There are at least 88 film and television adaptations—very loosely speaking—of Stevenson’s novella The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Most of the scholarship has focused on a handful of these adaptations (especially the 1931 version). This chapter is, in part, an attempt to remedy that situation—by drawing from a larger pool. To keep it manageable, however, I have limited the pool to North American and British adaptations of the novella and have not included those texts that only borrow in part from Stevenson’s work (like Monster on the Campus, The Nutty Professor, Altered States, or The Incredible Hulk).

A full treatment of the films in their entirety would also be a difficult endeavor. Instead, this chapter focuses on the character of Dr. Jekyll as an intellectual and a man of science. The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde was written at a time when scientific discourse was undergoing rapid changes; Stevenson was writing on the cusp of a time of “ever-increasing specialization, which sharply limits the extent to which non-specialists are able
to take part in such debates.”¹ Jekyll’s experiment placed him outside of the respected scientific discourse and ethical scientific practices that were quickly becoming codified by a newly developing academy of science. As more intellectuals found themselves moving out of the public eye by retreating to colleges and universities in the twentieth century, the figure of Dr. Jekyll, an independent scholar with his own ethically questionable research agenda, became increasingly the object of suspicion or even, it seems, horror. With this in mind, this chapter outlines the ways in which the figure of Dr. Jekyll transformed over the first 70 years of television and film adaptations.

The Silent Jekylls

The first filmic appearance of “Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde” came in 1912 and featured James Cruze as Jekyll. This film was a short, bare-bones production, essentially containing only the required elements to make it a retelling of the Jekyll tale. It did, however, introduce the film world to the idea of Dr. Jekyll as a romantic figure (which was not a focus of Stevenson’s work). In the movie, Jekyll “becomes the accepted suitor” of a lovely young woman, becomes Hyde against his will, attacks his fiancée, kills her father, and runs from the law. Jekyll’s fabricated romance with a young woman would be repeated in many of the later Jekyll films, including the 1920 version with John Barrymore in the title role. There is more of the tragic in the 1912 film than in others. In this film, Jekyll is a good man begging, struggling to keep the evil in himself at bay. As shall be discussed, in other Jekyll and Hyde films, the scientific obsession, exotic sense of morality, psychological experimentation, propensity for unethical human and animal subject research, and ego make Jekyll less likable.

In the 1920 version of the film, Jekyll still remains the tragic hero. The central theme of Stevenson’s source material, the downfall of a good man through the stripping away of the veneer of civilization, remains strong in this film. The intertitles of the film describe Dr. Jekyll’s character as an “idealist and philanthropist—by profession a doctor of medicine.”