Robert Louis Stevenson (1850 – 94)

He was born in Edinburgh in 1850. As a child he was often ill. So, during his life, he travelled to warmer countries, trying to improve his poor health (South of England, France, Italy, and finally Australia and Tahiti).

He received a strict Calvinist education from his family, he started studying engineering at university but then graduated in law. After that, he devoted himself to writing.

He was in conflict with the respectable Victorian society. He took up eccentric manners, grew his hair long and lived as a “bohemian”.

He married an American woman. They moved to Australia and then settled in Samoa, where he died of a brain haemorrhage in 1894.
His most well known novels are:

*Treasure Island* (1883)

*The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886).

He also wrote a lot of short stories.

**Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde** is a psychological novel where the main theme is the theme of the double, strongly related to the moral dichotomy between good and evil present in Victorian society.

The “double protagonist” embodies the hypocrisy of the Victorian compromise: Dr Jekyll is a respectable gentleman, but he hides inside himself an evil part (Mr Hyde) which at the end will prevail. So the novel is also a critique to the strict Victorian morality and hypocrisy.
The plot

Dr Jekyll is a scientist who, in order to improve mankind, wants to create a potion that can separate the double nature of man’s soul. It’s the same drug that releases Hyde and restores Jekyll.

With time, he becomes addicted to it and his evil part, Hyde, becomes stronger and stronger, so the man becomes a criminal and he will commit several crimes.

His evil double Hyde will end up dominating and controlling Jekyll. So the man has only two choices: he can either choose a life of crime and depravity or eliminate Hyde by killing himself.

Stevenson implies that if man wants to live in a civilized society, he has to repress the most instinctive part of himself.

An important character in the story is Mr. Utterson, Jekyll’s best friend, who is also a lawyer, and will investigate into this story. He understands that there is a strong connection between Jekyll and Hyde from several clues, but he will only find out the truth after Jekyll’s death, by reading two letters left by him.
Literary genre

This novel doesn’t belong to a clear literary genre, but shows elements of different traditions.

The Gothic novel: the most important events happen at night, in a dark, gloomy atmosphere. There’s a typical labyrinthine setting: the London described by Stevenson is like a labyrinth and Dr Jekyll’s house is isolated. Mystery, horror and terror are other important elements.

The Detective story: Mr Utterson is like a detective who collects evidence and makes hypotheses. At the end of the story, by putting together the various clues, he finds a rational explanation. Other typical elements of the crime story are: the title (“case”), the setting (a foggy, badly-lit London), and the plot (some mysterious events are solved by rational enquiry).

Decadentism: some typical elements are: the solitary protagonist, his strange and perverse interests, his tendency to a minute self-analysis which leads him to an inability to act (like Hamlet!), the inexpressed moral position of the author (although the story deals with moral issues).
The theme of the double

The double, or doppelgänger, is a second self, who is a distinct and separate being, but who is also dependent on the original.

There are a lot of details in the novel related to the theme of the double, for example:

When Jekyll turns into Hyde he undergoes also physical changes: Jekyll is tall and slim, while Hyde is small, deformed and ugly.

Jekyll’s house has two entrances: the front door (clean, respectable) and the back door (small and dirty, where Hyde goes out from).

The novel is set in London but it’s full of references to Stevenson’s hometown: Edinburgh. Edinburgh is a “double town”, divided into an old, medieval town full of narrow streets and dark passages, and a new town, with large streets and respectable big, white buildings.
Meaning

The author doesn’t clearly express any moral message, but deals with different issues.

- **The individual and “forbidden knowledge”**: like Dr Faustus and Frankenstein, also Jekyll wants to go beyond human limits but is inevitably punished in the end.

- **The dramatic conflict of human nature**: man is divided in two parts (a good one and an evil one, a higher and a lower, one spiritual, the other physical). These contrasts can lead to sin, which is often dangerous.

- **A study on human personality and psychology**: the story shows that repression of a part of man’s personality (the instinctive part) only increases its force and leads to the destruction of the personality. The author doesn’t offer a moral solution (Jekyll suffers both when he represses his instincts and when he liberates them), but shows a new awareness of the human mind: the human mind is not a single, well-defined block, but is made up of multiple, often contrasting pieces. This vision anticipates the age of psychoanalysis.

- **A satire on contemporary morality**: Dr Jekyll reflects the duplicitous atmosphere of Victorian society.
Narrative structure and style

The novel has a complex narrative structure, due to the shift of the narrative point of view. There are three different narrators: a third person narrator who tells most of the story but who is not omniscient, and two first-person narrators: dr Lanyon, who writes down his version of the story, and finally dr Jekyll himself, whose final confession takes up the last chapter of the book.

The style is characterized by a mixture of realism and symbolism. Stevenson is very precise in his descriptions. But the detailed physical descriptions of Jekyll turning into Hyde also have a deep symbolical meaning. (Dr Jekyll is tall, erect and virtuous, while mr Hyde is short, crooked and malignant. But at the end Hyde gradually becomes stronger, also in a physical sense. Hyde is taking control over Jekyll or, on a moral level, evil is triumphing over good.)