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Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

The Strange Case of the Alchemist's Daughter by Theodora Goss

Summary

Based on some of literature's horror and science fiction classics, this "tour de force of reclaiming the narrative, executed with impressive wit and insight" (Publishers Weekly, starred review) debut is the story of a remarkable group of women who come together to solve the mystery of a series of gruesome murders—and the bigger mystery of their own origins.

Mary Jekyll, alone and penniless following her parents' death, is curious about the secrets of her father's mysterious past. One clue in particular hints that Edward Hyde, her father's former friend and a murderer, may be nearby, and there is a reward for information leading to his capture... a reward that would solve all of her immediate financial woes.

But her hunt leads her to Hyde's daughter, Diana, a feral child left to be raised by nuns. With the assistance of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson, Mary continues her search for the elusive Hyde, and soon befriends more women, all of whom have been created through terrifying experimentation: Beatrice Rappaccini, Catherin Moreau, and Justine Frankenstein.

When their investigations lead them to the discovery of a secret society of immoral and power-crazed scientists, the horrors of their past return. Now it is up to the monsters to finally triumph over the monstrous.

Discussion Questions

1. The book begins with the epigraph "Here be monsters," followed by an argument between Mary and Catherine as to its appropriateness. In what way is this a fitting introduction to the themes presented in the book? Discuss the different examples of monstrosity in the story. Who are the real monsters?
2. Catherine decides to leave the other women's comments in the narrative so that the reader "will be able to see how annoying and nonsensical most of them are, while offering the occasional flash of insight into character." Do the interruptions afford you a better understanding of the characters? Are they nonsensical? How would the story have been different without these interruptions? If Goss had formatted them differently—as footnotes, for example—would they have had the same effect?

3. Dr. Rappaccini believed that “the forces of natural selection are no longer acting on man. So it has become [the scientist’s] duty to direct evolution, to create the higher forms that man can become.” Do the other members of the Alchemical Society believe this is true? Do you think there is any truth to his belief? How successful is Dr. Rappaccini in “directing evolution”? Do any of the other scientists succeed?
4. Why do the scientists of the society feel that women are the best subjects for their experiments? How does this play into or work against the prevailing attitudes toward women at the time? Do Mary and the other characters fit Victorian society’s ideas of womanhood? Are there any instances where the general expectations of women help them in their work?
5. Diana tries to weasel out of writing her portion of the manuscript by making Mary write her portion first, but Catherine says, “The whole story is Mary’s story.” Is this true? How large of a role do the other women play? Does Mary suspect at the beginning of the novel that she will be the central character in such a thrilling tale? How does the title, *The Strange Case of the Alchemist’s Daughter*, reflect her role in the story?
6. How did Beatrice become a prisoner of Professor Petronius? Does she think that she deserves a better life? Is it only her toxicity that sets her apart from others?
7. At one point, Mary wonders “Wasn’t Diana her sister? And Hyde’s daughter . . . What had Hyde been? And what, pray tell, was his daughter . . . What had the girl inherited from her father, other than his unpleasant temperament?” How much of Diana’s personality comes from her father, and how much comes from her mother? How much of her personality is a result of her environment? What is her role in the larger group?
8. When he is injured, Justine holds Watson “as tenderly as though he were a young bird in a nest. It is the way she holds everything—when you are as strong as Justine, the world is terribly fragile.” Is Justine as strong emotionally as she is physically? How has she learned to deal with her “monstrosity”?
9. In many ways, Catherine is the most independent of the women. How much is this due to her essential nature as a wild creature, and how much can be attributed to all that she went through during and since her transformation?
10. Despite the protests of the other women, Beatrice insists, “I killed my mother and Giovanni. Perhaps I killed my father as well, who knows?” Justine says, “In my heart, I knew myself to be a murderer.” Can any of the women be held responsible for the harm they do to others? Is there a point at which self-defense turns into murder?
11. At one point, Mary finds that “for a moment, she missed her routine. Somehow, she did not think her life would ever be that orderly again.” Does her life ever settle back into some sort of routine? Would she go back to her old life if she could? What parts of her previous life are worth carrying over into the new one?

12. All the women have some sort of tale of romantic love gone awry. To what extent are their romantic woes tied to their status as “other”? Do they deserve romantic love in their lives? To what degree have they found other forms of love?
13. Adam says to Sherlock Holmes: “I know your methods. They are impressive, although they are the methods of a calculating machine—you measure and observe, then make your deductions. You are a kind of glorified automaton. I doubt you can understand the methods of the creative mind.” Is this a fair assessment of Holmes’s methods and talents? Does he show any creativity in his work with this particular case? Would Mary—or any of the other women—agree with Adam?
14. When Adam first catches up to Victor Frankenstein and Justine, he has some harsh words for his creator. “You have been educating her, reading and discussing with her. As you never did with me! Now I see the full extent of your cruelty, Frankenstein! You created her to mock me, to taunt me with the love I should have had, which you intend to keep from me forever! You rejected me as your son, and she has rejected me as her mate,” he says. At this point, are Adam’s desires unreasonable? Why does Victor treat Justine so differently than he treated Adam? Who is the most monstrous person in this triangle?
15. Victor Frankenstein, Dr. Jekyll, Dr. Rappaccini, Dr. Moreau, Mr. Hyde: Did any of these men love their daughters? Which man has the most to atone for? What lasting effects do their actions have on their daughters? Can you think of any reasons these women could feel gratitude toward their fathers?
16. Throughout this ordeal, Mary had “been assuming, without realizing it—[that] the house on Park Terrace would become a home. For Diana and Beatrice, and Catherine and Justine, and now for Alice. They would all live there together, no more going off to join the circus or perform in freak shows.” What is she offering to the women, besides just a building in which to live? What does she get in return? In what ways are her expectations met?
17. Why does Catherine believe that Mary Shelley left Justine out of her version of Frankenstein? Do you think this is a valid theory? How does Catherine’s act of writing *The Strange Case of the Alchemist’s Daughter* compare to what Shelley did?

Summary and Discussion Questions from the publisher.