

CLASSICS BEYOND ANTIQUITY SERIES

*Finding Classics in...*



**STRANGE CASE OF  
DR. JEKYLL AND  
MR. HYDE**



UNIVERSITY OF  
CAMBRIDGE

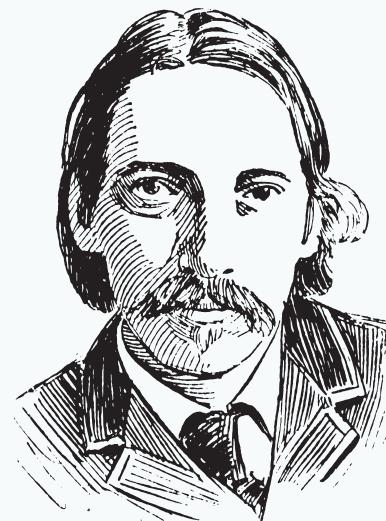
# **STRANGE CASE OF DR JEKYLL AND MR HYDE (1886)**

## **The Author and Classics**

Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894) is known to have been engaged in Classical learning throughout his life.

While he found classical languages difficult- failing to master Latin grammar and giving up Greek in despair- his

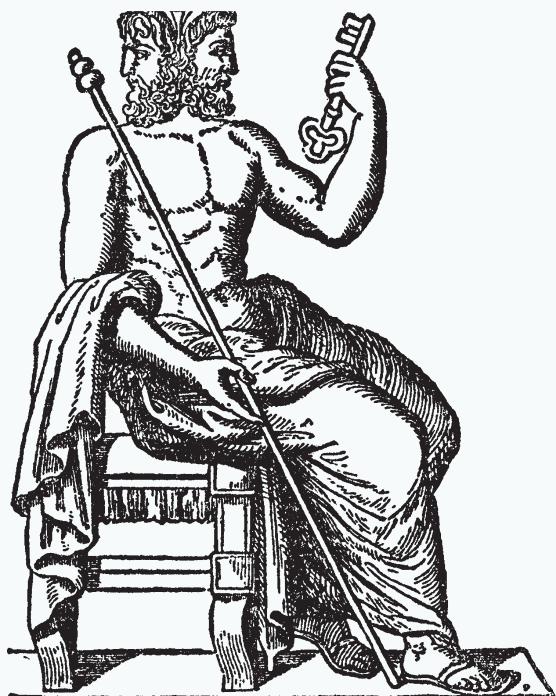
biographer tells us that he appreciated the works of the classical authors in translation and references to their works/thinking can be found in his letters and many of his literary works. Some of the Roman writers that influenced his work were Vergil, Horace, Lucretius, Livy, Tacitus, and Petronius. Among writers of Greek, he alludes, directly and indirectly, to Homer, Plato, and Euripides. Later in life he was captivated by the Elgin marbles, even keeping photographs of them in his rooms! He was interested by Roman history particularly the structure of the Roman State, planning to take a course of lectures in 1874 and he often refers to characters and stories from Greek Mythology.



# CLASSICAL THEMES AND IDEAS IN THE TEXT

## Janus

The *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* is famous for its themes of the duality of man. The Roman god Janus, famous for his two faces, represents similar ideas of duality as the god of change, new beginnings, and transitions both literal and metaphorical. The link between Janus and Jekyll/Hyde is often made- There was even a German Horror film based on the *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* called *The Head of Janus* Directed by F.W. Murnau in 1920.



Janus was one of the most important gods in the Roman Pantheon. In Ovid's *Fasti* Janus' two faces are explained as a representation of how the Gods came to be- originally there was chaos and out of chaos came the anthropomorphic gods we typically recognise; Janus' second face is a remnant of that former chaos in nature.

Though Janus was an important deity presiding over the order and civilisation of the Roman world, his connection to the primordial and chaotic past is central to his characterisation and importance to the Romans. His second face is what enables him to see past and future simultaneously, to represent the dualities of war and peace, and to be the gate keeper to the rest of the Gods. Janus' power comes from being a balance of order and chaos.

