

RESEARCH

## Catwoman's Hyde: A Comparative Reading of the 2002 *Catwoman* Relaunch and Stevenson's Novella

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This article advocates that the comic character of Catwoman is a comic incarnation of Robert Louis Stevenson's Edward Hyde. It does this first by problematizing Andreas Reichstein's reading of Batman as Hyde (1998). While the similarity between Bruce Wayne and Dr. Henry Jekyll is considerable (such as both being accomplished and affluent men of science who have nocturnal alter egos), Hyde embodies hedonistic desire and loss of control while Batman is the incarnation of discipline and control. This work then goes on to offer the numerous and stark similarities between Hyde and Catwoman, such as offering their counterparts animalistic freedom and the ability to achieve unification through embracing their darker halves. Because of her desire to embrace her dual human experience, the hero/villain Catwoman encapsulates the most human of comic characters.

**Keywords:** Catwoman; Batman; Hulk; Henry Jekyll; Edward Hyde; Ed Brubaker; Darwin Cooke; Robert Louis Stevenson; Andreas Reichstein; Identity Split; Hero/Villain; animalistic

Who is stronger, Catwoman or Hulk? In stark contrast to the Hulk, who is arguably the strongest comic-book character ever, Catwoman—like her beloved Batman—is one of the few comic-book characters that is “not super-powered, an alien, or a mutant,” but rather entirely human (Orr 1984: 176–177). Well, *almost* entirely human. Therefore, comparing Catwoman to Hulk may as well be comparing a person to a natural disaster; however, Jason Ranker (2008) discusses a comparison of these dissimilar comic characters... and, believe it or not, the comparison is apt.

In his research, Ranker highlights how Catwoman and Hulk represent stereotypical versions of strength constructed along gender lines; however, there is a better reason to place these two in a category of their own. Unlike almost every other character in the comic book multiverse, these two characters are both heroes *and* villains, often at the same time. Hulk continues to be one of the greatest threats to Earth but he is also a founding member of The Avengers. Similarly, Catwoman is a villain on par with the rest of Forever Evil, but she is also a founding member of the new Justice League of America (see **Figure 1**): “Unfortunately, being a fence-sitter on the thin line separating good and evil doesn't make her a neutral party” (Beatty 2004: 36). These are ambivalent characters that are neither absolute good nor evil, but are constantly torn between both aspects—they are both modern and powerful Edward Hydes.

Perhaps it can be argued that several villains have aspects similar to Robert Louis Stevenson's iconic Edward Hyde. Two-Face is a literal Janus figure and often physically depicts both good and evil, and Clayface's inability to fully control his transformation often results in Hyde-like horror in those around him. However, Two-Face does not suffer from his ambivalence, but simply relegates his dual nature to the fate of a coin flip. Clayface is not noble, like Jekyll, but rather is a disguised monster. Catwoman and her alter ego Selina Kyle, torn between both evil and good, are the only true Hyde and Jekyll of Gotham.

Adam Capitainio (2010) has thoroughly compared Marvel's Bruce Banner and the Incredible Hulk to Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, so this paper will move the discussion to the similar intellectual and emotional torment of DC's Kyle and Catwoman. To accomplish this task, this paper will first problematize Andreas Reichstein's (1988) reading of Batman as Mr. Hyde and then it will offer tangible evidence—especially from Brubaker, Cooke, and Allard's 2002 *Catwoman* relaunch—that, despite the physical dissimilarities of Kyle to Jekyll, Catwoman is a more complete version of a modern day Mr. Hyde.

