

It's such a fine line between a good man and a bad

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde by ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

Context

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON, ONE OF THE MASTERS OF the Victorian adventure story, was born in Edinburgh, Scotland, on November 13, 1850. He was a sickly child, and respiratory troubles plagued him throughout his life. As a young man, he traveled through Europe, leading a bohemian lifestyle and penning his first two books, both travel narratives. In 1876, he met a married woman, Fanny Van de Grift Osbourne, and fell in love with her. Mrs. Osbourne eventually divorced her husband, and she and Stevenson were married.

Stevenson returned to London with his bride and wrote prolifically over the next decade, in spite of his terrible health. He won widespread admiration with *Treasure Island*, written in 1883, and followed it with *Kidnapped* in 1886; both were adventure stories, the former a pirate tale set on the high seas and the latter a historical novel set in Stevenson's native Scotland. *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, which Stevenson described as a "fine bogey tale," also came out in 1886. It met with tremendous success, selling 40,000 copies in six months and ensuring Stevenson's fame as a writer. In its narrative of a respectable doctor who transforms himself into a savage murderer, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* tapped directly into the anxieties of Stevenson's age. The Victorian era, named for Queen Victoria, who ruled England for most of the nineteenth century, was a time of unprecedented technological progress and an age in which European nations carved up the world with their empires. By the end of the century, however, many people were beginning to call into question the ideals of progress and civilization that had defined the era, and a growing sense of pessimism and decline pervaded artistic circles. Many felt that the end of the century was also witnessing a twilight of Western culture.

With the notion of a single body containing both the erudite Dr. Jekyll and the depraved Mr. Hyde, Stevenson's novel imagines an inextricable link between civilization and savagery, good and evil. Jekyll's attraction to the freedom from restraint that Hyde enjoys mirrors Victorian England's secret attraction to allegedly savage non-Western cultures, even as Europe claimed superiority over them. This attraction also informs such books as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. For, as the Western world came in contact with other peoples and ways of life, it found aspects of these cultures within itself, and both desired and feared to indulge them. These aspects included open sensuality, physicality, and other so-called irrational tendencies. Even as Victorian England sought to assert its civilization over and against these instinctual sides of life, it found them secretly fascinating. Indeed, society's repression of its darker side only increased the fascination. As a product of this society, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* manifests this fascination; yet, as a work of art, it also questions this interest.

By the late 1880s, Stevenson had become one of the leading lights of English literature. But even after garnering fame, he led a somewhat troubled life. He traveled often, seeking to find a climate more amenable to the tuberculosis that haunted his later days. Eventually he settled in Samoa, and there Stevenson died suddenly in 1894, at the age of forty-four.

ON THEIR WEEKLY WALK, an eminently sensible, trustworthy lawyer named Mr. Utterson listens as his friend Enfield tells a gruesome tale of assault. The tale describes a sinister figure named Mr. Hyde who tramples a young girl, disappears into a door on the street, and reemerges to pay off her relatives with a check signed by a respectable gentleman. Since both Utterson and Enfield disapprove of gossip, they agree to speak no further of the matter. It happens, however, that one of Utterson's clients and close friends, Dr. Jekyll, has written a will transferring all of his property to this same Mr. Hyde. Soon, Utterson begins having dreams in which a faceless figure stalks through a nightmarish version of London.

Puzzled, the lawyer visits Jekyll and their mutual friend Dr. Lanyon to try to learn more. Lanyon reports that he no longer sees much of Jekyll, since they had a dispute over the course of Jekyll's

research, which Lanyon calls "unscientific balderdash." Curious, Utterson stakes out a building that Hyde visits—which, it turns out, is a laboratory attached to the back of Jekyll's home. Encountering Hyde, Utterson is amazed by how undefinably ugly the man seems, as if deformed, though Utterson cannot say exactly how. Much to Utterson's surprise, Hyde willingly offers Utterson his address. Jekyll tells Utterson not to concern himself with the matter of Hyde.

A year passes uneventfully. Then, one night, a servant girl witnesses Hyde brutally beat to death an old man named Sir Danvers Carew, a member of Parliament and a client of Utterson. The police contact Utterson, and Utterson suspects Hyde as the murderer. He leads the officers to Hyde's apartment, feeling a sense of foreboding amid the eerie weather—the morning is dark and wreathed in fog. When they arrive at the apartment, the murderer has vanished, and police searches prove futile. Shortly thereafter, Utterson again visits Jekyll, who now claims to have ended all relations with Hyde; he shows Utterson a note, allegedly written to Jekyll by Hyde, apologizing for the trouble he has caused him and saying goodbye. That night, however, Utterson's clerk points out that Hyde's handwriting bears a remarkable similarity to Jekyll's own.