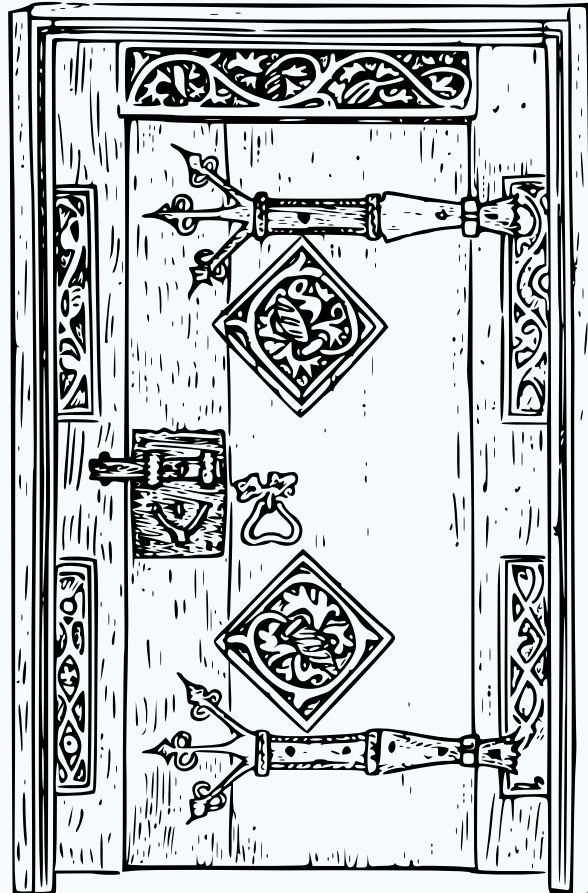
The idea that Mr Hyde is representative of a chaotic past form of human in contrast to Dr Jekyll's civilised 'progressive' nature is widely acknowledged. When Dr Jekyll first unleashes Mr Hyde he feels liberated and enjoys the liberation from always feeling constrained by society. However, when Mr Hyde is strengthened to the point that he can no longer return to the form of Dr Jekyll the balance is upset and his very life is under threat. The attempt by Dr Jekyll to distil and separate out his good and evil parts goes horribly wrong because these things cannot and should not be separated.

## *Questions to consider \**

It is a common theme in Ancient Religions for the 'primordial' past to be seen as a very powerful thing. What do you think it is about the 'deep past' that make people think it is so powerful? How does Mr Hyde embody those ideas?

Does Dr. Jekyll become more powerful when he creates his "second face" in Mr Hyde?

In his role as the god of transitions Janus was often associated with doors and doorways. In Roman tradition when the city was at war the doors to the temple of Janus would remain open, but in the \*rare\* times of peace the doors would be closed- it was a great achievement when Emperors could claim that they 'closed the doors of Janus'. Doors play a key role in the symbolism of the novella. As well as more psychological readings of the door metaphor, we can also draw this classical parallel with how the servants of Dr Jekyll attempted to keep the door to his house closed in the latter half of the text in order to retain peace and respectability and when the door to the lab is broken open, the narrative of Dr Jekyll's war with himself is made clear.



## Dionysiac Rites

In the Ancient Greek world, the rights of Dionysus offer an interesting parallel to the themes of self-restraint and release in the book. A key part of worshipping Dionysus was the idea of going into a Bacchic frenzy, releasing your inhibitions and surrendering yourself to a physical experience.



Social historians argue that these annual rites performed by the women of Athens during the Dionysia (a festival for Dionysus) were very important to them because of the sheltered and closeted lives they lived. Women were expected to be incredibly modest, feeling shame if they were so much as seen, and abide by strict codes of propriety.

The Dionysiac rites gave their desires and frustrations an outlet, which was in service of the city and its worship of the gods, rather than directed against it. In Dr Jekyll we see that the same desire for an outlet from the bounds of an oppressive societal code. However, the lack of a socially approved outlet for his frustrations drives him to dangerous measures that end in disaster and the murder of a respected citizen. Stevenson highlights a problem in Victorian society that the Greeks had seen and understood in their own.



We can also look at the tragedy of Dr Jekyll as similar to Pentheus, a character in Euripides' *Bacchae*. In Euripides' tragedy, Pentheus, the king of Thebes, is outraged by the people of his city engaging in the new rites of Dionysus and refuses to submit to them himself because he believes them to be immoral and sexually depraved. Secretly though, he is intrigued by the idea and wants to see what is happening- he believes that he will be able to deny Dionysus' cult and maintain his dignity, but still enjoy the experiences by spying on the worshippers. Similarly, Dr Jekyll wishes to indulge his base instincts in a manner that is separated from and maintains his 'good', dignified self. The result of Pentheus' hubris (insult to the god) is that he is savagely ripped apart by the worshippers when they are in their frenzy, just as Jekyll fears Mr Hyde being hunted and destroyed by those around him for the murder he committed, which in itself is a similar murder to the unthinking barbaric killing of Pentheus by the Bacchic revellers.

# *Questions to consider*

In what ways are the societies of Victorian England and Classical Athens repressive for both men and women? What societal expectations were placed upon people and how did this differ (between the sexes and the time periods)?

In Ancient Greece Men were allowed physical exercise and war to 'let off steam' and women were involved in religious rites- do you think this would have been enough to prevent frustrations against their societal norms?

What outlets would people in Victorian England have?

Do you think it is possible for people to indulge their desires and remain a respectable member of society today?

