The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde

by Robert Louis Stevenson

SUMMARY

A lawyer in late nineteenth-century London, Mr Utterson, is concerned when his cousin tells him about an event that occurred when an ugly little man called Hyde ill-treated a child. Hyde paid compensation to the child’s family but the cheque was signed by an old friend and client of Mr Utterson’s, a Dr Jekyll. Utterson cannot understand this or why Jekyll, a successful doctor, has made a will leaving everything to Mr Hyde. He imagines Hyde knows some secret about Jekyll’s past and is blackmailing him. But Jekyll denies this, though he makes Utterson promise to carry out the terms of his will. What is the strange connection that links Hyde to Jekyll?

ABOUT ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

Robert Louis Stevenson was born in Edinburgh in 1850, the son of a successful engineer. He suffered from ill health all his life, having inherited tuberculosis from his mother. He studied law at Edinburgh University but never practised. Instead, he shocked his parents by rejecting their strict Protestant religion and began a bohemian existence, first in London and then in an artists’ colony in France. There, in 1876, he fell in love with a married woman, the American, Frances Osbourne. They became lovers and three years later he risked his life on a dangerous journey to California to see her. They were married after her divorce in 1880 and Stevenson began writing fiction seriously.

The immediate success of his adventure story, Treasure Island (1883), and of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde (1886), made him famous, and he followed them with a series of fine historical novels about Scotland. After his father’s death, he took his mother, his wife and her son by her first marriage on a cruise in the Pacific, which ended with them settling in Samoa. Stevenson was popular with the inhabitants of the island and took an interest in their welfare. He was working on a new novel, Weir of Hermiston, when he died suddenly in 1894.

BACKGROUND AND THEMES

The dual character of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde has assumed mythical proportions in the hundred years or so since Stevenson’s novel was first published. The names are almost as familiar as those of other fictional nineteenth-century figures like Frankenstein and Dracula. ‘Jekyll-and-Hyde personality’, implying two totally contrasting forms of behaviour within the same person and expressing the main theme of the novel, is now a phrase in everyday usage.

Stevenson drew on his own experience in part in imagining this story. Though he set the novel in London he relied on his memories of the Edinburgh of his youth for much of the description. As a student, kept short of money by serious parents, he used to go to pubs in the older areas of the city at night and became aware of the contrast between the magnificent streets of the city centre and the ugly narrow alleyways close behind them. Stevenson relates this contrast to the theme of the novel in describing Jekyll’s house. It faces onto a square of grand and ancient houses but the entrance behind it that Hyde uses is dirty and ugly.

The first two paragraphs of Henry Jekyll’s confession (pages 48–49) are important to an understanding of the novel. They might apply in part to Stevenson himself as a young man concealing his double life from his parents. Jekyll is presented as one whose evil impulses, tempting him to become Hyde, were within him from the start. Stevenson would also have been aware in imagining a character leading a double life of the career of the notorious Deacon Brodie. In early eighteenth-century Edinburgh society, Brodie passed as a respected pillar of the community during the day but devoted his nights to crime and was eventually hanged. Like Jekyll, he had no inducement to rob or murder other than the enjoyment of the risks involved.

The Calvinist (of strict Protestant religion) tradition in which Stevenson was brought up is also relevant. It emphasized that our desires are naturally evil and it is only the grace of God that enables us to exercise the self-control necessary to repress them. The loss of inhibitions, enabling a man to escape from this repression, causes Jekyll, like many middle-class men in Victorian Britain, to regard vice as secret pleasure.
ACTIVITIES AFTER READING A SECTION

Keep us from realizing that Jekyll and Hyde are the same soon despite the clues, is that according to Jekyll's confession at the end, the transformation was moral as well as physical. For a long time the evil side of his nature was less developed so Hyde looked much smaller than Jekyll and Jekyll's clothes did not fit him. As a result, no one could have suspected that they were the same person. This neat solution to the problem resembles those of Conan Doyle when he invented the character of Sherlock Holmes a few years later.

ACTIVITIES BEFORE READING THE BOOK

The following teacher-led activities cover the same sections of text as the exercises at the back of the Reader, and supplement those exercises. Further supplementary exercises covering shorter sections of the text can be found on the Photocopiable Student's Activities pages of the Factsheet. These are primarily for use with class Readers but with the exception of discussion and pairs/groupwork questions, can also be used by students working alone in a self-access centre.

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING A SECTION

Chapters 1–3

Put students into pairs. One plays the part of Mr Utterson, the other of Mr Enfield. Imagine that they meet for their Sunday walk after Utterson has spoken to Dr Jekyll about Mr Hyde. Enfield asks Utterson about the conversation and Utterson explains his fears and Jekyll’s answers.

Chapters 4–6

Put students into small groups to discuss these questions. What makes people behave like Dr Jekyll at his best (see page 25) and Mr Hyde? Are some people naturally good and others evil, or are the good and bad equally balanced from birth and affected by events in life?