### Is Batman an American Mr. Hyde?

Reichstein (1998) makes a compelling argument that Batman's alter ego Bruce Wayne is an American Jekyll. Beyond the obvious comparisons of the successful, popular, and affluent bachelors, these are men of prominence and success who only transform into their alter egos at night. Reichstein highlights that despite both men being childless, Wayne and Jekyll have paternal affection for others: Wayne cares for his various wards and “Jekyll confesses

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**Figure 1:** In 2013, Geoff Johns and David Finch offered Catwoman as both a Superhero and a Supervillain: Johns, G and Finch D (2013): *Justice League of America* 1 (New York: DC Comics) and Johns, G Finch D, and Friend R (2013): *Forever Evil* 1 (New York: DC Comics). Copyright © 2013 DC Comics.

how he had a father's concern for Hyde" (Reichstein 1998: 340). Reichstein also discusses how both Wayne and Jekyll spend the vast majority of their free time in their secret laboratories, conducting various chemical experiments.

However, the staunchest similarity between these two characters is their double lives. Reichstein explains, "Besides all these formal similarities between Wayne and Jekyll, the essential link between these characters lies in their basic trait: their double identity, their double personality" (Reichstein 1998: 343). As Philip Orr discusses, "[When] Bruce Wayne refers to the Batman, he is not referring to himself in the third person; rather he is referring to the other" (Orr 1995: 174). Rather than just one person with two aspects, Wayne and Batman are two distinct individuals who just happen to exist within a common body. Wayne even confesses this idea to a psychologist: "I guess, we're all two people—one in daylight and one we keep in shadow" (*Batman Returns*). Similarly, in his final confession, Dr. Jekyll writes, "With every day, and from both sides of my intelligence, the moral and the intellectual, I thus drew steadily nearer to that truth ... that man is not truly one, but truly two" (Stevenson 1886: 77). Clearly, both of these men of science are all too intimately familiar with the dual nature of humanity, and their polarizing personalities. However, it is worth highlighting that the parallels

between these two characters lie almost exclusively along the similarities of Wayne and Jekyll.

As such, while Wayne is an American Jekyll, what is the answer to Reichstein's (1998) titular question "Batman—an American Mr. Hyde?" Both Batman and Hyde are empowered shadows of their other selves, and are able to accomplish what neither Wayne nor Jekyll ever could. They achieve this power by embracing animalistic aspects of their personalities. Jekyll describes his other self as playing "ape-like tricks" (Stevenson 1886: 91) and possessing "ape-like spite" (93). Capitainio explains, "This suggests that Hyde, as the hidden side of Jekyll's personality, is representative of the animal past and behavior that human beings have necessarily repressed in their quest for 'civilization'" (Capitainio 2010: 250).

While Jekyll is an accomplished pinnacle of human evolution—generous, brilliant, scientific, attractive, and affluent—Hyde returns this character to his evolutionary ape-like past, which was a common theme in the Gothic novels of the 1890s (Reichstein 1998: 346). Regarding the newfound freedom and anonymity of becoming Hyde, Jekyll writes, "And thus fortified, as I supposed, on every side, I began to profit by the strange immunities of my position" (Stevenson 1886: 86). Batman too is able to tap into his primal animal form—in this case a bat—and uses

this animal aspect to achieve his deepest desire for vengeance against the criminal element that orphaned him as a child. Batman also allowed Wayne to safely fulfill his desires for vigilantism.

While such similarities exist between Hyde and Batman, one of the most interesting parallels between these two characters is that both of them murder adversaries in their initial appearances. Mr. Hyde brutally assaults Sir Danvers Carew after a perceived insult: "And next moment, with ape-like fury, he was trampling his victim under foot and hailing down a storm of blows, under which the bones were audibly shattered and the body jumped upon the roadway" (Stevenson 1886: 27). Similarly, in Batman's first appearance, he is holding the villainous Stryker when "... suddenly, Stryker, with the strength of a madman, tears himself free from the grasp of the Bat-Man..." (Finger and Kane 1939: 6). Stryker then pulls out a gun and shoots at Batman, but Batman punches Stryker, knocking him over the rail and into an acid tank, to which Batman comments, "A fitting end for his kind" (Finger and Kane 1939: 6). While both men have murdered an adversary, Hyde has killed an upstanding gentleman and must pay for his action with his life, while Batman has killed a murderer and deserves an accolade. Hyde must hide behind Jekyll or face the gallows, whereas Batman can continue crime-fighting, and be a vigilante without repercussion. Despite the consequences of these actions, Hyde only longs to kill, while Batman resolves to never take a life.

