

Oscar Wilde

The Picture of Dorian Gray

Notes &c.

Objectives

1. To describe how the *avant-garde* experimentation in Symbolist literature during the late nineteenth century that led to Wilde's proto-modernist style.
2. To identify the relationship between politics and aesthetics in proto-modernist literature like *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.
3. To develop an awareness of not only what the text says but how it goes about saying it: the relationship between content and form.
4. To recognize experimental form in literature, even in an uncomplicated mystery novel such as *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Reading Assignment

Gifford, James. "Introduction." *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Oscar Wilde. Victoria, BC: McPherson Library, 2011. i–xii. Web. <https://tinyurl.com/y3ov5c86>

Wilde, Oscar. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Ed. James Gifford. Victoria, BC: McPherson Library, 2011. Web. <https://tinyurl.com/y3ov5c86>

Commentary

[Oscar Wilde](#)'s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* has a complicated print history. He first published it in 1890 in an issue of *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* that included several other poems and stories. However, he then revised it and expanded it significantly before publishing it as a novel in 1891. Most students read this expanded 1891 version of the novel. Our copy in this course is the first 1890 edition as it was printed in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*, which is shorter and, in many ways, more troubling to its audience. The novel was made even more famous when Wilde was charged with indecency in a very public libel trial, which ultimately led to his imprisonment in Reading Gaol (Jail) while at the height of his fame as a playwright. Since then, his works have been published and

performed extensively, and *Dorian Gray* has been made into a film three times, most recently in 2009 starring Ben Barnes and Colin Firth (though it is much changed for this film). You might wish to view some of the various film versions to develop a sense of how Wilde's writings, in particular his plays, function. Firth performs in two recent film adaptations: one of *Dorian Gray* and another based on Wilde's most successful comic play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Both adapt the text significantly but still carry the flavor of Wilde's original works, even when the plot is enormously changed (in other words, the films are not *nearly* good enough to replace reading the novel – there are *major* changes that are obvious).

As we would expect based on last week's readings, Wilde's novel is caught between political commentary and critiques of Victorian society versus the emerging theory of aesthetics that prized beauty above contents. Wilde was involved in the French [Symbolist movement](#), which is best seen in his experimental play *Salomé*, which he chose to write in French rather than English. This Symbolist experimentation permeates the novel and its recurring images of flowers, colors, and allusions to other texts. For instance, consider this example of a poem by the Symbolist poet [Stéphane Mallarmé](#):

Fan
(Of Méry Laurent)

Frigid roses to last
Identically will interrupt
With a calyx, white, abrupt,
Your breath become frost

But freed by my fluttering
By shock profound, the sheaf
Of frigidity melts to relief
Of laughter's rapturous flowering.

In carving out the sky
Like a fine fan you ply
Outdoing that phial's glass

Without loss or violation
Unable to hold fast
Méry's sweet emanation.

Once you have read *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, this poem's focus on small objects, color, an emotional shock that is not stated, and its "symbolist" attitude toward poetic images will seem more familiar, even if it is still somewhat confusing. Wilde brought this to his audience's Victorian expectations, causing much shock (and excitement).

At the same time, Wilde was an Irish Nationalist during a period in which Ireland was still deeply suffering from the repercussions of the Irish Famine and British colonial rule. Ireland was a colony ruled by England for centuries, even if popular ideas today forget the brutality and racism inflicted on the Irish well into the twentieth century and still ongoing. Wilde was also actively reading revolutionary literatures (such as books by the [anarchist](#) Peter Kropotkin) while completing his studies at Trinity College Dublin and then at Oxford University on an academic scholarship. At Oxford, he attended Magdalen College (pronounced "Maudlin" College) and studied Classics under [Walter Pater](#) and John Ruskin. In many respects, these two famous professors characterize the two struggling sides of Wilde's own writings. Pater's book *The Renaissance* advocates [aestheticism](#) and the movement that came to be known under the term "[Decadence](#)." In contrast, Ruskin was a famous social critic who advocated Christian socialism, critiqued Adam Smith's theory of economics, and influenced William Morris and the Fabian Society (The Fabian Society is the origin of the modern Labour Party, the London School of Economics, and Manhattan's The New School – it continues to influence world politics). These competing interests, the material conditions of Wilde's world, and the aesthetic aims of his art are all presented in the novel but may not be fully reconciled into a unified whole. Whether the book is a social critique or a purely aesthetic art object is difficult to determine, and Wilde seems to have claimed both things at different times.

In his book *Modernisms*, the British scholar (now at New York University) Peter Nicholls argues that there is not just one "Modernism" but several (hence the plural of his title). In that context, his view of the French Symbolists who influence Wilde is mainly stylistic. He argues:

Contemporary accounts of the style [of Symbolism] thus stress its likeness to jewelled ornamentation, brilliantly hard yet reified and atomistic. Wilde's *Dorian Gray*, for example, finds the 'poisonous' yellow book [*Á Rebours*] to be written in 'that curious jewelled style, vivid and obscure at once, full of *argot* and of archaisms, of technical expressions and of elaborate paraphrases, that characterizes the work of some of the finest artists of the

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French school of *Symbolistes*'. His model, Des Esseintes, had thought in similar terms of Mallarmé. (58)

Although these names may be unfamiliar, what you should notice in this comment is the manner in which Wilde alludes in his novel to a previous novel (*À Rebours*), a novel that was itself already referring back to a previous author (Mallarmé). That points us back to the preoccupations with form and a literary tradition.

