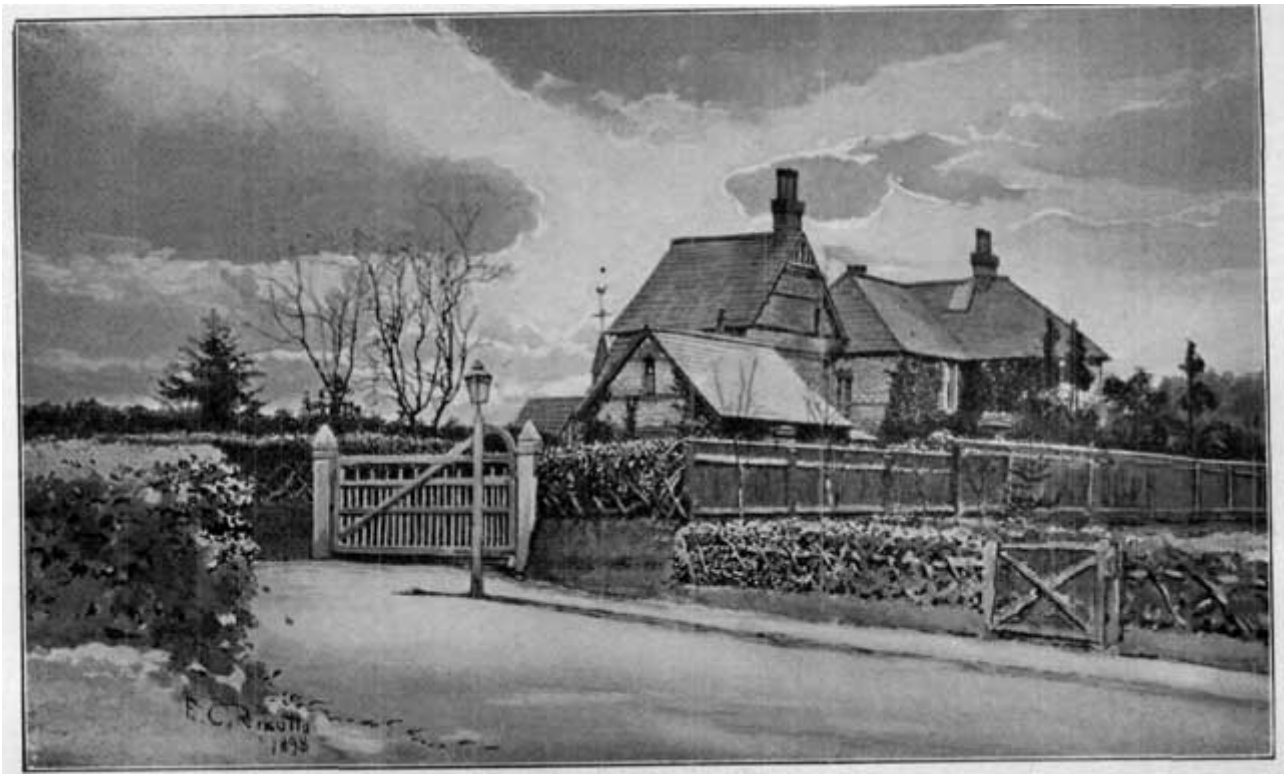
AWESOME stories

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde and the Story of Its Creation

This is the story of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, based on the novel by Robert Louis Stevenson. To see the first transformation of Jekyll to Hyde, move the film forward to 25:20. To see the first transformation of Hyde to Jekyll, move the film forward to 28:00.

While writing some of his famous novels - like *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* - Robert Louis Stevenson (whom everyone called "Louis") lived in Bournemouth. He called his house, in that English coastal town, "Skerryvore."



What was life like in the Stevenson home? For an answer to that question, we can ask Stevenson's stepson, Lloyd Osbourne, who wrote about the famous author in *An Intimate Portrait of R.L.S.* The following are excerpts from his 1924 book:

> *"Skerryvore" was an unusually attractive suburban house, set in an acre and a half of ground; and its previous owner - a retired naval captain - had been at no little expense to improve and add to it...One felt it was a dream-come true of long years passed at sea...*
>
> *The house and five hundred pounds toward furnishing it were a wedding present to my mother* [Fanny Vandergrift Osbourne, an American] *from RLS's parents. The wanderers were now anchored; over their heads was their own roof-tree; they paid rates and taxes ... Respectability, dulness, and similar villas encompassed him for miles in every direction.*
>
> *In his heart I doubt if he really ever liked "Skerryvore"; he never spoke of it with regret; left it with no apparent pang. The Victorianism it exemplified was jarring to every feeling he possessed, though with his habitual philosophy he not only endured it, but even persuaded himself that he liked it ... he was virtually a prisoner in that house the whole time he lived in it; for him those years in "Skerryvore" were gray, indeed.*

