

Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray
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Lecture 52

Introduction to Oscar Wilde; Literary Concepts; Plot of the novel

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Week 11: Oscar Wilde's The
Picture of Dorian Gray (1891)

Lecture 11A: Introduction to Oscar Wilde; Literary Contexts; Plot of the
novel

Image source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oscar_Wilde

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Hello, and welcome to Week 11's lectures on Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray. In today's lecture session, I will introduce the author Oscar Wilde, talk a little bit about his personal and literary context and offer you a brief summary of the plot of the novel.

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Oscar Wilde



- "Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde, (born October 16, 1854, [Dublin](#), Ireland—died November 30, 1900, [Paris](#), France), [Irish](#) wit, poet, and dramatist whose reputation rests on his only [novel](#), *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), and on his comic masterpieces *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895)."

- Source: Karl Beckson. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Oscar-Wilde>
- Image source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oscar_Wilde

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Oscar Wilde's full name is Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde. He was born on October 16, 1854 in Dublin, Ireland, and he died on November, 30, 1900, in Paris, which is in France. He was an Irish wit, poet, dramatist whose reputation rests on his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and on his comic masterpieces *Lady Windermere's Fan*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

The Picture of Dorian Gray is a novel which is interesting to us in terms of its gothic mood, whereas *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *The Important of Being Earnest* are plays and they considered to be his comic masterpieces, which satirize late Victorian society and its hypocrisies.

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Oscar Wilde



- “He was a spokesman for the late 19th-century [Aesthetic](#) movement in England, which advocated [art for art’s sake](#), and he was the object of celebrated civil and criminal suits involving homosexuality and ending in his imprisonment (1895–97).”

- Source: Karl Beckson. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Oscar-Wilde>
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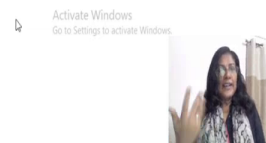
Oscar Wilde is famous for being a symbol of the aesthetic movement at the turn of the century in England and the aesthetic movement had at its heart this credo that is art should be for art sake. There is no apparent social purpose, which should inform a particular art when it is being structured and disseminated and enjoyed. So the most important facet of a literary work is its aesthetic elements, its formal pleasures, the way it has been constructed and structured.

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Aesthetic tendencies



- “He was deeply impressed by the teachings of the English writers [John Ruskin](#) and [Walter Pater](#) on the central importance of art in life and particularly by the latter’s stress on the [aesthetic](#) intensity by which life should be lived. Like many in his generation, Wilde was determined to follow Pater’s urging “to burn always with [a] hard, gemlike flame.” But Wilde also delighted in affecting an aesthetic pose; this, combined with rooms at Oxford decorated with objets d’art, resulted in his famous remark, “Oh, would that I could live up to my blue china!”
- Source: Karl Beckson. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Oscar-Wilde>



Oscar Wilde was deeply impressed by the teachings of the English writers, John Ruskin and Walter Pater. And with regard to these two writers, what was important was the significance of art in life and particularly by Pater’s stress on the aesthetic intensity by which life should be lived. Like many in his generation, Wilde was determined to follow Pater’s urging to burn always with a hard gemlike flame. But Wilde also delighted in affecting an aesthetic pose, this combined with rooms at Oxford decorated with objets d’art, resulted in his famous remark, “oh, would that I could live up to my blue china!”

As I pointed out just now, Oscar Wilde was greatly influenced by the great artists, John Ruskin, and Walter Pater, especially by Pater’s emphasis on the intense aesthetic life and it is very interesting to see this analogy of life to a gemlike flame and Wilde wanted to imitate that kind of intense life which is very attractive, which is fire like, which is like a precious stone that is burning, so life should be like that according to Wilde. And the last remark there on the slide by Wilde that he desires to live up to his very beautiful blue china, he desires to live up to the beauties of a particular object is telling in the guidelines about life that Oscar Wilde adhered to.

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Oscar Wilde



- “In the early 1880s, when [Aestheticism](#) was the rage and despair of literary London, Wilde established himself in social and artistic circles by his wit and flamboyance. Soon the periodical *Punch* made him the satiric object of its antagonism to the Aesthetes for what was considered their unmasculine devotion to art. And in their [comic opera](#) *Patience*, Gilbert and Sullivan based the character Bunthorne, a “fleshly poet,” partly on Wilde. Wishing to reinforce the association, Wilde published, at his own expense, *Poems* (1881), which echoed, too faithfully, his discipleship to the poets [Algernon Swinburne](#), [Dante Gabriel Rossetti](#), and [John Keats](#).”
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Now there are several points in this set of ideas which are very important in understanding the context to which Wilde belonged. Firstly, the idea of aestheticism in literature was both popular and at the same time was decried by social and literary commentators, and Wilde became one of the key members of the artistic circles because of his ability to be very, very attractively satirical and he was also very flamboyant. He dressed and spoke in a showy manner.