While *surface* similarities—such as the stark similarities between their alter egos, empowerment through animalistic disguise, and both having taken a life—exist between Hyde and Batman these characters are as dissimilar from each other as they are from their better halves. For Jekyll, becoming Hyde was embracing and savoring his dark side, "I knew myself, at the first breath of this new life, to be more wicked, tenfold more wicked, sold a slave to my original evil; and the thought, in that moment, braced and delighted me like wine" (Stevenson 1886: 79). Jekyll seems to use Hyde to indulge his baser desires. This is completely different from Batman whose "armor/costume harnesses the evil inside and outside of him, as well as protects against repressed sexual desires" (Reichstein 1998: 348). While Hyde is allowed to run rampant, participating in any debauchery that he comes upon, Batman focuses only on punishing criminals.

Most of all, Hyde embodies Jekyll's willing loss of control, while "Wayne/Batman is control" (Reichstein 1998: 347). After Hyde has killed Carew, Jekyll abandons the potion that unleashed his sinister self, but Hyde continued to reassert himself. Hyde manifests himself at first in dreams and then in reality by forcing the transformation unaided by any chemical concoction. Jekyll could not stop Hyde from taking over their body more and more. Batman, on the other hand, could be taken off at any time, cast aside. Reichstein explains, "He can don the costume/armor whenever he wants and drop it again to become Bruce Wayne" (Reichstein 1998: 348). Reichstein ultimately concludes, "Thus, Batman really is an American cousin of Edward Hyde" (Reichstein 1998: 350). However,

this paper suggests that by Reichstein's definition, Hyde's familial relationship might as well just as easily include comic book characters such Green Arrow or Iron Man, both of whom are—beneath their masks—affluent playboy bachelor inventors who don costumes/armors to combat evil. While the similarities between Jekyll and Wayne are notable, Batman is not a complete Hyde.

### No, but Catwoman Is

However, Catwoman, on the other hand, shares many similarities with Hyde. Jekyll describes the initial transformation into like this: "I felt younger, lighter, happier in body; within I was conscious of a heady recklessness, a current of disordered sensual images running like a millrace in my fancy, a solution of the bonds of obligation, an unknown but not an innocent freedom of the soul" (Stevenson 1886: 78). Kyle too feels the strength and freedom of her alter ego: "That had been one of the reasons for the mask, initially. To help provide. That and the excitement... the adventure. Don't kid yourself that they weren't a big part of it, too" (Brubaker, Cooke, and Allred 2002: 48). There is a youthful vibrancy and hedonistic abandonment to both Hyde and Catwoman. Catwoman is unbridled. Throughout Catwoman's history, she is known as thief, and she ultimately ignores societal rules while helping herself to whatever she desires. Ed Brubaker explains, "She was like Robin Hood, except she forgot to the money to the poor" (Beatty 2004: 6). Catwoman, like Hyde, is in it for the freedom and youthful thrill.

Jekyll and Hyde, Kyle and Catwoman are completely different people from their counterpart selves. Hyde has his own apartment and his own companions that exist in totally different circles than Jekyll. Similarly, as Beatty explains, "Aside from a few friends and lovers, Selina and Catwoman are two different women moving in different worlds. And that suits them both just fine" (Beatty 2004: 19). Jekyll/Hyde and Catwoman/Kyle are in actuality two individuals who share one common body and one common memory, but share little else.

Hyde and Catwoman are impervious shields for their more noble halves. No matter the potential atrocities that Hyde could ever commit, Jekyll believes that at any moment he could dispense Hyde instantly and permanently:

Think of it—I did not even exist! Let me escape into my laboratory door, give me but a second or two to mix and swallow the draught that I had always standing ready; and whatever he had done, Edward Hyde would pass away like the stain of breath upon a mirror; and there in his stead, quietly at home, trimming the midnight lamp in his study, a man who could afford to laugh at suspicion, would be Henry Jekyll. (Stevenson 1886: 82).

