



# Multiple Critical Perspectives™

Teaching Oscar Wilde's

## **The Picture of Dorian Gray**

from

**Multiple Critical Perspectives™**

by

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## General Introduction to the Work

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### Introduction to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

**T**HE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY is a novel detailing the story of a Victorian gentleman named Dorian Gray, who enters into a pact with his own portrait in order to combat the inevitable process of aging. The pact specifies that Gray's physical appearance will never alter, regardless of his behavior. Instead, the portrait will age and portray the physical changes that are the consequences of life. Wilde's novel elaborates on a series of social themes. The narrative style of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* relies heavily on the use of **irony** and **satire**. The novel is introduced by a series of aphorisms. Wilde added to the second edition of the novel in order to place the novel into the context of the Aesthetic movement and defend his preoccupation with beauty, attraction, and extravagance.

All novels rely on certain conventional elements, including **plot** (Dorian Gray is a young gentleman living in Victorian England. He makes the acquaintance of Lord Henry Wotton, who introduces him to the principles of hedonism and Aestheticism. Lord Henry's friend Basil Hallward, an artist, creates a magnificent portrait of Dorian. Seeing his own beauty in the portrait causes Dorian to express a rather strange wish: he wants to be able to always remain physically beautiful and unchanged while the portrait will display the signs of his aging. His wish is granted, and once Dorian realizes that the portrait will give him eternal beauty, Dorian dedicates his life to the pursuit of hedonistic pleasure without worrying about the consequences of his actions. He spends several years decadently indulging in drugs and sex, even causing the death of a beautiful young actress. Still, Dorian's outward appearance never reveals any signs of aging or any marks of experience. The picture, on the other hand, clearly reveals his depravity and becomes ugly, reflecting the corruption of Dorian's soul and the self-doubts and feelings of guilt weighing heavily on his conscience. When the burden of guilt and sin becomes too much to bear, Dorian destroys the portrait and, thus, ends his own life).

**Character** is another crucial element of the novel (Dorian Gray is the central character of the novel. He can be considered a **dynamic character** because he changes over the course of the novel. Other major characters are Lord Henry Wotton, whose influence over Dorian determines much of what happens throughout the plot, and Basil Hallward. The central female character is Sibyl Vane. Sibyl and her family are the only characters who are not members of the Victorian upper class, thus standing in stark contrast to Dorian and his friends).

Another significant element of the novel is **setting**, or time and place (*The Picture of Dorian Gray* takes place during the late nineteenth century in England, a time that witnessed the transition from traditional conservative moral values to the more progressive, modern lifestyle of the early twentieth century. The novel exemplifies many of the principles of Aestheticism, a movement that championed

## New Historicism Applied to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*



### Notes on New Historicism

A COMMON TENDENCY IN THE STUDY of literature written in, and/or set in, a past or foreign culture is to assume a direct comparison between the culture as presented in the text and as it really was/is. New Historicism asserts that such a comparison is impossible for two basic reasons.

First, the “truth” of a foreign or past culture can never be known as established and unchangeable. At best, any understanding of the “truth” is a matter of interpretation on the parts of both the writer and the reader. This is most blatantly evident in the fact that the “losers” of history hardly ever get heard. The culture that is dominated by another is often lost to history because it is the powerful who have the resources to record that history. Even in recent past events, who really knows both sides of the story? Who really knows the whole of the Nazi story? Or the Iraqi story? New Historicists argue that these unknown histories are just as significant as the histories of the dominant culture of power and should be included in any world view. Since they often contradict “traditional” (i.e., the winner’s) history, there is no way to really know the absolute truth.

Second, while the text under consideration does indeed reflect the culture in which it was written (and to some degree in which it is set), it also *participates* in the culture in which it is written. In other words, its very existence changes the culture it “reflects.” To New Historicists, literature and culture are born of one another. For example, although Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* certainly reflected the culture of the South during the mid-20th century, it also became a tool to raise awareness of, and change certain elements of, that culture.



## Activity One

### Examining the Influence of the Aesthetic Movement on the Novel

1. Copy and distribute the handout: *The Picture of Dorian Gray: New Historicism—Activity One: Information on the Victorian Era and the Aesthetic Movement*.
2. Divide the class into three groups (or a number of groups divisible by three).
3. Assign one of the following chapters to each group:
  - Group 1: The Preface
  - Group 2: Chapter I
  - Group 3: Chapter II
4. Have each group carefully examine their assigned chapter and note references that show how *The Picture of Dorian Gray* comments on and simultaneously practices the principles of the Aesthetic movement. Groups assigned to chapters I and II should pay particular attention to the way different characters react to and comment on Basil's portrait of Dorian.
5. Reconvene the class and use the following questions to generate a classroom discussion on elements of the Aesthetic movement as they are presented in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*:
  - Which aphorisms in the Preface specifically suggest the aesthetic attitude toward art and beauty?
  - How does Lord Henry value beauty?
  - What is the connection between beauty and art for Basil Hallward? For Lord Henry? For Dorian Gray?
  - How does the novel exemplify the credo “art for art’s sake”? What elements in the novel help create and reinforce this Aesthetic principle?
  - What is the connection between art and identity for Basil?
  - What is the connection between art and identity for Dorian?
  - How does Dorian’s portrait exemplify the notion of narcissism for Dorian? For Basil?
  - How does Basil’s refusal to sell the portrait exemplify the ideas of Aestheticism?
  - What is the relationship between art and artist according to Wilde’s aphorisms in the Preface? What is the relationship between art and artist according to Lord Henry? According to Basil Hallward?