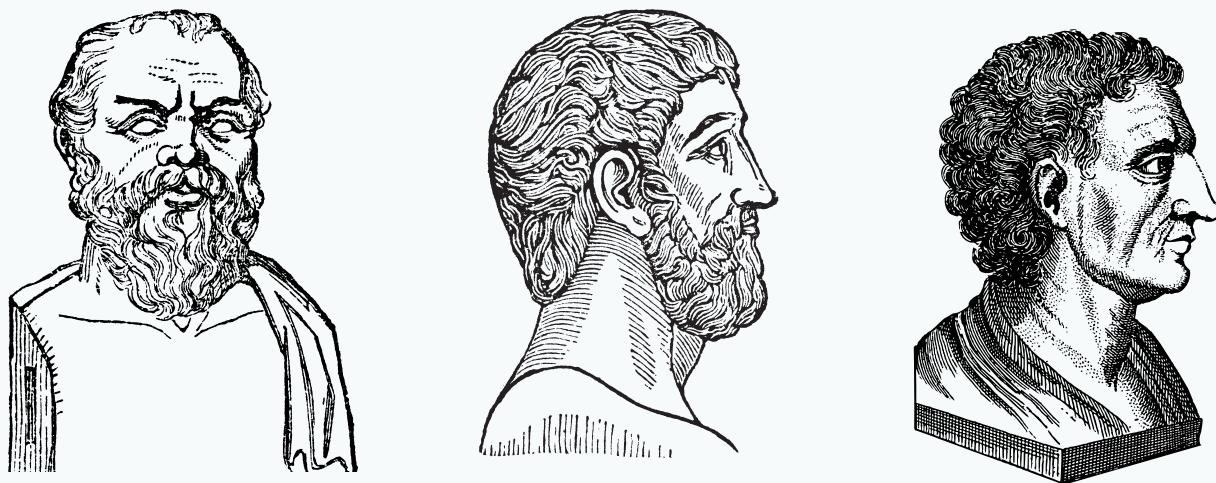
## **The Nature of the Soul**

Ancient Greek philosophers such as Aristotle and Plato also discussed the separation of the body into base instincts – the 'lower elements in my soul' as Jekyll calls them – and the higher intellect. Plato described a person's rational faculty as being like a charioteer trying to steer a reasonable course, with these two impulses as horses pulling in opposite directions.

Plato's theory of the soul outlined in Republic Book 4 suggests that there are three parts to the soul- Reason, Spirit, and Appetite. Reason is the part of the soul that is attracted to knowledge and truth. It is also, ideally, in charge of the other elements of the soul in a way that is informed by wisdom and that takes into consideration the concerns all parts of the soul and of the soul as a whole. These concerns of Appetite include a person's bodily needs. The natural attachment of spirit is to honour and recognition by others. It is also spirit that accounts for self-assertion and ambition. Plato has Socrates take spirit to be a natural ally of reason in many conflicts between reason and appetite. It is interesting to look at the position of Jekyll/Hyde within this framework, not least because Stevenson has Jekyll use the very vocabulary of appetite, spirit, and reason when outlining the story of his 'experiment'.

It would not be controversial to suggest that Hyde was a personification of the appetite in Jekyll's soul, which when strengthened stands in full opposition to Jekyll's spirit and reason. We see the violent expression of appetite vs. spirit (concern for honour and status) when Hyde brutally beats Sir Danvers Carew, a well-respected gentleman, with Jekyll's cane, a symbol of gentility, breaking it in two- a double destruction of things relating to honour and respectability. Hyde also is said to despise Jekyll, irrationally destroying objects related to his reason and spirit such as his scientific notes, a nod to reason in the form of learning and seeking truth, and a photograph of his father, related to spirit as parentage made up a large part of someone's respectability in Victorian England and Classical Greece alike.

It is interesting to note however, Jekyll states that he thinks man is made up of two sides, rather than Plato's proposed three- though he does say that he thinks it likely that in the future people would discover more facets to the soul. It seems likely here that he is referring to the two elements of spirit and appetite that reason is trying to govern without necessarily counting reason as a separate part in itself.



## *Questions to consider*

Find other examples from the text which support Plato's theory of the soul.

Do you think Jekyll successfully removes his appetite when he creates Mr Hyde? Is appetite still present in Jekyll? Does Hyde show any signs of reason or spirit?

Do you think Plato's theory of the soul is a good explanation of how the soul works in this book? If not how would you describe the workings of Dr. Jekyll's soul?

# Appearance of Mr Hyde

"There is something wrong with [Mr Hyde's] appearance; something displeasing, something downright detestable."

