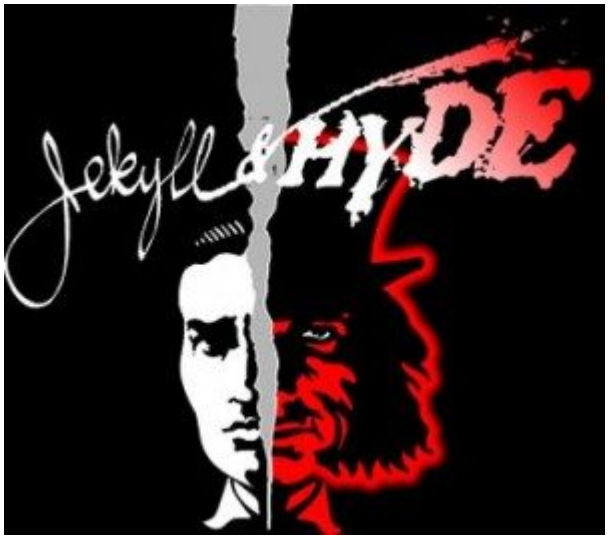
We're All Henry Jekyll's Bairns: Robert Louis Stevenson's Enduring Influence on Scottish Literature

By Alistair Braidwood



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Perhaps this is why Robert Louis Stevenson's literature continues to influence fellow Scottish writers in particular. What could be described as 'Stevenson's Antisyzygy', the importance of having 'duelling polarities' within his novels, seems difficult to refute. His love of opposing characters in his most famous work cannot be denied, from the innocent Jim Hawkins and the morally ambiguous Long John

Silver in *Treasure Island*, through *The Master of Ballantrae*'s battling brothers James and Henry Durie, to the clash of 'Scotlands' as typified by *Kidnapped*'s David Balfour and Alan Breck, and, of course, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, but he was a more complex writer than this may suggest. He wrote in and about Scotland but also brought a more worldly view to his home country as was to be expected of such a travelled man.

This attempt to offer as holistic a view of the Scotland of his day as was possible sets him apart from most other Scottish writers of any time. His stories move from the urban backdrop of *Jekyll and Hyde* (set in London, but surely spiritually based in Edinburgh) to the rural country village setting for the likes of his short story "Thrawn Janet", and also offers a literary tour of the country from the highlands and islands to the borders and coast to coast. He may, like the influential Sir Walter Scott, have preferred to set many of his tales in an idealised past, but his writing often looked at contemporary concerns for his time, and these themes are as relevant today as they ever were.

Undoubtedly *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* is the novel which influences modern Scottish literature over all others. The idea of the split personality, of the attempt to unite the apparently contrary, is one that continues to have a universal appeal. *Jekyll and Hyde*'s themes of morality, science, religion and aesthetics are all contemporary concerns and while these can be found in his other work, *Jekyll and Hyde*, with the battle of good and evil in a single individual at its centre, is a tale which captures the imagination like few others before or since.

But the novel, like Scotland itself, is much more complex than those who concentrate on the duality at its heart may realise. It asks questions about individual morality and personal responsibility, the nature of addiction, and the aesthetics of evil. In the last 20-30 years there have been countless tales told by Scottish writers which clearly owe a debt to Stevenson's novella. Among the most interesting of the novels which share one or more of the themes of *Jekyll and Hyde* include James Robertson's *The Fanatic*, Ron Butlin's *The Sound of My Voice*, Duncan McLean's *Bunker Man*, A.L Kennedy's *Paradise*, Alice Thompson's *The Existential Detective*, John Burnside's *The Devil's Footprints*, Iain Banks' *Complicity*, Frederick Lindsay's *Brond*, Irvine Welsh's *Filth* and *Marabou Stork Nightmares* and Kevin McNeil's *The Stornoway Way* and, laying all his cards on the table, his *A Method Actor's Guide to Jekyll and Hyde*.

All of these, (perhaps with the exceptions of *Paradise* and *The Sound of My Voice* which are particularly about the debilitating and destructive nature of addiction), look at the concept of morality in modern society, but they also embrace the horror of Stevenson's novel. This horror comes from the individual's fear of losing control, of the desires of the dark heart overcoming the rational mind, or perhaps the greater fear that the rational mind will fail and no longer exist. In some of the novels such horror is more recognisably realistic, and believable, and therefore disturbing, than in the more fantastical.

Perhaps the most powerful of these from the above list is *Bunker Man* where, over the novel, the central figure of Rob Catto's descent into madness is represented by his nemesis, the mysterious 'Bunker Man' of the title, but the actions, and the responsibility for them, are Rob's alone. Like *Jekyll and Hyde*, *Bunker Man* is an examination on the nature of morality, about how powerful and addictive acting in a destructive manner can be. Like Jekyll losing control over Hyde, Catto's behaviour spirals out of control until he is threatening those he loves as well as himself. Catto's behaviour becomes increasingly reprehensible to the reader, and it is supposed to, and the same is true of the events in Jekyll and Hyde.

