

Introducing the Novella and Background

It deals with the relation of the baser parts of man to his nobler—of the capacity for evil that exists in the most generous natures, and it expresses these things in a fable, which is a wonderfully happy invention.

—Henry James, American novelist

Robert Louis Stevenson spent three years (from September 1884 to July 1887) living on England's southern coast with his wife, Fanny, in a house that his father had given them. Stevenson had already written *Treasure Island* and *A Child's Garden of Verses*, along with many stories and essays, which earned him popularity and some money. Yet, financial wolves were always howling at the Stevenson's door, and the climate, often cold and damp even in the southern part of the country, further weakened Stevenson's lungs. The writer spent much of the three years lying in bed. Not surprisingly, the combination of money troubles and ill health caused the author to brood and worry.

One night in 1885, Stevenson had a dream. When Fanny woke him, he told her with irritation that she had interrupted "a fine bogey tale." The word bogey refers to a frightening person or thing. Stevenson wrote a first version of the story in the following three days. When he read his work to Fanny, she judged that it was nothing more than a spooky story and challenged her husband to do more with its philosophical possibilities. She urged him to make the tale an exploration of the darker side of human nature. Agreeing with her, Stevenson tossed the manuscript into the fire and turned to a second draft. In three more days, he turned his dream story into the classic study of hidden evil that we know today.

The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1886) became an instant success. Critics compared Stevenson with Edgar Allan Poe, master of the horror story, and with Nathaniel

Hawthorne, whose novels also contained explorations of evil. So popular did the story become that within a month, the humor magazine *Punch* was already publishing a parody of the tale.

Why has Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde touched so many readers so powerfully? One answer lies in the spirit of the time in which it was written. At the end of the 1800s, Britain was experiencing a period of intense social, economic, and spiritual change, after many decades of confident growth and national self-fulfillment. Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde perfectly captured some readers' fears that their carefully built society was hypocritical.

Stevenson was aware of the new ideas about economics, science, and the workings of the mind. To many readers, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde was a symbolic representation of these threats to traditional British society. Political reforms had given many more men the right to vote, and the working classes were beginning to flex their political muscles. Karl Marx's ideas about the struggle for power among the different social classes were becoming more influential. To some of Britain's upper-class readers, the character of Edward Hyde represented the increasing political power of the working class.

Other readers saw in the novella echoes of Charles Darwin, who earlier in the century had challenged the long-held religious belief in God's creation of the universe. Darwin had claimed that life forms developed as a result of evolution, the extremely slow and gradual changes species underwent in response to their environments. Gone was the certainty of the religious model of life. It was replaced by social Darwinism, a radical new conception of life as a struggle in which only the fittest survived. Some readers considered Hyde to be a model of the strong yet evil individual who would survive while Jekyll fell. Hyde was the natural man, free of the civilizing influences of society and religion. Stevenson himself had received an extremely strict religious upbringing, which emphasized sin and the punishments of hell. He seems to have

reacted against this upbringing, and the conflict between religion and science probably interested him greatly.

Still other readers found in Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde a reflection of the new ideas about the workings of the human mind. A Viennese doctor named Sigmund Freud had begun the investigations that would lead him to create psychoanalysis, a method of analyzing psychic phenomena and treating emotional disorders. Freud believed that human beings are powerfully influenced by impulses of which they are not aware and which are often expressed in dreams. To many readers, Hyde represented Dr. Jekyll's subconscious desire to be freed from his society's restrictions.

THE TIME AND PLACE

The novella takes place in London in the 1880s. The settings include Jekyll's fine home in a formerly grand neighborhood now in decay; Lanyon's comfortable home in Cavendish Square, where many distinguished doctors have their houses and offices; and Hyde's house in Soho, a part of London known for its immigrant populations.

The Victorian Era

Robert Louis Stevenson was born at the height of the Victorian Era, which stretched from the 1830s to the beginning of the 1900s. Britain's Queen Victoria came to the throne in 1837 at the age of eighteen and ruled until her death in 1901. During her sixty-four-year reign, Great Britain was the world's leading economic and military power and controlled a vast empire. Queen Victoria's reign was a period of intense change in many arenas. Railroads and a postal system expanded to link almost every corner of the nation, making transportation and communication much faster. Medical and sanitary advances led to improvements in health. The government began to support schools financially. Political reforms allowed more people to

participate in self-government. Industry grew rapidly, while agriculture became less important to the economy. Cities like London, Manchester, and Glasgow became densely populated as masses of people flocked to them in search of work.

The prosperous decades between 1850 and 1870 were characterized by a general optimism and a sense of accomplishment. By the 1880s, however, pessimism and worry had begun to cloud the thoughts of many Victorians. With the increase in the urban population, poverty became a formidable problem. The strength of Britain's vast empire was challenged by difficult foreign wars. Workers demanded more power, and women were entering the workforce in greater numbers. The changes in traditional society disturbed and frightened many Britons. It was at this historical juncture that Stevenson wrote *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. As you read, look for signs of a society undergoing major changes.

DID YOU KNOW?

Robert Louis Stevenson intended that the last name of his famous doctor be pronounced JEEK-uhl. Such a pronunciation would have been more common in the author's Scottish dialect. Stevenson himself tried hard to convince his readers that the name was pronounced with a long e. In spite of Stevenson's preference, the tormented doctor has come to be known as JECK-uhl by almost every reader, actor, and critic since the first appearance of the story.