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## Discovering Literature: Romantics and Victorians

### The Picture of Dorian Gray: art, ethics and the artist

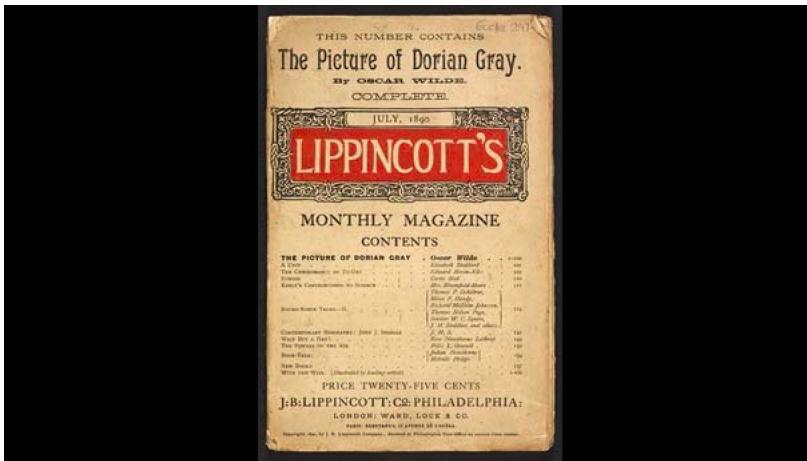
Article by: [Greg Buzwell](#)

- Themes: [London](#), [The Gothic](#), [Fin de siècle](#)

Dark desires and forbidden pleasure are at the centre of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Greg Buzwell examines the interplay between art and morality in Oscar Wilde's novel, and considers its use of traditional Gothic motifs as well as the theories of the new aesthetic movement.

Oscar Wilde's [only novel](#), *The Picture of Dorian Gray* ([works/the-picture-of-dorian-gray](#)) (1891), is a superb example of late-Victorian Gothic fiction. It ranks alongside Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) as a representation of how fin-de-siècle literature explored the darkest recesses of Victorian society and the often disturbing private desires that lurked behind acceptable public faces. The novel also examined the relationship between art and reality, highlighting the uneasy interplay between ethics and aesthetics as well as the links between the artist, his or her subject and the resulting image on canvas.

#### The Picture of Dorian Gray as first published in Lippincott's Magazine



Front cover to the *Lippincott's Magazine* publication of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde's only novel, July 1890.

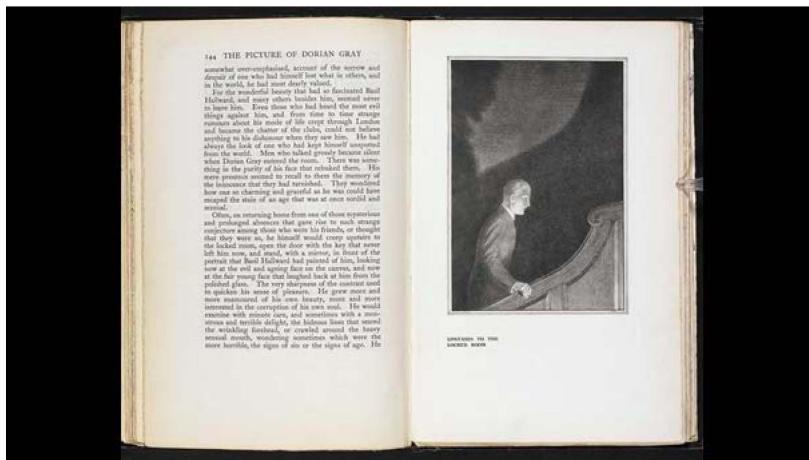
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#### 'The terrible pleasure of a double life'

The idea of a double life – of outwardly playing a respectable role while inwardly pursuing an existence that crossed the boundaries of acceptable behaviour – is central to the plot of the novel. Dorian Gray, once he becomes aware his portrait will bear the scars of his corruption – thus leaving his actual appearance unstained – feels free to ignore the pious morality that pervaded the Victorian era. Rather like Dr Jekyll in Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, Dorian is able to pursue his debauched activities knowing his respectable appearance and unblemished looks will shield him from accusations of depravity. His ability to have the best of both worlds – the continued acceptance of his peers and the ability to fulfil his basest desires – becomes in itself an important part of his fascination with events. When attending a society gathering only hours after having committed a murder we are told Dorian 'felt keenly the terrible pleasure of a double life' (ch. 15).

