

AESTHETICISM

Late 19th century → the Aesthetic movement developed in the universities and intellectual circles as a reaction against the vulgarity¹ of bourgeois life² and for an unconventional existence. **Excess, Art and Beauty played an important role.** No didactic purpose. THE ARTIST IS THE CREATOR OF BEAUTIFUL THINGS (from the Preface of the Picture of Dorian Gray)

FEATURES OF AESTHETIC WORKS

- Excessive attention to the self
- Disenchantment with contemporary society
- Evocative use of language

OSCAR WILDE became a celebrity for his wit³ and his extravagance. He believed that only Art, the cult of Beauty, could save the soul and he wrote only to please himself without any didactic purpose: **Art's for Art sake.**

The Picture of Dorian Gray is by far the most outstanding English novel of that period. London, end of the 19th century, the protagonist is a young man whose beauty fascinates a painter Basil Hallward who paints his portrait. But Dorian starts leading a life of excess and pleasure, making use of everybody. Eternal youth is what he wants and gains while his portrait represents the dark sides of his personality corrupted by the signs of vice and age. The young man hides it in a room so that nobody can see it and ... I am not going to give away the ending in case you want to read the book in the next years.

LOOK at the picture and READ the quotes. DISCUSS IN PAIRS: what possible reasons there could be for making a pact with the devil?

Faust and Mephisto, 19th century



No matter what we breed
We still are made of greed
This is our kingdom come
This is our kingdom come
(Imagine dragons, Demons)

Faustus: Stay, Mephistopheles, and tell me, what good will my soul do thy lord?

Mephistopheles: Enlarge his kingdom.

Faustus: Is that the reason he tempts us thus?

Mephistopheles: Solamen miseris socios habuisse doloris.
(It is a comfort to the wretched to have companions in misery.)"
(Christopher Marlowe, Dr. Faustus)

¹Vulgarity = bad taste

²Bourgeois life = middle class, conventional life (with negative connotation)

³Wit = clever humour

Read some excerpts FROM THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY: CHAPTER ONE

1.

The studio was filled with the rich odour of roses, and when the light summer wind stirred amidst the trees⁴ of the garden, there came through the open door the heavy scent of the lilac, or the more delicate perfume of the pink-flowering thorn. From the corner of the divan of Persian saddle-bags⁵ on which he was lying, smoking, as was his custom, innumerable cigarettes, Lord Henry Wotton could just catch the gleam of the honey-sweet and honey-coloured blossoms of a laburnum, whose tremulous branches seemed hardly able to bear the burden of a beauty so flamelike as theirs. (...)

In the centre of the room, clamped to an upright easel⁶, stood the full-length portrait of a young man of extraordinary personal beauty, and in front of it, some little distance away, was sitting the artist himself, Basil Hallward, whose sudden disappearance some years ago caused, at the time, such public excitement and gave rise to so many strange conjectures. (...)

What atmosphere is conveyed in this description? Can you understand from this snippet more about the expression “evocative use of **language**”? What language does the writer use? (realistic, symbolic, descriptive...)

2.

"It is your best work, Basil, the best thing you have ever done," said Lord Henry languidly. (...)

"I don't think I shall send it anywhere" (...)

"No, I won't send it anywhere." (...)

"Not send it anywhere? My dear fellow, why? Have you any reason? What odd chaps⁷ you painters are! You do anything in the world to gain a reputation. As soon as you have one, you seem to want

⁴Stirred amidst the trees = mosse dagli alberi

⁵Saddle-bags = cuscini

⁶Clamped to an upright easel = fissato ad un cavalletto verticale

⁷Odd chaps = tizi strani (informal)

to throw it away. It is silly of you, for there is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about. (...)

"I know you will laugh at me," he replied, "but I really can't exhibit it. I have put too much of myself into it." Lord Henry stretched himself out on the divan and laughed. "Yes, I knew you would; but it is quite true, all the same. "Too much of yourself in it! Upon my word, Basil, I didn't know you were so vain; and I really can't see any resemblance between you, with your rugged strong face and your coal-black hair, and this young Adonis, who looks as if he was made out of ivory and rose-leaves."

"Why, my dear Basil, he is a Narcissus, and you-- well, of course you have an intellectual expression and all that. But beauty, real beauty, ends where an intellectual expression begins. Intellect is in itself a mode of exaggeration, and destroys the harmony of any face."

(...)

What does Basil Hallward not want to exhibit his picture? What is Lord Henry Wotton's opinion?

3.

Mr. Dorian Gray is in the studio, sir," said the butler, coming into the garden. "You must introduce me now," cried Lord Henry, laughing. The painter turned to his servant, who stood blinking in the sunlight⁸. "Ask Mr. Gray to wait, Parker: I shall be in a few moments." The man bowed and went up the walk. Then he looked at Lord Henry. "Dorian Gray is my dearest friend," "He has a simple and a beautiful nature. Your aunt was quite right in what she said of him. Don't spoil him. Don't try to influence him. Your influence would be bad." (...) What nonsense you talk!" said Lord Henry, smiling, and taking Hallward by the arm, he almost led him into the house. (...)