Through his potion, Jekyll could transform into his shadow self and fulfill his most monstrous desires. In the same vein, in *The Dark End of The Street*, Kyle embraces her bestial aspect, throwing off all moral, legal, and earthly limitations by transforming herself into a Cat-Woman. In



this comic, The Cat-side is able to beat up her (masculine) enemies, climb tall buildings, and seemingly fly through the air (via her whip).

It is important to note in Catwoman history, she was known as "The Cat" and first appeared in the first issue of *Batman* in 1940. However, in 1950, ten years after "The Cat's" inception, the mild-mannered alter ego Kyle was named. It is a common misconception that Kyle came first—not a decade later—but this idea of the villainous side appearing before the sociality acceptable persona parallel's Stevenson's novella in which the story of Hyde accosting the young girl appears pages before the discussion of Jekyll. This argument will now go back to a previous quote from Jekyll, "I knew myself, at the first breath of this new life, to be more wicked, tenfold more wicked, sold a slave to my original evil; and the thought, in that moment, braced and delighted me like wine" (Stevenson 1886: 79). Jekyll seems to use Hyde to indulge his baser desires, but in reality the reverse is true—Hyde uses Jekyll for his own desires.

The problem is that these shielding personas eventually took on a life all their own. Hyde lashed out at his alter ego, punishing him through the destruction of Jekyll's belongings: "Hence the ape-like tricks that he would play me, scrawling in my own hand blasphemies on the pages of my books, burning the letters and destroying the portrait of my father" (Stevenson 1886: 91). In Brubaker, Cooke, and Allread's comic, Catwoman too began to have a life outside of Kyle, who says, "The mask is part of who I am now. But it's also part of the problem, too... because it became a person all on its own" (Brubaker, Cooke, and Allred 2002: 54). Thus, while Hyde and Catwoman were created to liberate their alter egos and allowed them to achieve humanly-impossible, animalistic acts, these personas became whole persons in and of themselves. The animal-side uncontrollable and often exhibits behaviors that are outside of normative human roles. Catwoman is wild, something that Kyle struggles to understand (**Figure 1**). Furthermore, in **Figure 1**, this Cat-self bids for ownership of the body she cohabitates and eventually becomes intricately integrated and a fully realized being.

Ultimately, Hyde asserts himself and begins replacing Jekyll. The problem is that, with Carew's murder on his head, Hyde's only salvation lies in being Jekyll, but he could not condemn himself to perpetual torpor; as such, "Unable to compound the remedy that turns him into Dr. Jekyll again one day, Jekyll/Hyde kills himself" (Reichstein 1998: 339). Similarly, in this comic, Catwoman killed off both Kyle and then herself (Brubaker, Cooke, and Allred 2002: 16)... or at least Catwoman went through a lot of trouble to make it appear that way. Hired to find out if Catwoman truly was dead, Detective Slam Bradley asks the-very-much-alive Kyle, "But a while back, you *killed off* Selina Kyle... and a few *months* ago, you killed *Catwoman*, too... so, the question is—who's left to find?" (Brubaker, Cooke, and Allred 2002: 33). Kyle reemerges and tries to live again, believing that Catwoman is dead and buried; however, Catwoman too refuses to stay dead. As Orr says, "[Catwoman] won't be killed" (Orr 1994: 181). Catwoman's immortality is in fact the sole attribute that Ranker's

(2008) work offers as to why she is stronger than the Hulk. Beatty too notes, "Selina definitely has nine lives considering the number of times she has survived near-fatal catastrophes" (Beatty 2004: 25). While most often the nine lives of the Catwoman are seen in response to her battle with others, this immortality applies to her battle with Kyle as well.

