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## Beyond Science: Exploring Victorian Anxieties in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*

**Shabrina Adzani Yusra**

English Literature Study Program, Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Andalas, Padang

Email: [shabrinaay.student.sasingunand@gmail.com](mailto:shabrinaay.student.sasingunand@gmail.com)

### ABSTRACT

This study examines how Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* reflects Victorian anxieties surrounding misuse of scientific discoveries. The novels follow Dr. Henry Jekyll, a respected physician who creates a potion to unleash his darker self in the form of the monstrous Edward Hyde. Using a historical-biographical approach and qualitative analysis, this study draws on primary data from novels supported by secondary sources including literary criticism and journal articles. The findings reveal that Stevenson addresses Victorian fears of unchecked scientific progress through Dr. Jekyll's experiments, the societal reactions to Mr. Hyde and the depiction of Jekyll's hubris, which ultimately highlight the era's concerns about the ethical limits of science.

Keywords: Historical-biographical, Scientific advancements, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Victorian anxieties

### ABSTRAK

Artikel ini mengkaji bagaimana novel *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* karya Robert Louis Stevenson mencerminkan kecemasan Masyarakat Victoria terkait penyalahgunaan penemuan ilmiah. Novel ini mengikuti kisah Dr. Henry Jekyll, seorang dokter yang dihormati. Dia menciptakan ramuan untuk melepaskan sisi gelap dirinya dalam bentuk Edward Hyde yang mengerikan. Menggunakan pendekatan historis-biografis dan analisis kualitatif, studi ini memanfaatkan data primer dari novel serta didukung oleh sumber sekunder seperti kritik sastra dan artikel jurnal. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Stevenson menyoroti ketakutan Masyarakat Victoria terhadap kemajuan ilmu pengetahuan yang tak terkendali melalui eksperimen Dr. Jekyll, reaksi masyarakat terhadap Mr. Hyde, serta penggambaran kesombongan Jekyll yang pada akhirnya menekankan kekhawatiran era tersebut akibat batas-batas etis ilmu pengetahuan.

Kata Kunci: Historis-biografis, Kemajuan Ilmiah, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Kecemasan Masyarakat Victoria

### INTRODUCTION

The 19th century, often referred to as the Victorian era, was marked by a rapid surge in scientific discoveries and technological inventions that transformed society. However, alongside the significant advancements, there were also some fears about the potential misuse of these discoveries. The anxieties that pervaded Victorian society arose from fear of

cultural degeneration, medical advancement, and growing addiction (Pascoe, 2019, p. 1). Moreover, somehow, these anxieties found their way to literature. They serve as the essential foundation for gothic literature, as they reflect the fears of society at that time to address them directly (Smith, 2013, p. 18).

One notable 19th-century literary work that utilizes the gothic theme in the story is Robert Louis Stevenson's novella, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Published in 1886 and set in Victorian London, the novella recounts the story of a respected scientist, Dr. Henry Jekyll, who created a potion to unleash his dark personality through the monstrous and sinister creature, Edward Hyde. Through this narrative, Stevenson explored the duality of human nature through medical experiments. Simultaneously, with the disastrous consequences of Dr. Jekyll's experiments, where he cannot regain control over Mr. Hyde, Stevenson also reflects on the era's anxieties towards the potential misuse of scientific advancements and the societies' worries about science overstepping moral boundaries in the 19th century.

Numerous studies have delved into this novella, covering various topics, as one of the most celebrated works of gothic fiction. In *Behold The Beast: Victorian Anxieties and Monstrous Forms* (2019), Pascoe argues that Mr. Hyde embodies the monstrous manifestations of Victorian fears, specifically those related to moral decay, scientific progress, and the destabilization of societal norms, thus providing a tangible representation of these anxieties. On the other hand, in the study *The Split Character as Reaction to Victorian Moral and Social Restrictions in Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray and Robert Louis Stevenson's Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (2024), Ellenardóttir claims that the novella illustrates how the rules and restrictions of the Victorian age inevitably led to a split in people's characters. Additionally, while Esmailzadeh et al., in their study *Violating Positivist Precepts: A Comtean Look into The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (2024) argue that the novella does not inherently convey anti-positivist or anti-scientific sentiments, I contend that Stevenson's portrayal of Dr. Jekyll's experiments illustrates a deeper cautionary stance. The novella reflects anxieties surrounding the ethical implications and potential misuse of scientific advancements, particularly when detached from moral responsibility, which addresses this issue in detail. Although previous studies have explored the connection between *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and the Victorian era, this article will further examine how Stevenson uses scientific experiments not only to mirror societal fears of unchecked scientific progress but also to critique the moral and ethical boundaries of such advancements. By

