Robert Louis Stevenson

About the author

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 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.

For a long time, Stevenson was considered a popular novelist but not to be taken seriously as literature. More recently however he has become part of literary studies.

Summary

Chapter 1

We are introduced to the good natured Mr Utterson, a lawyer. He points out to a friend a strange door and the friend, Enfield, has a story to tell about it. Enfield had witnessed the cruelty of a man to a passing child, and had obliged the man to pay compensation to the family. The cruel man was named Hyde, but the cheque he used came from a friend of Utterson's, the very respectable Doctor Jekyll. Utterson supposed the evil man was blackmailing Jekyll.

Chapter 2

That evening Utterson examines Dr Jekyll's will, which stipulates that in the case of Henry Jekyll's death or disappearance, all of his possessions should be given to Edward Hyde. Utterson goes to see Dr Lanyon, another close friend of Dr Jekyll's. He finds that Lanyon has not spoken to Jekyll for a long period of time due to a serious disagreement over 'unscientific' activities. Utterson also learns that Lanyon has never heard of Hyde. Utterson begins to search for Mr Hyde, finally meets him, sees his face, and Hyde gives him his address.

Chapter 3

Utterson argues with Jekyll over the question of his will and tells him what he has found out about Hyde. Jekyll tells him rather angrily to drop the question and says he can get rid of Mr Hyde at any point. He also requests that Utterson take care of Hyde when Jekyll is no longer there. Utterson reluctantly agrees.

Chapter 4

Nearly a year later, a certain Sir Danvers Carew is murdered. The murder is witnessed by a young woman who recognizes Hyde as the murderer. The victim carried a note addressed to Mr Utterson. The police contact Mr Utterson who identifies the victim. The police, with Mr Utterson, find the rooms in Hyde's house wrecked and Hyde gone.

Chapter 5

Utterson and Jekyll discuss the murder. Jekyll promises that he is not hiding Hyde and that he is, 'done with him in this world.' Jekyll shows a letter he says he has just received from Hyde. The letter thanks Jekyll for his kindness and reassures him that Hyde has a safe means of escape. Jekyll is worried that his reputation could be damaged if he gives the letter to the police. Utterson agrees to keep it for him. When leaving the house, Utterson discovers from the butler that nothing was delivered that day, and Utterson begins to grow uneasy. With a friend, he compares the writing on Mr Hyde's supposed letter with Jekyll's handwriting: they are similar. Utterson is angry that Jekyll should have forged a letter for a murderer.
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Chapter 6
Some time later. Jekyll, freed from the influence of Hyde, has become a new man. In early January, Utterson attends a dinner at Jekyll’s home, and Dr Lanyon is also present. A few days afterwards, Utterson learns that Jekyll has isolated himself and will see no one. Lanyon has suffered a terrible shock, and says he ‘shall never recover.’ He also appears to be very angry at Jekyll. Stunned and shaken, Utterson returns home and writes a note to Jekyll asking for an explanation. Jekyll replies ‘I have brought on myself a punishment and a danger that I cannot name.’ One week later, Dr Lanyon dies and leaves Mr Utterson a letter with instructions only to open it following the death or disappearance of Dr Jekyll.

Chapter 7
Utterson, passing by Jekyll’s house, sees him suffer some strange sort of seizure before Jekyll quickly closes his window.

Chapter 8
Weeks afterwards, Jekyll’s butler comes to Utterson’s house, upset and very worried about Jekyll who has been locked in his office for weeks. The two of them go to Jekyll’s. A strange voice refuses to come out. The butler believes Jekyll has been murdered and the murderer is in the office. The man in the office has been demanding a particular medicine which the butler has not been able to find. They break in and find the body of a small man who appears to have poisoned himself. They assume it is Hyde. On Jekyll’s table, Utterson finds a new will of Jekyll’s that leaves all possessions to Utterson, not Hyde. There is also a note for Utterson asking him to read first Dr Lanyon’s sealed letter, then Jekyll’s letter. They say nothing of the documents to the police, hoping even now to be able to save Jekyll’s reputation.

Chapter 9
Chapter nine consists of the text of Lanyon’s letter to Utterson, which he was instructed not to open until Lanyon and Jekyll had both died (or Jekyll had disappeared). Lanyon explains Jekyll had shown him that Hyde could transform into Jekyll by drinking a potion. The shock had been so tremendous for Dr Lanyon that he felt he was sure to die of the shock (after writing the letter).