For a few months, Jekyll acts especially friendly and sociable, as if a weight has been lifted from his shoulders. But then Jekyll suddenly begins to refuse visitors, and Lanyon dies from some kind of shock he received in connection with Jekyll. Before dying, however, Lanyon gives Utterson a letter, with instructions that he not open it until after Jekyll's death. Meanwhile, Utterson goes out walking with Enfield, and they see Jekyll at a window of his laboratory; the three men begin to converse, but a look of horror comes over Jekyll's face, and he slams the window and disappears. Soon afterward, Jekyll's butler, Mr. Poole, visits Utterson in a state of desperation: Jekyll has secluded himself in his laboratory for several weeks, and now the voice that comes from the room sounds nothing like the doctor's. Utterson and Poole travel to Jekyll's house through empty, windswept, sinister streets; once there, they find the servants huddled together in fear. After arguing for a time, the two of them resolve to break into Jekyll's laboratory. Inside, they find the body of Hyde, wearing Jekyll's clothes and apparently dead by suicide—and a letter from Jekyll to Utterson promising to explain everything.

Utterson takes the document home, where first he reads Lanyon's letter; it reveals that Lanyon's deterioration and eventual death were caused by the shock of seeing Mr. Hyde take a potion and metamorphose into Dr. Jekyll. The second letter constitutes a testament by Jekyll. It explains how Jekyll, seeking to separate his good side from his darker impulses, discovered a way to transform himself periodically into a deformed monster free of conscience—Mr. Hyde. At first, Jekyll reports, he delighted in becoming Hyde and rejoiced in the moral freedom that the creature possessed. Eventually, however, he found that he was turning into Hyde involuntarily in his sleep, even without taking the potion. At this point, Jekyll resolved to cease becoming Hyde. One night, however, the urge gripped him too strongly, and after the transformation he immediately rushed out and violently killed Sir Danvers Carew. Horrified, Jekyll tried more adamantly to stop the transformations, and for a time he proved successful; one day, however, while sitting in a park, he suddenly turned into Hyde, the first time that an involuntary metamorphosis had happened while he was awake.

The letter continues describing Jekyll's cry for help. Far from his laboratory and hunted by the police as a murderer, Hyde needed Lanyon's help to get his potions and become Jekyll again—but when he undertook the transformation in Lanyon's presence, the shock of the sight instigated Lanyon's deterioration and death. Meanwhile, Jekyll returned to his home, only to find himself ever more helpless and trapped as the transformations increased in frequency and necessitated even larger doses of potion in order to reverse themselves. It was the onset of one of these spontaneous metamorphoses that caused Jekyll to slam his laboratory window shut in the middle of his conversation with Enfield and Utterson. Eventually, the potion began to run out, and Jekyll was unable to find a key ingredient to make more. His ability to change back from Hyde into Jekyll slowly vanished. Jekyll writes that even as he composes his letter he knows that he will soon become Hyde permanently, and he wonders if Hyde will face execution for his crimes or choose to

kill himself. Jekyll notes that, in any case, the end of his letter marks the end of the life of Dr. Jekyll. With these words, both the document and the novel come to a close.

Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde

One might question the extent to which Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde are in fact a single character. Until the end of the novel, the two personas seem nothing alike—the well-liked, respectable doctor and the hideous, depraved Hyde are almost opposite in type and personality. Stevenson uses this marked contrast to make his point: every human being contains opposite forces within him or her, an alter ego that hides behind one's polite facade. Correspondingly, to understand fully the significance of either Jekyll or Hyde, we must ultimately consider the two as constituting one single character. Indeed, taken alone, neither is a very interesting personality; it is the nature of their interrelationship that gives the novel its power.

Despite the seeming diametric opposition between Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, their relationship in fact involves a complicated dynamic. While it is true that Jekyll largely appears as moral and decent, engaging in charity work and enjoying a reputation as a courteous and genial man, he in fact never fully embodies virtue in the way that Hyde embodies evil. Although Jekyll undertakes his experiments with the intent of purifying his good side from his bad and vice versa, he ends up separating the bad alone, while leaving his former self, his Jekyll-self, as mixed as before. Jekyll succeeds in liberating his darker side, freeing it from the bonds of conscience, yet as Jekyll he never liberates himself from this darkness.

