One of the most celebrated writers of his time, the Scotsman Robert Louis [Balfour] Stevenson may be best know for adventure stories like *Treasure Island* and *Kidnapped* or his eerie novella *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, but his book of poems *A Child’s Garden of Verses* (1885) is considered a masterpiece of children’s literature, and his essays and travel books earned him a reputation as an acclaimed stylist of English prose. Born in Edinburgh, Scotland, he was, in his own words, “an only child and, it may be in consequence, both intelligent and sickly.” Although he studied engineering and law, and passed the bar, he never practiced either. Plagued by tuberculosis for most of his life, he nevertheless traveled extensively and loved the open air. In Paris at the age of twenty-six, he fell in love with Fanny Vandegrift Osbourne, an older married art student and mother of two. He followed her to San Francisco, and they were married in 1880, after her divorce. Stevenson’s family opposed their scandalous union, which caused the couple financial difficulties. They moved often, trekking through resorts seeking to improve his health. Stevenson eventually traveled through the South Seas, settling in Samoa in 1890. He built a large house for himself and his wife, his widowed mother, and his stepson Lloyd Osbourne. The Samoans honored him with the title “Tusitala” (the Tale-teller) and built a special road to his house. After his wife partially recovered from a nervous collapse, Stevenson died of a brain hemorrhage at the age of 44 and was buried on Mount Vaea near Apia, Samoa.

Stevenson’s most celebrated works date from the period of his long stay in a sanitarium at Saranac Lake, New York. Stevenson was captivated by Scottish history all of his life, and most of his works seek to combine adventure with some form of historical conflict. *Treasure Island* (1883), which originated as a pirate adventure told to amuse his stepson, explores the conflicts in Scotland between Highlander and Lowlander, Jacobite and Whig. The two protagonists of *Kidnapped* (1886) and its sequel *David Balfour* (1893) become attached to each other yet retain separate values. The former novel incorporates an actual Scottish murder committed in 1745 and depicts the political tensions in eighteenth-century Scotland. The powerful psychological study *Jekyll and Hyde* (1886), which first
came to Stevenson through a dream, can be interpreted as emblematic of the conflicts of civilization, modernity, and science. He develops the theme of divided personality even more fully in *The Master of Ballantrae* (1889), a story of opposing brothers told by a narrator with divided feelings. The novella *The Ebb-Tide* (1894) explores, with a realism that anticipates Joseph Conrad, the darkness of human nature and the evil consequences arising from a lack of inner restraint.

In the wake of Darwinian theory and various other scientific models of personal, social, and cultural evolution, Stevenson’s *Jekyll and Hyde* novella reflects the Victorian fear of personal and social Degeneration or decadence—a reversion to some earlier, more primitive evolutionary stage. At the core of Victorian fears of degeneration, or “devolution,” was the specific fear that somehow the coarser, baser elements of the human character, vestiges inherited from our bestial past, would eventually overwhelm and transfigure the noble elements—that is, that the primitive, atavistic core is what ultimately governs us, routinely overcoming the presumably reliable moral will. That is part of the reason why we find repeated allusion to the dangers of contamination and a resulting desire for purity: the corrupt Hyde first comes to public consciousness when he runs over an innocent (presumably “pure”) child; Utterson and Lanyon go to great lengths to try to uphold the purity of law and science respectively; the relative purity or impurity of Jekyll’s drug is reported to be a key factor in the Jekyll-Hyde transformations.

These fears of degeneration often manifest themselves in instances of the grotesque—that amorphous, undefinable, erosion of rational distinctions—which turns out to be extremely difficult to control. Jekyll seeks to control his world, to master the irrational, through reason, science. What Hyde destroys is Victorian old-world rationality, order, and decorum, which science embodies in part. Hyde replaces that rationality and decorum with madness and perversity. The trampling of an innocent girl and the murder of a Member of Parliament strike at the social and legal bases of social order, the social “purity” and social law. Moreover, once Jekyll ceases to use science for socially mainstream, tangibly practical—that is, socially controlled—purposes, but instead bends it to aristocratically elitist and arrogantly narcissistic ones, he, in effect, invokes Degeneration. Morality falters when it yields to arrogance (even arising from presumably “objective” science) and loses its connection to spiritual and social traditions. Degeneration (or devolutionary reversion) is shown to be as equally natural, and possible, as Progress (or upward evolution). Hyde, the product of the hubris of science, represents less pure evil than a “fall,” a reversion, back into savagery, a slide from the civilized to the uncivilized.

Stevenson’s novella also expresses the great Victorian fear of a reduction or loss of personal and social will, confidence, and essential identity, which are manifested in the foundation social discretion whose ultimate goal is the preservation of society’s institutions. The only feasible way to protect oneself against inadvertent degeneration—a “fall”—is to cling to stable, time-honored social “rules” of decorum, discretion, personal and social loyalty, the “gentleman’s code of honor.” Discretion, in both word and deed, is the essential
core of civilized order; and conversely, scandal—the loss of honor—is the most immediate and tangible threat to that order. As the novella demonstrates, decorum and social order degenerate under invasive, uncontrollable suppositions, rumor, gossip, and particularly scandal. In this respect, sin is not as deadly as the scandal it can bring. One can survive sin; one cannot survive scandal. One’s duty to society, as well as loyalty to one’s friends (who make society personally meaningful), is to avoid disgrace at all costs; the viability of both friendship and time-honored social institutions depends on it. It seems hardly incidental (or accidental) that virtually all explanations of the novella’s mysteries are delayed until they can be revealed in “safety,” that is, literally until after the death of the principals.