focusing on Stevenson's nuanced portrayal of science, this study aims to reveal a more complex stance towards the intersection of science and morality during that period. This article argues that Robert Louis Stenvenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* reflects Victorian anxieties about the ethical dangers of scientific advancements, particularly fears of moral corruption, loss of control, and social decay as portrayed through Dr. Jekyll's experiments, the character's reactions to Mr. Hyde and Dr. Jekyll's hubris.

## THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

Historical-biographical criticism interprets literary works primarily as a reflection of the author's life and times, or the life and times of the characters in the work (Guerin et al., 2011, p. 51). This approach views literature as a reflection of the society in which it is produced, and the reflection or expression of its author's life. It supposes that a literary text talks about social or political issues of its time, which means that the best way to understand the text is to analyze it in the context of those issues (Walfajri, 2023). It also assumes that a literary text takes a particular position on the problems it discusses, whether in agreement or disagreement.

Published in 1886, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* is a novella with a solid Victorian-era setting. The author believes that historical-biographical criticism is needed to thoroughly comprehend and examine Victorian anxiety's theme, as it reflects how society at that time responded to scientific experiments. Furthermore, this approach closes how Stevenson's life background contributes to depicting characters in the novella. Historical-biographical criticism explains Stevenson's stance towards scientific advancement during the Victorian era.

This study uses a qualitative method to analyze and present how scientific experiments in the novella reflect Victorian anxieties. The author gathered data from two sources: primary and secondary sources. Primary sources come from the novella *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. The author will comprehensively read the novella to obtain specific information for the analysis. Secondary sources will be collected from literary books, journal articles, and websites to support primary data and arguments.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As an era of significant innovation and progress, the Victorian era brought about significant changes that impacted various aspects of life for Victorians (Ellenardóttir, 2024, p. 3). The rapid changes during the Victorian era gave rise to a distinct form of social anxiety, often referred to as 'Victorian Anxiety.' This anxiety stemmed from widespread fears of cultural degeneration, uncertain implications of medical advancements, and increasing prevalence of addiction. These concerns reflected deeper tensions within Victorian society as it grappled with the challenges posed by modernization and shifting moral values (Pascoe, 2019, p. 1). These anxieties serve as the core foundation for gothic literature, as gothic literature brings out society's fears through written literary works. Stevenson's most acclaimed novella, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, is no exception. The work serves as a potent example of how the Gothic theme is incorporated into literary works.

Gothic elements in literature often encompass more than monstrous forms. They include a pervasive atmosphere of dread, moral ambiguity, and psychological fear, along with supernatural or mystical elements, all of which serve to reflect anxieties and threats that haunt both the author and society (Pascoe, 2019, p. 1). Particularly concerning Victorian anxieties, these monstrous forms reflect the anxieties in Victorian society. In his novella, through the character of the sinister, the evil creature Edward Hyde, Stevenson uses traditional monstrous forms like other gothic literature to bring out society's fear. However, Stevenson also cleverly employs science, in this case, the scientific experiments that Dr. Jekyll undergoes to reflect on society's anxieties at that time.