Chapters 7–10

Put students into small groups. Ask them to study the first three paragraphs of Dr Jekyll's statement on pages 48–49. Then ask them to discuss this question: Do you know of any cases in your own country of people leading a double life?

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING THE BOOK

Put students into small groups to discuss this question. Dr Jekyll suggests that we all have an evil side to our nature but keep it under control. Do you agree? He suggests that the things he was ashamed of were pleasures and the drug set him free to enjoy them. What sort of pleasures do you think he is talking about? Would they be considered evil today, as they were in Stevenson's time?

GLOSSARY

It will be useful if your students know the following new words. They are practised in the Before You Read sections at the back of the book. (Definitions are based on those in the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English.)

Chapters 1–3

blackmail (n) getting someone to give you money or do what you want by saying you will tell a secret about them

butter (n) the most important man servant in a house

candle (n) a stick which is burnt to produce light

distaste (n) a feeling of strong dislike

fancy (n) an idea not based on fact

neglect (n) a lack of care or attention

relief (n) a feeling you have when you are no longer worried about something

scorn (n) a feeling showing that you think someone is not worth your good opinion

Chapters 4–6

carriage (n) a vehicle with wheels pulled by a horse

inspector (n) a police officer

misery (n) a feeling of great unhappiness

seal (n) a means of closing a letter so that it can't be opened without the seal being broken open

victim (n) a person who has been hurt by a crime

Chapters 7–10

axe (n) a tool used for cutting wood

despair (n) a feeling of being without hope

experiment (n) a scientific test carried out to prove something

locksmith (n) someone who makes and repairs locks

mask (n) something worn over the face to hide it or to stop people from recognizing you

rusty (adj) when metal becomes old and wet it gets rusty

sigh (v) to breathe out heavily when you are feeling sad

suspicion (n) feeling that you do not trust someone or think something is wrong

tempt (v) to make someone want to do something that may be wrong

OTHER THEMES IN THE BOOK

Other themes in the book have become more relevant today because of the advances made since then in medical science. Jekyll would resemble a schizophrenic, a split personality, except that he deliberately induces the effect. In fact, his experience and the reasons for it are much closer to those of the generation of the 1960s who experimented with drugs like LSD. Such drugs produce unnatural behaviour in the short term and in the long term transform the entire personality, much as Jekyll eventually finds it impossible to choose when he will become Hyde.

Because the story is so well known that readers have often heard of it before reading it, they may not fully appreciate Stevenson's skill in telling it. His task was to keep us from realizing that Jekyll and Hyde are the same person for as long as possible. In part, this is achieved through dividing the focus of the narration between Utterson and others. But the masterstroke, which prevents us from reaching the obvious conclusion too soon despite the clues, is that according to Jekyll's confession at the end, the transformation was moral as well as physical. For a long time the evil side of his nature was less developed so Hyde looked much smaller than Jekyll and Jekyll's clothes did not fit him. As a result, no one could have suspected that they were the same person. This neat solution to the problem resembles those of Conan Doyle when he invented the character of Sherlock Holmes a few years later.
Look at the front cover of the book and read the information on the back cover. What kind of story do you imagine this is? What do you suppose may happen? Guess. What do you know about Robert Louis Stevenson? Write notes, then read the Introduction in the book.

CHAPTERS 1–3

Chapter 1
Answer these questions. First try to answer them without looking at the book. Then check your answers in the book.
(a) How is Mr Utterson different from what he seems at first sight?
(b) How does this make him able to help people in trouble?
(c) What does he do every Sunday?
(d) In what way is the house Mr Enfield points out different from those near it?
(e) What effect does the strange little man, Mr Hyde, have on everyone who sees him?
(f) Where does he get the money to pay the child’s family?
(g) Why does Mr Enfield spend the rest of the night with them?
(h) Why does Mr Utterson not ask him the name of the man who has written the cheque?

Chapters 2 & 3
1 Which of these statements are true, which are false? Correct those that are false.
(a) Mr Utterson refused to take charge of Dr Jekyll’s will.
(b) Dr Jekyll has left everything he has to Mr Hyde.
(c) Mr Utterson and Dr Lanyon were friends of Dr Jekyll’s at school.
(d) Dr Lanyon and Dr Jekyll have similar professional opinions.
(e) Mr Utterson thinks Mr Hyde looks like Dr Jekyll because he is tall and well dressed.
(f) Mr Hyde says he lives in the house where Mr Enfield sees him.
(g) Dr Jekyll’s house is in a square behind the house Mr Hyde enters.
(h) Mr Utterson guesses that Mr Hyde is blackmailing Dr Jekyll.

2 Work in pairs. You are both Mr Utterson. You want to save Dr Jekyll from the evil character of Mr Hyde and are sure that Hyde is blackmailing him. What do you imagine is Dr Jekyll’s secret? How do you think you can stop Mr Hyde? Discuss these problems.

