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Sparknotes

The Strange Case Of Dr. Jekyll And Mr. Hyde

A Critical
Analysis &
Study Guide

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To: Allah, Muhammad, Hamid, Aadheela, Vassen,
Narendra, Amina, Lim & my Family...

Without whom this would have been possible...

Table of Contents

Plot Overview.....	4
Character List.....	8
Analysis of Major Characters.....	11
Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde	11
Mr. Gabriel John Utterson.....	13
Dr. Hastie Lanyon	15
Themes, Motifs & Symbols.....	17
Themes.....	17
The Duality of Human Nature	17
The Importance of Reputation.....	18
Motifs.....	19
Violence Against Innocents.....	19
Silence.....	20
Urban Terror.....	21
Symbols.....	22
Jekyll's House and Laboratory.....	22
Hyde's Physical Appearance.....	23
Chapter 1: "Story of the Door"	24
Summary	24

Analysis.....	26
Chapters 2–3.....	29
Summary— Chapter 2: “Search for Mr. Hyde”	29
Summary— Chapter 3: “Dr. Jekyll Was Quite at Ease”	30
Analysis — Chapters 2–3.....	31
Chapters 4–5.....	34
Summary— Chapter 4: “The Carew Murder Case”	34
Summary— Chapter 5: “Incident of the Letter”	35
Analysis — Chapters 4–5.....	36
Chapters 6–7.....	39
Summary— Chapter 6: “Remarkable Incident of Dr. Lanyon”	39
Summary— Chapter 7: “Incident at the Window”.....	40
Analysis — Chapters 6–7	41
Chapter 8: “The Last Night”.....	43
Summary	43
Analysis.....	45
Chapter 9: “Dr. Lanyon’s Narrative”.....	49
Summary	49
Analysis.....	51
Chapter 10: “Henry Jekyll’s Full Statement of the Case”	53

Summary	53
Analysis.....	56
Important Quotations Explained	61
Key Facts	70
Study Questions & Essay Topics.....	72
Study Questions	72
Suggested Essay Topics.....	75

Plot Overview

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.

Character List

Dr. Henry Jekyll - A respected doctor and friend of both Lanyon, a fellow physician, and Utterson, a lawyer. Jekyll is a seemingly prosperous man, well established in the community, and known for his decency and charitable works. Since his youth, however, he has secretly engaged in unspecified dissolute and corrupt behavior. Jekyll finds this dark side a burden and undertakes experiments intended to separate his good and evil selves from one another. Through these experiments, he brings Mr. Hyde into being, finding a way to transform himself in such a way that he fully becomes his darker half.

Mr. Edward Hyde - A strange, repugnant man who looks faintly pre-human. Hyde is violent and cruel, and everyone who sees him describes him as ugly and deformed—yet no one can say exactly why. Language itself seems to fail around Hyde: he is not a creature who belongs to the rational world, the world of conscious articulation or logical grammar. Hyde is Jekyll's dark side, released from the bonds of conscience and loosed into the world by a mysterious potion.

Mr. Gabriel John Utterson - A prominent and upstanding lawyer, well respected in the London community. Utterson is reserved, dignified, and perhaps even lacking somewhat in imagination, but he does seem to possess a furtive curiosity about the more sordid side of life. His rationalism, however, makes him ill equipped to deal with the supernatural nature of the Jekyll-Hyde connection. While not a man of science, Utterson

resembles his friend Dr. Lanyon—and perhaps Victorian society at large—in his devotion to reasonable explanations and his denial of the supernatural.

Read an in-depth analysis of Mr. Gabriel John Utterson.

Dr. Hastie Lanyon - A reputable London doctor and, along with Utterson, formerly one of Jekyll's closest friends. As an embodiment of rationalism, materialism, and skepticism, Lanyon serves a foil (a character whose attitudes or emotions contrast with, and thereby illuminate, those of another character) for Jekyll, who embraces mysticism. His death represents the more general victory of supernaturalism over materialism in Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

Read an in-depth analysis of Dr. Hastie Lanyon.

Mr. Poole - Jekyll's butler. Mr. Poole is a loyal servant, having worked for the doctor for twenty years, and his concern for his master eventually drives him to seek Utterson's help when he becomes convinced that something has happened to Jekyll.

Mr. Enfield - A distant cousin and lifelong friend of Mr. Utterson. Like Utterson, Enfield is reserved, formal, and scornful of gossip; indeed, the two men often walk together for long stretches without saying a word to one another.

Mr. Guest - Utterson's clerk and confidant. Guest is also an expert in handwriting. His skill proves particularly useful when Utterson wants him to examine a bit of Hyde's

handwriting. Guest notices that Hyde's script is the same as Jekyll's, but slanted the other way.

Sir Danvers Carew - A well-liked old nobleman, a member of Parliament, and a client of Utterson.

Analysis of Major Characters

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 "troglydyte," 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

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