### Victorian Anxieties About Scientific Experiments

Dr. Jekyll's transformation, framed through scientific experimentation rather than supernatural forces, underscores Victorian era's deep-seated anxieties about the ethical boundaries of scientific progress. By shifting the source of horror from mystical to scientific, Stevenson reflects societal fears about the destabilizing potential of unchecked scientific advancements, particularly the loss of moral control and the unforeseen consequences of manipulating human nature. This shift mirrors the growing public concern about whether science, now seen as a tool of power, could be used irresponsibly with dire repercussions for individuals and society. However, as Rizano (Rizano, 2021, p. 41) points out the real issue faced by society is not merely a moral dilemma, but a structural one. Anxieties about scientific advancement, while framed in moral terms, were in fact symptoms of deeper structural

problems within Victorian society. These include class hierarchies, economic pressures, and rigid social norms that govern individual behavior. By focusing solely on the moral dangers of scientific progress, narrative risks obscure the underlying societal structures that perpetuate these anxieties.

Stevenson's novels then can be read as a critique not just of scientific ethics, but of the broader societal frameworks that allowed such unchecked progress to flourish in the first place. This critique is particularly relevant in the context of medical practice, as highlighted by Pascoe (2019, p. 44), who noted that while doctors in the Victorian era were seen as keepers of England's purity. They were simultaneously viewed as threats to it because of their reckless pursuit of progress and knowledge. This dual perception contributed to the growing anxiety within Victorian society regarding scientific advancements, underscoring the ambivalence surrounding figures who were expected to uphold societal values while also pushing the boundaries of knowledge. Pascoe further stated that the state of doctors and scientists at the end of the Victorian era could be viewed as being at a crossroads: "on the one hand offering hope, on the other reaching into new and unexplored territory scientifically and socially (2019, p. 45). This aligns with the perspective that doctors during the Victorian era contributed to the development of new forms of addiction (Harrison, 2009, p. 55), which became one of the stems of Victorian anxieties.

Furthermore, the novella enhances Victorian society's anxiety about scientific advancements by portraying the fatal outcomes of Dr. Jekyll's experiments. Through the disastrous transformation of the well-respected Dr. Jekyll into sinister Edward Hyde, Stevenson reflects on society's anxieties about the dangers and potential misuse of scientific knowledge and discoveries. Moreover, Stevenson portrayed Mr. Hyde as an animal-like character, evident in the line, 'Mr. Hyde shrank back with hissing intake of breath (Stevenson, 2018, p. 24). This animalistic portrayal is significant, as it reflects society's anxieties regarding the dehumanizing effects of unchecked scientific advancement. By depicting Hyde in this manner, Stevenson taps into the primal fear that scientific exploration can lead to the emergence of primitive instincts and moral degradation, thereby challenging an era's belief in the progressive nature of knowledge. Science then is not inherently the object of fear. Rather, it is an instrument that forces humanity to confront its darker side (Gustiari, 2022, p. 70). This is further emphasized by Stevenson's use of the word 'hissing' to give Mr. Hyde an animalistic quality, capturing the societal anxieties of the Victorian era, when rapid scientific discoveries often revealed unsettling, potentially destructive aspects of human nature.

Eventually, Dr. Jekyll's inability to control Mr. Hyde led to his death. This outcome reinforces Stevenson's warning that, while scientific experiments offer potential for progress, they simultaneously carry the risk of crossing natural boundaries, resulting in unpredictable and dangerous consequences. As seen in the animalistic portrayal of Mr. Hyde and the societal fears surrounding dehumanization, Stevenson highlights the tension between scientific ambition and the ethical dilemmas it creates, underscoring Victorian anxiety about the unforeseen costs of advancing knowledge.

### **Other Characters' Reaction to Mr. Hyde**

The reactions of other characters to Mr. Hyde in the novella, such as Enfield and Utterson, further reflect Victorian society's moral objections to Dr. Jekyll's experiments. Both Enfield and Utterson, who embody the rigid moral standards and social decorum of their time, are deeply disturbed by Hyde's presence. Their discomfort and judgment not only highlight the Victorian emphasis on outward respectability and self-control but also the societal fear of transgressions against these norms. In this way, their reactions represent the broader anxieties of the era, where any deviation from accepted behavior, particularly through scientific experimentation, was seen as a threat to the social order. Several characters in the novella show a common reaction when meeting Mr. Hyde's evil and violent creatures, namely, disgust. For instance, Enfield's description of Mr. Hyde's physical appearance illustrates his deep aversion to him: 'there is something wrong with his appearance, something down-right detestable. I never saw a man I so disliked and yet I scarcely know why' (Stevenson, 2018, p. 15).