When the New Jersey-born critic [Edmund Wilson](#) turned to the subject of Symbolism in his influential book *Axel's Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870–1930*, he populated this French literary movement with the likes of Stéphane Mallarmé, Gérard de Nerval, [Charles Baudelaire](#), and Arthur Rimbaud. All four of these poets influenced Wilde significantly and also appear in quotations that [T.S. Eliot](#) placed in his 1922 poem *The Waste Land*. Wilson saw Symbolism as a reaction against the rising Classicism (literary conservatism) that arose after the Romantic period in English and European art and literature. Wilson was a major American literary critic and managing editor of the magazines *Vanity Fair* and *The New Republic*, but his interests in [Marxism](#) and Psychoanalysis shaped his critical views. His argument was that the Symbolists (among whom he counted Oscar Wilde) shaped Modernism as it developed. Moreover, both movements were products of the material conditions of their time and reflect deep struggles with the nature of human thought. You might consider as you read Wilde's novel how the "jewelled style" and construction of a literary heritage through "elaborate paraphrases" or allusions influences your reading experience. Are these important features of the book? Are they essential components of its form?

The "Introduction" to your edition contains background information on this specific edition as well as its aesthetic and political interests.

Beyond Introductions: Familiar with Dorian

You already know from the reading above that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* has a complicated print history. What was not mentioned was the rationale for this complication. Wilde's novel was both enthralling and appalling for the British and American reading publics because of its sexual suggestions. For modern readers, this is nearly impossible to worry over since the novel never discusses nor even mentions sex overtly – for readers in 1890, its suggestions were impossible to ignore. This is also the heart of the problem.

Wilde dissented from the mainstream Victorian society not by writing a novel in which the protagonist engaged in dangerous love affairs and murders. This was commonplace, just as our modern television shows can regularly depict murders, assaults, heinous sexual crimes, and a variety of social transgressions. The difficulty is that Wilde does not present Dorian to his readers in a manner that makes it clear that he is our villain and must be subject to the scorn or censorship of the narrative. We are familiar with this as well. Our contemporary films and television may depict horrible events, but only in the context of their *being* horrible. We are taught very clearly whom to love and whom to hate. In its most conventional form, this appears as the shape of the narrative with a crime or transgression opening the work and its eventual punishment closing the narrative, such as a murder followed by a court conviction in television shows such as *Law & Order*, or a lie followed by an apology in *The Big Bang Theory*. In short, the good win and the bad lose. However, Wilde reminds us in his later play *The Importance of Being Earnest* that this is not always how reality works, as when Miss Prism is asked how her own three volume novel ends: "The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means" (II.13–15).

Wilde does not engage in this "fiction" in *Dorian Gray*, or at least he resists it to a degree that his audience found uncomfortable. They had a genre of "ghost story" and "murder mystery," both of which could contain sex and violence but absolutely needed to have punishment and an explicit moral censure of the antagonist by the end. Instead, Wilde's *Dorian Gray* makes Dorian seem somewhat sympathetic to the reader, and Dorian's punishment appears "off stage" in the novel. We never have an opportunity to "see" it directly nor to impart an explicit moral lesson from it.

Likewise, Wilde's novel was condemned for its homosexual content. None of this is, of course, explicit. We know that Basil loves Dorian, and Basil likewise does not wish to exhibit the painting for fear that it will reveal his secret: that he is homosexual and in love with Dorian Gray. This was not, however, the primary problem for the reading public, for such scenarios were already reasonably common in literature. The problem lay in the narrative structure of "punishment" and an explicit moral. In previous works, nearly all homosexual characters (or those implicitly gay) would receive moral condemnation and punishment. For Wilde, Basil is perhaps the only likeable and morally sympathetic character in the novel, and the reader is most surely meant to understand his murder as a crime and as an evil act, not as a justified punishment. This is where Wilde's audience rebelled, and

our edition details his revisions that curtain or elide much of this content for the expanded (and cut) 1891 edition of the novel.

This dissent, however, cost Wilde dearly. Although his novel was very successful and has led to films, comics, stage adaptations, and many bestselling novelist responses or continuations, he revised the book in 1891 to remove its dissenting voice. In 1895, Wilde was tried and imprisoned for “gross indecency” for his own homosexuality. The hard labor during imprisonment ruined his health, and he died of meningitis three years after his release, most likely due to his injuries during his term in prison.

Questions for Self-Review

1. Is there a social critique or a moral implicit in Wilde’s novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*?
2. Does the form of the novel, its structure, support or conflict with its social function and its critique of Victorian London society?
3. How do social class, wealth, and power function in the novel?
4. Does the novel critique British Imperialism or the aristocracy, or is it apolitical by virtue of its aesthetic aims?
5. Does the ending of the novel imply a moral or lesson that is not explicitly stated?
6. Must we know about Wilde’s life or Victorian social conditions in order to discuss *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as a work of art?

Works Cited & Supplemental Readings

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