Jekyll's partial success in his endeavors warrants much analysis. Jekyll himself ascribes his lopsided results to his state of mind when first taking the potion. He says that he was motivated by dark urges such as ambition and pride when he first drank the liquid and that these allowed for the emergence of Hyde. He seems to imply that, had he entered the experiment with pure motives, an angelic being would have emerged. However, one must consider the subsequent events in the novel before acquitting Jekyll of any blame. For, once released, Hyde gradually comes to dominate both personas, until Jekyll takes Hyde's shape more often than his own. Indeed, by the very end of the novel, Jekyll himself no longer exists and only Hyde remains. Hyde seems to possess a force more powerful than Jekyll originally believed. The fact that Hyde, rather than some beatific creature, emerged from Jekyll's experiments seems more than a chance event, subject to an arbitrary state of mind. Rather, Jekyll's drinking of the potion seems almost to have afforded Hyde the opportunity to assert himself. It is as if Hyde, but no comparable virtuous essence, was lying in wait.

This dominance of Hyde—first as a latent force within Jekyll, then as a tyrannical external force subverting Jekyll—holds various implications for our understanding of human nature. We begin to wonder whether any aspect of human nature in fact stands as a counter to an individual's Hyde-like side. We may recall that Hyde is described as resembling a "troglodyte," or a primitive creature; perhaps Hyde is actually the original, authentic nature of man, which has been repressed but not destroyed by the accumulated weight of civilization, conscience, and societal norms. Perhaps man doesn't have two natures but rather a single, primitive, amoral one that remains just barely constrained by the bonds of civilization. Moreover, the novel suggests that once those bonds are broken, it becomes impossible to reestablish them; the genie cannot be put back into the bottle, and eventually Hyde will permanently replace Jekyll—as he finally does. Even in Victorian England—which considered itself the height of Western civilization—Stevenson suggests that the dark, instinctual side of man remains strong enough to devour anyone who, like Jekyll, proves foolish enough to unleash it.

Mr. Gabriel John Utterson

Although Utterson witnesses a string of shocking events, Utterson himself is a largely unexciting character and is clearly not a man of strong passions or sensibilities. Indeed, Stevenson intends for him to come across in this way: from the first page of the novel, the text notes that Utterson has a face that is "never lighted by a smile," that he speaks very little, and that he seems "lean, long,

dusty, [and] dreary." Yet, somehow, he is also "lovable," and dull and proper though he may be, he has many friends. His lovability may stem from the only interesting quality that Stevenson gives him—namely, his willingness to remain friends with someone whose reputation has suffered. This loyalty leads him to plumb the mystery that surrounds Jekyll.

Utterson represents the perfect Victorian gentleman. He consistently seeks to preserve order and decorum, does not gossip, and guards his friends' reputations as though they were his own. Even when he suspects his friend Jekyll of criminal activities such as blackmail or the sheltering of a murderer, he prefers to sweep what he has learned—or what he thinks he has learned—under the rug rather than bring ruin upon his good friend.

Utterson's status as the epitome of Victorian norms also stems from his devotion to reason and common sense. He investigates what becomes a supernatural sequence of events but never allows himself to even entertain the notion that something uncanny may be going on. He considers that misdeeds may be occurring but not that the mystical or metaphysical might be afoot. Thus, even at the end, when he is summoned by Poole to Jekyll's home and all the servants are gathered frightened in the hallway, Utterson continues to look for an explanation that preserves reason. He desperately searches for excuses not to take any drastic steps to interfere with Jekyll's life. In Utterson's devotion to both decorum and reason, Stevenson depicts Victorian society's general attempt to maintain the authority of civilization over and against humanity's darker side. Stevenson suggests that just as Utterson prefers the suppression or avoidance of revelations to the scandal or chaos that the truth might unleash, so too does Victorian society prefer to repress and deny the existence of an uncivilized or savage element of humanity, no matter how intrinsic that element may be.

Yet, even as Utterson adheres rigidly to order and rationality, he does not fail to notice the uncanny quality of the events he investigates. Indeed, because we see the novel through Utterson's eyes, Stevenson cannot allow Utterson to be *too* unimaginative—otherwise the novel's eerie mood would suffer. Correspondingly, Stevenson attributes nightmares to Utterson and grants him ominous premonitions as he moves through the city at night—neither of which seem to suit the lawyer's normally reasonable personality, which is rarely given to flights of fancy. Perhaps, the novel suggests, the chilling presence of Hyde in London is strong enough to penetrate even the rigidly rational shell that surrounds Utterson, planting a seed of supernatural dread.