Likewise, Utterson similarly reacts to Mr. Hyde's appearance, describing him as having "unknown disgust, loathing and fear" (Stevenson, 2018, p. 26). The universal disgust and hatred that other characters experience upon encountering Hyde can be seen as a manifestation of a deeper fear of the unintended consequences of uncontrolled scientific experimentation. Hyde's grotesque physical appearance and animalistic behavior symbolize the Victorian anxiety surrounding the possibility that scientific advances could lead to the degradation of human identity and morality. In the context of Dr. Jekyll's transformation, Hyde represents the darker primitive side of human nature that emerges when scientific ambitions cross theoretical boundaries. This fear of losing control over one's identity and, by extension, the fear of societal decay reflects the broader Victorian concerns about the potential for scientific progress to disrupt the moral and social fabric of their world. This

reaction implies shared societal discomfort with the consequences of Jekyll's horrid transformation.

Lanyon's strong objection to Dr. Jekyll's scientific experiments highlights one perspective of Victorian society, particularly among the more conservative elements that view such experiments as transgressing natural boundaries. However, while Lanyon's rejection reflects his adherence to traditional scientific and moral principles, it does not necessarily represent society as a whole. Victorian society was divided into those who embraced the era's rapid scientific progress and those who feared the potential to disrupt the established norms. Lanyon's reaction illustrates the tension within the scientific community and society at large, where some saw experimentation as a dangerous overreach, while others were more open to its possibilities. This division reflects the broader cultural debate of the time as society grapples with the ethical implications of scientific advance. Both of them are well-respected and successful doctors; however, they share a different view of the experiment that Dr. Jekyll undergoes, referring to them as "unscientific balderdash" (Stevenson, 2018, p. 20). Jekyll's tragic death eventually justifies Dr. Lanyon's revulsion towards the experiments. Crossing humans' natural boundaries through imprudent experiments ultimately leads to terrible consequences.

Moreover, Dr. Jekyll's description of his chemical potion as 'transcendental medicine' (Stevenson, 2018, p. 90) highlights the inherent danger of his work. The term 'transcendent' implies that the experiment goes beyond the limits of ordinary science, venturing into unknown and potentially perilous realms. This reflects Jekyll's ambition to transcend human limitations and alter the nature of his identity. In this context, the 'transcendental' becomes dangerous because it disregards ethical and natural boundaries, embodying the Victorian fear that unchecked scientific ambition could have catastrophic consequences, as seen in Jekyll's ultimate loss of control over his monstrous alter ego. This choice of words indicates that Dr. Jekyll's experiments are viewed as potentially harmful attempts to alter the essence of human nature. The concept of "transcendental medicine" conveys a sense of excessive ambition, whereby pursuing knowledge enters a dangerous and morally ambiguous territory. This portrayal of extreme science reflects Victorian society's deep concerns regarding the ethical limits of scientific exploration. The reactions of characters such as Enfield and Utterson, who represent the moral standards of the time, illustrate society's intuitive rejection of experiments that push beyond accepted boundaries. Dr. Lanyon's vehement opposition to Jekyll's 'transcendental medicine' further reinforces these fears, as his traditional views on



science and morality emphasize the dangers of crossing natural and ethical lines. The concept of 'transcendental medicine' embodies the ultimate fear of Victorian society that unchecked scientific ambition could not only alter human identity but also disrupt the social and moral fabric by blurring the lines between progress and destruction. These elements depict broader societal anxiety regarding the unpredictable and potentially devastating consequences of unregulated scientific experimentation.