Chapter 10
This final chapter presents a transcription of Jekyll’s confession letter to Utterson. Jekyll explains that he had wanted to study man’s dual nature and after many years had developed a potion which transformed him into his negative alter ego. He explains that he enjoyed living as Hyde and exploring his evil side. Sadly, soon he was no longer able to control when he became Hyde. During one transformation he murdered Carew and in the following months Hyde came back regularly and carried out more crimes. Finally, no longer able to find the ingredient that allowed him to transform back into Jekyll, he realized he had to transform himself permanently into Hyde.

Background and themes
Stevenson’s novel deals with the dark side of human personality, and also reflects the priorities of the society Stevenson was part of – a respectable, ‘Victorian’, middle class society most concerned with form and manners. 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. A ‘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.

There have been a large number of film adaptations of Stevenson’s work. In general however, they differ from the original in that the story is told from the point of view of Jekyll/Hyde and not from the point of view of a third person, Utterson in the novella.

Particularly notable is the 1941 film directed by Victor Fleming, starring Spencer Tracy. The 1996 film by Stephen Frears, Mary Reilly, is based on a reworking of the Jekyll story, told from the point of view of Dr Jekyll’s maid, who is attracted to both Jekyll and Hyde. The story is also the initial basis of the extremely popular TV series The Incredible Hulk.

Stevenson drew partly on his own experience 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 strict 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.

The first two paragraphs of Henry Jekyll’s confession (pages 48–49) are important to an understanding of the
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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 Edinburgh society, Brodie passed as a respected pillar of the community during the day but devoted his nights to burglary and was eventually hanged for this crime.

The Calvinist tradition in which Stevenson was brought up is also relevant. This religious view emphasises 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.

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 realising 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.

Discussion activities

Before reading

1 Discuss: Start a discussion on Stevenson and the period in which he lived. Guide students with these questions

Have you heard of Robert Louis Stevenson?
What books is he famous for? What are the themes?
What do you know already about Jekyll and Hyde?
When was the 'Victorian period'?
Do you know what is meant by 'Victorian morality'?

2 Discuss: Book cover
Get students to look at the book cover. Ask them to describe it.

What emotion is shown in each eye?
What other emotions can you show with your eyes?

3 Discuss: Character
Put students into groups. Tell them that they are going to read about two characters who look completely different. Dr Jekyll is a good man, tall and well-built. Mr Hyde is evil, much smaller and uglier. Can we tell what people are like from their appearance and expressions? Ask them to give examples.

Guide the students with these questions:
Do violent people look violent at first sight?
What can you tell about someone's character without knowing them, just by looking at them?
Can you tell someone's job, for example, by looking at them?
Can someone look like a librarian, a lawyer or a building worker?

Chapter 2

Before reading

4 Discuss and predict: Ask your students the following questions:

What is a will?
What do wills contain?
What sentences might you see in a typical will?
Who do you need to help you write a will?
What do you imagine Dr Jekyll's will might contain?

Chapter 3

Before reading

5 Discuss and predict: Ask your students the following questions:

Mr Utterson is obviously worried by the situation. What do you think he will say to Dr Jekyll about it (remember he must be very polite).
What do you imagine Jekyll's reaction might be? Will he tell his friend the whole truth? If not, how will he justify this?

Chapters 2–3

After reading

6 Role play: Put students into pairs and give them the following instructions:

One of you is to play 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.

7 Role play and pair work: Put students into pairs and give them the following instructions:

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? How can you do something while maintaining the appearance of respectability? Discuss these problems.
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Chapter 4

After reading
8 Role play and pair work: Ask students to work in pairs. One student plays the role of the servant girl who has just recovered from fainting after seeing the horrible murder of Carew. She is in shock and has difficulty expressing herself. The other student plays the role of a policeman/policewoman wanting to question the servant girl to find out what she has seen. He or she tries not to be brutal but must have the information as quickly as possible so as to be able to give chase to the criminal.

9 Write a report: Ask your students to imagine that they are the policeman or policewoman who has conducted the interview with the servant girl. Give them the following instructions.
You must now write a report to your superior officer. You need to explain what emotional state the young woman was in, summarise the answers she gave to your questions and give your opinion on whether or not the girl’s evidence is to be trusted. The report must be written in a fairly formal style. Begin ‘Interview Report concerning eye witness account of Sir Carew’s murder …’

Chapter 5

Before reading
11 Discuss and role play: Ask your students the following questions
What do you think will happen next in the story?
Mr Utterson will talk to Dr Jekyll. What might he ask him?
What attitude will Utterson show? Will he be aggressive? Accusing? Worried?
How will Dr Jekyll react? Will he be angry? Defensive? Frightened?
Ask your students to prepare a written list of questions for Mr Utterson to ask Dr Jekyll. Then divide them into pairs to role play the conversation between Utterson and Jekyll.

