

The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde

© Mark Mantho

Where are the *women* in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and how might the presence of a strong female character, acting as Jekyll's "inverse double," change the allegorical meaning of the novella? What do the characters of Utterson, Enfield, and Dr. Lanyon mean, allegorically, in the story? And how should readers view Jekyll? As a) an overreaching tragic hero who means well or b) an arrogant, weak-willed twit who never fully accepts responsibility for the evil he unleashes?

I find the first of these questions the most intriguing, if the most fanciful. Although it's true that film versions of Stevenson's book have prominently featured female leads, the same cannot be said for the original work itself. I wonder why this is. Possibly Stevenson simply didn't think about including any women in the almost exclusively masculine world he creates, but I am tempted to believe that more is involved. Did the author construct *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* the way he did because he sought, at least in part, to comment on the moral and ethical hazards that can accompany "male ambition" unchecked by any counterbalancing female influence? The protagonist is a respected doctor and scientist -- professions that, at least in Stevenson's day, were the sole province of men -- whose own stupidity and hubris lead him to ruin. An observer might conclude that had the author incorporated a fully realized female character into his story, one able to exercise a degree of persuasive power over the unfortunate Dr. Jekyll, matters might have turned out differently indeed.

What kind of woman would she have been? And what, allegorically, might she have represented? The first question begs a fairly predictable reply: Jekyll could have been supplied, as in the movies, with a long-suffering but ultimately ineffectual love interest, one who stands by and watches helplessly as "the man she loves" staggers blindly toward his inevitable self-destruction. In short, an appendage. Yet, what if this Victorian lady bore less a resemblance to Donna Reed than to Hillary (Rodham) Clinton? Surely I project, but think of the possibilities... What if, instead, the

primary female presence in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* weren't a love interest at all (on the surface anyway) but, rather, Henry Jekyll's mother? What allegorical profit might readers reap from *that* scenario? Enough, I assume, to keep the critics happy for awhile. ("Why did she give him a tunafish sandwich? What does that mean?")

In any case, investigating the absence of consequential female characters in *Jekyll and Hyde* -- and speculating on what those characters might have added to the allegorical effect of the story -- is a stimulating business. It's unfortunate that we can't ask Stevenson what, exactly, he had in mind when piecing together his plot, but that's okay; the fact that we'll never know for sure makes this *Strange Case* worth repeated investigation.