Neither writer gives the reader easy answers as both Stevenson and Mclean ask us to consider whether concepts of good and evil are social and cultural constructs, or whether there is a natural compulsion to do unto others as they would do to you? It is interesting to note that Mclean has admitted that he was part driven to write the novel after John Major, the Prime Minister of the time, proclaimed in 1993 'Society needs to condemn a little more and understand a little less.' By writing a novel where the central character acts in such a morally and socially reprehensible way McLean is challenging us to try and understand Rob's actions even when our instinct may be to simply condemn. Surely this is one of the questions which Stevenson also asks. Do we simply dismiss the actions of Edward Hyde (and Henry Jekyll), or should we try and understand more about the desires which drive a man to such extremes in the first place, or the effect of trying to control them? Is there a moral imperative and if so, when this is denied, then is it legitimate to talk about psychological abnormality?

Whereas Jekyll uses chemicals to release his Hyde side, with Rob it is as if his increasing paranoia unlocks the door to his own suppressed feelings. The Bunker Man of the title, who is another in the long line of Scottish 'others', becomes a character who Catto fears but also becomes fascinated by. Like Stevenson with

Hyde, Mclean doesn't take the easy route of suggesting that Bunker Man is a figment of Rob's damaged mind as is often the case in such novels; he is all too real, and this makes Rob's actions all the more reprehensible to the reader. *Bunker Man* forces you to face your own moral boundaries.

In *A Method Actor's Guide to Jekyll and Hyde*, Kevin MacNeil writes a realistic internal dialogue for the central character Robert, a man whose mind is a mess, a situation which the author sets up in this opening line 'I'm in two minds'. After being involved in an accident, struggling actor Robert is determined not to lose his acting roles, and his girlfriend, to his nemesis Wolfe. It appears that he is psychotic in his paranoia, which is perhaps understandable, at least to the reader, but Robert is the most unreliable of narrators, and, like Stevenson, MacNeil plays with narrative and point of view to unsettle the reader.

As with *Bunker Man*, MacNeil's is a (mainly) psychological retelling of *Jekyll and Hyde*. It is a distinctly Freudian examination of the Id, Ego and Super-Ego, and the power of the mind for self-deception. What MacNeil manages to convey so well is a sense of not knowing what to believe; of having your expectations challenged, and that applies to the reader as well as Robert. It is a novel concerned with the masks that we all wear, the roles that we play. The distinct difference between how others perceive us and how we perceive ourselves. Kevin MacNeil understands that all the world is a stage, and he can empathise with the fragile psychological state of the players. Henry Jekyll 'created' Edward Hyde as he wanted to try and rid himself of his more base thoughts and desires. Stevenson seemed to believe that we are reliant on our consciousness and personal morality to stop us from ever becoming Hyde. MacNeil suggests that such an attempt is futile, and that the best we can hope for is to be able to keep our darker urges at bay. If, for some reason we can't control our Hyde side, then all hell may break loose.

Irvine Welsh's use of the 'other' is a technique he uses regularly, with many characters switching minds and bodies, or dreaming between snatches of reality, but in 1998's *Filth* he was particularly ingenious. The central figure of Bruce Robertson is a corrupt Edinburgh policeman who indulges his basest desires with barely a worry, or so it would seem, involved in pornography, prostitution, drug use and abuse, and just about any other vice you care to mention.

The novel begins with Bruce supposedly attempting to solve a murder, but he is

too concerned with fulfilling his desires to care. It is the appearance of his malignant, and judgemental, tapeworm where the novel changes. The tapeworm's influence over Bruce grows throughout the novel as it does, and Bruce becomes his 'Host'. It is through the tapeworm that the reader learns of the life that has brought Bruce to become the terrible man he is today. Like Henry Jekyll with Edward Hyde, Bruce comes to the realisation that he must destroy himself, something the tapeworm encourages him to do, but in typical Welsh style this is not a selfless act of redemption, rather one of revenge on his wife Carol from beyond the grave.

But is Bruce's final act so different from Henry's? What runs through both novels is guilt; Robertson's for his actions as a younger man and Jekyll's for unleashing Hyde. Both the tapeworm and Hyde are apparently a result of these men's deepest desires and their wish to fulfil them, the physical manifestations of their psychological state, and there is always a price to pay. Guilt, regret, and the need for punishment, are strong themes in Scottish literature, and all of the books mentioned in this essay have them at their heart.

As with a present day reading of James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, the temptation is to view *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* as a psychological novel only, one which deals with the descent into madness. However, it should never be forgotten that for all its complexities Stevenson was intent on writing in a gothic/horror tradition and another reason for the books enduring success is that it continues to serve as a chilling, genuinely unsettling, tale. Like all the best writers Stevenson left it to the reader to decide what to think, whether to attempt to understand or condemn.

Stevenson's literature (and non fiction for that matter) points the way to looking at Scotland in the widest scope possible, and not to only deal in simple ideas and stereotypes such as dualism. As Scotland as a culture and society develops and progresses, its literature must reflect these changes. Too often one style of writing, or writer, overshadows others, but to get the fullest picture a literature should not be limited. Robert Louis Stevenson didn't limit his imagination or his style and this should be his ultimate legacy to today's writers, and those of tomorrow.

References & Further Information

[1] Edward J Cowan and Douglas Gifford eds. *The Polar Twins* (John Donald, 2000) p 1.

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