

THE PICTURE OF  
DORIAN GRAY  
OSCAR WILDE



EDITED BY  
MICHAEL PATRICK GILLESPIE

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION  
SECOND EDITION

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Oscar Wilde  
THE PICTURE OF  
DORIAN GRAY



AUTHORITATIVE TEXTS  
BACKGROUNDS  
REVIEWS AND REACTIONS  
CRITICISM

SECOND EDITION

*Edited by*

MICHAEL PATRICK GILLESPIE  
MARQUETTE UNIVERSITY

*First Edition edited by*

DONALD L. LAWLER  
EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

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## Preface

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In a letter composed on 12 February 1894 and sent to Ralph Payne, who had written to praise *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde neatly summarizes his relations to the central characters and gently mocks simplistic reactions to them through a series of concise analogies. "I am so glad you like that strange coloured book of mine: it contains much of me in it. 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" (*The Letters of Oscar Wilde*, 352). While the passage from his letter catches the tone of Wilde's insouciant wit and sly self-deprecation, it also neatly suggests a number of elements central to an understanding of the novel.

Even allowing for his irrepressible flamboyance, Wilde certainly came very close to the mark in relating how diverse perceptions of his own nature inform conceptions of the characters in his novel. For all its originality, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* takes up themes of aesthetics, sensuality, and personal independence that Wilde had explored in lectures and in writings for over a decade before the book appeared. The novel, however, enjoys the distinction of allowing for extended discussions of all of those themes and of providing a relatively safe venue for elaborating upon a broad range of indulgences at which previous expressions could only hint.

Though Edward Carson, who prosecuted Wilde for immoral acts in 1895, sought to make the book a manifesto of Wilde's hedonistic life style, I think it more accurate to see it as a rigorous examination of the limitations of the aesthetic views that had come to shape his art. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* articulates, without offering a clear resolution, the conflict that arises as a result of the struggle within an individual's nature between the impulse toward self-gratification and the sense of guilt that is a consequence of acting upon that inclination.

Nonetheless, one can understand, if not sympathize with, Carson's inclination to collapse fact and fiction. All of Wilde's writing has an intensely personal tone to it, and the issues of art, imagination, and sensuality outlined in the novel were at the time unsettled in Wilde's own life. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* merely provides greater space than heretofore available for a wide-ranging exposition of his inter-

ests and concerns. Though the consequent aesthetic and ethical issues that arise in the narrative may seem daunting, one can come to a solid understanding of the novel by keeping in mind a few fundamental concepts.

The Trinitarian description that he favors in his February 12 letter neatly captures the way Wilde's life informed both the composition and perception of the work. The tension between the probity of Basil Hallward, the immorality of Lord Henry, and the unabashed self-indulgence of Dorian combine to echo the author's conflicting feelings during this period, evident in any biographical account of him. At the same time, the similarities can prove to be a trap for hasty readers who seek to interpret the work by simply imposing Wilde and their impressions of him on the central characters of the novel. In fact, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* presents a complex view of the conflicted inter-relation between fantasy and fact that characterized Wilde's world and his writings, and it presents contemporary readers with the challenge of forming understandings without mistaking Wilde for his characters.

Of course, Wilde did much to encourage this blurring of distinctions. From the time of his permanent move to London in 1879, flamboyance had characterized his approach to the world. With a single-minded determination, Wilde made himself a public personality well before he had gained prominence as a writer. Indeed, for much of the 1880s his determined advocacy of "art for art's sake" seemed as much self-parody as sincere assertion of belief.

When *The Picture of Dorian Gray* appeared, however, its narrative went beyond the flummery often characterizing his public performances. Its discourse demanded that points of view Wilde had previously thrown out casually at dinner parties or alluded to obliquely in public lectures now be given full and sustained scrutiny. Further, its sustained tone of intellectual rigor—evident in Lord Henry Wotton's explanation of New Hedonism—insisted that equally serious attention be paid to Wilde as its author.

Taking Oscar Wilde seriously was a new proposition for late-Victorian London. He had already gained notoriety as a journalist, critic, and short story writer, but *The Picture of Dorian Gray* offered readers the first substantial piece of evidence of Wilde's far-ranging creative ability. Although much of the dialogue features the same style of repartee that made Wilde such a desirable dinner guest and many of the descriptions have the same fascination with excess that punctuated his poems and public lectures, the content of the novel lays out serious consideration of ethical issues relating to the movement from the nineteenth century's fixation upon society to the twentieth century's celebration of the individual. Critics may debate whether *The Picture of Dorian Gray* stands as the first English Mod-

ernist novel, but few will disagree that it touches on the same issues—the role that one should allow social institutions in shaping an individual's character—that writers like James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, and Virginia Woolf would minutely explore in the next quarter century.