The immortal Catwoman torments Kyle, much as Hyde tortures Jekyll: "And this again, that the insurgent horror was knit to him closer than a wife, closer than an eye; lay caged in his flesh, where he heard it mutter and felt it struggle to be born" (Stevenson 1863: 91). Kyle struggles to control the beast within her, but unlike Jekyll who does not seek to understand Hyde—Kyle grapples with accepting Catwoman as a part of herself. Kyle waits a moment and then answers Bradley's question: "I don't *know*. Hopefully someone who can look in the mirror without any pain" (Brubaker, Cooke, and Allred 2002: 16). In the mirror here, Kyle sees all the pain that she has caused and that she has endured. Jekyll has a similar mirror experience, but his is all the more tragic because of the loss of control that it represents: "[and] bounding from my bed I rushed to the mirror. At the sight that met my eyes, my blood was changed into something exquisitely thin and icy. Yes, I had gone to bed Henry Jekyll, I had awakened Edward Hyde" (Stevenson 1886: 83).

It is important to highlight that mirrors denote the true representation of self. Christian Metz explains how it is only through a mirror that people can understand themselves and construct their egos: "Thus the child's ego is formed by identification with its like, and this in two senses simultaneously, metonymically and metaphorically: the other human being who is in the glass, the own reflection which is not the body, which is like it" (Metz 1975: 48–49). Metz underscores the duality of co-existence of each individual's two selves—the rational ego and the primal id. Thus, by a proverbial mirror, Kyle is able to be a full self, and it is in this mirror, that she understands the Cat's self. Another way to put it is that the animal-self allows Kyle the only way for her survive and to be a full and actualized person. Whereas the rest of humanity strives to deny the animalistic id inside them, Kyle realizes that she ultimately needs to embrace her Cat self into her life.

Whereas Jekyll embraced the concept of humanity's dual nature, he theorized that each person was in reality a conglomeration of individuals forced confined in uncomfortable cohabitation: "I hazard the guess that man will be ultimately known for a mere polity of multifarious, incongruous and independent denizens" (Stevenson 1886: 78). In her nightmares, Kyle wrestles, not with Catwoman, but with the vast multitude of individuals that exist inside her: "Like everything I've ever been is struggling inside me... trying to find some place to fit themselves" (Brubaker, Cooke, and Allred 2002: 44). On the surface, it is easy to focus simply on the duality, but for both Jekyll and Kyle, the double personalities that they battle are just the beginning, as if both these two—and everyone of us for that matter—could just as easily say, "My name is Legion; for we are many" (Mark 5: 9).



**Figure 2:** In her dreams, Catwoman is separated from Kyle; Catwomen surround the helpless Kyle and burn away her humanity, leaving just Catwoman in her place: Brubaker, E Cooke, D, and Allred, M (2002: 43–44) *Catwoman: The Dark End of the Street*. (New York: DC Comics). Copyright © 2001, 2002 DC Comics.

While Kyle and Catwoman embody just two persons that inhabit their body, there are multitudes of others. Ignoring the staunch differences in attitude and mannerisms between Kyle and Catwoman, both characters pronouncedly vacillate in skin tone and costume within themselves—even just within this single comic book. For instance, while the panels within the comic showcase a Catwoman who is very overtly a pale Caucasian brunette, the various covers from this same comic depict a darker complected Kyle that is clearly mulatto, Hispanic, or even Italian (see **Figure 3**, left side). However, even this ethnic alteration pales to the disguises that Kyle dons that make her unrecognizable, the staunchest of which is when Kyle goes undercover as a blond bombshell (see **Figure 3**, right side). Thus comic's art work is indicative of Kyle and Catwoman's personality and multiplicity. Despite all of her various incarnations, Kyle and Catwoman are always at their cores women: "She was a 'woman,' and all woman at that" (Madrid 2009: 248). Kyle summons up her female alter egos, uses them as tools, and discards them just as quickly. Kyle can control all these incarnations of herself—other than Catwoman.