### **Stevenson's Stance through the Portrayal of Dr. Jekyll**

In the novella, Dr. Jekyll is depicted as a well-established community member known for his integrity and charitable work. However, despite his public persona, he conducted a secret radical experiment that created a ruthless monster that killed many people in town. Throughout the novella, we see how Dr. Jekyll is fully aware of the wickedness of his alter ego: he understands that the monster he created has become corrupted and dissoluble. Nevertheless, he does not seem troubled by it, as he states, "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" (Stevenson, 2018, p. 97). This admission highlights Dr. Jekyll's recognition of the power and freedom he feels when embracing darker impulses. Rather than recoiling from this revelation, he finds exhilaration in liberation from social constraints, illustrating a profound paradox of human desire. The temptation to transcend traditional moral boundaries in pursuit of personal gratification (Kurniawan, 2023). Stevenson portrays Jekyll not merely as an ignorant, overproud doctor, but as a complex character who knowingly engages in moral transgression to fulfill his desires. This duality emphasizes inherent conflict within the human psyche, where the quest for freedom can lead to a perilous surrender to one's basest instincts.

Additionally, Dr. Jekyll's inability to regain control over Mr. Hyde illustrates not only the fatal consequences of his overconfidence in his experiments but also reflects a profound internal conflict and loss of self-mastery. This structure highlights the inherent limitations of science in fully understanding and controlling human nature. Jekyll's transformation into Hyde represents a fracture in his identity, revealing that his attempts to segregate his darker impulses were ultimately futile. Instead of achieving mastery over his duality, he succumbs to the forces that he sought to contain. Thus, Stevenson critiques the notion that scientific advancement can provide a complete understanding of humanity. Rather, it exposes the complexities and dangers of attempting to manipulate fundamental aspects of the human



psyche (Rozadi, 2022). Complete domination by Mr. Hyde, which led to his death, simultaneously emphasized Stevenson's cautionary message towards unchecked scientific experiments, hinting at his disposition towards Victorian anxieties.

Stevenson came from a family of engineers and studied engineering before becoming a writer (Stiles, 2006, p. 881). Throughout his life, Stevenson suffers from a chronic illness that makes regular schooling difficult. His personal history may have influenced his critical stance on science, which did not improve his health. Given that the life events of an author are a crucial reflection of his writing, Stevenson's personal experiences provide significant insights into why he portrays the outcomes of Dr. Jekyll's scientific experiments as dreadful. Stevenson suffered from chronic illness, which likely instilled in him a deep awareness of mortality and the fragility of human existence. This perspective may have influenced his deduction of Jekyll's tragic downfall as a cautionary tale of the dangers of overreaching ambition. Additionally, with a background in engineering, Stevenson was exposed to the transformative potential of science and technology as well as to the ethical dilemmas they posed. His familial ties to engineering may have shaped his skepticism regarding unchecked scientific exploration, making the disastrous consequences of Jekyll's experiments resonate with his understanding of the limits of human control over nature. Together, these experiences enrich the themes of duality and moral conflict within his work, emphasizing the inherent risks of transcending national boundaries.

## CONCLUSION

Through *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Stevenson critiques Victorian anxieties surrounding the potential misuse of scientific discoveries, particularly in the context of rapid advancements in areas such as medicine and psychology. His portrayal of Dr. Jekyll's experiments with 'transcendental medicine' serves as a cautionary reflection on the ethical dilemmas posed by scientific ambition. The novella underscores the fact that unregulated experimentation could lead to dehumanization and moral decay, as well as the potential for individuals to lose control over their identities.

By highlighting these concerns, Stevenson addresses the broader societal unease regarding the implications of scientific progress that, while promising, carries the risk of catastrophic consequences if not carefully managed. First, by depicting Dr. Jekyll's transformation through scientific experiments, Stevenson highlights a critical aspect of the

Victorian era's anxiety towards scientific advancements. Furthermore, the portrayal of the disgust of other characters' reactions towards Mr. Hyde also shows how Stevenson depicts Victorian society's views on the result of extreme scientific experiments as something that crosses the natural boundaries of humans. Eventually, the portrayal of Dr. Jekyll's arrogance regarding the horrendous results of his experiments also suggests Stevenson's stance on scientific experiments prevalent during the Victorian era. Through these points, Stevenson appears to align with Victorian anxieties of the time.

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