Signet Classic

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde

Robert Louis Stevenson

With an Introductory Essay by
VLADIMIR NABOKOV

and a New Afterword by
DAN CHAON

Throughout his life, **Robert Louis Stevenson** (1850–94) was plagued by ill health, which interrupted his formal education at Edinburgh University. Pursuing the life of a bohemian during his twenties and thirties, he traveled around Europe and formed the basis of his first two books, *An Inland Voyage* (1878) and *Travels with a Donkey* (1879). Stevenson gained his first popular success with *Treasure Island* (1883). *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, which sold 40,000 copies in six months, and *Kidnapped* appeared in 1886, followed by *The Black Arrow* in 1888.

Dan Chaon is the author of a novel, *You Remind Me of Me*, and two short story collections, *Fitting Ends* and the 2001 National Book Award Finalist *Among the Missing.* His work has appeared in numerous magazines, including *Story*, *Ploughshares*, and *TriQuarterly*, as well as *Best American Short Stories* and *The Pushcart Prize 2000.* The recipient of numerous prizes and honors, he teaches at Oberlin College.

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A SIGNET CLASSIC

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"The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde"*

Vladimir Nabokov

"Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" was written in bed, at Bournemouth on the English Channel, in 1885 in between hemorrhages from the lungs. It was published in January 1886. Dr. Jekyll is a fat, benevolent physician, not without human frailties, who at times by means of a potion projects himself into, or concentrates or precipitates, an evil person of brutal and animal nature taking the name of Hyde, in which character he leads a patchy criminal life of sorts. For a time he is able to revert to his Jekyll personality—there is a down-to-Hyde drug and a back-to-Jekyll drug—but gradually his better nature weakens and finally the back-to-Jekyll potion fails, and he poisons himself when on the verge of exposure. This is the bald plot of the story.

First of all, if you have the Pocket Books edition I have, you will veil the monstrous, abominable, atro-

*Editor's note: In 1948 Vladimir Nabokov was appointed Associate Professor of Slavic Literature at Cornell University, where he taught Russian Literature in Translation, and Masters of European Fiction. For the next ten years he introduced undergraduates to the delights of great fiction, including *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, in fifty-minute classroom lectures. In 1980 his notes were collected by Fredson Bowers and published by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich as *Lectures on Literature*, from which this essay has been reprinted by permission.

cious, criminal, foul, vile, youth-depraving jacket—or better say straitjacket. You will ignore the fact that ham actors under the direction of pork packers have acted in a parody of the book, which parody was then photographed on a film and showed in places called theaters; it seems to me that to call a movie house a theater is the same as to call an undertaker a mortician.

And now comes my main injunction. Please completely forget, disremember, obliterate, unlearn, consign to oblivion any notion you may have had that "Jekyll and Hyde" is some kind of a mystery story, a detective story, or movie. It is of course quite true that Stevenson's short novel, written in 1885, is one of the ancestors of the modern mystery story. But today's mystery story is the very negation of style, being, at the best, conventional literature. Frankly, I am not one of those college professors who coyly boasts of enjoying detective stories—they are too badly written for my taste and bore me to death. Whereas Stevenson's story is—God bless his pure soul—lame as a detective story. Neither is it a parable nor an allegory, for it would be tasteless as either. It has, however, its own special enchantment if we regard it as a phenomenon of style. It is not only a good "bogey story," as Stevenson exclaimed when awakening from a dream in which he had visualized it much in the same way I suppose as magic cerebration had granted Coleridge the vision of the most famous of unfinished poems. It is also, and more importantly, "a fable that lies nearer to poetry than to ordinary prose fiction."* and therefore belongs to the same order of art as, for instance, *Madame Bovary* or *Dead Souls*.

*Nabokov states that critical quotations in this essay are drawn from Stephen Gwynn, *Robert Louis Stevenson* (London: Macmillan, 1939). Ed.

