



Blue Ava Ford Publications  
**International Journal of Trends in English Language and  
Literature (IJTELL)**

An International Peer-Reviewed English Journal; ISSN:2582-8487  
Impact Factor: 7.589 (SJIF); [www.ijtell.com](http://www.ijtell.com) Volume-5, Issue-4; Oct-Dec (2024)

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**Review: The Picture of Dorian Gray, by Oscar Wilde**

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Asst .Lect. **Atheer Makki Alshimmary**  
University of Kerbala, Center for Strategic Studies, Iraq  
[Atheer.m@uokerbala.edu.iq](mailto:Atheer.m@uokerbala.edu.iq)

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**Introduction**

Born in 1854 in Dublin and an Oxford graduate, Oscar Wilde lived in a time when social progress was about to collide with recent historical conservatism. He was himself to be a witness of the fin de siècle, a period characterized particularly by its culture which epitomized the notion of ‘pleasure and decay.’ The decade of the eighties in England was politically a difficult time of transition of power, with Ireland demanding autonomy and Germany becoming a threat on the international scene after unification. On a European scale, this was also the time of the domination of the bourgeoisie, but in England, this period was slowly disappearing from the Royal family as well. Regardless, the English, a nation only lately reconstituted, still longed for stability. This premillennial tension was then, among others, artistically transmitted through the literature of the decade which was imbued with baroque dance around the paradox, the strange, the morbid, the unattainable ideal of perfect artifice. Wilde, a child of his age, was then open to this paradox in an age of morality; one would never suspect that the born Victorian that he was would be the one to write the criticism of that era.

The Picture of Dorian Gray was written by Oscar Wilde at the end of an oppressive epoch in England, at a time of lasting peace, affluence, and expanding power. In the Victorian era - especially during the long reign of Queen Victoria, from 1837 to 1901 - a conservative morality came into bloom. During this time, however, radical reform laws were passed such as the Factory Acts, the Education Acts, and the various Public Health Acts. This was an age of British imperialism at its peak, and so, the rich upper class could buy almost as many modern marvels as they liked. Hence, this was a time when art lovers and artists alike had a greater extent than previous generations to explore new, innovative artistic styles, safe from aggressive laws and pressure from society. The people gained a sense of general well-being and prosperity. One of the best ways to show this off was to decorate the lavish interiors with paintings by the more prestigious artists and other arrangements that could show off their inclusivity from the crowd and their wealth. Art, in general, was prized as a social status



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symbol when Wilde penned this novel in the late 1880s, and there were different art theories and movements developing such as, for instance, Pre-Raphaelitism, Symbolism, the Impressionists, and Victorian art. To make art more personal, it intertwined with religious symbolism and some political propaganda.

### **Themes and Symbolism in The Picture of Dorian Gray**

Wilde's only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, was published in 1890. The narrative itself is complex, examining many themes over a vast period of time. Critics argue that this level of narrative intricacy is enough to boost its interpretation from being about sophisticated romanticism all the way to existential allegory. Some of the most important themes in the book are the nature of beauty, art and the artist, hedonism, the nature of influence, and the nature of good and evil. The central symbol of the entire novel is the portrait of Dorian, and the story basically tells of a man who spends his entire life in pursuit of personal pleasure only to be devoured by the consequences. Most critics agree that it is the themes of this novel which set it apart from Wilde's other works, as Dorian's descent into moral wickedness and eventual tangle with murder mark it as a distinctly Gothic novel. It is also rife with Wilde's philosophy about art, aestheticism in general, and the canons of beauty.

Wilde's use of color association is mockingly covered. The thirteen symbols of color that illustrate the various personality traits assigned to characters such as Lord Fermor and Elder Pearson support the reading of the novel as containing an "allegory of the individual saga of personal damnation." The anti-aestheticism of the novel is sublimated by the association of Dorian with the color gold, representing intellectual sterility and spiritual decadence. The appearance of the color is always restrictive to the portraiture of Dorian, and as Dorian himself becomes more restrictive, the appearance of the color becomes less frequent, as it diminishes the anti-aestheticism of the story and the moralizing of the ending. The novel is thus a battleground for the two sides of Wilde: the formal Victorian socialite prone to the abjection of the human being in man, as well as the aesthetic philosopher, the man who is interested in doing what his characters cannot, looking into the soul of man and exploring its beckoning depths. Both prejudices come heavily to bear on the story; the fall of Dorian as an allegory of Wildeanism serves to corrupt, to disgust, to become protagonist thereafter.