Dr. Hastie Lanyon

Lanyon plays only a minor role in the novel's plot, but his thematic significance extends beyond his brief appearances. When we first encounter him, he speaks dismissively of Jekyll's experiments, referring to them as "unscientific balderdash." His scientific skepticism renders him, to an even greater extent than Utterson, an embodiment of rationalism and a proponent of materialist explanations. As such, he functions as a kind of foil for Jekyll. Both men are doctors, well respected and successful, but they have chosen divergent paths. From Lanyon's early remarks, we learn that Jekyll shared some of his research with Lanyon, and one may even imagine that they were partners at one point. But Lanyon chooses to engage in rational, materialist science, while Jekyll prefers to pursue what might be called mystical or metaphysical science.

It is appropriate, then, that Lanyon is the first person to see Jekyll enact his transformations—the great advocate of material causes is witness to undeniable proof of a metaphysical, physically impossible phenomenon. Having spent his life as a rationalist and a skeptic, Lanyon cannot deal with the world that Jekyll's experiments have revealed. Deep within himself, Lanyon prefers to die rather than go on living in a universe that, from his point of view, has been turned upside down. After his cataclysmic experience, Lanyon, who has spent his life pursuing knowledge, explicitly rejects the latest knowledge he has gained. "I sometimes think if we knew all," he tells Utterson, "we should be more glad to get away." With these words, Lanyon departs from the novel, his uncompromising rationalism ceding to the inexplicable reality of Jekyll.

The Duality of Human Nature

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde centers upon a conception of humanity as dual in nature, although the theme does not emerge fully until the last chapter, when the complete story of the Jekyll-Hyde relationship is revealed. Therefore, we confront the theory of a dual human nature explicitly only after having witnessed all of the events of the novel, including Hyde's crimes and his ultimate eclipsing of Jekyll. The text not only posits the duality of human nature as its central theme but forces us to ponder the properties of this duality and to consider each of the novel's episodes as we weigh various theories.

Jekyll asserts that “man is not truly one, but truly two,” and he imagines the human soul as the battleground for an “angel” and a “fiend,” each struggling for mastery. But his potion, which he hoped would separate and purify each element, succeeds only in bringing the dark side into being—Hyde emerges, but he has no angelic counterpart. Once unleashed, Hyde slowly takes over, until Jekyll ceases to exist. If man is half angel and half fiend, one wonders what happens to the “angel” at the end of the novel.

Perhaps the angel gives way permanently to Jekyll's devil. Or perhaps Jekyll is simply mistaken: man is not “truly two” but is first and foremost the primitive creature embodied in Hyde, brought under tentative control by civilization, law, and conscience. According to this theory, the potion simply strips away the civilized veneer, exposing man's essential nature. Certainly, the novel goes out of its way to paint Hyde as animalistic—he is hairy and ugly; he conducts himself according to instinct rather than reason; Utterson describes him as a “troglodyte,” or primitive creature.

Yet if Hyde were just an animal, we would not expect him to take such *delight* in crime. Indeed, he seems to commit violent acts against innocents for no reason except the joy of it—something that no animal would do. He appears deliberately and happily *immoral* rather than *amoral*; he knows the moral law and basks in his breach of it. For an animalistic creature, furthermore, Hyde seems oddly at home in the urban landscape. All of these observations imply that perhaps civilization, too, has its dark side.

Ultimately, while Stevenson clearly asserts human nature as possessing two aspects, he leaves open the question of what these aspects constitute. Perhaps they consist of evil and virtue; perhaps they represent one's inner animal and the veneer that civilization has imposed. Stevenson enhances the richness of the novel by leaving us to look within ourselves to find the answers.

The Importance of Reputation

For the characters in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, preserving one's reputation emerges as all important. The prevalence of this value system is evident in the way that upright men such as Utterson and Enfield avoid gossip at all costs; they see gossip as a great destroyer of reputation. Similarly, when Utterson suspects Jekyll first of being blackmailed and then of sheltering Hyde from the police, he does not make his suspicions known; part of being Jekyll's good friend is a willingness to keep his secrets and not ruin his respectability. The importance of reputation in the novel also reflects the importance of appearances, facades, and surfaces, which often hide a sordid underside. In many instances in the novel, Utterson, true to his Victorian society, adamantly wishes not only to preserve Jekyll's reputation but also to preserve the appearance of order and decorum, even as he senses a vile truth lurking underneath.