What made life difficult for Stevenson during those years in Bournemouth? His health, never good throughout his life, was especially bad at the time:

> *His health throughout was at its lowest ebb; never was he so spectral, so emaciated, so unkempt and tragic a figure. His long hair, his eyes, so abnormally brilliant in his wasted face, his sick-room garb, picked up at random and to which he gave no thought - all are ineffaceably pictured in my mind; and with the picture is an ineffable pity.*
>
> *...But in general he was a prisoner in his own house and saw nothing of Bournemouth save his own little garden. There could be no pretense he was not an invalid and a very sick man. He had horrifying hemorrhages, long spells when he was doomed to lie motionless on his bed lest the slightest movement should restart the flow, when he would speak in whispers, and one sat beside him and tried to be entertaining - in that room he was only too likely to leave in his coffin.*

How was he able to write at all, while he was so ill? Osbourne tells us more:

> *How thus handicapped he wrote his books is one of the marvels of literature - books so robustly and aboundingly alive that it is incredible they came out of a sick-room; and such well-sustained books with no slowing down of their original impetus, nor the least suggestion of those intermissions when their author lay at the point of death.*

What did Stevenson write, while living at Skerryvore?

> *Those years in "Skerryvore" were exceedingly productive. The "Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," was written here; so was "Kidnapped;" so was "Markheim," and any number of his best short sorties; so too, was the "Life of Fleeming Jenkin."* (Lloyd Osbourne, *An Intimate Portrait of RLS*, quoted in "Appendix E: Stevenson in Bournemouth, 1884-87," included in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, by Robert Louis Stevenson, Martin A. Danahay, editor, pp 129-131.)

Robert Louis Stevenson is a writer still widely admired in the 21st century. His stories, with their monsters and "bad guys," appeal to children and adults alike. Even Google, the popular search engine, honored the 160th anniversary of his birth - November 13, 2010 - with a popular "Google Doodle."

What inspired Stevenson? Where did he get the idea for his popular work, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*? Lloyd Osbourne, who was living with Louis at the time, tells us what happened when he first learned his stepfather had a great idea for a new story:

> *One day he came down to luncheon in a very preoccupied frame of mind, hurried through his meal - and unheard-of thing for him to do - and on leaving said he was working with extraordinary success on a new story that had come to him in a dream, and that he was not to be interrupted or disturbed even if the house caught fire.*
>
> *For three days a sort of hush descended on "Skerryvore"; we all went about, servants and everybody, in a tiptoeing silence; passing Stevenson's door I would see him sitting up in bed, filling page after page, and apparently never pausing for a moment. At the end of three days the mysterious task was finished, and he read aloud to my mother and myself the first draft of "The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde."*

How did that story sound, as read by its Scottish author? Osbourne continues:

> *I listened to it spellbound. Stevenson, who had a voice the greatest actor might have envied, read it with an intensity that made shivers run up and down my spine.*
>
> *When he came to the end, gazing at us in triumphant expectancy and keyed to a pitch of indescribable self-satisfaction - as he waited, and I waited, for my mother's outburst of enthusiasm - I was thunderstruck at her backwardness. Her praise was constrained; the words seemed to come with difficulty; and then all at once she broke out with criticism. He had missed the point, she said; he had missed the allegory; had made it merely a story - a magnificent bit of sensationalism - when it should have been a masterpiece.* (Osborne, quoted in Appendix E of *Jekyll and Hyde*, at pp 131-32.)

Stevenson's burst of creativity had resulted in a masterpiece. His stepson loved it. The world has since loved it. How could Fanny, his wife, have been so critical? How did Louis respond to her comments?

> *Stevenson was beside himself with anger. He trembled; his hand shook on the manuscript; he was intolerably chagrined. His voice, bitter and challenging, overrode my mother's in a fury of resentment. Never had I seen him so impassioned, so outraged, and the scene became to painful that I went away, unable to bear it any longer. It was with a sense of tragedy that I listened to their voices from the adjoining room, the words lost but fraught with an emotion that struck at my heart.*

As we go back to that day in the Bournemouth house, and listen-in to the family's conversation, what do we hear from the man who wrote one of the most famous stories in western literature?

> *When I came back my mother was alone. She was sitting, pale and deslote before the fire, and staring into it. Neither of us spoke. Had I done so it would have been to reproach her, for I thought she had been cruelly wrong.*
>
> *Then we heard Louis descending the stairs, and we both quailed as he burst in as though to continue the argument even more violently then before. But all he said was: "You are right I have absolutely missed the allegory, which, after all, is the whole point of it - the very essence of it."*
>
> *And with that, as though enjoying my mother's discomfiture and her ineffectual start to prevent him, he threw the manuscript into the fire! Imagine my feelings - my mother's feelings - as we saw it blazing up; as we saw those precious pages wrinkling and burning and turning into flame.*
> (Osborne, quoted in Appendix E of *Jekyll and Hyde*, at page 132.)

