

The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde



The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde was published in January 1886. Planned for Christmas a month earlier, in the tradition of “shilling shockers” – tales of horror and mystery to be read during the Christmas season – its appearance had been delayed. No mere spooky tale for all the family, this is a disturbing story for adults – altogether a darker tale than Charles Dickens’ A Christmas Carol, published just over forty years earlier.

Film Adaptations

The first ever moving pictures appeared eight years after the book was published. And film producers could hardly wait to provide their own take on the story. “The change is displayed with a dramatic ability almost beyond comprehension.” This is from a film review. Since that time, all of the 123 film versions of the story have presented this “change” far too early: in the book the “change” is actually described late, in two letters addressed to Mr Utterson. Presenting it any earlier totally destroys the detective-story nature of the piece. And it really is a kind of detective story.

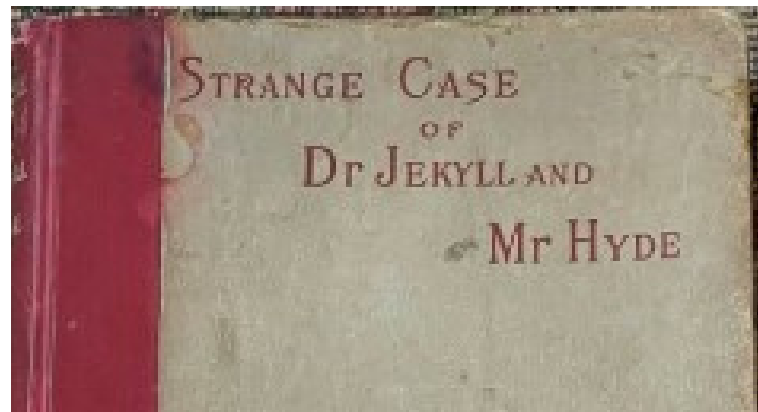


The Audience as Detectives

It is the book, not any film, that we are dealing with. So, it is perhaps helpful to try to approach the story with the mind of its first readers. However much some of our young audience may think they know of this story, we ask them to make an imaginative leap: to think of themselves as being among those first readers in 1886. The one character that seems to represent the detective – and, incidentally, the reader – in search of the truth, is Mr Utterson. Like Utterson, the original reader will have spent much of the novel wondering, what is the mysterious hold this evil Mr Hyde seems to have over the respectable Dr Jekyll?

Victorian Society

It soon becomes obvious that all the chief characters are members of the “respectable” ruling class. And, they are all men – Victorian men. Respectability to them lies not so much in their actual behaviour, as in how they are perceived by others. Avoiding a scandal is vitally important to their position in society.



Censorship

Robert Louis Stevenson, our author, had to rely on hints when dealing with some of the aspects of his subject. This is because, as Utterson speculates on possible motivations, the current sexual taboos of the time come into play. Literary censorship was a matter the author had to keep an eye on.