

# The good mr. hyde



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

“ I learned to recognize the thorough and primitive duality of man . . . if I could rightly be said to be either, it was only because I was radically both” (41). So says Henry Jekyll in a heartfelt letter to his best friend, Henry Utterson. His final letter to his friend draws upon realization after realization regarding the basic foundation of human nature: the omnipresent duality of good and evil. Indeed, Stevenson’s story of Jekyll and Hyde is a clear juxtaposition of these two ideals. On one side of the coin, Stevenson describes Dr. Henry Jekyll, who from his respectable social title to his pleasant good looks describes a perfect good. He is “ a large, well-made, man of fifty” (18), well-liked, and highly-respected. Mr. Hyde, meanwhile, seemingly counters everything Jekyll stands for: he is pale, dwarfish, ugly, and “ gives the impression of deformity without any nameable malformation” (15). The fact that these two diametric opposites are revealed, in the end, to be the same person represents Robert Louis Stevenson’s deliberate contrast between the ideas of good and evil, and more importantly, the incessant struggle between them. However, through Jekyll’s inability to fully split himself into two beings, Stevenson preaches about the flawed definitions of good and evil. Although Jekyll is meant to be the “ perfect good” and Hyde the “ ultimate bad”, it is only true on a superficial level. Stevenson’s novella is not so simple that these two characters can be defined in such stark, black and white terms: instead, each is an amalgamation of both ideals. In fact, in some ways, Hyde can even be viewed as a better person than Jekyll, especially to those who value honesty and truth over social goodness. He, at least, is honest and straightforward in his desires. Jekyll is a “ hypocritical creature carefully concealing his little sins” (Nabokov 10) who tries desperately to hide his immoralities behind a

<https://assignbuster.com/the-good-mr-hyde/>

mask, deceiving everyone he knows. Even in the face of death, Jekyll refuses to come out and explain himself to his friends, opting instead to reveal the truth in a letter meant to be read post-mortem, poisoning himself when on the verge of exposure. Ironically, even his adamant denial of hypocrisy in his letter to Utterson is a testament to his hypocrisy: “ I was in no sense a hypocrite; both sides of me were in dead earnest; I was no more myself when I laid aside restraint and plunged in shame, than when I labored, in the eye of day, at the furtherance of knowledge or the relief of sorrow and suffering” (41). Though Jekyll is always quick to defend himself from accusations of his hypocrisy because he sees himself as justified in his pursuit of perfection, it is undeniable that he constantly uses Hyde—which, as Nabokov points out, derives from “ Haven” in Danish (Nabokov 9)—as a hiding place behind which he can act upon his base instincts. Jekyll lives vicariously through Hyde’s freedom and delightfully uses him as a mask while he lives out his most wicked fantasies: “ I knew myself, at the first breath of this new life, to be more wicked, tenfold more wicked, sold a slave to my original evil; and the thought, in that moment, braced and delighted me like wine. I stretched out my hands, exulting in the freshness of `these sensations; and in the act, I was suddenly aware that I had lost in stature” (42). Since Hyde is Jekyll’s mask, an extension of his original being, they are the same person; they only differ in inhibition. The two have the exact same instincts and desires, but while Jekyll puts effort into restraining himself from acting upon his viler instincts in an effort to maintain his high social standing, Hyde acts on desire and animalistic recklessness. Hyde releases his inhibitions, becoming a “ social bad”—ugly, rude, violent, and cruel—because he sees himself as allowed to destroy his social duties. Stevenson

uses this marked contrast to make an obvious point: every human is “ not truly one, but truly two” (41). However, he also goes on to suggest that this same omnipresent balance of good and evil is both a necessary and fragile trait found in every individual. The conflict here, therefore, comes from from Hyde’s necessary existence, not the dissonance between good and evil. Through that observation, we realize that the reason behind Jekyll’s inability to fully separate his alter egos was simply due to the natural order of the universe: it is not possible to split something into “ good” and “ evil” because the two ideas so overwhelmingly overlap. Jekyll was unable to control the two separate beings because we, as humans, were not meant to be able to do so. The definitions of good and bad are flawed because they need to be—because it is not possible for them not to be. They are flawed because true good and evil do not exist, and therefore, they cannot be divided into separate entities. The reason that Hyde becomes evil and Jekyll becomes good in Stevenson’s novella is because they themselves believe to be those things—not because they actually are. Jekyll’s split into two personalities is more a psychological division rather than a corporeal one: by accepting a specific societal role, Jekyll and Hyde grows into “ good” and “ evil.” Because Jekyll considers himself responsible for social righteousness, he becomes a “ good” in the way that society views good: gentlemanly, smartly dressed, and intelligent. His good appearance is what makes him “ good” in the eyes of his city. Hyde, meanwhile, believes he is meant to be a bad person, and increasingly releases that idea upon his environment: once he is unwilling to remain a mask any longer, he soon begins to exert a will of his own. After Hyde tramples upon a young girl, Jekyll suppresses Hyde for nearly two months before Hyde is able exert enough resolve to reemerge. At <https://assignbuster.com/the-good-mr-hyde/>

this point Hyde's consciousness becomes too much for Jekyll to subdue and Hyde becomes more and more realized until it is finally Jekyll who is the shell. Thus, Stevenson's Strange Case warns us about trying to overstep human boundaries—it is in our best interest not to reach the potential that Jekyll was so fixated on. That balance between good and evil exists to limit the extent to which people can become “good” or “bad” rather than maximize it: it stops us from becoming bloodthirsty, uninhibited men like Hyde. After all, this balance is what makes us human. We all have faults, and we all have an “imperfect and divided countenance ... commingled out of good and evil” within us (43). Trying to rid ourselves of that vital human characteristic is akin to amputating a limb. It is all a part of the human struggle to try to control both sides, but in the end, we will all only become stronger and better for it—advancing not only our individual selves, but our impacts on the world.

WORKS CITED  
Nabokov, Vladimir. “The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.” *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson. New York: Signet Classic, 2003. Print.  
Stevenson, Robert Louis. *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. 1886. Reprint. NY: Norton, 2003. Print.