There is a delightful winey taste about this book; in fact, a good deal of old mellow wine is drunk in the story: one recalls the wine that Utterson so comfortably sips. This sparkling and comforting draft is very different from the icy pangs caused by the chameleon liquor, the magic reagent that Jekyll brews in his dusty laboratory. Everything is very appetizingly put. Gabriel John Utterson of Gaunt Street mouths his words most roundly; there is an appetizing tang about the chill morning in London, and there is even a certain richness of tone in the description of the horrible sensations Jekyll undergoes during his *hydizations*. Stevenson had to rely on style very much in order to perform the trick, in order to master the two main difficulties confronting him: (1) to make the magic potion a plausible drug based on a chemist's ingredients and (2) to make Jekyll's evil side before and after the hydization a believable evil.

[Here Nabokov quoted from "I was so far in my reflections . . ." through "mankind, was pure evil," pp. 105–108.]*

The names Jekyll and Hyde are of Scandinavian origin, and I suspect that Stevenson chose them from the same page of an old book on surnames where I looked them up myself. Hyde comes from the Anglo-Saxon *hyd*, which is the Danish *hide*, "a haven." And Jekyll comes from the Danish name *Jökulle*, which means "an icicle." Not knowing these simple derivations one would be apt to find all kinds of symbolic meanings, especially in Hyde, the most

*Editor's note: Throughout his lecture, Nabokov quoted extensively from the novel. For this essay, we provide the beginning and the ending passages that he quoted, with the corresponding page numbers from this edition.

obvious being that Hyde is a kind of hiding place for Dr. Jekyll, in whom the jocular doctor and the killer are combined.

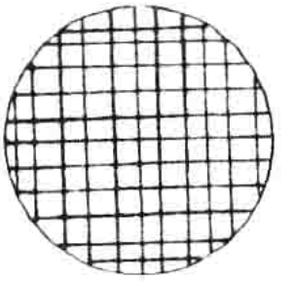
Three important points are completely obliterated by the popular notions about this seldom read book:

1. Is Jekyll good? No, he is a composite being, a mixture of good and bad, a preparation consisting of a ninety-nine percent solution of Jekyllite and one percent of Hyde (or *hydatid* from the Greek "water" which in zoology is a tiny pouch within the body of man and other animals, a pouch containing a limpid fluid with larval tapeworms in it—a delightful arrangement, for the little tapeworms at least. Thus in a sense, Mr. Hyde is Dr. Jekyll's parasite—but I must warn that Stevenson knew nothing of this when he chose the name.) Jekyll's morals are poor from the Victorian point of view. He is a hypocritical creature carefully concealing his little sins. He is vindictive, never forgiving Dr. Lanyon with whom he disagrees in scientific matters. He is foolhardy. Hyde is mingled with him, within him. In this mixture of good and bad in Dr. Jekyll, the bad can be separated as Hyde, who is a precipitate of pure evil, a precipitation in the chemical sense since something of the composite Jekyll remains behind to wonder in horror at Hyde while Hyde is in action.
2. Jekyll is not really transformed into Hyde but projects a concentrate of pure evil that becomes Hyde, who is smaller than Jekyll, a big man, to indicate the larger amount of good that Jekyll possesses.
3. There are really three personalities—Jekyll, Hyde,

and a third, the Jekyll residue when Hyde takes over.

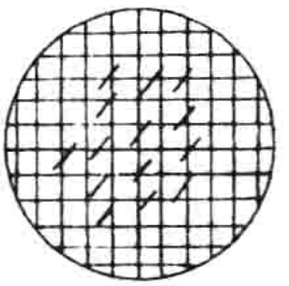
The situation may be represented visually.

Henry Jekyll
(large)

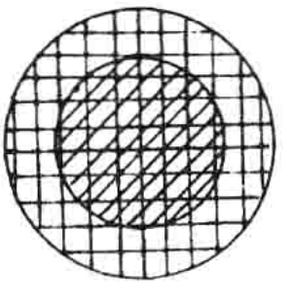


Edward Hyde
(small)

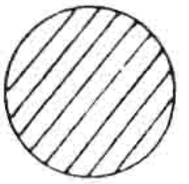
But if you look closely you see that within this big, luminous, pleasantly tweed Jekyll there are scattered rudiments of evil.