There was an element of dandyism and Oscar Wilde’s demeanour was picked up by the periodical press and *Punch* made fun of him as well as the aesthetes because *Punch* thought this kind of artistic tendency, the aesthetic artistic tendency, was unmasculine. This kind of art was not very masculine. There was a feminine subtext to it and Wilde was at the receiving end of this

satirical representation of Punch and Wilde responded to it by emphasizing the beauties of nature in his poetry, in the fashion of Swinburne and Rossetti and Keats. So, Wilde reemphasized and reiterated his joy in celebrating the fleshly side of nature.

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Oscar Wilde



- “Wilde was a reviewer for the *Pall Mall Gazette* and then became editor of *Woman’s World* (1887–89). During this period of apprenticeship as a writer, he published *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888), which reveals his gift for [romantic allegory](#) in the form of the [fairy tale](#).”
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Wilde was a reviewer for the *Pall Mall Gazette* and then became editor of *Woman’s World*, which was published between 1887 and 1889 under his editorship. During this period of apprenticeship as a writer, he published *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, which came out in 1888, which reveals his gift for romantic allegory in the form of the fairy tale.

In this particular collection, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, which was immensely popular and continues to be immensely popular to this day, one can see the gift of Oscar Wilde in combining allegory with a fairy tale narrator. So there is a lot of irony, allegories, attire and romance in these tales and they have a moral purpose as well.

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Oscar Wilde



- "In the final decade of his life, Wilde wrote and published nearly all of his major work. In his only novel, [The Picture of Dorian Gray](#) (published in *Lippincott's Magazine*, 1890, and in book form, revised and expanded by six chapters, 1891), Wilde combined the supernatural elements of the [Gothic novel](#) with the unspeakable sins of French [decadent fiction](#). Critics charged immorality despite Dorian's self-destruction; Wilde, however, insisted on the amoral nature of art regardless of an apparently [moral](#) ending."

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"In the final decade of his life, Wilde wrote and published nearly all of his major work. In his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* published in *Lippincott's Magazine* 1890, and in book form, revised and expanded by six chapters that came out in 1891, Wilde combined the supernatural elements of the Gothic novel with the unspeakable sins of French decadent fiction. Critics charged immorality despite Dorian's self destruction, Wilde, however, insisted on the amoral nature of art regardless of an apparently moral ending."

Wilde, especially in the final years of his life, in the final decade he wrote and published. He brought his work out himself. He financed his work. He published his own work. And in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which, sorry for that Freudian slip, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which was initially published in *Lippincott's Magazine* in 1890 was expanded. Wilde added a couple of chapters and it came out as a novel a book form in 1891.

In terms of its form, it is very interesting because it combines the gothic mood with the French decadent fiction type of narrative. So there is a hybrid tone to this novel and this novel was condemned by critics who argued that this an immoral book. Interestingly, Wilde argued that art is amoral. It does not have a message to communicate to its readers, artist's art, art for art's own sake is what Wilde believed in.

Despite this kind of claim one can see that the novel is moralistic in tone. Dorian self-destructs. He finds that he has to pay for his crimes and that can be seen as a moral way in which the novel is structured. But despite this kind of structuring, critics attack this novel for its apparent immorality.

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The Picture of Dorian Gray



- “The Picture of Dorian Gray, moral fantasy novel ...published in an early form in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* in 1890. The novel, the only one written by Wilde, had six additional chapters when it was released as a book in 1891. The work, an archetypal tale of a young man who purchases eternal youth at the expense of his soul, was a romantic exposition of Wilde's own Aestheticism.”
- Source: Ronan McDonald <https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Picture-of-Dorian-Gray-novel-by-Wilde>

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“The Picture of Dorian Gray is a moral fantasy novel. There are elements of the fantastic in this work. And as I pointed out, it was published in Lippincott’s monthly magazine and turned into a novel form the year, in the year 1891. The novel, the only one by Wilde had six additional chapters when it was released as a book in 1891. The work, an archetypal tale of a young man who purchases eternal youth at the expense of his soul was a romantic exposition of Wilde’s own Aestheticism.”

At the heart of The Picture of Dorian Gray, there is a young man and the young man can be an archetype for anyone who wants to remain youthful forever. And for that kind of bargain, this young man sells his soul. And this is a reflection of Wilde’s own aesthetic philosophy.

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The Picture of Dorian Gray



- “The story begins in the art studio of Basil Hallward, who is discussing a current painting with his witty and amoral friend Lord Henry Wotton. Henry thinks that the painting, a portrait of an extraordinarily beautiful young man, should be displayed, but Basil disagrees, fearing that his [obsession](#) with the portrait’s subject, [Dorian Gray](#), can be seen in the work.”
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The setting is interesting. It is in an art studio and there is a conversation between Lord Henry Wotton and Basil Hallward, who is an artist, Henry thinks that this painting should be displayed, but Wotton, Henry Wotton thinks that this painting should be displayed, but Basil thinks that it is a personal project.

