

Dr. Jekyll and the crimes of Mr. Hyde

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Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* is often discussed as though it presents two independent personalities competing inside one body. That reading captures the novella's imagery of divided human nature but can weaken the question of moral responsibility. Hyde is not an unrelated intruder who seizes an innocent Jekyll. He is the form through which Jekyll permits himself to act without reputation, social restraint, or immediate recognition. Jekyll designs the experiment, consumes the drug, conceals the consequences, returns to the transformation after witnessing cruelty, and repeatedly treats Hyde's conduct as if it belonged to someone else. The novella therefore examines not only duality but self-deception. Jekyll wants the pleasures of transgression without accepting the identity of the transgressor. His responsibility increases because he understands the danger and nevertheless continues. Hyde eventually becomes harder to control, but loss of control is the foreseeable consequence of choices Jekyll made while he still possessed judgment and freedom.

The Difference Between Duality and Innocence

Jekyll's theory begins with a recognizable observation: human beings contain conflicting desires, values, and impulses. Respectable conduct does not eliminate selfishness, aggression, secrecy, or shame. Stevenson complicates this insight by showing what happens when Jekyll treats moral conflict as a chemical engineering problem. Instead of learning to govern contradictory desires, he attempts to divide them physically. The experiment promises a purified respectable self and a separate immoral self. Yet the result is asymmetrical. Hyde appears as concentrated appetite and cruelty, while Jekyll does not become a wholly virtuous being. Jekyll's original consciousness remains capable of vanity, concealment, and rationalization. This imbalance matters because it reveals that Jekyll's scheme was never a neutral scientific attempt to understand the mind. It was also an attempt to enjoy forbidden behavior without damaging the public identity on which his status depended. (Stevenson)

Respectability as a Motive

Jekyll is a wealthy physician whose position depends on reputation. Victorian respectability involved public expectations concerning morality, class, profession, self-command, and domestic conduct. The novella does not specify every private act Jekyll wishes to conceal, and that ambiguity allows Hyde to represent a broad field of prohibited desire. Jekyll's problem is not merely that society has unreasonable rules. It is that he values both social honor and secret release. Rather than challenge a hypocritical moral culture openly, he develops a method that lets him preserve its rewards while

violating its standards anonymously. Respectability therefore operates as motive and concealment. Jekyll is not forced into the laboratory by public persecution; he chooses secrecy because he wants incompatible advantages. Hyde's crimes emerge from this structure of privileged concealment. (Arata)

Creation and Foreseeability

Jekyll's responsibility begins with creation. He intentionally develops and uses the compound that produces Hyde. At first he may not predict the precise form or intensity of the transformation, but early experience gives him information. Hyde's smaller body suggests that the repressed side has been exercised less, yet its rapid pleasure in freedom makes its danger apparent. Once Hyde harms a child and Jekyll knows what occurred, the experiment is no longer innocent. He creates financial arrangements for Hyde, secures a separate residence, provides access to funds, and prepares explanations. These actions resemble planning around a known risk. Even if Jekyll does not intend every later assault, he makes future wrongdoing easier and detection harder. Moral responsibility includes foreseeable consequences, especially when a person repeatedly recreates the condition that produced earlier harm.

The Trampling of the Child

The early assault witnessed by Enfield establishes Hyde's character through action rather than diagnosis. He moves over a child without ordinary recognition of her humanity and responds to public outrage with cold calculation. Jekyll later understands that Hyde committed the act. At this point he could destroy the drug, disclose the danger, seek help, or accept restrictions. Instead, he compensates the family through a cheque connected to Jekyll's respectable identity and continues maintaining Hyde's independent existence. Financial compensation resolves the immediate scandal but does not address the source of risk. Jekyll's response demonstrates how wealth and reputation can absorb consequences that might otherwise force change. The incident is a warning, and ignoring a warning is central to later culpability.

The Murder of Sir Danvers Carew

Hyde's murder of Sir Danvers Carew marks an escalation from casual cruelty to lethal violence. The attack is described through a witness whose limited view emphasizes suddenness and excessive force. Jekyll did not plan this particular killing in the conventional sense, but he had knowingly continued a practice that released an increasingly powerful violent identity. After the murder, he attempts abstinence and experiences a period of charitable behavior. This response reveals that he recognizes moral connection between Hyde's conduct and his own life. He does not react as one person would to an unknown criminal; he reacts with guilt, fear, and reform. His later relapse is

therefore not based on ignorance. Jekyll has learned that transformation can end in murder and still remains psychologically attached to the freedom it offers.