Dorian's friend Lord Henry makes this link between the criminal and the respectable citizen clear when he observes: 'Crime belongs exclusively to the lower orders. I don't blame them in the smallest degree. I should fancy that crime is to them what art is to us, simply a method of procuring extraordinary sensations' (ch. 19). Dorian, with his visits to opium dens and his delight in high culture combines the criminal and the aesthete – the very definition of 'decadence' distilled into a single person and a disturbing example of the split between the wholesome public persona and the furtive private life.

#### Henry Keen's illustrations to The Picture of Dorian Gray



This illustration by Henry Keen draws out Dorian Gray's double nature, 1925.

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### Ethics and aesthetics

While much of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* delights in the beautiful and the intoxicating indulgence of the senses – the novel's opening paragraph for example describes the heady pleasures to be derived from the scents of roses and lilacs – it can be argued that Wilde intended his book neither as a celebration of decadence nor as a fable about the perils of its excesses. As Wilde states in the preface to the novel 'There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all'. In other words, any moral disgust or vicarious pleasure derived from the book reflects more upon us as readers than it does on the novel itself. The book is a tale, pure and simple. It is we, the readers, who force it to bear the weight of a moral dimension.

### 'Dogmas for the Use of the Ages' by Oscar Wilde



'There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book': Oscar Wilde's manuscript drafts of epigrams, here titled 'Dogmas for the Use of the Ages', later used for the Preface to *Dorian Gray*.

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The idea lying behind Aestheticism, the controversial theory of art that was newly fashionable at this time, was that art should be judged purely by its beauty and form rather than by any underlying moral message ('art for art's sake'). This is exemplified in the novel by the dandyish Lord Henry Wotton. Lord Henry advocates the hedonistic pursuit of new experiences as the prime objective in life. In his view, 'one could never pay too high a price for any sensation' (ch. 4). Dorian, although seduced by Wotton's poisonous whisperings, is increasingly interested in the moral consequences of his behaviour. He stands before his decaying portrait, comparing the moral degradation as depicted in oil with his unblemished innocence as reflected by the mirror. The contrast gives him a thrill of pleasure: 'He grew more and more enamoured of his own beauty, more and more interested in the corruption of his own soul' (ch. 11). Dorian – via his wish to remain handsome, while the painting bears the weight of his corruption – muddies the boundary between art and life, aesthetics and ethics. The painting is made to serve a moral purpose, being transformed from an object of beauty into a vile record of guilt, something 'bestial, sodden and unclean' (chapter 10). This tainting of the picture perhaps constitutes, for the aesthete, Dorian's greatest crime – namely the destruction of a beautiful artwork.

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ventional, has no real claim upon us.