It is intriguing that in the novella, language, one of the key elements thought to separate humans from the animals, is presumed to provide the glue, the cohesive bond, that establishes social and moral order (in the form of various prescriptions, wills, letters, and other directives). The novella literally consists of a series of stories—by Enfield, Utterson, Lanyon, and finally Jekyll, in addition to a limited omniscient narrator—each attempting to provide a rational explanation, a coherent narrative that will have a chance of salvaging the collective sanity of its readers. But the characters’ narratives cannot control the metaphysical violence that Jekyll’s violations unleash; in fact, if anything, the narratives only proliferate it. Far from providing a discreet and controlling order, the novel’s various narratives have the effect of gossip—indeed, they are the very vehicles for gossip—the emblem and expression of uncontrollable language, the absence of decorum, and, not least, the erosion of traditional social loyalties. Thus, in a sense, they end up ironically undermining the social order they hope to sustain.

On one level, then, Stevenson’s novella is a very complicated contest between social Propriety (originally in the figure of the respectable Jekyll, but soon shifted by default to the other characters) and grotesque Scandal (first, in the figure of Hyde, then in the figures of both Hyde and Jekyll). In addition to the classic battle of good versus evil, Jekyll and Hyde represent even more fundamentally the opposing forces of social loyalty and personal desire, public viability and private duplicity. The story investigates the idea that everyone, as Freud would later decree, has a double life—a conscious public self and a repressed secret self—and that, in order for civilization to endure, law and rationality must mediate between the two (just as the Ego must mediate between the Superego and the Id). “Sin” or even “evil” may be less an absolute category than a function of relative mental/social/spiritual health—i.e., less a sin than a disease, a psychological (and inevitably, a potentially criminal) “case” study, as the novella’s title *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* suggests.

Stevenson’s famous novella, whatever other themes it investigates, is also an important discourse interrogating key Victorian cultural fantasies, such as the potential perfectibility of Man. It throws into doubt the customary Victorian assumption that humans, as rational and basically good, are inclined to make the right decisions and find workable solutions to problems. Strength of will, or “good character,” is not sufficient to avoid a “fall”; rather a human being’s “bad” side is likely to almost always overwhelm his/her “best self” eventually. Jekyll’s failure, after all, is his inability to control his metamorphosis—a failure of his will, or the efficacy of the will.
In this sense, the novella strongly suggests that the quest for “purity” is a “Trojan horse” proving personally and socially ruinous. The novella seems to argue implicitly that the healthiest course is to accept imperfection, avoid polar alternatives, and try to achieve some “golden mean” of discreet prudence. Idealistic “Truth” (and, for that matter, personal liberty) is not as important as protecting personal honor specifically, and one’s culture generally. Some “truths” should not be revealed, because they are too “dangerous”; they upset and threaten to destroy the stability and viability of social order. Therefore, it is all-important to respect and protect personal privacy and obey the “gentleman’s code of honor.” One’s highest calling is to do one’s Duty, which seems to include minding one’s own business (the course Utterman initially espouses to Enfield but then transgresses), rather than making oneself (and others) vulnerable to gossip and scandal. The disaster that befalls the world of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* is that Henry Jekyll violates that code and duty, betraying the trust of his friends (most obviously, Lanyon, and to a lesser degree, Utterson), bringing disgrace on himself but also on them, and in the behavior of Hyde, bringing scandal and lawlessness to the rest of society.

A footnote for later consideration: notice that it does not seem to occur to Stevenson to include women in his novel about “honor,” discretion, *esprit de corps*, and the avoidance of degeneration. Are women capable of deep-down honor? Was it thought to be a natural part of their character? Women don’t seem to show up, except as emblems, in the work of either Tennyson or Stevenson. Are women suitable participants in intellectual discussions and debates? What is their relation to “character”? Social cohesion? (These questions are raised more forcefully in the last half of the course, when we study various “New Women” writers, Oscar Wilde, and Aubrey Beardsley.)

Stevenson counted among his many friends the writers Henry James and Mark Twain, and the painter John Singer Sargent. His literary output was prodigious and included thirteen novels, three books of short stories, six travel books, four books of essays, and two books of poetry. He wrote several unsuccessful plays in collaboration with others, including his dear friend, the poet and famous editor William Ernest Henley, who was the model for Long John Silver in *Treasure Island*. Usually associated with the late-Victorian revival of the Gothic and romance, Stevenson was a disciplined artist who strongly defended the power of illusion and imagination, and who insisted that fiction should render the truths that make life significant, as opposed to the trivial or mundane. Although he became less highly esteemed in the 20th- and 21st centuries than he was during the 19th, his finely wrought stories made an important contribution to the development of modern English fiction.