After reading
12 Discuss: Ask your students to look at Chapter 5 and to answer the following questions.
Why do you think Utterson is unhappy to find the two pieces of handwriting are so similar?

Chapter 6

Before reading
14 Discuss: Ask your students the following questions:
Do you think Utterson reacted to the letter in the best way possible in Chapter 5? What other course of action might he have taken?
Why didn’t he, in your opinion?
What do you think will happen next?

Chapter 8

Before reading
17 Discuss and predict: Ask your students to consider the following:
The situation is clearly critical, and a crisis is approaching. What do you think will happen next?
Will Hyde win against Jekyll or will Jekyll win against Hyde?
Will Hyde escape to commit more crimes?

After reading
18 Discuss: Ask your students to work in small groups and discuss the following questions before they read on:
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?

19 Discuss: Jekyll and Hyde today
Ask your students to imagine that the story is happening today. Instead of Utterson and the servants, a modern police force with modern technology is going to deal with the situation where
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an unknown possibly dangerous person is locked in the laboratory. Ask them to imagine what might happen. Guide them with these questions:
What would a modern police force do in these circumstances? Would they use high technology weapons? What other high technology might they use?

20 Write a TV report: Ask your students to write a TV report. Give them these instructions.
Suppose the situation is happening today. The laboratory is locked and police are closing in. You work for the BBC and you have to give an on the spot report. Write this report. Begin in this way: ‘I am here outside Dr Jekyll’s laboratory. There have been no new developments in this extraordinary siege situation this afternoon. The police are still trying to decide how to deal with it. According to our information, this is what happened: …’

21 Discuss and predict: Put your students in groups. Chapters 9 and 10 will explain what really happened to Jekyll. Can they imagine the explanation? Have them try to guess the answers to the following questions.
Why did Lanyon die? Why did Jekyll begin his experiments? Did he enjoy the results of the experiments? At what point did he lose control and why? What happened in the end?

Chapters 9–10
After reading
22 Discuss: 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 these questions:
Do you know of any cases in your own country of people leading a double life? Do you know of any cases in books or films you have enjoyed? Would you like to lead a double life (as a spy, for example)? Why/why not?

23 Write: Write a short newspaper article about the events of Chapter 10. You can quote the police officer, and Mr Utterson. Begin like this: ‘Strange events took place last night in the London residence of a certain Dr Jekyll, and police and other commentators are still unsure of the explanation. Late in the evening …’

After reading
24 Discuss: Who is to blame? Ask your students to discuss this question with another student and then compare their opinions with those of the rest of the class. Guide them with these questions.
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? Should deterrence or treatment be the main priority concerning such people?

25 Discuss: Our dark side
Ask your students to work in small groups and discuss the following questions
Dr Jekyll suggests that we all have an evil side to our nature but keep it under control. Do you agree? What might your dark side be like? If you could commit crimes and be free from guilt, what crimes would you choose? What are the similarities and differences between Jekyll and Hyde?

26 Discuss: Crime and responsibility
Ask your students to work in small groups and discuss the following questions
In most countries today, if you are guilty of a crime, you may receive a reduced sentence if for some reason you are considered not fully in control of yourself, because you are mentally ill for example. In the British judicial system this is known as ‘diminished responsibility’. Do you know how this works in other countries? What do you think the limits of such a concept should be? Think about the same question on a more personal level. Do we sometimes do things wrong despite ourselves, not being able to stop ourselves? What kind of actions would you forgive a friend if they did them ‘because they had drunk too much alcohol’? What kind of action would you not forgive in these circumstances?

27 Discuss: Respectability
Ask your students to work in small groups and discuss the following questions
You will have noticed that several of the characters in the novel are very concerned about their reputation. Hyde, when he is found mistreating the child, Utterson, when he fears causing a scandal by breaking into Jekyll’s laboratory, are two examples. Respectability was extremely important for the Victorian middle class. What is left of that respectability today? What activities would middle class people not want to be publicly known, or these days is everything permissible? Can you think of famous people or politicians who have damaged their reputation through scandals, in your country? Tell the stories.

Vocabulary activities
For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.