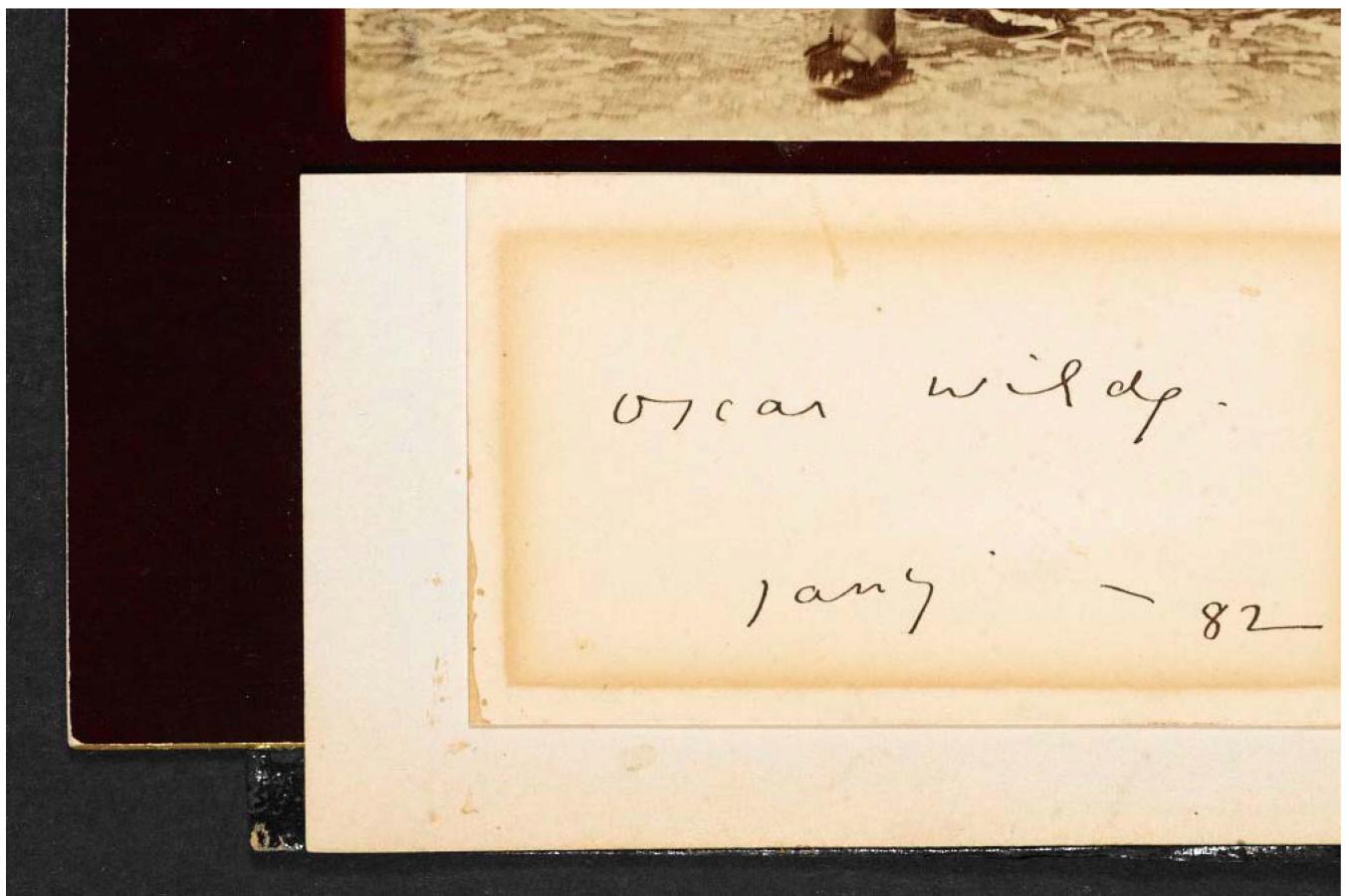
Walter Pater's 'Orientalism' A Study of the Beauty of the Renaissance (1873) heavily influenced Aestheticism. Note his reference to 'art for art's sake' in the last sentence. His emphasis on pleasure and disinterestedness alienated critics and it became associated with homosexuality.  
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of the most beautiful places in the writings of Rousseau is that in the sixth book of the 'Confessions,' where he describes the awakening in him of the literary sense. An undefinable taint of death had always clung about him, and now in early manhood he believed himself stricken by mortal disease. He asked himself how he might make as much as possible of the interval that remained ; and he was not biassed by anything in his previous life when he decided that it must be by intellectual excitement, which he found in the clear, fresh writings of Voltaire. Well, we are all *condamnés*, as Victor Hugo says : *les hommes sont tous condamnés à mort avec des sursis indéfinis* : we have an interval, and then our place knows us no more. Some spend this interval in listlessness, some in high passions, the wisest in art and song. For our one chance is in expanding that interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time. High passions give one this quickened sense of life, ecstasy and sorrow of love, political or religious enthusiasm, or the 'enthusiasm of humanity.' Only, be sure it is



2.