Kyle's therapist asks her, "How long has it been now since you put on the [Catwoman] outfit?" to which Kyle replies, "The outfit? Oh, yeah... *that*. Almost six months"

(Brubaker, Cooke, and Allred 2002: 45). Like Jekyll, Kyle has tried to repress her own Hyde by abandoning the hide of Catwoman. Also like Jekyll, Hyde (i.e.: Catwoman) fought back: "[But] I was still cursed with my duality of purpose; and as the first edge of my penitence wore off, the lower side of me, so long indulged, so recently chained down, began to growl for license" (Stevenson 1886: 87). Catwoman plagues Kyle with hellish dreams in which she is surrounded by Catwomen who set Kyle on fire, burning away her humanity and leaving only the silhouette of the Catwoman (see **Figure 2**). In this suffering, Kyle is like Jekyll: "I began to be tortured with throes and longings, as of Hyde struggling after freedom" (Stevenson 1886: 85). Kyle feels the Cat personality struggling for freedom. However, Kyle tries to avoid the temptation of becoming Catwoman—which is why she is seeing a therapist—but Catwoman refuses to let her get a moment's peace until Kyle acquiesces. Catwoman refuses to let Kyle be complete until Kyle fully embraces *all* of her aspects.

### Conclusion

Reichstein tries to reduce Catwoman to little more than one of the "mostly bizarre array of villains in the Batman comics, like the Joker, the Penguin, the Catwoman ... [who]





**Figure 3:** The Many Faces of Catwoman, from darkly-completed brunette to blond bombshell: Brubaker, E Cooke, D, and Allred, M (2002: 39 & 103, panel 1) *Catwoman: The Dark End of the Street*. (New York: DC Comics). Copyright © 2001, 2002 DC Comics.

reflect the purely bad side of Batman—like counterparts, or mirrors showing him what would happen to him if he lost control” (Reichstein 1998: 346–347). However, Catwoman should not be reduced to simply reflect the bad side of Batman. While Bruce Wayne is similar to a Dr. Henry Jekyll, Batman is not a complete Mr. Edward Hyde... but Catwoman is.

This argument suggests that Catwoman is such an integral part of Kyle and that her life is shattered—without her “other.” While other critics have studied Batman and Hulk—no one has considered Catwoman as Hyde. It is interesting to note that Kyle logically and consciously puts on Catwoman and both co-habitat the same space. Again, this is very akin to Jekyll and Hyde, who—although different in body and manner—share the same memory (Stevenson 1886: 85) and handwriting (89). These are two parts of a cohesive whole, both vying for control over their life while staunchly rebelling against being controlled by any man (even a Batman) and any law.

Reichstein succeeds at linking Jekyll with Wayne, but she ignores the complexity of comparing Hyde to Batman. Thus, this work corrected that oversight by advocating Jekyll and Hyde story is about identity structure: the socially acceptable personality versus the uncontrollable

and often intolerable. A close examination of *Dark End of the Street* reveals the identity problems in Stevenson’s novella also manifest in Kyle and Catwoman. This comic reinforced the Jekyll side is about social conformity, whereas the Hyde represents the uncontainable and unacceptable. Thus, this paper argues that offering a critical approach to Catwoman as Hyde is the only way for freedom from social norms and offers independence from social conformity.

It is noteworthy that Kyle’s Hyde self is not about a tortured individual who seeks to redeem herself from her alter ego, but about accepting that separate self and releasing it from the confines of societal rules. In other words, Catwoman is the ability for humankind to negotiate life with a wild animalistic side. Catwoman’s fictional personality offers readers a chance to enter a new sphere of identity understanding. However, instead of untamed mayhem or total anarchy, Catwoman tests the limits of what life would be like without the rules and limitations of social rules. The tragedy of Stevenson’s novella is not the fall of a celebrity, but rather the fall of one of us. Jekyll is a friend and peer, not an estranged and obsessive recluse like Wayne. As such, Kyle is more like Jekyll—like all of us—in that she is a complex character torn between

manifestations of good and evil. Catwoman, the Hyde-like heroic villain and villainous hero, and is one of the most humanistic comic characters of all.

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