Stevenson characterises Mr Hyde as intensely ugly and even suggests that he is "deformed". As he is a representation of the 'evil' inside of Dr Jekyll, we can infer a link being made between physical appearance and morality. The equivalencies of beauty with goodness and ugliness with immorality are ones that have often been held throughout history, but this was particularly the case for the Ancient Greeks who considered physical beauty as a sign of divine favour. There is a famous story that a courtesan called Phryne was even pardoned for supposed impiety when Hyperides, who was defending her in court, showed the council her naked body, the successful argument being that she wouldn't be so beautiful if she had been impious!



In the Iliad we are introduced to a character called Thersites, who is reminiscent of Mr Hyde. He is said to be bow-legged and lame, to have shoulders that cave inward, and a head which is covered in tufts of hair and comes to a point. He is described as vulgar, obscene, and somewhat dull-witted. Here we have a character who is like Mr Hyde- ugly and deformed- and he is taken to be morally reprehensible. In the Iliad he is beaten by Odysseus for arguing against Agamemnon. Interestingly though, what he does argue for is what the majority of the Greek army want- to go home. Though the Greeks scorn him for his appearance and his vocalisation of his frustrations, Thersites, like Mr Hyde, can be seen as a representation of the average man's true desires that often don't tend towards glory and propriety.

## *Questions to consider*

Can you think of any other texts you have studied where beauty represents goodness and ugliness represents evil? Do you think this is a good device for authors to use?

It is noted that both Thersites and Mr. Hyde are deformed in some way- what does this tell us about views towards disability in both Victorian England and Ancient Greece? Why might they have held these views?



The 1968 Film adaptation *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* directed by Charles Jarrott has the make-up concept for Mr. Hyde radically different from earlier adaptations of the book, which typically depict the character as like a neanderthal to highlight a return to natural instincts- in Jarrott's version he is depicted as like a Satyr.

Satyrs in Greek mythology were male nature spirits known for their base instincts and sexual excesses, they were lovers of wine, music, dancing, and women. They were companions of the god Dionysus and they often attempted to seduce or rape nymphs and mortal women alike, usually with little success. Over the course of Greek history their depictions became less bestial and more human in appearance. Nietzsche- in the 19th century- realised the importance of satyrs to Greek thinking and argued that they were essentially humans stripped down to their most basic and bestial instincts, hence the link to the boorish and wild Mr Hyde.



# **EXPLICIT CLASSICAL REFERENCES EXPLAINED**

**"Such unscientific balderdash,' added the doctor, flushing suddenly purple, 'would have estranged Damon and Pythias"**  
**(Chapter 2)**

In Greek literature, Damon and Pythias are two famous friends. When Pythias was condemned to die, he requested time to settle his affairs. Initially, his request was refused. In response, Damon pleaded for Pythias to be allowed to leave and pledged his own life if he failed to return. He did return and both men received pardons for their extraordinary display of loyalty.

Saying that a disagreement over a matter of scientific approach would even break apart such a strong friendship is a clear indication that this was not 'only' a matter of scientific difference between the two old friends.



## **"Like the captives of Philippi, that which stood within ran forth" (Chapter 10)**

When describing first drinking the 'drug' Dr. Jekyll likens Mr. Hyde to the captives of Phillipi and their release. After Mark Anthony and Octavian were triumphant in two battles in the Macedonian city of Philippi, they chose to free the captives who had chosen to side with Cassius and Brutus. Ordinarily, the captives of Philippi would have been executed or enslaved.

This suggests that Mr Hyde has been captive inside of Dr. Jekyll and has presumably until now been losing the battle to his reasonable self. It also frames the release of his 'appetite' as an act of mercy on it- he doesn't, as is customary, continue to repress his desires but he allows them to be free. This image also creates a parallel between the internal conflict of Dr. Jekyll and the turbulence of the Roman State during the Wars of the Second Triumvirate.

### *Questions to consider*

How does this quotation add to your thoughts about the nature of Jekyll's soul? Does it work in relation to Plato's Theory?

Look up the Wars of the Second Triumvirate- If we think Stevenson wanted to draw a parallel between Jekyll's internal conflict and these wars, what further comparsions can we make?

# FURTHER READING

- \* For all additional questions don't be afraid to Google and explore websites like Wikipedia if you want to find out more about what things were like in the ancient world as well as looking at our recommendations.

**Ovid's *Fasti*** (Book 1)

**Euripides' *Bacchae***

More on Ancient Greek Society and its structures:

<https://www.worldhistory.org/article/483/ancient-greek-society/>

<https://online.maryville.edu/social-science-degrees/social-culture-ancient-greece/>

Philosophical Theories of the Soul (Including Plato's):

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ancient-soul/>

Would you be beautiful in the ancient world?

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-30746985>

Satyrs

<https://www.theoi.com/Georgikos/Satyroi.html>

About the Triumvirates:

<https://www.thoughtco.com/first-and-second-triumvirates-of-rome-117560>