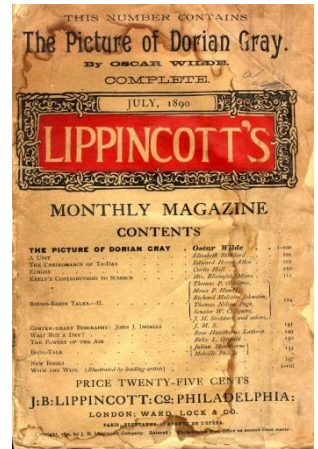


# Critical Reception at the Time of Oscar Wilde

When first published, overall, initial critical reception of the book was poor, with the book gaining “certain notoriety for being ‘mawkish and nauseous,’ ‘unclean,’ ‘effeminate,’ and ‘contaminating.’” *The Irish Times* wrote that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was “first published to some scandal.” This had much to do with the novel's homoerotic overtones, which caused something of a sensation amongst Victorian critics when first published.



A large portion of the criticism was levelled at Wilde's perceived hedonism, and its distorted views of conventional morality. *The Daily Chronicle* of 30 June 1890 suggests that Wilde's novel contains “one element... which will taint every young mind that comes in contact with it.” *The Scots Observer* of 5 July 1890 asks why Wilde must “go grubbing in muck-heaps?”

Victorians were great moralisers. They promoted a code of values based on personal duty, hard work, respectability and charity. These values were of equal application to all strata of society, but were given their essential Victorian form by the upper or middle classes. The idea of respectability – a mixture of morality, hypocrisy and conformity to social standards – was of utmost importance. Victorians believed that art could be used as a tool for social education and moral enlightenment, as illustrated in works by writers such as Charles Dickens and George Gissing.

## Get ready to report to the class.

*Critical reception at the time of Oscar Wilde?*

*What was the book reproached with?*

*Vision of art at the time?*

*Victorian times and mentalities?*

## Oscar Wilde's Preface to the Book

When *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was first published in Lippincott's Monthly Magazine in 1890, it was decried as immoral. In revising the text the following year, Wilde included a preface, which serves as a useful explanation of his philosophy of art. The purpose of art, according to this series of epigrams, is to have no purpose, be it moral or political. A revolutionary attitude at a time when Victorians believed that art could be used as a tool for social education and moral enlightenment.

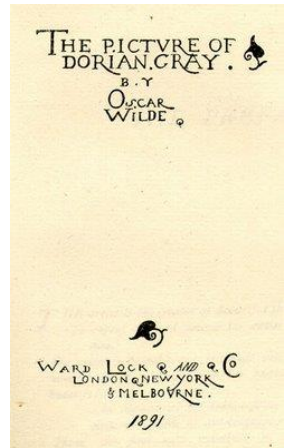
The Aesthetic Movement, of which Wilde was a major proponent, sought to free art from this responsibility. The aestheticists were motivated as much by a contempt for bourgeois morality – a sensibility embodied in Dorian Gray by Lord Henry, whose every word seems designed to shock the ethical certainties of the burgeoning middle class – as they were by the belief that art need not possess any other purpose than being beautiful.

Extracts from the preface:

“There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all.”

“No artist desires to prove anything. No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style.”

“Vice and virtue are to the artist materials for an art.”



### Get ready to report to the class.

*Reasons for the preface?*

*Wilde's philosophy of art?*

*Comment on the extracts from the preface.*

## Three Examples of Contemporary Critical Reception

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a haunting, Gothic novel that combines beautiful writing with a simple plot. It's a thoughtful and thoroughly enjoyable cautionary tale encouraging us not to give too much purpose to art and warns us about the aesthetic ills that society can possess.

Written in his distinctively dazzling manner, the tale of Dorian Gray's moral disintegration caused a scandal when it first appeared in 1890. Just a few years later, the book and the aesthetic/moral *dilemma* it presented became issues in the trials occasioned by Wilde's homosexual liaisons, which resulted in his imprisonment. Of Dorian Gray's relationship to autobiography, Wilde noted in a letter, "Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry what the world thinks me: Dorian what I would like to be – in other ages, perhaps."

Although the mannered society of the late 1800s may seem far removed from that of today, The obsession with self-image which leads to Dorian's wish in the first place can easily be associated with 2014 and how teenagers of today measure their attractiveness in the number of Facebook 'likes' on profile pictures. The way Dorian's social aspirations lead to his downfall therefore makes the novel an interesting moral commentary.

Wilde himself observes: "Was there anything so real as words?" – the way Dorian follows such an immoral route after being handed a book by Lord Wotton to attempt to raise his spirits after a sad incident, is particularly striking. This is helped by Wilde's relatively straightforward language, making it all the more readable.

**Get ready to report to the class.**

*Critical reception today? Positive? Negative?*

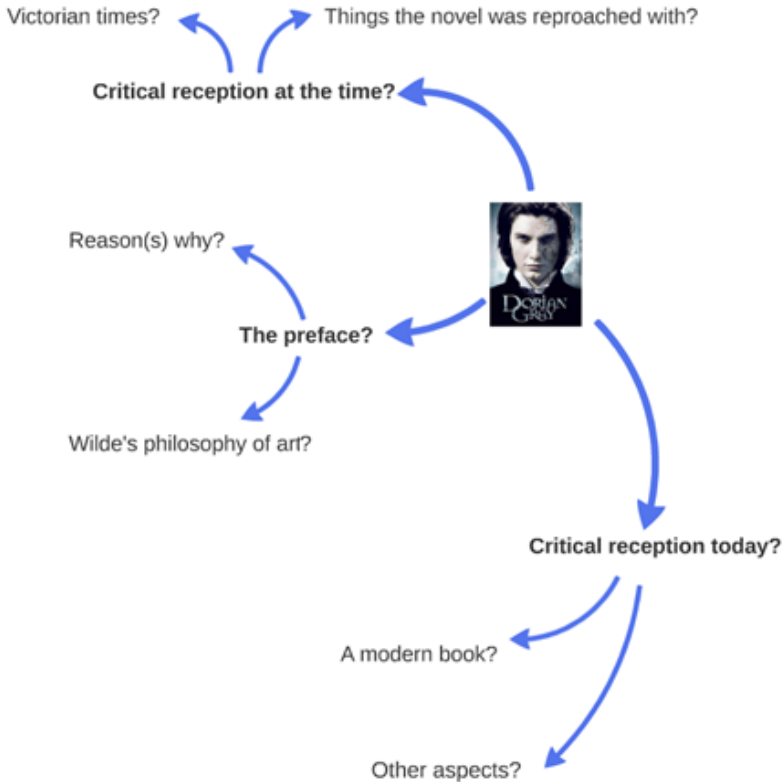
*Autobiographical aspects?*

*A modern tale?*



# Reflecting on Art

**A. Copy the spidergram, listen to the other groups' presentations and complete :**



**B. Use your notes to reflect on the following questions:**

*To what extent does the vision about art depends on the society and time you live in?*

*Is art universal?*

*To what extent can works of art tell us about the way society evolves?*