

Genre, scientific censuring, and gender roles

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Genre, Scientific Censuring, and Gender roles The theme of science begins to be discussed through literature in the late Victorian era to the early Edwardian period. Two novels are both rich in not only scientific influence, but how the Britain's dealt with and viewed science as a society. The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde by Robert Louis Stevenson and The War of the Worlds by H. G. Wells are two famous and historic pieces of literature that can be looked at to view the influence of science and the impact it had on the society at that time. One novel is being classified as science fiction, while the other had been referred to as gothic literature. One can say that science was seen as the work of mad men and these two novels censure science to a certain degree. We shall first look at and examine the earlier of the two novels, which is The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde by Stevenson. Stevenson tells a very cautionary tale of science in this work. Dr. Jekyll is an educated man of science who is respected and helps people of the community. Mr. Hyde is the opposite and characterized as a monster-like man: " It wasn't like a man; it was like some damned Juggernaut. "(Stevenson 9) and again " And the next moment, with ape-like fury, he was trampling his victim under his foot, and hailing down a storm of blows, ..."(Stevenson 22). Stevenson writes about the " citadel of medicine, where his friend, the great Dr. Lanyon, had his house and received his crowding patients" (Stevenson 13). The author portrays the Dr. Lanyon as being great, as physicians were seen as great persons of the community and well respected. Mr. Hyde is representative of the dark side of the scientific field. New technology and new medicines can be great healers, but the author is saying that if we alter with God's work and the nature of human life, it can turn on society. There is a general moral strategy to this novel penned by <https://assignbuster.com/genre-scientific-censuring-and-gender-roles/>

Stevenson, and that is “ to describe an evil that wears the face of science and then show how to combat it. This story is meant to warn the audience of the irresponsibility of scientists in fooling with random uncertainties, discontinuities, and relativism (Toumey 412-13). This story can thus be classified as a vehicle for not only damming science, but underlying a certain evil within it. Herein lays the first similarity between the two novels. While both novels are from somewhat different genres of fiction, they share a common ground: scientific knowledge. In *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Dr. Jekyll’s knowledge of science is what creates the monster Mr. Hyde. In *The War of the Worlds* the knowledge of science helps the narrator out in many instances, however not all. The narrator is obviously an educated man; we learn this from the very beginning when he is writing the treaties. He is intrigued at first and says: “ It would be curious to know how they live on another planet; we might learn a thing or two” (Wells 37). We also see how intelligent he when analyzing alien remains as he states: “ The pulmonary distress caused by the denser atmosphere and greater gravitational attraction was only too evident in the conclusive moments of the outer skin” (Wells 125). The narrator obviously knows more than an average person or an uneducated one. He always seems to make better decisions than the other characters he runs into. Wells does seem to be painting a cautious picture of knowledge though. *The War of the Worlds* has very little magical elements if any. Some may consider the aliens to be “ magical” rather than science fiction, but the story also may be seen as being scientifically plausible. The fact that it is plausible makes it part of the science fiction genre rather than fantasy. There is a lot of science jargon used and the narrator uses his knowledge of science. For example: “ The <https://assignbuster.com/genre-scientific-censoring-and-gender-roles/>