When the magic drug starts to work, a dark concentration of this evil begins forming

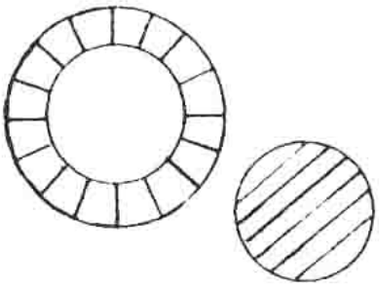


and is projected or ejected as



Still, if you look closely at Hyde, you will notice that above him floats aghast, but dominating, a residue

of Jekyll, a kind of smoke ring, or halo, as if this black concentrated evil had fallen out of the remaining ring of good, but this ring of good still remains: Hyde still wants to change back to Jekyll. This is the significant point.



It follows that Jekyll's transformation implies a concentration of evil that already inhabited him rather than a complete metamorphosis. Jekyll is not pure good, and Hyde (Jekyll's statement to the contrary) is not pure evil, for just as parts of unacceptable Hyde dwell within acceptable Jekyll, so over Hyde hovers a halo of Jekyll, horrified at his worser half's iniquity.

The relations of the two are typified by Jekyll's house, which is half Jekyll and half Hyde. As Utterson and his friend Enfield were taking a ramble one Sunday they came to a bystreet in a busy quarter of London which, though small and what is called quiet, drove a thriving trade on weekdays. "Even on Sunday, when it veiled its more florid charms and lay comparatively empty of passage, the street shone out in contrast to its dingy neighbourhood, like a fire in a forest; and with its freshly painted shutters, well-polished brasses, and general cleanliness and gaiety of note, instantly caught and pleased the eye of the passenger.

"Two doors from one corner, on the left hand going east, the line was broken by the entry of a court; and just at that point, a certain sinister block

of building thrust forward its gable on the street. It was two storeys high; showed no window, nothing but a door on the lower storey and a blind forehead of discoloured wall on the upper; and bore in every feature, the marks of prolonged and sordid negligence. The door, which was equipped with neither bell nor knocker, was blistered and distained. Tramps slouched into the recess and struck matches on the panels; children kept shop upon the steps; the schoolboy had tried his knife on the mouldings; and for close on a generation, no one had appeared to drive away these random visitors or repair their ravages."

This is the door that Enfield points out to Utterson with his cane, which was used by a repugnantly evil man who had deliberately trampled over a running young girl and, being collared by Enfield, had agreed to recompense the child's parents with a hundred pounds. Opening the door with a key, he had returned with ten pounds in gold and a cheque for the remainder signed by Dr. Jekyll, which proves to be valid. Blackmail, thinks Enfield. He continues to Utterson: "It seems scarcely a house. There is no other door, and nobody goes in or out of that one but, once in a great while, the gentleman of my adventure. There are three windows looking on the court on the first floor; none below; the windows are always shut but they're clean. And then there is a chimney which is generally smoking; so somebody must live there. And yet it's not so sure; for the buildings are so packed together about that court, that it's hard to say where one ends and another begins."

Around the corner from the bystreet there is a square of ancient, handsome houses, somewhat run to seed and cut up into flats and chambers. "One

house, however, second from the corner, was still occupied entire; and at the door of this, which wore a great air of wealth and comfort," Utterson was to knock and inquire for his friend, Dr. Jekyll. Utterson knows that the door of the building through which Mr. Hyde had passed is the door to the old dissecting room of the surgeon who had owned the house before Dr. Jekyll bought it and that it is a part of the elegant house fronting on the square. The dissecting room Dr. Jekyll had altered for his chemical experiments, and it was there (we learn much later) that he made his transformations into Mr. Hyde, at which times Hyde lived in that wing.

