Oscar Wilde, [*The Picture of Dorian Gray*](http://www.amazon.com/Picture-Dorian-Barnes-Noble-Classics/dp/1593080255/ref=sr_1_2?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1435853546&sr=1-2&keywords=dorian+gray+barnes+and+noble) (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2003)

Summary:

Dublin-born Oscar Wilde climbed to the top of society as a witty playwright before writing his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Published in 1890, the story was immediately considered a scandalous book in England. The novel how Dorian Gray sells his soul to remain eternally young. Peppered with controversial musings such as “Youth! Youth! There is absolutely nothing in the world worth having but youth!” and “Beauty is a form of genius…. Only shallow people do not judge by appearances,” the novel was understandably difficult for a late Victorian audience. Concern arose that the book was a mirror for Wilde’s own life, and it certainly was for his much-popularized philosophy of aestheticism, or “art for art’s sake,” that art deals with beauty, not morality. After being convicted of “gross indecency,” Wilde died in 1900 of poor health and without money.

Themes, Symbols, & Motifs:

* Beauty. The book equates youth with beauty. Both—embodied in the passages on jewels, music, and tapestries—distract Dorian from his sins.
* Discipleship. Lord Henry disciples the impressionable Dorian, forming a toxic relationship. Basil too connects with Dorian, worshipping him.
* Red/White. Dorian longs for his “rose-white boyhood,” the “white purity of boyhood.” Before Basil is stabbed, he quotes Scripture: “’Though your sins be as scarlet, yet I will make them white as snow.’”
* Society. Victorian society portrayed in the novel values manners over morals.
* Art. Aestheticism holds that art is never meant to be instructive but is simply beautiful for its own sake. Art does not order life or teach moral lessons. Still, the portrait and the yellow book, both works of art, monumentally influence Dorian and others.
* Dorian’s Portrait. Just as energy cannot be destroyed, the effect(s) of sin must be felt somewhere, whether in the painting or on Dorian himself.

Discussion Questions:

1. According to the Preface, what is Wilde’s philosophy of art?
2. Discuss the major similarities and differences between the three main characters—Basil, Lord Henry, and Dorian—particularly what each believes to be the purpose of art.
3. Discuss the story’s overlapping elements with Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, especially the characters Ophelia, Laertes, and Prince Hamlet.
4. Before encountering the yellow book, was Dorian innocent?
5. Relate Mark 8:36 to the book.
6. Discuss: Basil is moral, Lord Henry amoral, and Dorian immoral.
7. What role do conscience and society play in the book? Consider Chapter Eleven.
8. Read and analyze Wilde’s letter from prison, [*De Profundis*](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/921/921-h/921-h.htm), or “Out of the Depths.” Consider how it relates to Psalm 130.
9. Why does Dorian attempt to destroy the painting?
10. What are the similarities between this book and the Alfred Hitchcock film [*Rope*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rope_(film))?
11. How could this book be considered a pro-homosexual book?
12. Should the life of artists (their morality, immorality, etc.) bear on how we receive or interpret their art?