Violence Against Innocents

The text repeatedly depicts Hyde as a creature of great evil and countless vices. Although the reader learns the details of only two of Hyde's crimes, the nature of both underlines his depravity. Both involve violence directed against innocents in particular. In the first instance, the victim of Hyde's violence is a small, female child; in the second instance, it is a gentle and much-beloved old man. The fact that Hyde ruthlessly murders these harmless beings, who have seemingly done nothing to provoke his rage and even less to deserve death, emphasizes the extreme immorality of Jekyll's dark

side unleashed. Hyde's brand of evil constitutes not just a lapse from good but an outright attack on it.

Silence

Repeatedly in the novel, characters fail or refuse to articulate themselves. Either they seem unable to describe a horrifying perception, such as the physical characteristics of Hyde, or they deliberately abort or avoid certain conversations. Enfield and Utterson cut off their discussion of Hyde in the first chapter out of a distaste for gossip; Utterson refuses to share his suspicions about Jekyll throughout his investigation of his client's predicament. Moreover, neither Jekyll in his final confession nor the third-person narrator in the rest of the novel ever provides any details of Hyde's sordid behavior and secret vices. It is unclear whether these narrative silences owe to a failure of language or a refusal to use it.

Ultimately, the two kinds of silence in the novel indicate two different notions about the interaction of the rational and the irrational. The characters' refusals to discuss the sordid indicate an attribute of the Victorian society in which they live. This society prizes decorum and reputation above all and prefers to repress or even deny the truth if that truth threatens to upset the conventionally ordered worldview. Faced with the irrational, Victorian society and its inhabitants prefer not to acknowledge its presence and not to grant it the legitimacy of a name. Involuntary silences, on the other hand, imply something about language itself. Language is by nature rational and logical, a method by which we map and delineate our world. Perhaps when confronted with the irrational and the mystical, language itself simply breaks down. Perhaps something about verbal expression stands at odds with the supernatural. Interestingly, certain parts of the novel suggest that, in the clash between language and the uncanny, the uncanny need not always win. One can interpret Stevenson's reticence on the topic of Jekyll's and Hyde's crimes as a conscious choice not to defuse their chilling aura with descriptions that might only dull them.

Urban Terror

Throughout the novel, Stevenson goes out of his way to establish a link between the urban landscape of Victorian London and the dark events surrounding Hyde. He achieves his desired effect through the use of nightmarish imagery, in which dark streets twist and coil, or lie draped in fog, forming a sinister landscape befitting the crimes that take place there. Chilling visions of the city appear in Utterson's nightmares as well, and the text notes that

He would be aware of the great field of lamps of a nocturnal city. . . . The figure [of Hyde] . . . haunted the lawyer all night; and if at any time he dozed over, it was but to see it glide more stealthily through sleeping houses, or move the more swiftly . . . through wider labyrinths of lamp-lighted city, and at every street corner crush a child and leave her screaming.

In such images, Stevenson paints Hyde as an urban creature, utterly at home in the darkness of London—where countless crimes take place, the novel suggests, without anyone knowing.

Symbols

Jekyll's House and Laboratory

Dr. Jekyll lives in a well-appointed home, characterized by Stevenson as having "a great air of wealth and comfort." His laboratory is described as "a certain sinister block of building â [which] bore in every feature the marks of profound and sordid negligence." With its decaying facade and air of neglect, the laboratory quite neatly symbolizes the corrupt and perverse Hyde.

Correspondingly, the respectable, prosperous-looking main house symbolizes the respectable, upright Jekyll. Moreover, the connection between the buildings similarly corresponds to the connection between the personas they represent. The buildings are adjoined but look out on two different streets. Because of the convoluted layout of the streets in the area, the casual observer cannot detect that the structures are two parts of a whole, just as he or she would be unable to detect the relationship between Jekyll and Hyde.

Hyde's Physical Appearance

According to the indefinite remarks made by his overwhelmed observers, Hyde appears repulsively ugly and deformed, small, shrunken, and hairy. His physical ugliness and deformity symbolizes his moral hideousness and warped ethics. Indeed, for the audience of Stevenson's time, the connection between such ugliness and Hyde's wickedness might have been seen as more than symbolic. Many people believed in the science of physiognomy, which held that one could identify a criminal by physical appearance. Additionally, Hyde's small stature may represent the fact that, as Jekyll's dark side, he has been repressed for years, prevented from growing and flourishing. His hairiness may indicate that he is not so much an evil side of Jekyll as the embodiment of Jekyll's instincts, the animalistic core beneath Jekyll's polished exterior.

Adapted from www.sparknotes.com



Poster from the 1880s.



Richard Mansfield was mostly known for his dual role depicted in this double exposure. The stage adaptation opened in London in 1887, a year after the publication of the novella. Picture 1895