Wilde could make these great thematic strides because he relied on stylistic forms he had been practicing to perfection for a decade. The narrative of his novel builds on the strengths of his earlier work—a fascination for detail, a love of paradox, and a deft sense of humor. This allows its content to go well beyond the scope of any previous writing. Both in novella and novel form, the story of Dorian Gray explores with great sensitivity the relation of art to morality, the impact of hedonism, and the inescapability of spiritual questions. Wilde pursues these topics without turning the book into a polemic because his formal writing skills give him the ability to engage ideas without seeming to assume a didactic mode.

The duality exercised in the form and content stands as the key to the novel's lasting success. In publishing *The Picture of Dorian Gray* Wilde showed himself capable of much more than a flippant response to the world. His representations of the major characters show a keen sensitivity to human appetites, human needs, and most of all human weaknesses. At the same time, Wilde refuses to recapitulate the standard pieties or received wisdoms of his Victorian contemporaries. Instead, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* shows an author determined to explore the contradictory elements of human nature without falling back on conventional pieties.

Not surprisingly, the boldness of his ideas created a great deal of consternation among a number of readers and reviewers who saw the first version of Dorian Gray's story in novella form in *Lippincott's Magazine* in June of 1890. As the excerpts from contemporaneous reviews reprinted in this edition attest, the apparent open advocacy of a lifestyle based solely upon gratification, the New Hedonism expounded by Lord Henry, was more than many could bear. Despite the death of Dorian at the end of the tale, the self-indulgence in which he had partaken over the course of the narrative maddened some readers. (One is reminded of the observation that Puritans disapproved of bear baiting not because of the suffering endured by the animal but because of the enjoyment experienced by the audience.)

The events leading to the composition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* gave little indication of the impact it would produce. In the fall of 1889, J. Marshall Stoddart, the American editor of *Lippincott's Magazine*, traveled to England. Stoddart previously had met Wilde in 1882 while the latter was touring America, and at a dinner party in London Stoddart persuaded Wilde and Arthur Conan Doyle to



contribute novella length works to the magazine. (Doyle subsequently sent Stoddart his second Sherlock Holmes adventure, "The Sign of Four.") Wilde initially proposed that *Lippincott's* use a story that he had already written, "The Fisherman and His Soul," but Stoddart rejected the idea. Wilde wrote to Stoddart on 17 December 1889 that he had "invented a new story which is better than 'The Fisherman and His Soul' and I am quite ready to set to work at once on it" (*The Letters of Oscar Wilde*, 251).

Wilde sent the initial version of the work to Stoddart early in 1890. As the manuscript, held by the Clark Library, attests, Stoddart did not hesitate to excise portions that he felt would be too graphic for his readers' sensibilities. (A full discussion of the first manuscript appears in the Donald L. Lawler essay in this collection.) Stoddart apparently had a good idea of the taste of American readers. The novella appeared in the July 1890 issue of *Lippincott's*. The issue in which it appeared quickly sold out, and American critics praised the work as a modern morality tale. That was not the case in England, however, where a number of reviewers excoriated the work. A lively debate, lasting into the fall, took place in the columns of various newspapers between Wilde and his supporters on one hand and hostile reviewers on the other.

Although Wilde steadfastly defended his work, the criticism did in fact have an impact on his revisions when he rewrote it as a full-length novel. In its expanded form, published by Ward, Lock & Company in 1891, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* retains its essential narrative elements. However, Wilde made modifications that present some of his more daring ideas in a less direct fashion and he included a Preface that addresses through aphoristic statements the charges of immorality leveled against the novella. Individual readers can judge the effect of these changes. (To facilitate comparison, the original *Lippincott's* version immediately follows the expanded text of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in this edition.) However, one cannot dispute that the novel, as we now have it, has exercised a powerful impact upon its readers for well over a century.

In organizing this edition, I have tried to provide a sampling of the aesthetic world that informed Wilde's creative efforts. Selections from Walter Pater and Joris Karl Huysmans provide glimpses of the writings that shaped Wilde's views, and portions of two of his essays offer clear articulations of his adaptation and application. Likewise, an extensive selection of responses to the novella's appearance shows not only the public perception of the work but also Wilde's sense of what his writing aimed at.

The criticism gathered here reflects the range of approaches that offer effective methods for understanding Wilde's novel. The section begins with my essay highlighting interpretive alternatives presented

by the narrative. Simon Joyce explores the impact of sexuality on our readings, while Donald L. Lawler traces the evolution of the work's composition. Sheldon W. Liebman presents an insightful view of the development of character in the novel, while Maureen O'Connor and Ellie Ragland-Sullivan present very different approaches to the way the identity of the author informs our sense of his writing. And John Paul Riquelme explains how elements of the Gothic exert a powerful impact on the novel. While these selections cannot exhaust possibilities for reading, they do underscore the variety of approaches that can produce a satisfying understanding of the novel.