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The Picture of Dorian Gray



- "Dorian then arrives, and he is fascinated as Henry explains his belief that one should live life to the fullest by indulging one's impulses. Henry also points out that beauty and youth are fleeting, and Dorian declares that he would give his soul if the portrait were to grow old and wrinkled while he remained young and handsome. Basil gives the painting to Dorian."
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"Dorian then arrives, and he is fascinated as Henry explains his belief that one should live life to the fullest, but indulging one's impulses. Henry also points out that beauty and youth are fleeting, and Dorian declares that he would give his soul if the portrait were to grow old and wrinkled, while he remained young and handsome. Basil gives the painting to Dorian."

We can very clearly see that Henry is laying out the philosophy of indulgence live life to the full that seems to be his credo. And one can see that Dorian is becoming very quickly influenced by Henry's philosophy. Henry's point that beauty and youth are fleeting, they're ephemeral and Dorian immediately points out, declares that if he could retain his youth and if the portrait can age, if the portrait of his figure could age then he would easily sell his soul to get that kind of deal. And Basil ends up giving the portrait to Dorian.

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The Picture of Dorian Gray



- "Henry decides to take on the project of molding Dorian's personality. A few weeks later, Dorian tells Henry that he has fallen in love with an actress, Sibyl Vane, because of her great beauty and acting talent. Henry and Basil go with him to a dingy theatre to see Sibyl, but her performance is terrible. Sibyl explains to Dorian that now that she knows what real love is, she can no longer pretend to be in love on stage. Dorian is repulsed and wants nothing further to do with her."

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Dorian is taken under the wing of Henry. Henry becomes the guide and friend and philosopher of Dorian. And a few weeks later Dorian informs his friend that he is in love with an actress called Sibyl Vane, who is very beautiful and apparently has a lot of acting talent. And the friends, including Henry and Basil, go with Dorian and they witness the performance of Sibyl, who is terrible on the stage and Sibyl informs Dorian that she cannot pretend to be on love with anyone else on the stage. She cannot express or pretend affection on stage because she knows what real love is. Dorian is disgusted with Sibyl and he breaks off with her.

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The Picture of Dorian Gray



- “When he returns home, he sees a cruel expression on the face of his portrait, and he decides to seek Sibyl’s forgiveness. Henry arrives the next day, however, with news that Sibyl committed suicide the previous night, and he convinces Dorian that there is no reason for him to feel badly about it.”

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We can see how things take a turn for the worst very quickly. Dorian's cruel rejection ends in Sibyl’s suicide and Dorian is able to feel repentance only when he sees his cruelty depicted for him on the face of his portrait that is very interesting. He is able to look at how he would have appeared to Sibyl by examining, by looking at the portrait and he decides to ask her forgiveness, but it is too late. Henry informs him the next day that Sibyl is no more and Henry also offers comfort and solace to Dorian saying that there is no need to feel guilty about it, no need to feel bad about it. So, one can also see that Henry is not a great adviser of Dorian. So he seems to be Dorian’s bad angel.

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The Picture of Dorian Gray



- “Dorian has the portrait removed to his attic. Henry sends Dorian a book that he finds poisonous and fascinating (critics have suggested that it might be *Against the Grain* by Joris-Karl Huysmans). Under the book's influence, Dorian spends the next 18 years in the pursuit of *capricious* and sybaritic excess, and he becomes increasingly drawn to evil. He frequently visits the portrait, noting the signs of aging and of corruption that appear, though he himself remains unblemished.”
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Dorian becomes uncomfortable with this changing portrait, this magical gothic portrait of his own face and he gets it removed and kept in the attic of his home, the evil angel, Henry Wotton sends Dorian an important object. It is a poisonous and fascinating book by Joris-Karl Huysmans and it is titled 'Against the Grain'. This book is hugely influential and it makes Dorian spend the next 18 years, nearly two decades, in the pursuit of pleasure.

He is extremely indulgent in sensual pleasures and one can see that he is drawn to the evil side than to the good. Dorian is curious to see how the portrait changes and he notices that the portrait ages and there is corruption writ large on his face in the portrait, but he himself, his own body and appearance, his own face is spotless. It remains as youthful and as handsome as ever.