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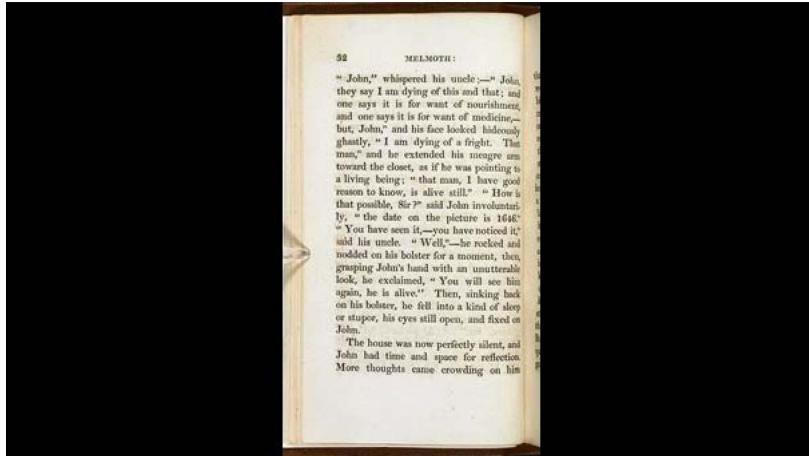


### Paintings and ancestry

Paintings often play a sinister role in Gothic fiction. The first Gothic novel, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) includes a figure stepping from a painting and into reality while *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), written by Oscar Wilde's great-uncle Charles Maturin, describes the haunting gaze of a portrait as it follows the viewer around a room. The picture hidden in Dorian's attic may be the most disturbing portrait in Wilde's book, but it is not the only canvas in the novel which provides a pointer to Dorian's behaviour. At one point Dorian walks through the picture-gallery of his country home, looking at the portraits of his ancestors: 'those whose

blood flowed in his veins'. The saturnine and sensuous faces stare back at him, causing Dorian to reflect whether 'some strange poisonous germ crept from body to body till it had reached his own?' (ch. 11). This poses the question as to whether Dorian is free to determine his own actions, and is thus entirely responsible for his behaviour, or whether his actions are dictated by his genetic inheritance – an inheritance, as the faces of his ancestors indicate, 'of sin and shame'. The eminent mental pathologist Henry Maudsley wrote in his book *Pathology of Mind* (1895): 'Beneath every face are the latent faces of ancestors, beneath every character their characters'. This idea already seems present in much Gothic fiction, including Wilde's novel.

### Melmoth the Wanderer

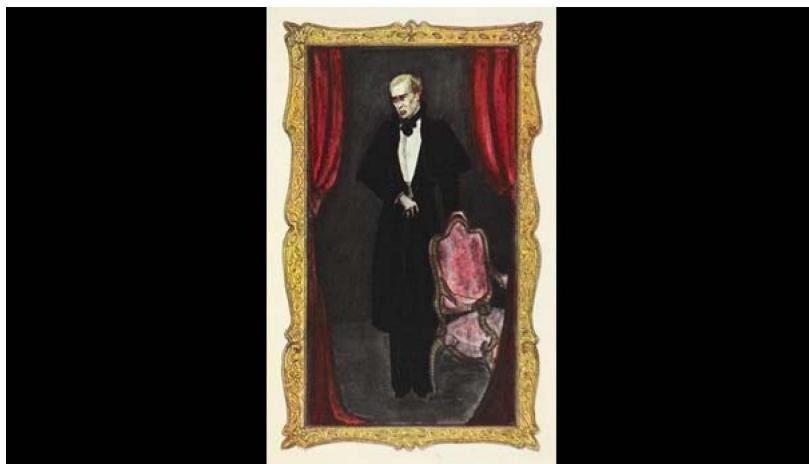


The monstrous portrait from Charles Maturin's Gothic novel *Melmoth the Wanderer*, 1820.

