle between Jonathan Harker and Dracula even takes on mythical proportions as the former can be identified with Herakles – representing solar civilising forces – similarly eradicating the giant Antheus – monstrous offspring of Gaia, representing unsanitary chthonic forces, who also relied on his native soil for replenishing his powers.

Secondly, on a private-public level, the undead villain reunites a series of traits strikingly similar to the uncanny-stirring image the Victorians would have entertained about their immigrants. He is parasitic and seeking to spread his influence; he can shape-shift (cf. the 'they all look the same to me' attitude) and blend in with crowds; he uses harmful exotic practices and is surrounded by people and pe(s)ts commonly associated with corpses, diseases, filth and darkness.

Lastly, on the most unsettling level of his being a private threat, Dracula, as vampire lord, is the ultimate expression of the collective phobia for sexually-transmitted diseases, on which the vampire mythos might have been founded in the first place. A pervasive offender of the Victorian virtues centred around restraint and decorum, Dracula brings about a sense of imposture and cultural implosion also raising concerns in Hyde, but with the added offence of sexual irresistibility and lack of restraint that was frowned upon as a mark of barbarism but privately lusted after. As described in a telling passage,

“His face was not a good face. It was hard, and cruel, and sensual, and big white teeth [...] pointed like an animal's.”

Dracula is also monstrous because he introduces a further element of confusion and corruption, by adding a fourth level to his liminality: male and female. In many ways he is dominant and predatory, traits traditionally associated with male sexuality and the male gender in a larger sense. However, his lust for conquering and ruling is accomplished not by the direct, foolhardy ways expected of a (male) warrior, but rather by cunning and seduction, methods most often culturally ascribed to females. In this context, it may also be significant that in the life-and-(un)death confrontation with the Harkers and their allies, the vampire is hardly ever

fighting them directly, but rather by recourse to minions, elements and traps. The very scene of his destruction is also symbolic: two young males (both of whom have had their beloved woman contaminated by Dracula) assert their will, their life and their manhood over the vampire in what is almost an Oedipal scene. The two men deliver typically 'manly' death: one by slitting his throat and the other by driving a stake through his heart (is it truly out of place to read it as taking 'sexual vengeance' on him?), thus closing the gender circle of male and female, contaminator and carrier, penetrator and penetrated.

As shown by the two influential works of literature investigated above, monstrosity - as an expression of the uncanny underlying many aspects of civilisation - can successfully be culturally encoded by elements in the habitats of characters, revealing their choice of labyrinths or their responses to those they were placed in. At the end of the Victorian age, the uncanny manifested itself in personifying class, ethnic and racial anxieties both on private (social) and public (geopolitical) levels as transgressors against the known order of things - Minotaurs of urban labyrinths, born but also made.

Works Cited

Borges, Jorge Luis. *The Book of Sand*. Bucharest: Univers, 1983.

Stevenson, Robert Louis. *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. New York: Signet Classic, 2003.

Stoker, Bram. *Dracula*. Bucharest: Univers, 1990.