**Character Analysis: Dorian Gray, Lord Henry, and Basil Hallward**

The characters of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* represent opposing values. Dorian embodies the prevailing ethos of the day, representing hedonism, moral ambiguity, and the “modern” man; Lord Henry Wotton stands for a biting wit and the value of beauty; and Basil Hallward embodies artistic aestheticism, moral value, and, in a way, real, unadulterated love for Dorian. As such, he serves as a counterpoint to Lord Henry. A detailed character analysis of each figure supports this claim and connects motivations to the broader themes of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Dorian’s character is often epitomized as a pantheistic playboy who sees the person in the image and the painting as entities of equal worth. Essentially, he lacks moral grounding; he is “a thing that no one but I had ever made love to.” When readers are first introduced, Dorian is the embodiment of the noble savage; he is young, innocent, and eager to indulge in life. In contrast, Lord Henry is an attractive, middle-aged English noble and represents the zenith of modern British life. Lord Henry’s character is primarily concerned with the corruption of Dorian Gray, although he is not free from guilt himself. Dorian’s sullen face is too melodramatic and childish for Henry, but Dorian is also an initial fan of Lord Henry, whose witty and shamelessly disgraceful conversation lures Dorian out of his shy, moral comfort zone. In analyzing Lord Henry, he is a man fascinated by the earthly world and is responsible for fragmenting Dorian’s character.

Instead of witnessing Dorian’s tragic journey, Basil remains Dorian’s guardian. Indeed, Basil envies Dorian’s physical well-being, but he adores Dorian’s spirit more. The love he feels for the real man transcends that, and he is often angry with himself for not being honest about it: “And yet, if I did not hate him, I should still love him. I can’t help myself. The secret of the man’s character.” In Basil, Wilde explored his own vision of a truly good Victorian. The noble focal figure at the heart of the novel serves to highlight Dorian’s degeneracy; at the same time, the purity of Basil’s love for this figure is continually tested. Through Basil, Wilde ridicules the innocent philosopher who rejects the flesh as “noble” and the physical world as beautiful. Interestingly, Basil ultimately fails as a philosopher since he falls in love not with abstract archetypes, but with the actual Dorian, which shows his sensual and eternal way. After painting Dorian’s portrait, years later, he attempts to restore the original portrait, as if there is no connection between the atrophied Dorian and the beautiful portrait in the past.



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### **The Aesthetic Movement and its Influence on the Novel**

The Aesthetic Movement significantly influenced Oscar Wilde's writing and his only published novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The Aesthetic Movement advanced the belief in "art for art's sake"—a philosophy established in part through artistic displays in the 1890s. The controversial movement urged contemporaries to detach aesthetic beauty from any conventional, lawful religious or moral framework and to prize artistic beauty as the highest good. In the novel, Wilde plays on the precarious, often contradictory relationship between the aesthetic and the ethical. His narrator is positioned to serve as a mouthpiece for Wilde's own developing philosophy, both by embracing aspects of the Aesthetic Movement and by critiquing some of its more visible promoters. The novel places a great emphasis on sensory experience, sensuous pleasure, and beauty, using extreme examples to underscore a conflict or blurring of the lines between the aesthetically and the morally pleasing.

Within the Aesthetic Movement, many accepted Walter Pater as an unofficial spokesman. Pater stresses the importance of sensory experience and the primacy of external beauty above internal moral and spiritual purity. Wilde fully absorbed and enacted this Aesthetic Movement influence in his novel, as he is called to be served and enjoyed.

### **Morality, Sin, and Consequences in *The Picture of Dorian Gray***

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a novel of contentious ethical dilemmas and creative narrative choices. It takes the reader on a whirlwind through London's elite and their lavish lifestyles while having them contemplate deeply the nature of sin and what is considered good and evil. Though much of this analysis will focus on the ethical and philosophical concepts present in *Dorian Gray*, it is crucial to also touch on the psychological aspects of these themes as both interaction and critique. Though there is certainly no unified moral philosophy expounded in *Dorian Gray*, there does remain an uprooting and a transition of thoughts that abandoned the Victorian era for something entirely complex and different.

Consequences are tightly linked with the moral content of one's actions. Since pleasure itself can be interpreted as sin, as pleasure is self-seeking particularly, one sees many of the characters in the novel asking for it to be dulled. One character is the most expressive of this desire for life to be made less strong. Inwardly, it seems that these characters, at least one and another, do not actually wish for less of the sea of experience in which to swim. They go about their earlier actions that are reprehensible; they seek consequences that correspond with the ethical content of their choices. Unbeknownst to them, consequences have not been



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so easily dissociated from choice. The characters encounter, in the end, the traditional consequences of their choices, depicted as they would be in any traditional moral story: misery, ultimately death, and condemnation from society.

## References

Wilde, O. (2014). *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde. BookRix.