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*The Picture of Dorian Gray* provides both a standard 'Gothic' account of Dorian's actions – the supernatural picture and the lascivious ancestors gazing from their portraits – but also a forward-looking scientific rational for his depraved desires, namely the importance of inheritance in determining behaviour. Dorian resembles his mother physically, inheriting from her 'his beauty, and his passion for the beauty of others' (ch. 11), while, as his corruption accelerates, the twisted portrait in Dorian's attic increasingly resembles his wicked grandfather. This latter idea suggests Dorian is a scientific case study, as well as a moral one. Throughout the book Lord Henry treats Dorian as a beautiful subject upon which to experiment – partly via his encouragement of Dorian to pursue a philosophy of pleasure, and partly through a call to social evolution – a wish to abandon the restraints of Victorian morality on the grounds that sin and conscience are outmoded primitive concepts to be swept aside in the pursuit of new sensations. Lord Henry locates progress in the overcoming of hereditary fears: 'Courage has gone out of our race ... The terror of society, which is the basis of morals, the terror of God, which is the secret of religion – these are the two things that govern us' (ch. 2). His call to youth is a call to courage. Dorian's ultimate failure to live up to Lord Henry's ideals is due to his inability to escape his conscience as depicted in the portrait. By attempting to destroy the painting, and thus free himself from the constant reminder of his own guilt he, ultimately, manages only to destroy himself.

### The Picture of Dorian Gray illustrated by Majeska



Taken from the 1930 American edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, these colour illustrations depict the physical transformation of Dorian Gray's portrait.