At first, Lloyd thought his step-father had acted rashly. Then he realized otherwise:

> *My first impression was that he had done it out of pique. But it was not. He really had been convinced, and this was his dramatic amend. When my mother and I both cried out at the folly of destroying the manuscript he justified himself vehemently. "It was all wrong," he said. "In trying to save some of it I should have got hopelessly off the track. The only way was to put temptation beyond my reach."*

Did Louis abandon the story or immediately begin writing a new version?

> *Then ensued another three days of feverish industry on his part, and of a hushed, anxious, and tiptoeing anticipation on ours; of meals where he scarcely spoke; of evenings unenlivened by his presence; of awed glimpses of him, sitting up in bed, writing, writing, writing, with the counterpane littered with his sheets* [of paper]*. The culmination was the "Jekyll and Hyde" that every one knows; that, translated into every European tongue and many Oriental, has given a new phrase to the world.* (Osborne, quoted in Appendix E of *Jekyll and Hyde*, at page 132.)

As a creative burst fueled his mind and body, Louis wrote more than 10,000 words a day - in longhand:

> *The writing of it was an astounding feat from whatever aspect it may be regarded. Sixty-four thousand words in six days; more than ten thousand words a day. To those who know little of such things I may explain that a thousand words a days is a fair average for any writer of fiction...*
> (Osborne, quoted in Appendix E of *Jekyll and Hyde*, at page 132.)

Working on his novel, *Weir of Hermiston* - at his home in Samoa - Stevenson died of a cerebral hemorrhage. Forty-four years old at his death, he was buried near his Samoan home. After Fanny died in 1914, her daughter carried her ashes to Samoa where they were interred next to her husband's remains.

This film version of "Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde" - from 1920 - stars John Barrymore as Jekyll/Hyde. Now in the public domain, it remains one of the most-respected films of all time.

NOTE: To see the transformation scene, when Dr. Jekyll first becomes Mr. Hyde, move the film forward to 00:25:00.

Credits:

This silent film, based on *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (by Robert Louis Stevenson), was released in 1920. It stars John Barrymore as Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

NOTE that the film does not exactly follow the book.

Director:
John S. Robertson

Producer:
Adolph Zukor

Based on the book by Robert Louis Stevenson

Screenplay:
Thomas Russell Sullivan
Clara Beranger

Starring:
John Barrymore
Martha Mansfield
Charles Lane

Nita Naldi

Cinematography:
Roy F. Overbaugh

Distributed by:
Famous Players-Lasky Corporation
Paramount Pictures

Release Date:
March 18, 1920

Online, public domain.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/Dr.-Jekyll-and-Mr.-Hyde-and-the-Story-of-Its-Creation

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/Dr.-Jekyll-and-Mr.-Hyde-and-the-Story-of-Its-Creation

Media Stream

Skerryvore Cottage - Home of Robert Louis Stevenson
When Robert Louis Stevenson wrote *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, he was living at Skerryvore Cottage in Bournemouth, England. This image depicts Skerryvore Cottage.
This illustration, depicting Skerryvore, is from *The Life of Robert Louis Stevenson for Boys and Girls*, by Jacqueline M. Overton (who also provides information about Skerryvore and Stevenson's work there):
In the spring of 1885 Thomas Stevenson [the author's father] purchased a house at Bournemouth, England ... as a present for his daughter-in-law [Fanny Osborne].

They named the cottage "Skerryvore," after the famous lighthouse he had helped to build in his young days, and it was their home for the next three years—busy ones for R.L.S.
One of Stevenson's projects, at Skerryvore, came to him in a dream. Overton recounts the events in Chapter VI:
Stevenson had often said the "brownies" in his dreams gave him ideas for his tales. At Skerryvore they came to him with a story that among all his others is counted the greatest.

"In the small hours one morning," says his wife, "I was awakened by cries of horror from Louis. Thinking he had a nightmare I awakened him. He said angrily, 'Why did you wake me? I was dreaming a fine bogey tale.'"

The dream was so vivid that he could not rest until he had written off the story, and it so possessed him that the first draft was finished within three days. It was called "The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde."

This story instantly created much discussion. Articles were written about it, sermons were preached on it, and letters poured in from all sorts of people with their theories about the strange tale.

Six months after it was published nearly forty thousand copies were sold in England alone; but its greatest success was in America where its popularity was immediate and its sale enormous.
Click on the image of Skerryvore for a better view.
Image from "The Life of Robert Louis Stevenson for Boys and Girls," by Jacqueline M. Overton published in New York, during 1933, by Charles Scribner's Sons. Online via Project Gutenberg.
View this asset at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Skerryvore-Cottage-Home-of-Robert-Louis-Stevenson