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The Picture of Dorian Gray



- “One evening he runs into Basil, who tells him that there are rumours that he has destroyed the lives and reputations of many people. Dorian, however, refuses to accept blame. Basil declares that he clearly does not know Dorian, who responds by taking him to the attic to see the portrait. The painting has become horrifying. Basil tells Dorian that if this is a reflection of his soul, he must repent and pray for forgiveness, and a suddenly enraged Dorian murders Basil. He blackmails another former friend into disposing of the body.”
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Once again, you can see how gruesome Dorian Gray behaves when he is forced to face the truth. Basil, his old friend, informs Dorian that he has a bad reputation because people talk behind his back, at the back of Dorian and say that, he had destroyed, spoil the reputations of several people. And Basil is at a loss to understand the behavior of Dorian. Dorian takes him to the attic and shows him the portrait and the portrait is ugly to look at. The painting is a thing of horror. It becomes a gothic object.

And Basil very quickly reached the lesson there. It is an easy lesson. And he tells Dorian that he has to beg for forgiveness because the portrait represents his soul, his horrible soul and Dorian is unable to bear that kind of judgment and he in an impulse murders Basil and gets rid of his body with the help of another former friend.

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The Picture of Dorian Gray



- “Dorian goes to an opium den, where Sibyl’s vengeful brother, James, finds him, but the fact that Dorian still appears quite young dissuades him from acting. However, another patron of the den later divulges Dorian’s age. At a subsequent hunting party at Dorian’s country estate, one of the hunters accidentally shoots and kills James, who was hiding in a thicket.”
- Source: Ronan McDonald <https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Picture-of-Dorian-Gray-novel-by-Wilde>

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“Dorian goes to an opium den, where Sibyl’s vengeful brother, James, finds him, but the fact that Dorian still appears quite young dissuades him from acting. However, another patron of the den later divulges Dorian’s age. At a subsequent hunting party at Dorian’s country estate, one of the hunters accidentally shoots and kills James, who was hiding in a thicket.”

So James is the brother of Sibyl and he wants to take revenge on Dorian for his appalling behavior towards Sibyl. Everyone is at a loss as to how Dorian is still so young and so is James. He is also confused that Dorian is youthful. He comes to learn about his real age from another member of the den. And at a shooting party organized by Dorian, James is very conveniently killed off. Somebody accidentally kills James, when he was hiding in a thicket.

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The Picture of Dorian Gray



- “Some weeks later Dorian tells Henry that he has decided to become virtuous and recently decided against taking advantage of a young girl who was smitten with him. Dorian goes to see if the portrait has improved because of his honourable act, but he sees rather that it has acquired a look of cunning. He decides to destroy the portrait and stabs it with a knife. His servants hear a scream, and, when they arrive, they see a loathsome old man dead on the floor with a knife in his chest and a portrait of the beautiful young man he once was.”

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Towards the end of the novel, we see Dorian informing Henry that he is going to change for the better and that he is not going to take advantage of a young girl. He is not going to spoil her faith in him. And once he makes this decision, he goes to check if the portrait has gotten better because of this good deed of not taking advantage of an impressionable young girl. But when he looks at the portrait, he sees an appearance of cunning on his face. His portrait looks very, very crafty. And Dorian is unable to bear this kind of expression anymore and he decides to destroy the portrait.

He stabs it with a knife and there is a lot of screaming, which is heard by his servants and when they come to find out, they find a dead man, an old man, who is dead on the floor with a knife in his chest. The old man is dead and the portrait becomes young. Dorian regains his old age, the

corrupt old body is what is lying on the floor, motionless and lifeless and the portrait, which was really ugly looking has become beautiful and youthful looking.

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The Picture of Dorian Gray



- ““There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book,” wrote Wilde. “Books are well written, or badly written. That is all.” The [aphorisms](#) that make up the “Preface” of Wilde’s novel were his response to those critics who had denounced the immorality and unhealthiness of this story after its scandalous first appearance in *Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine*. However, for all its transgressive delights, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* could easily be read as a profoundly moral book, even a cautionary tale against the dangers of vice.”
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““There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book”, wrote Wilde. Books are well written or badly written. That is all. The aphorisms that make up the preface of Wilde's novel were his response to those critics who had denounced the immortality and unhealthiness of this story after its scandalous first appearance in Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine. However, for all its transgressive delights The picture of Dorian Gray could easily be read as a profoundly moral book, even a cautionary tale against the dangers of vice.”

According to Oscar Wilde, there is no such thing as an immoral book. Books can only be well written or very poorly written, badly constructed, that is it. These are all the aphorisms that one can find in the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. And though the book was denounced, put down and criticized for its immorality and unhealthiness, they thought this was not a suitable book to be read by the society. Despite all this kind of fears and worries one can easily see that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a moral book.

In fact, one can also see it as a cautionary tale of Oscar Wilde, who is warning the readers against the dangers of evil, of sensual pleasure of excessive indulgence in pleasures of many kinds. So what is interesting is that despite its morality, it was condemned as an immoral book.

Thank you for watching, I will continue in the next session.