Context:

Robert Louis Stevenson, one of the masters of the Victorian adventure story, was born in Edinburgh, Scotland, on November 13, 1850. He was a sickly child, and respiratory troubles plagued him throughout his life. As a young man, he traveled through Europe, leading a bohemian lifestyle and penning his first two books, both travel narratives. In 1876, he met a married woman, Fanny Van de Grift Osbourne, and fell in love with her. Mrs. Osbourne eventually divorced her husband, and she and Stevenson were married.

Stevenson returned to London with his bride and wrote prolifically over the next decade, in spite of his terrible health. He won widespread admiration with *Treasure Island,* written in 1883, and followed it with *Kidnapped* in 1886; both were adventure stories, the former a pirate tale set on the high seas and the latter a historical novel set in Stevenson’s native Scotland. *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,*which Stevenson described as a “fine bogey tale,” also came out in 1886. It met with tremendous success, selling 40,000 copies in six months and ensuring Stevenson’s fame as a writer.

In its narrative of a respectable doctor who transforms himself into a savage murderer, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* tapped directly into the anxieties of Stevenson’s age. The Victorian era, named for Queen Victoria, who ruled England for most of the nineteenth century, was a time of unprecedented technological progress and an age in which European nations carved up the world with their empires. By the end of the century, however, many people were beginning to call into question the ideals of progress and civilization that had defined the era, and a growing sense of pessimism and decline pervaded artistic circles. Many felt that the end of the century was also witnessing a twilight of Western culture.

With the notion of a single body containing both the erudite Dr. Jekyll and the depraved Mr. Hyde, Stevenson’s novel imagines an inextricable link between civilization and savagery, good and evil. Jekyll’s attraction to the freedom from restraint that Hyde enjoys mirrors Victorian England’s secret attraction to allegedly savage non-Western cultures, even as Europe claimed superiority over them. This attraction also informs such books as Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness.* For, as the Western world came in contact with other peoples and ways of life, it found aspects of these cultures within itself, and both desired and feared to indulge them. These aspects included open sensuality, physicality, and other so-called irrational tendencies. Even as Victorian England sought to assert its civilization over and against these instinctual sides of life, it found them secretly fascinating. Indeed, society’s repression of its darker side only increased the fascination. As a product of this society, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* manifests this fascination; yet, as a work of art, it also questions this interest.

By the late 1880s, Stevenson had become one of the leading lights of English literature. But even after garnering fame, he led a somewhat troubled life. He traveled often, seeking to find a climate more amenable to the tuberculosis that haunted his later days. Eventually he settled in Samoa, and there Stevenson died suddenly in 1894, at the age of forty-four.