



Signet Classic

Dr. Jekyll
and
Mr. Hyde

Robert Louis
Stevenson

With an Introductory Essay by
VLADIMIR NABOKOV
and a New Afterword by
DAN CHAON

"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.

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Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde

Robert Louis Stevenson

"Why did you wake me? I was dreaming a fine bogey tale."

Robert Louis Stevenson's masterpiece of the duality of good and evil in man's nature sprang from the darkest recesses of his own unconscious—during a nightmare from which his wife awakened him, alerted by his screams. More than a hundred years later, this tale of the mild-mannered Dr. Jekyll and the drug that unleashes his evil, inner persona—the loathsome, twisted Mr. Hyde—has lost none of its ability to shock. Its realistic police-style narrative chillingly relates Jekyll's desperation as Hyde gains control of his soul—and gives voice to our own fears of the violence and evil within us. Written before Freud's naming of the ego and the id, Stevenson's enduring classic demonstrates a remarkable understanding of the personality's inner conflicts—and remains the irresistibly terrifying stuff of our worst nightmares.

The Signet Classic edition includes, as an Introduction,
the famous Cornell lecture on *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by
VLADIMIR NABOKOV

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