

# WORLDVIEW GUIDE

## THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY



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## INTRODUCTION

*“Would you like to know the great drama of my life? It is that I have put my genius into my life—I have put only my talent into my works.”<sup>1</sup>*

Before Lady Gaga, Madonna, Prince, David Bowie, Salvador Dali, or Liberace, there was Oscar Wilde, the archetype of the artist *poseur*. Wilde’s character, Lord Henry, may provide a modern motto: “[T]here is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about.”

If Wilde had a forerunner, it was Lord Byron, *littérateur* and scandalous *bon vivant* . . . perhaps one even finds a subtle hint of the charming speech, profligate luxury, and scofflaw in David’s son, Absalom. Like Absalom, Wilde’s

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1. Oscar Wilde speaking to André Gide, recorded in *British Authors of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Stanley Kunitz and Howard Haycraft (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1936), 658.

subversive chatter and consequent actions brought him a sudden reversal, snared by the symbol of his own strength and luxury. Oscar Wilde's career established a cult of artistic spectacle and personal scandal inspiring provocateurs in every generation since.



## WORLDVIEW ANALYSIS

*“As a matter of fact I do not think that one person influences another, nor do I think there is a bad influence in the world.”*

Sometimes an idea is so clearly misguided that only the smitten and ingenuous can receive it. The italicized quote above, taken from Wilde’s court testimony, is such a statement and stands entirely on the grandstanding hubris of the speaker. Handled in the clear light of day, the idea is engaging largely because of its bold absurdity. It may serve as a fitting culmination of so much that Wilde did and said; a moment to recognize his worldview caught far outside its native province of card tables, velvet jackets, dining engagements, and sly characters. We begin with reflection on this phrase and its consequences, then treat its significance to the novel.

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9. Oscar Wilde, from his courtroom testimony, see *The Picture of Dorian Gray: Norton Critical Edition* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988), 360.

Does one person influence another? Of course! From the cradle to the grave, there may be no more evident fact about human behavior than the fact that our lives are inextricably bound to others. We must, or how would a toddler even learn to walk or speak? As we mature, we grow more careful in our imitation, more discrete in adopting those traits we admire, but the natural human inclination to imitate what it loves and reject what it hates stays with us all to the grave. Is it possible to suffer a bad influence from another person? Again, the answer is only too clear, and one need only consider pivotal relationships in one's life to verify the truth.

So, why would Oscar Wilde make such a remark? First, it fits in with his overall pose of provocative artist and aesthete. No doubt, an audible gasp—and chuckle—rippled over the courtroom more than once during those trials when Wilde took the witness stand.

Second, don't forget that Wilde was exceptionally intelligent; he had good reason to say such a thing.<sup>10</sup> Beside the stirring effect, Wilde had a larger context in mind: if one person cannot corrupt another, how could he have sexually corrupted Alfred Douglas? Thus, there should be no case made against Wilde, nor should his works be repressed due to perceived illicit content. If Wilde could

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10. For the complete court transcript, see the University of Missouri: <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/wilde/Wildelibeltranowcross.html> (accessed on February 6, 2017).