

Excerpt from SCIENCE FICTION FILMS OF THE 20TH CENTURY: THE EARLY YEARS
by Theresa M. Moore - ©2018, all rights reserved.

Dr. Jekyll And Mr. Hyde (1920)

Directed by John S. Robertson

Produced by Adolph Zukor and Jesse L. Lasky

Written by Thomas Russell Sullivan and Clara Beranger

Based on The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde by Robert Louis Stevenson

Cinematography by Roy F. Overbaugh

Production Company: Famous Players – Lasky/ Artcraft Pictures

Distribution: Paramount Pictures

Release date: March 18, 1920; running time: 79 minutes. silent

Cast:

John Barrymore as Dr. Henry Jekyll/Edward Hyde

Brandon Hurst as Sir George Carew

Marth Mansfield as Millicent Carew, Sir George's daughter

Charles Willis Lane and Dr. Richard Lanyon

George Stevens as Poole, Jekyll's butler

Nita Naldi as Miss Gina, Italian artist

Cecil Colvelly as Edward Enfield

J. Malcolm Dunn as John Utterson

Plot: Henry Jekyll (John Barrymore) is a doctor of medicine, an idealist, and philanthropist. When he is not treating the poor in his free clinic, he is in his laboratory experimenting with various medicines and tinctures.

Sir George Carew (Brandon Hurst), the father of his fiancée, Millicent (Martha Mansfield), is "piqued" by Dr. Jekyll. "No man could be as good as he looks," Carew says.

Following dinner one night, Carew taunts Dr. Jekyll in front of their friends, Edward Enfield (Cecil Clovelly), Dr. Lanyon (Charles Lane) and John Utterson (J. Malcolm Dunn), proclaiming "In devoting yourself to others, Jekyll, aren't you neglecting the development of your own life?"

"Isn't it by serving others that one develops oneself?" Jekyll replies.

"Which self?" Carew retorts. "Man has two - as he has two hands. Because I use my right hand, should I never use my left? Your really strong man fears nothing. It is the weak one who is afraid of experience. A man cannot destroy the savage in him by denying its impulses. The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it. With your youth, you should live - as I have lived. I have many memories to cherish. What will you have at my age?"

And thus the seed is sown. Tempted to discover this for himself, Jekyll begins his experiments to transform himself into a different man. As he observes, "Wouldn't it be marvellous if the two natures in man could be separated - housed in different bodies? Think what it would mean to yield to every evil impulse, yet leave the soul untouched!"

Finally, Jekyll develops a potion that turns him into a hideously evil creature that he calls Edward Hyde. To facilitate this identity, he tells his servant, Poole (George Stevens), that Hyde is to have "full authority and liberty about the house." Jekyll also draws up a will leaving all his worldly possessions to Hyde. Poole, being discreet, is also concerned. This seems out of character for his usually charitable Dr. Jekyll.

Jekyll begins to live a double life. Hyde sets up a room in one of the seediest parts of London. He brings in a girl from the dance hall, Gina (Nita Naldi), to live with him there. He visits opium dens, dance halls, and bars - any place that satisfies his evil desires. Gina seems content to serve his interests, as long as Hyde showers her with gifts. Hyde becomes fascinated with a ring Gina has on. She shows him that it is a poison ring, with a container to hold powder or liquid. On a strange impulse, Hyde takes it from her and begins to wear it.

Although Jekyll has developed a potion that will return him to his original appearance and character, each time he takes the potion to become Edward Hyde he worsens. He not only looks more evil and decrepit, he becomes more cruel to those around him. Gina becomes the focus of his cruelty when she threatens to leave him, and he kills her.

Meanwhile, Millicent Carew is worried about the absence of her fiancé, so Sir George goes to call on Jekyll to see what is the matter. Jekyll is not at home when he calls, and Sir George encounters Hyde in the street just as he knocks a small boy to the ground, injuring him. To make restitution for his actions, Hyde goes and gets a check, which he gives to the boy's father.

Carew notices that the check has been signed by Dr. Jekyll. He returns to Jekyll's home and confronts Poole about his missing master. Poole tells him the story of Edward Hyde.

In the meantime, Hyde/Jekyll has returned to the lab and, after drinking the restorative, returns to his original self. Sir George finds Jekyll in his lab and demands to know his relationship with "a vile thing like Hyde?"

"What right have you to question me - you who first tempted me?" says Jekyll.

Sir George angrily retorts that unless Jekyll is forthcoming with an explanation, he must object to Jekyll's marriage to Millicent. This angers Jekyll to the point that he suddenly becomes Hyde, right in front of Sir George's eyes, without benefit of the potion. Horrified, Sir George runs into the courtyard, where Hyde catches him there and clubs him to death with his walking stick.

A maid has seen the altercation through a window, and she calls for the police. Forced to abandon his position, Hyde runs to his apartment in the tenement district and destroys any evidence that may link him to Jekyll. He eludes the police by only minutes and returns to the lab, where he drinks the potion that restores him to his Jekyll persona.

In the following days, while Millicent grieves the death of her father, Jekyll is tortured by guilt. Jekyll stays locked up in his lab fearing he may become Hyde at any moment. Soon, a compound needed to make the potion that will restore him is depleted, and cannot be found in all of London. He sends Poole to scour the city. There is no more time to delay.

Millicent is concerned about this isolation and goes to see him, but Jekyll will not let her in. Millicent begs to enter the lab, even as he starts to transform again into Hyde on his own.

Desperate to spare Millicent from the monster inside him, Jekyll consumes the poison he took from Gina just before he opens the door. Hyde has had designs on Millicent all along. He lets her in, locks the door behind her and grabs her in his arms. They struggle. But the poison takes effect and Hyde starts convulsing. Terrified, Millicent runs from the lab and calls for help.

Lanyon and Utterson are visiting, and they burst into the lab with Poole, but Hyde is no longer there. They find Jekyll dead, sitting in a chair. Lanyon concludes that Jekyll has committed suicide, and calls Poole and Millicent in. Millicent is devastated to see Jekyll this way and bursts into tears. Lanyon declares that Hyde has killed Dr. Jekyll. The monstrous evil is over.

In the final shot, Millicent is grieving next to the body of Dr. Jekyll. END

Analysis and Additional Notes: I fully expected to see another absurdity of love among the ruins, but this time I saw a full play of temptation, experimentation, and self-destruction full bore. John Barrymore was quite effective as both Jekyll and Hyde, showing the good and evil at war within Jekyll. One could see him in the throes of a peculiar addiction, with all the sensations of guilt and remorse, avarice and viciousness, shown through his facial and body language alone. It did not take much more than a rearrangement of hair, a humpish tightness of body, a facial expression, for Barrymore to transform himself from one persona to the other. It appeared physically demanding to such a point that Jekyll's exhaustion may have been real for Barrymore. He carried the plot with such verve that the other characters seemed superfluous. I give it 3.5 stars for quality of presentation.

Production: the character of Millicent Carew does not appear in Stevenson's original story, but in the 1887 stage version by Thomas Russell Sullivan, starring Richard Mansfield. The 1920 film version used the play's concept of Jekyll being engaged to Carew's daughter, and Hyde beginning a dalliance with a dance-hall girl.

Critical reception: film review aggregator Rotten Tomatoes reported an approval rating of 92%, based on 13 reviews, with a rating average of 7.8 out of 10. Film critic Leonard Maltin gave the film 3 out of 4 stars, complimenting Barrymore's performance as both Jekyll and Hyde, and the film's production, calling it "well made".