



Original Research

Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde—was Robert Louis Stevenson inspired by Horace Wells? ☆☆☆

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ABSTRACT

It has been suggested that Robert Louis Stevenson's masterpiece *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* derived inspiration from the real-life tragedy of the final days of Connecticut dentist Horace Wells, innovator of the clinical use of the anesthetic properties of nitrous oxide. We examined Stevenson's letters, biographies, and other references in the literature, press, and online to determine whether any factual basis exists for Stevenson to be aware of Wells' life, and also if it played any role in creating the novel's plot. Stevenson was born in Scotland, several years after Wells had committed suicide in New York. Wells' life and death received widespread coverage in the northeastern United States, but there is no evidence that it was printed in newspapers or periodicals in England or Scotland. On the other hand, novelists of the period, psychologists, and the lay public were quite interested in the concept of split personalities and the dual nature of man, so these may have been natural substrates for the novel. There is evidence that Stevenson dreamt about episodes similar to those depicted in his novel. All claims to any relationship between Wells and the novel come from the United States, and none of them are backed by evidence. In the absence of evidence supporting a relationship between the behavior exhibited by Wells during his final days and any inspiration that Stevenson might have derived from it, we conclude that there is insufficient evidence to suggest any relationship between them.

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Background

Scottish novelist Robert Louis Stevenson (1850–1894) wrote essays, stories, novels, poems, plays, and biographies during a prolific 20-year literary career. He is best known for his select dozen or so novels, which include *Treasure Island*, *Kidnapped*, *Black Arrow*, and *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Biographers have noted that many of Stevenson's writings are based on experiences from either his own life or those of individuals known to him.

Horace Wells (1815–1848) was an American dentist who spent most of his life in New England. The highlight of his professional career was the innovation of the clinical use of the anesthetic properties of nitrous oxide. After his extensive use of the agent in his dental practice, he attempted to demonstrate its efficacy near Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, in January 1845. During the tooth extraction, for

poorly documented reasons, the patient cried out—although later admitting that he had not felt any pain. Nonetheless, the audience was convinced that this was a hoax. The entire demonstration was labeled as “humbug,” and Wells' personal life and career immediately took a downward spiral. He desperately sought recognition for his work in Europe, after which he attempted to restart his dental practice in Hartford, Connecticut, and later in New York. He began abusing ether and chloroform as well as making the acquaintance of at least one unsavory individual. One evening in 1848, under the influence of drugs, he splashed acid on two prostitutes and was arrested and remanded to the notorious Tombs prison in New York. Wells committed suicide while incarcerated by using a razor to slash an artery in his groin, having inhaled chloroform to dull the pain, and thus ended a brilliant career marked by triumph as well as tragedy.

Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde is the only novel by Stevenson that explores the topic of split personality and the duality of human existence. The story begins with an inexplicable attack on a child in the middle of the night by a certain Edward Hyde. The rough man who commits this crime is apprehended and pays a fine with a check bearing the signature of the respectable Dr. Henry Jekyll, a signature that is verified by the bank as being genuine. The story continues as friends and acquaintances of the good doctor try to come to terms with his unusual behavior and unwillingness to participate in his usual social activities. Indications point to something

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amiss without hinting as to what this may be. The appearances of the solitary Hyde, who continues entering and leaving an adjacent building through a dilapidated door, add more questions about Jekyll's strange behavior. As the novel comes to its end, the reader discovers that Jekyll and Hyde are one and the same. The tale ends with the despairing suicide of the protagonist(s).

The Author—Robert Louis Stevenson (1850–1894)

Robert Louis Stevenson was born in Edinburgh, Scotland, on November 13, 1850, the only child to respectable middle-class parents [1]. His childhood upbringing in the fashionable New Town of the city reflected the family's distinguished heritage in civil and maritime engineering [1]. Thomas Stevenson, his father, was a famous lighthouse engineer, who served as President of the Royal Scottish Society of Arts (1859–1860) [2] and the Royal Society of Edinburgh (1884–1886) [3]. He was also a founding member of the Scottish Meteorological Society in 1855 [2]. His wife was Margret Balfour, the daughter of a reverend with a strict religious outlook on life [1].

Despite this robust lineage, "Louis" Stevenson grew into a young man suffering both from chronic ill health and a romantic, liberal nature [4]. His father's wishes for his only son to carry on the family's esteemed name and line of work were to be disappointed, for although the 17-year-old Stevenson entered the University of Edinburgh to study engineering, it was clear from the start that "formal learning did not interest him" [4]. His time at the university was invested instead in exploring the alleys of the Old Town, just beyond the hallowed walls of learning [4]. Indeed, its "louche, bohemia drinking-houses" became his refuge from the constraints of the prudish upper-middle class of Victorian society, opening up a "freer, more honest, less hypocritical way of life" than that of the New Town [4]. Thus, it was perhaps little surprise to Thomas Stevenson when, in April 1871, young Stevenson announced his wish to pursue a literary career instead of a life of steady income and social standing [5]. However, it was possibly his son's frail health that made Thomas "wonderfully resigned" to the possibility that Louis was not suited to the arduous work of a marine engineer and permitted Louis the freedom to choose his own path in life [5].

