Conan Doyle's The Adventure of the Creeping Man as Stevensonian Analogue

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NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

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Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, an admirer and correspondent of Robert Louis Stevenson in the 1890’s, shared with him an interest in the preternatural; indeed, the life and works of each reveal a fascination with psychic research and science fiction that was marked enough to have Stevenson address Doyle as “fellow spookist” (XXIV, 341) in a playful letter written at Vailima on April 5, 1893. The purpose of this article is to suggest the possibility that in writing “The Adventure of the Creeping Man” (from *The Case Book of Sherlock Holmes*, published in 1927), Doyle was influenced by the most bizarre of all Stevenson’s tales, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886).

The stories present an identical situation: for the attainment of a goal that has become an obsession, a brilliant and successful middle-aged scientist resorts to a powerful drug having the capacity to produce physical and psychological change. In Henry Jekyll’s case, the end is the separation of what he conceives as the good and evil in man: “From an early date, even before the course of my scientific discoveries had begun to suggest the most naked possibility of such a miracle, I had learned to dwell with pleasure, as a beloved day-dream, on the thought of the separation of these elements” (VII, 351-352). The objective of Professor Presbury, “the creeping man,” is marriage to a girl many years his junior, whom he loves with “the passionate frenzy of youth” (p. 1072). Moreover, the drug each man takes has a marvelous rejuvenating effect. Dr. Jekyll continually speaks of the “energy of life” (p. 370) possessed by his alter ego, Edward Hyde: “I felt younger, lighter, happier in body; within I was conscious of a heady recklessness, a current of disordered sensual images running like a mill race in my fancy” (pp. 353-354); similarly, Professor Presbury’s reaction to “the wondrous strength-giving serum,” which offers “the secret

1 New York, 1911. All citations made in the text to Stevenson’s writings will be from the Thistle Edition (27 vols.). Occasionally in references to both Stevenson and Doyle, upper- and lower-case letters have been altered for the sake of clarity and improved appearance.

2 Citations from “The Adventure of the Creeping Man” in my text are to *The Complete Sherlock Holmes* (Garden City, N. Y., 1930).

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of rejuvenescence and the elixir of life” (p. 1082), is described by Doyle’s narrator, Dr. Watson:

Now he stepped forward into the drive, and an extraordinary change came over him. He sank down into a crouching position and moved along upon his hands and feet, skipping every now and then as if he were overflowing with energy and vitality. . . .
The professor was clearly visible crouching at the foot of the ivy-covered wall. As we watched him he suddenly began with incredible agility to ascend it. From branch to branch he sprang, sure of foot and firm of grasp, climbing apparently in mere joy at his powers, with no definite object in view (pp. 1080-1081).

Just as Jekyll’s powders release a primordial instinct in the “ape-like fury” (p. 305) of Mr. Hyde, whose hand, significantly, is “lean, corded, knuckly, of a dusky pallor and thickly shaded with a swart growth of hair” (p. 359), the langur-derived serum Professor Presbury injects into his bloodstream renders him like “‘the great black-faced monkey of the Himalayan slopes, biggest and most human of climbing monkeys’” (p. 1082). Accordingly, like Hyde’s, the professor’s hands and knuckles are, as Sherlock Holmes observes, “thick and horny in a way which is quite new in my experience” (p. 1080).

Although in their night-life Dr. Jekyll and Professor Presbury thus respond to the joy of a newly found exuberance, their experimentation has an adverse effect on their proper selves. Jekyll tells us, “I became, in my own person, a creature eaten up and emptied by fever, languidly weak both in body and mind. . . . The powers of Hyde seemed to have grown with the sickness of Jekyll” (pp. 369, 370); and Presbury, though experiencing no corresponding weakness, undergoes a sinister change: “Apart from his queer fits . . . he has actually more energy and vitality than I can remember, nor was his brain ever clearer. But it’s not he—it’s never the man whom we have known” (p. 1079). Each man also drifts from his former manner by becoming alternately furtive and agitated at the thought of exposure.