## Psychoanalytical/Freudian Applied to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*



### Notes on the Psychoanalytic Theory

THE TERM “PSYCHOLOGICAL” (also “psychoanalytical” or “Freudian Theory”) seems to encompass two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses on the text itself, with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining conflicts, characters, dream sequences, and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is similar to the Formalist approach. One will further understand that a character’s outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

#### Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son’s desire for his mother, the father’s envy of the son and rivalry for the mother’s attention, the daughter’s desire for her father, the mother’s envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father’s attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level to avoid breaking a serious social more.
- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory asserts that it is in dreams that a person’s subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and accomplished in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.

## Activity One

### Examining the Text as A Testament to Wilde's Own Life

1. Copy and distribute the handout: *The Picture of Dorian Gray* Psychoanalytic Theory—Activity One: Oscar Wilde Fact Sheet.
2. Have students—individually, in pairs, or in small groups—study the fact sheet and peruse the book for suggestions to Wilde's own personality, beliefs, and lifestyle.

*Note: Remind students that The Picture of Dorian Gray is a work of fiction and need not be read autobiographically, but the Psychoanalytic Approach assumes an autobiographical element to all works.*

3. Reconvene the class and discuss the following:
  - To what extent does Lord Henry Wotton embody the qualities of the Aesthete and the Dandy? What aspects of Lord Henry's character suggest Wilde's personal life and attitudes?
  - To what extent does Dorian Gray embody the qualities of the quintessential Aesthete and the Dandy? What aspects of Dorian's character suggest Wilde's personal life and attitudes?
  - What is the significance of male-male relationships in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*? What range of male-male relationships is suggested in the novel?
  - To what extent might the novel be interpreted as a semi-autobiographic account of Wilde's affairs?
  - What does the novel's preoccupation with decadence and excess suggest about Wilde's personal life?
  - To what extent might Lord Henry's attitude toward marriage suggest Wilde's own attitude toward marriage?
  - How might the writing of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* have functioned as a vehicle to express Wilde's secret desires?
  - What is the significance of decorum, social propriety, etc. in Wilde's personal life? In the novel?

## Marxist Criticism Applied to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*



### Notes on the Marxist Approach

**T**HE MARXIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE is based on the philosophy of Karl Marx, a German philosopher and economist. His major argument was that whoever controlled the means of production in society controlled the society—whoever owned the factories “owned” the culture. This idea is called “dialectical materialism,” and Marx felt that the history of the world was leading toward a communist society. From his point of view, the means of production (i.e., the basis of power in society) would be placed in the hands of the masses, who actually operated them, not in the hands of those few who owned them. It was a perverted version of this philosophy that was at the heart of the Soviet Union. Marxism was also the rallying cry of the poor and oppressed all over the world.

To read a work from a Marxist perspective, one must understand that Marxism asserts that literature is a reflection of culture, and that culture can be affected by literature (Marxists believed literature could instigate revolution). Marxism is linked to Freudian theory by its concentration on the subconscious—Freud dealt with the individual subconscious, while Marx dealt with the political subconscious. Marx believed that oppression exists in the political subconscious of a society—social pecking orders are inherent to any group of people.

#### Four main areas of study:

- economic power
- materialism versus spirituality
- class conflict
- art, literature, and ideologies



## Activity One

### Examining References to Sibyl Vane and her Family as A Testament to the Division between the Classes in Victorian England

1. If you have not already done so, copy and distribute the handout: *The Picture of Dorian Gray* New Historicism—Activity One: Information on the Victorian Era and the Aesthetic Movement.
2. Examine especially the section on the Industrial Revolution and Social Class.
3. Remind students that Karl Marx (*The Communist Manifesto* had been in print since 1848) believed that an eventual uprising of the working class was inevitable.
4. Have students (independently, in pairs, or in small groups) examine the following sections relating to Sibyl Vane, her family, and her profession.
  - Chapter IV – Lord Henry's comments on class; Dorian's discussion of Sibyl's family and social standing
  - Chapter V – Sibyl's motivations; her mother's motivations; James Vane's fears
  - Chapter VI – Lord Henry's discussion with Basil Hallward about Dorian's engagement and Sibyl's social status
  - Chapter VII – Lord Henry's and Basil's observations and comments on the playhouse, the theater clientele, and the actors
5. Use the following questions to initiate a classroom discussion on class and social status:
  - Who are the powerful characters in the novel? Who are the powerless? What kind of power do the powerful characters have?
  - Why do the powerful in the novel have power? How do Lord Henry and Dorian finance their lavish lifestyles?
  - What attitudes toward the lower classes does Lord Henry exhibit? Basil? Dorian?
  - What can you infer from the novel about the distribution of wealth?