Many people have contributed to this project, and I realize that to a great extent whatever success it enjoys relates directly to their efforts. No two people have done more to shape this volume than my editors at Norton, Carol Bemis and Brian Baker. Their enthusiasm, energy, and trust have been invaluable. Their sound judgments have saved me from numerous false steps, and their warm support has made working on this edition a pleasure. There may still be shortcomings here that even they could not find, but the value of this book comes to a large degree from their careful scrutiny. I also wish to thank the staff at the Clark Library, John Espy, A. Nicholas Fargnoli, Paula Gillespie, Merlin Holland, Tim Machan, Michael McKinney, Joan Navarre, Albert Rivero, David Rose, Sara Schepis, and Joan Sommers and the Inter-Library Loan staff at Marquette University.

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## A Note on the Texts

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*The Picture of Dorian Gray* first appeared as a novella of over fifty thousand words. It was published in the July 1890 issue of *Lippincott's Monthly*. The revised and expanded novel length version was printed by Ward, Lock and Company in April 1891 and sold for six shillings. This was the same company that bound the British edition of *Lippincott's* magazine. A new printing was called for in October 1895, by which time the publisher had become Ward, Lock and Bowden. The novel was not reprinted again until 1901, the year following Wilde's death, by Charles Carrington, a slightly disreputable English publisher of pornographic literature in Paris, who, following Wilde's bankruptcy in 1895, had acquired the rights in expectation that profit was to be made from the scandal surrounding the novel, which figured prominently in Wilde's famous trials. Robert Ross, as executor of the Wilde estate, eventually reacquired the rights to the novel. Since that time, the novel has never been out of print.

In the March 1891 edition of Frank Harris's *Fortnightly Review* Wilde published "A Preface to 'Dorian Gray.'" It consisted of twenty-three aphorisms, written by Wilde in response to the criticisms made of the *Lippincott's Dorian Gray* (see *Reviews and Reactions*, pp. 352–66). By the time Ward, Lock and Company brought out the novel-length version in April, Wilde had added a new aphorism to the Preface ("No artist is ever morbid. The artist can express everything") and had divided the original ninth aphorism (beginning "The nineteenth century dislike of Realism . . .") to make a final total of twenty-five aphorisms.

As in the first Norton publication of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, this edition reprints the texts of the original 1890 *Lippincott's* novella and the revised and expanded version into the novel published by Ward, Lock and Company in 1891. These were the only two versions prepared for and seen through publication by the author. The revised version of 1891, representing Wilde's final intentions, appears ahead of the *Lippincott's* text of 1890. Obvious typographical errors have been silently emended. With that exception, this edition reproduces the settings, including Wilde's punctuation, of the 1891 edition.

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The Texts of  
THE PICTURE OF  
DORIAN GRAY





## The Preface<sup>1</sup>

*The artist is the creator of beautiful things.*

*To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim.*

*The critic is he who can translate into another manner or a new material his impression of beautiful things.*

*The highest as the lowest form of criticism is a mode of autobiography.*

*Those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt without being charming. This is a fault.*

*Those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated. For these there is hope.*

*They are the elect to whom beautiful things mean only Beauty.*

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

*The nineteenth century dislike of Realism is the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in a glass.*

*The nineteenth century dislike of Romanticism is the rage of Caliban not seeing his own face in a glass.*

*The moral life of man forms part of the subject-matter of the artist, but the morality of art consists in the perfect use of an imperfect medium.*

*No artist desires to prove anything. Even things that are true can be proved.*

*No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style.*

*No artist is ever morbid. The artist can express everything.*

*Thought and language are to the artist instruments of an art.*

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

*From the point of view of form, the type of all the arts is the art of the musician. From the point of view of feeling, the actor's craft is the type.*

*All art is at once surface and symbol.*

*Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril.*

*Those who read the symbol do so at their peril.*

1. Wilde's preface to *Dorian Gray* appeared in Frank Harris's *Fortnightly Review* several months before the second edition of the novel. It seems to have ~~three~~ **three** aims. The first is to take weapons out of the hands of the critics who had attacked the *Lippincott's* edition of *Dorian Gray* by anticipating some of the charges likely to be made against it. The second intent is to respond to some of the criticism made of the magazine edition. In so doing, Wilde was to repeat rather sententiously the major points of his aesthetic creed at the time (and to anticipate the main line of his defense of *Dorian Gray* at the trials). The third intention is expressed in the tone and manner of the epigrams, which anticipate those Wilde published in 1894 under the title "Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young" in *The Chameleon*, an Oxford undergraduate journal. The paradoxes are not so plentiful in the former as in the latter, and the manner is less insolent, but the intent is to be provocative. It was this adopted manner that revealed Wilde could be every bit as pompous as those he ridiculed and that earned him the title "sovereign of insufferables" from Ambrose Bierce.



*It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors.*

*Diversity of opinion about a work of art shows that the work is new, complex, and vital.*

*When critics disagree the artist is in accord with himself.*

*We can forgive a man for making a useful thing as long as he does not admire it. The only excuse for making a useless thing is that one admires it intensely.*

*All art is quite useless.*

OSCAR WILDE