results of an anatomical examination of the Martians...I have already given" (Wells 180). He also says that although his " knowledge of comparative physiology is confined to a book or two" (Wells 179). The narrator speaks eloquently and intelligently about all matters pertaining to the Martians from a scientific standpoint. The reason why science fiction celebrates technology is that it assumes the technology is equivalent to progress and intelligence, regardless of the moral strengths or weaknesses of the good guys and bad guys who employ it (Toumey 414). If science can be represented in terms of knowledge and that knowledge is shown to be evil, then the case can be made that two novels censure science to a certain degree. Interesting enough, there seems to be a duality in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. There is, as was mentioned earlier, a sense of censorship, but on the other hand scientists were not portrayed as all evil in this work by Stevenson. They were referred to as respectable, high class citizens, mainly because they helped people. However, in this society of respectables, Dr. Jekyll stands out as " the very pink of the proprieties" (Stevenson 29). Dr. Jekyll's studies tend towards the mystic and transcendental, he still manages to maintain a good scientific reputation in the community. And yet, despite Jekyll's social role- and in fact, because of it- it is Jekyll, rather than Utterson or Lanyon, who brings forth the monster Mr. Hyde (Miyoshi 472). This is where one can see the difference in the two novels from a genre standpoint and from a scientific viewpoint. The story is a very dark tale that goes against the grain of typical Victorian era literature. Judith Halberstam's referral to the " opposite of the normal and pure" of Mr. Hyde is why she calls this work Gothic fiction. She thinks that Stevenson is portraying the opposite of pure, namely evil. Hyde is a kin to the devil, but it seems

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impossible to define the exact quality that places fear in those that meet him. We see this when Stevenson writes: "for O my poor old Harry Jekyll, if ever I read Satan's signature upon a face, it is on that of your new friend (Hyde)" (Stevenson 17). One might agree with her because all gothic literature contains a villainous monster-like figure in it. In this case, Mr. Hyde is the gothic figure who acts like a monster, running over children in the street and killing people. In Wells' *The War of the Worlds*, it is a different type of look at science. Science can be seen as harmful and can hinder a character's progress throughout the novel. Aliens are supposed to be these super evolved and brilliant creatures that are all brain and no emotion, but in the end, their ultimate downfall is germs. The germs ironically enough, are completely uneducated life forms. They seem almost unstoppable throughout the entire story and the fate of England seems immanent. The story turns into a piece about survival. The survival of the human race not only against life forms from another planet, with superior technology, but with superior knowledge. The last point we can explore is the similarity in gender description in both novels. Both novels have male dominated story lines and characters. In Stevenson's story the plot is completely centered on the title character(s) and two other male roles. The two other male roles are that of Mr. Utterson and Dr. Lanyon. This story was written in a time when gender roles were shifting, the story lacks coherent representations of sexuality despite its seeming emphasis on an emphatically male society (Doane and Hodges 63). Hyde represents this transformative power that is at once a brutal, violent force, and completely masculine. (Doane and Hodges 65). The essence of the moral in the story is seen from a male perspective, much like that of *The War of the Worlds*. The narrator in that story goes <https://assignbuster.com/genre-scientific-censoring-and-gender-roles/>

through the whole story using a particular tone that suggests all he is interested in is personal preservation and the gain of scientific knowledge. At no time does he show concern for his wife, nor does the narrator ever speak of the fact that he might not see her ever again. The wife eventually makes it back to their house in the end unscathed, but even then the narrator shows very little emotion towards her. Her role in the story is, in essence, useless. The role of women is useless in the story just like the role of woman in society in terms of scientific advancement, government, and in military. Exclusion of woman in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* shows the operative principles of patriarchy. It shows the need for men to distinguish the patriarchal self from enemies, pretenders, competitors, and corruptors. At the heart of this is the male anxiety derived from the weakening of patriarchy in late Victorian Britain. Men are afraid of their weakening position and the progression of the female in society (Doane and Hodges 66). There seems to be an overwhelming fear that Britain's will be conquered and that maybe, all people are equal. There also is the fear that of the failure of your military, doctrine, and religion. A good example of this can be seen at the end of *The War of the Worlds*. Supplies come from all over the world, not from their own government or country. This may explain the fear of complacency in the novel and the message that one shouldn't over estimate your superiority. The character of the artillery man is a bit of a rabble rouser until he actually has to do something, which further demonstrates the fear of the role of man diminishing. Wells interestingly seems to see woman as either strong, like the narrators' wife who survived and made it back their house, or useless as mentioned before. Works Cited Doane, Janice, and Devon Hodges. "Demonic Disturbances of Sexual Identity: *The Strange Case* <https://assignbuster.com/genre-scientific-censoring-and-gender-roles/>

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