Before we see Dorian Gray, what are your expectations about him? How do you imagine the first meeting among the three characters?

FROM CHAPTER TWO

⁸Blinking in the sunlight = sbattendo le palpebre alla luce del sole

4.

As they entered they saw Dorian Gray. He was seated at the piano, with his back to them, turning over the pages of a volume of Schumann's "Forest Scenes." "You must lend me these, Basil," he cried. "I want to learn them. They are perfectly charming." (...)

Lord Henry looked at him. Yes, he was certainly wonderfully handsome, with his finely curved scarlet lips, his frank blue eyes, his crisp gold hair. There was something in his face that made one trust him at once. All the candour of youth was there, as well as all youth's passionate purity. One felt that he had kept himself unspotted from the world. No wonder Basil Hallward worshipped⁹ him.

How do the three characters meet? What does Dorian Gray look like?

Referring to the excerpts

1. Highlight the description of the **Characters**

- Basil, the painter
- Lord Henry
- Dorian Gray

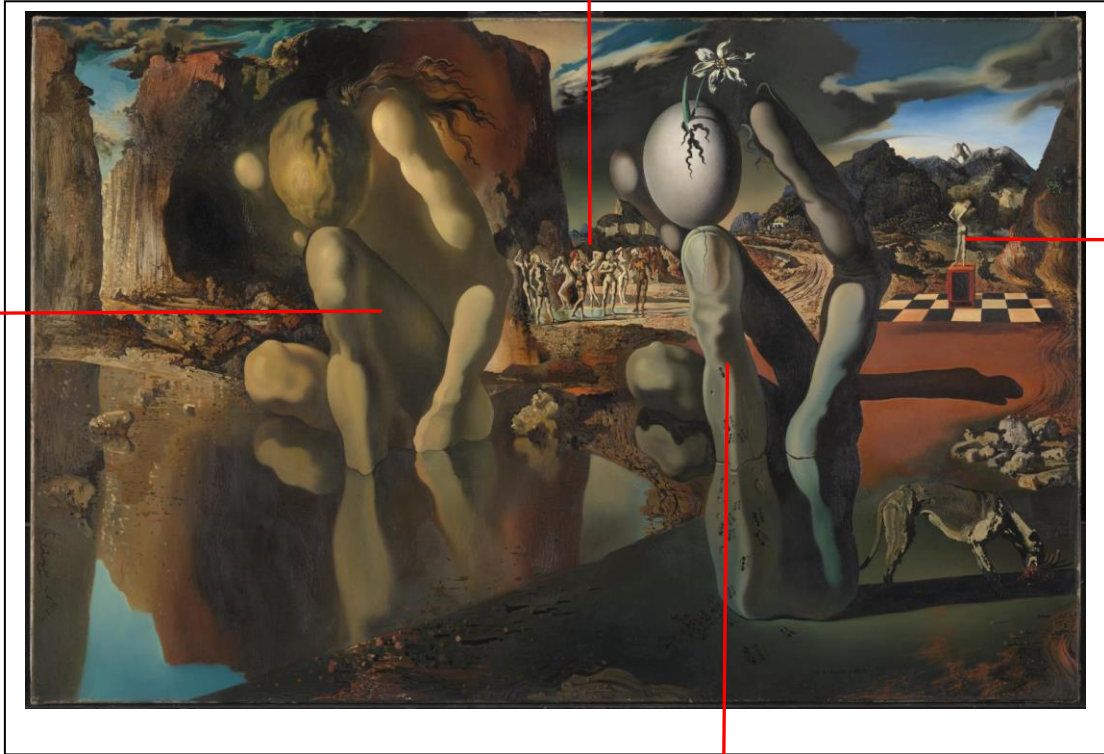
2. Find **typical elements of Aestheticism** in the text

- Excessive attention to the self
- Disenchantment with contemporary society
- Evocative use of language

⁹Worshipped = venerava (usually referred to God, Saints)

Salvador Dalí, Metamorphosis of Narcissus 1937, London Tate Gallery

2. A group of women showing their emotions for the death of Narcissus



1. Narcissus falling in love with his reflection in a pool

4. A statue on a chessboard: Narcissus is very proud of himself and considers himself a god among men.

3. A decaying stone figure resembling to Narcissus: a hand is holding an egg from which a plant is growing. Ants are crawling to reach the plant.

DISCUSS AND WRITE. Can you imagine a modern version of this story? Think of a person who might want to make a pact with the devil. Think about what they might achieve and the price they would have to pay.