CHAPTERS 4–6

Chapters 4 & 5
1 Put these events in order.
(a) Mr Utterson takes a police inspector to Mr Hyde’s address in Soho.
(b) Poole tells Mr Utterson that no one has brought a letter that day.
(c) Mr Utterson thinks Dr Jekyll is trying to protect Mr Hyde by writing a false note.
(d) Mr Hyde loses his temper with an old man and kills him with his stick.
(e) The inspector finds a broken stick in Mr Hyde’s room.
(f) Guest, Mr Utterson’s clerk, tells him Mr Hyde’s handwriting is like Dr Jekyll’s.
(g) Mr Utterson recognizes the old man as Sir Danvers Carew.
(h) Dr Jekyll shows Mr Utterson a letter from Mr Hyde.
(i) The police find a letter for Mr Utterson in the old man’s pocket.
(j) A servant girl recognizes Mr Hyde in the street outside her window.

2 Work in pairs. Play the parts of Mr Utterson and the police inspector. Imagine that Mr Utterson feels he must tell the police what he suspects about the letter Dr Jekyll has shown him. Ask and answer questions. How did Mr Utterson get the letter? What did Dr Jekyll tell him? Why doesn’t he believe him? What does he suspect, after showing the letter to Mr Guest? Why?

Chapter 6
1 Answer these questions.
(a) How does Dr Jekyll’s behaviour change after Mr Hyde’s disappearance?
(b) Why does Mr Utterson go to see Dr Lanyon?
(c) What reason does Dr Lanyon give for thinking he is dying?
(d) What does he refuse to talk about?
(e) What advice does Dr Jekyll give Mr Utterson in answer to his letter?

(f) What does Mr Utterson find addressed to him after Dr Lanyon’s death?

(g) Why doesn't he open it?

(h) What does Poole tell Mr Utterson when he goes again to see Dr Jekyll?

2 Talk with another student.

(a) What do you think the shock was that kills Dr Lanyon?

(b) Why do you think Dr Jekyll might ‘disappear’?

CHAPTERS 7–10

Chapters 7 & 8

1 Answer these questions.

(a) What is Dr Jekyll doing when Mr Utterson and Mr Enfield see him on their morning walk?

(b) Why does what they see fill them with horror?

(c) Why does Poole come to see Mr Utterson one evening?

(d) Whose voice does he think he hears when he says Mr Utterson has come to see Dr Jekyll?

(e) What does he believe has happened to Dr Jekyll?

(f) Why does Mr Utterson think this is not probable?

(g) What did Dr Jekyll ask Poole to do several times in the previous week?

(h) What does Poole say the Doctor was wearing when he last saw him?

(i) What does Mr Utterson think is the reason for this?

(j) How do Mr Utterson and Poole get into Dr Jekyll’s room?

(k) What do they find when they enter?

(l) What do they imagine has happened to Dr Jekyll?

2 Work with another student. Before you read on, discuss these questions:

What do you think has happened to Dr Jekyll? What strange things have been happening in the house? Why does Dr Jekyll need a special medicine?

Chapter 9

1 Talk to another student.

Were you right about what happened to Henry Jekyll? If so, when and how did you guess? Talk to other pairs and compare your answers.

2 Put these events in order.

(a) A carpenter and locksmith open the door to Dr Jekyll’s study

(b) A man dressed in clothes too big for him knocks at Dr Lanyon’s door.

(c) The strange man gives Dr Lanyon the choice of staying or leaving the room.

(d) Dr Lanyon receives a letter from Dr Jekyll.

(e) Dr Lanyon takes some powders and a bottle of red liquid home.

(f) The strange man is transformed into Dr Jekyll.

(g) Dr Lanyon drives to Jekyll’s house.

(h) The strange man mixes the powders and red liquid.

Chapter 10

Put the two halves of these sentences together

(a) As a young man, Henry Jekyll

(b) Though he is ashamed of his secret pleasures

(c) He discovers a drug that will allow him

(d) When he takes the drug for the first time

(e) The physical effect of the drug

(f) He decides that the drug is neither good nor bad but

(g) As time passes, he finds it more difficult

(h) He decides to be Jekyll rather than Hyde but

(i) Eventually he realizes that the special power of the drug

(j) When he knows he can not obtain any more of the original powder

(i) he feels younger and happier and free from responsibility.

(ii) is due to the fact that the first supply was impure.

(iii) is already living a double life.

(iv) to change back into his personality as Dr Jekyll.

(v) to change his body and mind.

(vi) he decides to take his own life.

(vii) is to make him smaller and uglier.

(viii) it unlocks the evil he has inside him.

(ix) after two months he mixes the drug again.

(x) the two sides of his character are equally strong and natural.

Activities after reading the book

Discuss this question with another student and then compare your opinions with those of other students.

Do you feel sorry for Dr Jekyll or do you think he was to blame for what happened to him?

Do you know of cases of people today who have been responsible for crimes after taking drugs? How should these people be treated?