Of course, the personality transformation is most profound in the alter ego. When Jekyll changes into Hyde, he becomes capable of trampling “calmly over [a] child’s body” (p. 284) and clubbing and kicking an old man to death. A curious feature of the Stevenson story consists in the reaction others have to Hyde’s violence. After being caught on the occasion of his knocking down the little girl and leaving her “‘screaming on the ground’” (p. 284), Hyde fills the onlookers with thoughts of hatred and murder: “But the doctor’s case was what struck me. He was the usual cut and dry apothecary, of no particular age and colour, with a strong Edinburgh accent, and about
as emotional as a bagpipe. Well, sir, he was like the rest of us; every
time he looked at my prisoner, I saw that Sawbones turn sick and
white with the desire to kill him’’ (p. 285). Indeed, Henry Jekyll’s
oldest and most trusted friend, Lawyer Utterson, feels a “hitherto un-
known disgust, loathing, and fear” (p. 297) on first encountering Hyde.

These elements find strikingly similar counterparts in Doyle. Having
taken the elixir drug, Professor Presbury climbs the side of
his house and peers into his daughter’s room, leaving her nearly dead
“of surprise and horror” (p. 1075). His conduct on this night, like
Hyde’s treatment of the little girl, is not due to calculated malicious-
ness, but comes about through “mere chance” (p. 1083); and whereas
Presbury’s actions here are not marked by Hyde’s cruelty, they do
prove the same inhuman indifference towards the anguish of
others, more remarkable in his case since the one whom he terrifies is
not just a figure of innocence but “his only daughter” (p. 1072). We
have seen that Hyde perverts the feelings of those who would respect
and perhaps love Henry Jekyll; Professor Presbury, too, begins to
alienate other men and, in his second self, arouses even in Roy, “his
devoted wolfhound” (p. 1072), a frenzied rage and animosity: “The
dog, of course, was aware of the change far more quickly than you.
His smell would insure that. It was the monkey, not the professor,
whom Roy attacked, just as it was the monkey who teased Roy”
(p. 1083).

Although these resemblances are among the most persuasive in
suggesting the influence of Stevenson on Doyle, other parallels can
be enumerated. The voice of orthodox science labels Henry Jekyll’s
work “too fanciful” and “unscientific balderdash” (p. 292); Dr.
Watson tells us that Lowenstein of Prague, the inventor and supplier
of Presbury’s elixir, is “an obscure scientist . . . tabooed by the pro-
fession” (p. 1082). In The Strange Case Gabriel Utterson becomes
an amateur detective bent on discovering the secret of the Jekyll-Hyde
relationship: “If he be Mr. Hyde . . . I shall be Mr. Seek’’ (p. 294),
while Doyle’s story boasts the most celebrated of fictional detectives,
Mr. Sherlock Holmes of Baker Street. Moreover, each of the mysteries

\*The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde does not signal Stevenson’s
first use of a detective-story motif; for the tales from New Arabian Nights
(1882) and The Dynamiter (1885), he created Prince Florizel of Bohemia
and his companion, Colonel Geraldine, whose personalities and sleuthing activi-
ties foreshadow those of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson. Indeed, A Study
in Scarlet (1887) seems to recall the theme of Mormon terror set forth in
the “Story of the Destroying Angel” from The Dynamiter. Apparently the
Stevenson-Doyle connection will arrest the attention of the wary reader in more
than one instance.
is solved under conditions of night wind, periodic darkness, and human vigilance:

Stevenson
The scud had banked over the moon, and it was now quite dark. The wind, which only broke in puffs and draughts into that deep well of building, tossed the light of the candle to and fro about their steps, until they came into the shelter of the theatre, where they sat down silently to wait (p. 334).

Doyle
It was nearly midnight before we took our station among some bushes immediately opposite the hall door of the professor. It was a fine night, but chilly, and we were glad of our warm overcoats. There was a breeze, and clouds were scudding across the sky, obscuring from time to time the half-moon (p. 1080).

The most compelling link between the two tales, however, remains their related moral commentaries. Dr. Jekyll at last recognizes the unholiness implicit in his efforts to absolve himself from responsibility for his evil: "I have been made to learn that the doom and burden of our life is bound forever on man's shoulders, and when the attempt is made to cast it off, it but returns upon us with more unfamiliar and more awful pressure" (p. 352). In like manner, Sherlock Holmes draws an ethical conclusion from Professor Presbury's experimentation: "When one tries to rise above Nature one is liable to fall below it. The highest type of man may revert to the animal if he leaves the straight road of destiny" (p. 1082). The similarities in these stories, especially when viewed in a total pattern of concept, imagery, and event, thus appear too close to be merely accidental.

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