Young Stevenson soon severed the ties with his childhood upbringing more drastically when he renounced Christian beliefs, a subject that was to cause much dispute between father and son [6]. Moving away from the predominant Victorian doctrine and conservative realism of the time, he abandoned a career in law as soon he passed the bar examinations in 1875 and fulfilled his dreams of traveling and writing for the remainder of his life [5].

Taking to his new freedom with enthusiasm, Stevenson moved in London's literary circles with Andrew Land, Edmund Gosse, and Leslie Stephen [6]. In 1873, he met Sidney Colvin and Fanny Sitwell during a visit to Suffolk, England. Colvin, best known as the editor of the posthumous collection of *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, was to become a good friend and advisor [6]. Sitwell, an older woman estranged from her husband, soon became the focus of much of Stevenson's attention—he even came to address her as his "Madonna" in his letters [7]—but his love appeared unrequited, and she was to later marry Colvin in 1903 [6].

Stevenson's travels to continental Europe took him to France several times [5]. At first, he went to recuperate from ill health [6], but an encounter with a married American art student Fanny Van de Griff Osborne at the end of a canoe voyage led to romance [5]. He spent a year with Fanny and her children in Paris and, the following year, pursued her through great financial and physical adversity across the ocean to California [6]. After Fanny's divorce, they married in May 1880 when Stevenson was age 29 [8]. The adventure and hardship of these years were the inspiration for his earliest published works, including *An Inland Voyage* (1878), *Travels with a Donkey in Cévennes*

(1879), and *The Amateur Emigrant* (published posthumously, in 1895) [9].

The new couple, along with Fanny's son Lloyd, returned to Scotland in 1880 to start their life together [8]. The next few years (1880–1887) included summers in Scotland and England, in particular his beloved house "Skerryvore" in Bournemouth on the southern coast of England, and winters in France [7]. It is believed that, in the face of increasing infirmity, these years brought Stevenson great joy and happiness: "yet if I could but heal me of my bellowses, I could have a jolly life—have it, even now...I have so many things to make life sweet for me, it seems a pity I cannot have that one other thing—health" [10]. To be sure, many of his most famous works were to emerge from this period starting with his first popular book *Treasure Island* (1883) and continuing on with *Kidnapped* (1886) and *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) [11]. The last was to establish his international fame [11].

These golden years came to an abrupt end with the death of Thomas Stevenson in 1887 [8]. The widowed Mrs Stevenson joined her son and his family in the United States, traveling from the Adirondacks in Upstate New York to San Francisco, California, and eventually setting sail to make their new home in the Eastern and Central Pacific Islands [8]. Robert Louis Stevenson spent 3 years sailing the archipelagos of the South Seas, fulfilling the dreams of adventure from his boyhood that are immortalized in his book *Treasure Island* [12]. Stevenson's liberal ways adjusted well to the unconventional lifestyle presented by the culture of these islands [13]. In October 1890, he bought a 400-acre estate that he named "Vailima" (five rivers) in Upolu, Samoa, and immersed himself in local politics [14]. Arguably, his most significant legacy to his last home, however, was his relationship with the native islanders, who bestowed upon him the affectionate nickname "Tusitala" meaning "the story teller" in the Samoan language [13].

After a long battle though, his illness, presumably tuberculosis, was to finally become a great enough burden to impact his life and work, and his letters reveal that this was a source of much frustration [15]. He felt his creative spark finally rekindle in what he considered his literary masterpiece, *Weir of Hermiston*; sadly, it was to remain unfinished [16]. An obituary in *The New York Times* dated December 18, 1894, read as follows:

A dispatch to The Star, dated Apia, Samoa, Dec. 8, confirms the report that Robert Louis Stevenson, the novelist, died suddenly a few days ago from apoplexy. His body was buried on the summit of Paa Mountain, 1,300 feet high...although Mr. Stevenson was anything but apoplectic, there is little doubt that his untimely end was due to apoplexy, induced by the heat of the climate [17].

Note that "apoplexy" was the term used in the late 19th century for a cerebrovascular accident (stroke) resulting from cerebral hemorrhage or ischemia [18]. The inhabitants of Upolu carried his body through the specially carved "Road of Loving Hearts" to rest at the 1300-ft summit of Mount Vaea, overlooking his last home, Vailima [19]. His untimely death "created a small shock wave" felt most keenly by contemporary literary circles [20].

His legacy through the ages has changed significantly. Immediately after his death, a flurry of obituaries, memoirs, letters, and hagiographies were published by those who knew him, sanctifying the man and his work [20]. These include the well-known works *Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson* and *The Life of Robert Louis Stevenson* [5], written by his cousin Graham Balfour. Those who came after rebelled against this idolized image, and so Stevenson's name became relegated to the shelves of children's books and horror stories for much of the 20th century [20]. In recent times, attention has turned to his lesser-known works, his reputation rising among literary purists who acknowledged his presence within the ranks of true Victorian literature [20].

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