

The Life and Times of Oscar Wilde

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“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.”

— Oscar Wilde, in his preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*



Photograph of Oscar Wilde
taken in 1882 by Napoleon Sarony

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde (1854–1900) was an Irish author, playwright and poet. After writing in different forms throughout the 1880s, he became one of London's most popular playwrights in the early 1890s. Today he is remembered for his epigrams, his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, his plays, as well as the circumstances of his imprisonment and early death.

Wilde's parents were successful Anglo-Irish Dublin intellectuals. At university, Wilde proved himself to be an outstanding classicist, first at Trinity College in Dublin, then at Oxford. He became known for his involvement in the rising philosophy of aestheticism, led by two of his tutors, Walter Pater and John Ruskin. After university, Wilde moved to London as a spokesman for aestheticism, trying his hand at various literary activities: he published a book of poems, lectured in the United States and Canada on the new "English Renaissance in Art," and then returned to London where he worked prolifically as a journalist. Known for his biting wit, flamboyant dress and glittering conversation, Wilde became one of the best-known personalities of his day.

At the turn of the 1890s, he refined his ideas about the supremacy of art in a series of dialogues and essays, and incorporated themes of decadence, duplicity, and beauty into his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). He wrote *Salome* (1891) in French in Paris but it was refused a license for production in England due to the absolute prohibition of Biblical subjects on the English stage. Unperturbed, Wilde produced four society comedies in the early 1890s, which made him one of the most successful playwrights of late Victorian London.

At the height of his fame and success, while his masterpiece, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), was still on stage in London, Wilde had the Marquess of Queensberry prosecuted for libel. The Marquess was the father of Wilde's lover, Lord Alfred Douglas. The trial unearthed and utilized evidence, including passages of text from *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, that caused Wilde to drop his charges and led to his own arrest and trial for gross indecency with other men. After two more trials he was convicted and imprisoned for two years' hard labor.

Upon his release he left immediately for France, never to return to Ireland or Britain. He died destitute in Paris of cerebral meningitis at the age of 46.

The Aestheticism Movement — The artists and writers of the Aesthetic style professed that the Arts should provide refined sensuous pleasure, rather than convey moral or sentimental messages. They believed that Art did not have any didactic purpose; it need only be beautiful. Life should copy Art, they asserted. The main characteristics of the style were:

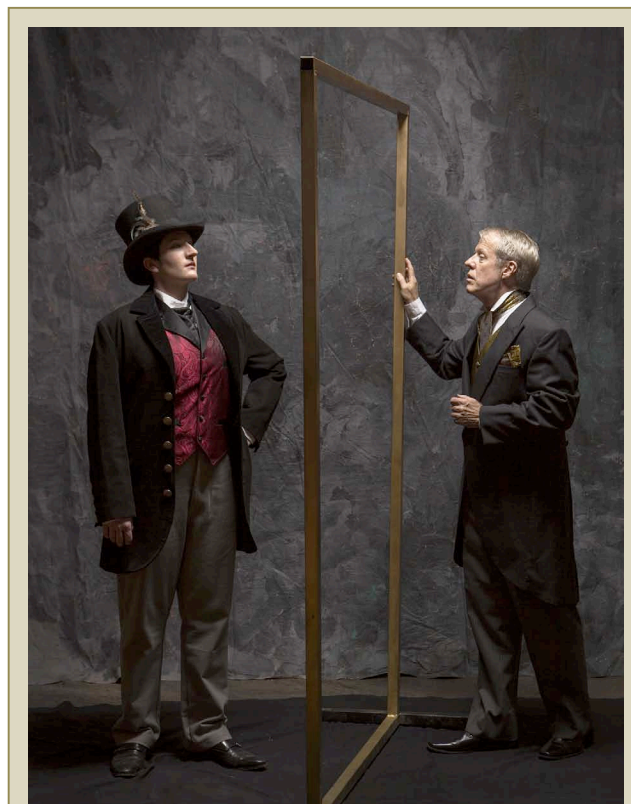
- suggestion rather than statement
- sensuality
- great use of symbols
- correspondence between words, colors and music

The philosophical foundations of Aestheticism were formulated in the eighteenth century by Immanuel Kant, who spoke for the autonomy of art. Wilde was especially influenced as a college student by the English essayist Walter Pater, an advocate of “art for art’s sake,” who helped to form Wilde’s humanistic aesthetics in which he was more concerned with the individual (the self) than with popular movements like Industrialism or Capitalism. Wilde advocated freedom from moral restraint and the limitations of society.

This point of view contradicted Victorian convention in which the arts were supposed to be spiritually uplifting and instructive. Wilde went a step further and stated that the artist’s life was even more important than any work that he produced; his life was to be his most important body of work, a philosophy he expounded upon with his first and only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

The stage adaptation of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is adapted from a combination of three editions of the novel that exist: the 13-chapter version that appeared in *Lippincott’s Magazine* in 1890, the expanded 20-chapter version Wilde published as a novel in 1891, and finally *The Uncensored Edition of The Picture of Dorian Gray* released by Harvard Press in 2011—in which the text originally found “objectionable” and “unclean” by Wilde’s publishers has been restored based on the original typescripts.

The Picture of Dorian Gray is Wilde’s greatest testament to aestheticism and his most significant contribution to the movement, widely considered among the great literary masterpieces of the late Victorian period. More than any of his plays, *Dorian Gray* fully encapsulates Wilde’s philosophy on art. In his own time, the words, ideas and story of *Dorian Gray* could never have been presented on stage. We hope to celebrate Wilde’s wit and wisdom, as well as illuminate how far society has (and has not) come since *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was written, by finally bringing Wilde’s greatest work into Wilde’s most famous arena — the theatre.



Dani Dryer as Dorian Gray and Joseph McGrath as Lord Henry in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

*“The stage is not merely the meeting place of all the arts,
but is also the return of art to life.”*

—Oscar Wilde