Hyde as Mask and Agency

Calling Hyde a mask does not mean that the transformation is imaginary. Within the novella's supernatural logic, Hyde possesses a distinct body, voice, and behavioral style. However, the moral function of that body is concealment. It allows Jekyll to speak of desire as though it belongs to another person. The mask changes appearance but does not erase authorship. Jekyll remembers Hyde's conduct, prepares resources for him, and initially decides when to become him. Hyde's agency grows, yet it originates within a structure Jekyll created. The story thus anticipates modern questions about responsibility when people act through anonymous accounts, intoxication, technological systems, or organizations. Altered conditions may affect control, but deliberately creating a condition to escape accountability does not provide automatic excuse. (Dryden)

Addiction and Repetition

Jekyll's relationship with transformation resembles addiction in several respects: anticipation, relief, increasing compulsion, failed abstinence, continued use despite catastrophic harm, and loss of control. The analogy should not be treated as a clinical diagnosis, but it helps explain why knowledge does not immediately produce change. Each transformation reinforces the association between Hyde and freedom from restraint. Jekyll's periods of reform remain fragile because they depend on willpower while leaving the underlying fantasy intact. He still imagines that the pleasure can be separated from the victimization. The narrative becomes darker when transformations occur without the drug, showing that the boundary he tried to control has been altered by repeated use. Addiction language can explain diminished control at later stages, yet it does not erase the earlier choices through which the pattern became established.

Scientific Responsibility

Jekyll is also responsible as a scientist and physician. He conducts a high-risk experiment on himself without peer review, external observation, safeguards, or a plan for containment. Personal experimentation may appear to limit harm to the researcher, but Jekyll's transformation creates danger for the public. He withholds information from Dr. Lanyon and others until crisis, uses a servant and intermediaries without informed understanding, and stores substances capable of producing unpredictable effects. His secrecy is motivated partly by professional rivalry and shame. Stevenson's novella therefore presents scientific ambition without ethical accountability. Knowledge is pursued as private property, while society bears the risk. Jekyll's professional status makes the failure more serious because he possesses education and authority that should increase his ability to anticipate

harm.

Utterson, Lanyon, and Social Silence

The men around Jekyll contribute to an environment of secrecy, although they are not responsible for Hyde's crimes in the same way. Utterson values discretion and avoids scandal, a quality that makes him loyal but slow to confront disturbing evidence. Lanyon rejects Jekyll's work as unscientific and later witnesses the transformation, yet professional estrangement limits earlier communication. Servants observe unusual conduct but operate within hierarchy. The novella suggests that respectable communities can protect wrongdoing by treating privacy as more important than inquiry. Jekyll benefits from others' reluctance to ask direct questions. Institutional responsibility does not replace individual responsibility, but it explains how private violence can continue within networks organized around status and silence.

Does Hyde Become an Independent Person?

A possible defense of Jekyll is that Hyde eventually acts independently and resists Jekyll's wishes. If Hyde has separate consciousness, perhaps responsibility should be divided. The novella keeps this issue ambiguous. Jekyll sometimes describes Hyde in the third person and reports fear of him, yet he also admits pleasure in Hyde's actions and remembers them from within. The transformations do not produce two biographies with separate histories; they produce competing modes of one life. Hyde depends on Jekyll's body, resources, and initial decisions, while Jekyll depends on Hyde to enact desires. Even if Hyde becomes partially autonomous, Jekyll remains responsible for knowingly creating and repeatedly enabling him. Shared or diminished responsibility is not the same as innocence.

Suicide, Death, and Final Responsibility

The ending does not show Jekyll nobly sacrificing himself in a simple act of redemption. The precise relation between Jekyll's final intention and Hyde's death remains uncertain because the last documents are mediated and the body discovered is Hyde's. What is clear is that concealment has collapsed. Jekyll can no longer sustain his public identity, and Hyde faces capture. Death prevents legal trial and leaves Utterson to reconstruct the truth through documents. Jekyll's confession increases understanding but arrives too late to protect the victims. Confession is morally significant because it abandons denial, yet acknowledgment after irreversible harm cannot substitute for earlier action. The narrative's documentary structure forces readers to judge responsibility after the responsible subject has disappeared. (Veeder)

Crime, Law, and Moral Identity

If Jekyll and Hyde were treated as separate legal persons, practical questions would arise about intention, memory, bodily identity, and control. The novella is not a legal case, but it uses crime to test the limits of identity. Law usually connects responsibility to a person across time despite changing moods, roles, and desires. Jekyll seeks an exception: he wants one body to hold two moral accounts. Stevenson rejects that accounting trick. A person cannot deliberately create an anonymous self, provide it with resources, benefit from its freedom, and then claim that its crimes belong to someone else. The enduring phrase “Jekyll and Hyde” sometimes suggests unpredictable personality change, but the novella’s deeper lesson concerns continuity beneath appearance.

Conclusion

Dr. Jekyll bears responsibility for the crimes of Mr. Hyde because Hyde originates in Jekyll’s deliberate experiment and is repeatedly enabled after his violence becomes known. Jekyll’s control diminishes, but that later loss is preceded by informed choices, concealment, preparation, and relapse. Hyde expresses desires that Jekyll refuses to integrate into a responsible moral identity. The experiment does not separate good from evil; it separates conduct from reputation and gives privilege a new disguise. Stevenson’s novella therefore criticizes both ungoverned desire and the respectable hypocrisy that encourages secrecy. Jekyll’s tragedy is not that an entirely foreign monster invades him. It is that he tries to escape responsibility for part of himself and creates conditions in which that part can harm others without restraint.

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