Just as Jekyll is a mixture of good and bad, so Jekyll's dwelling place is also a mixture, a very neat symbol, a very neat representation of the Jekyll and Hyde relationship. . . . In a bystreet, corresponding to another side of the same block of houses, its geography curiously distorted and concealed by an agglomeration of various buildings and courts in that particular spot, is the mysterious Hyde side door. Thus in the composite Jekyll building with its mellow and grand front hall there are corridors leading to Hyde, to the old surgery theatre, now Jekyll's laboratory, where not so much dissection as chemical experiments were conducted by the doctor. Stevenson musters all possible devices, images, intonation, word patterns, and also false scents, to build up gradually a world in which the strange transformation to be described in Jekyll's own words will have the impact of satisfactory and artistic reality upon the reader—or rather will lead to such a state of mind in which the reader will not ask himself whether this transformation is possible or not. Something of the same sort is managed by Dickens in

Bleak House when by a miracle of subtle approach and variegated prose he manages to make real and satisfying the case of the gin-loaded old man who literally catches fire inside and is burnt to the ground.

Stevenson's artistic purpose was to make "a fantastic drama pass in the presence of plain sensible men" in an atmosphere familiar to the readers of Dickens, in the setting of London's bleak fog, of solemn elderly gentlemen drinking old port, of ugly faced houses, of family lawyers and devoted butlers, of anonymous vices thriving somewhere behind the solemn square on which Jekyll lives, and of cold mornings and of hansom cabs. Mr. Utterson, Jekyll's lawyer, is "a decent, reticent, likeable, trustworthy, courageous and crusty gentleman; and what such people can accept as 'real,' the readers are supposed also to accept as real." Utterson's friend Enfield is called "unimpressionable," a sturdy young businessman definitely on the dull side (in fact it is this sturdy dullness that brings him and Utterson together). It is this dull Enfield, a man of little imagination and not good at observing things, whom Stevenson selects to tell the beginning of the story. Enfield does not realize that the door on the bystreet which Hyde uses to bring the cheque signed by Jekyll is the door of the laboratory in Jekyll's house. However, Utterson realizes the connection immediately, and the story has started.

Although to Utterson the fanciful was the immodest, Enfield's story leads him, at home, to take from his safe Jekyll's will in his own handwriting (for Utterson had refused to lend the least assistance in the making of it) and to read again its provision: "not only that, in the case of the decease of Henry

Jekyll, M.D., D.C.L., L.L.D., F.R.S., etc., all his possessions were to pass into the hands of his 'friend and benefactor Howard Hyde,' but that in case of Dr. Jekyll's 'disappearance or unexplained absence for any period exceeding three calendar months,' the said Edward Hyde should step into the said Henry Jekyll's shoes without further delay and freed from any burthen or obligation, beyond the payment of a few small sums to the members of the doctor's household." Utterson had long detested this will, his indignation swelled by his ignorance of Mr. Hyde: "now, by a sudden turn, it was his knowledge [from Enfield's story of the evil small man and the child]. It was already bad enough when the name was but a name of which he could learn no more. It was worse when it began to be clothed upon with detestable attributes; and out of the shifting, insubstantial mists that had so long baffled his eye, there leaped up the sudden, definite presentment of a fiend.

" 'I thought it was madness,' he said, as he replaced the obnoxious paper in the safe, 'and now I begin to fear it is disgrace.' "

Enfield's story about the accident starts to breed in Utterson's mind when he goes to bed. Enfield had begun: "I was coming home from some place at the end of the world, about three o'clock of a black winter morning, and my way lay through a part of town where there was literally nothing to be seen but lamps. Street after street, and all the folks asleep—street after street, all lighted up as if for a procession and all as empty as a church. . . ." (Enfield was a stolid matter-of-fact young man, but Stevenson, the artist, just could not help lending him that phrase about the streets all lighted up, with the folks asleep, and all as empty as a church.) This phrase starts to