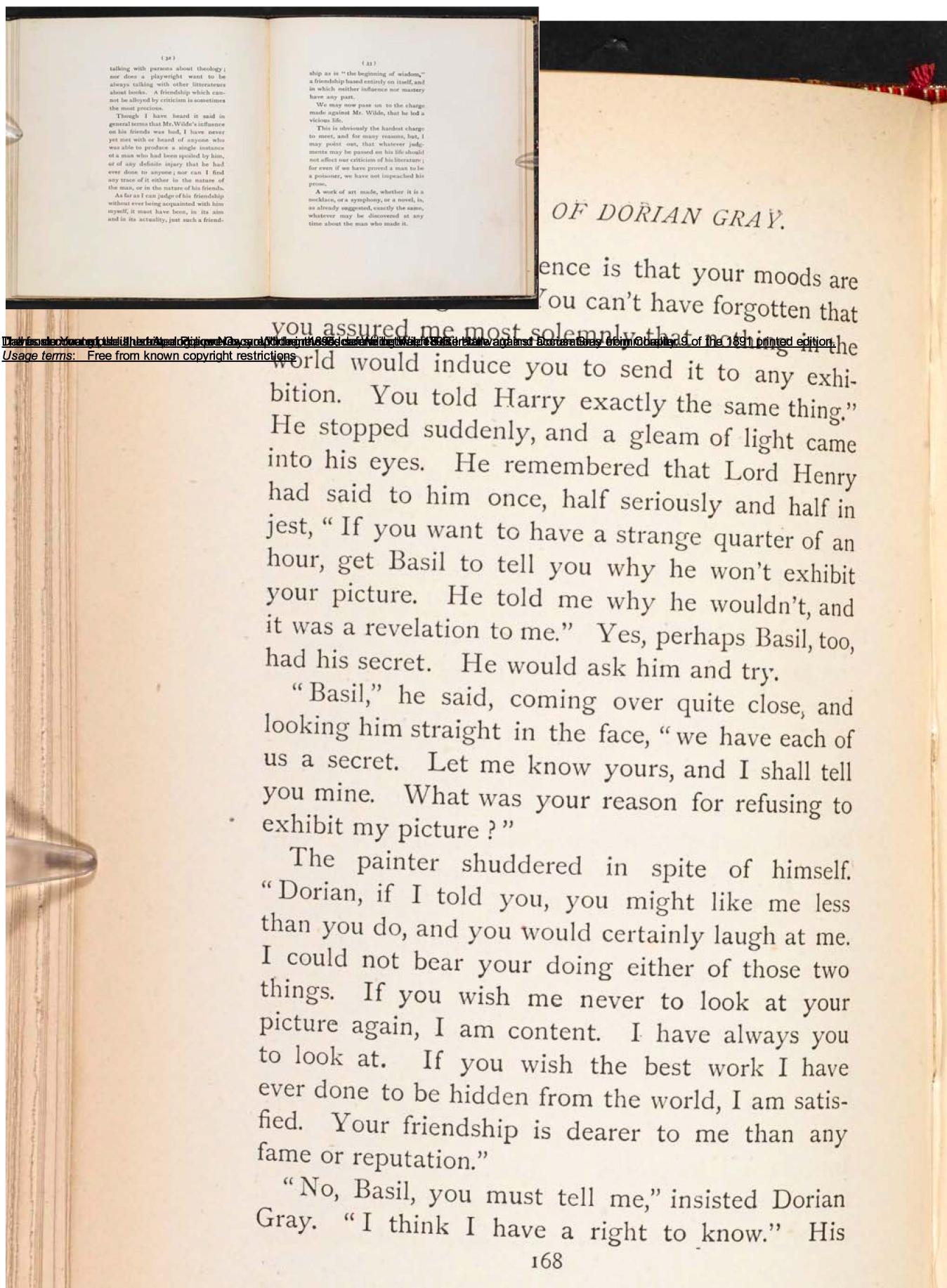
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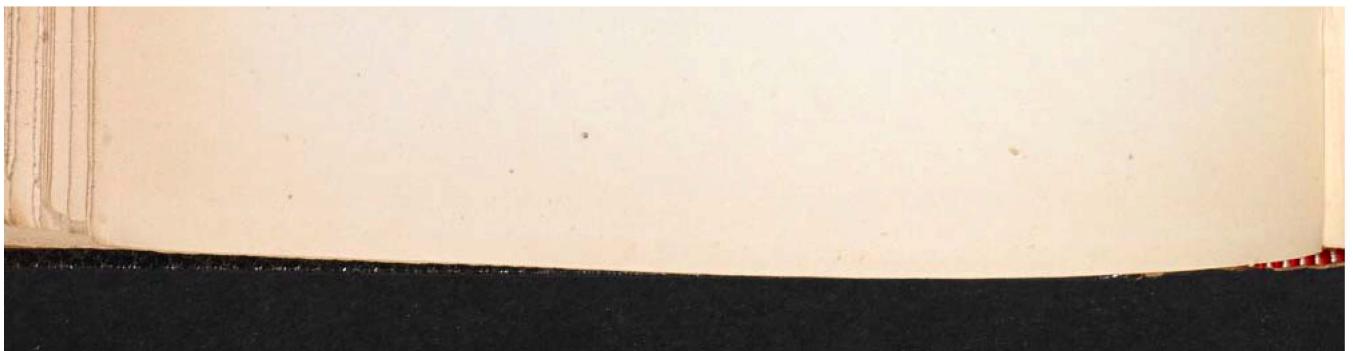
### Oscar Wilde and Dorian Gray

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* first appeared in the July 1890 number of *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* and immediately caused an outcry due to its perceived references of homosexual desire. The review in the *Scot's Observer* memorably described the book as having been written for 'outlawed noblemen and perverted telegraph-boys' – a reference to a recent scandal involving a homosexual brothel in London's Cleveland Street. In response to such hostile criticism Wilde considerably amended the text and a longer, noticeably 'toned-down' version of the book was published by Ward Lock and Co in April 1891. It is this later version that forms the standard text of the novel. Even so the *Lippincott's* version was used by opposing counsel in evidence against Wilde in two of his

trials in an attempt to show him guilty of 'a certain tendency'. For many people Oscar Wilde the artist – with his flamboyant public persona and his secretive private life – and his novel with its two distinctly different versions and its duplicitous central character mirrored each other from the start.

1.





2.

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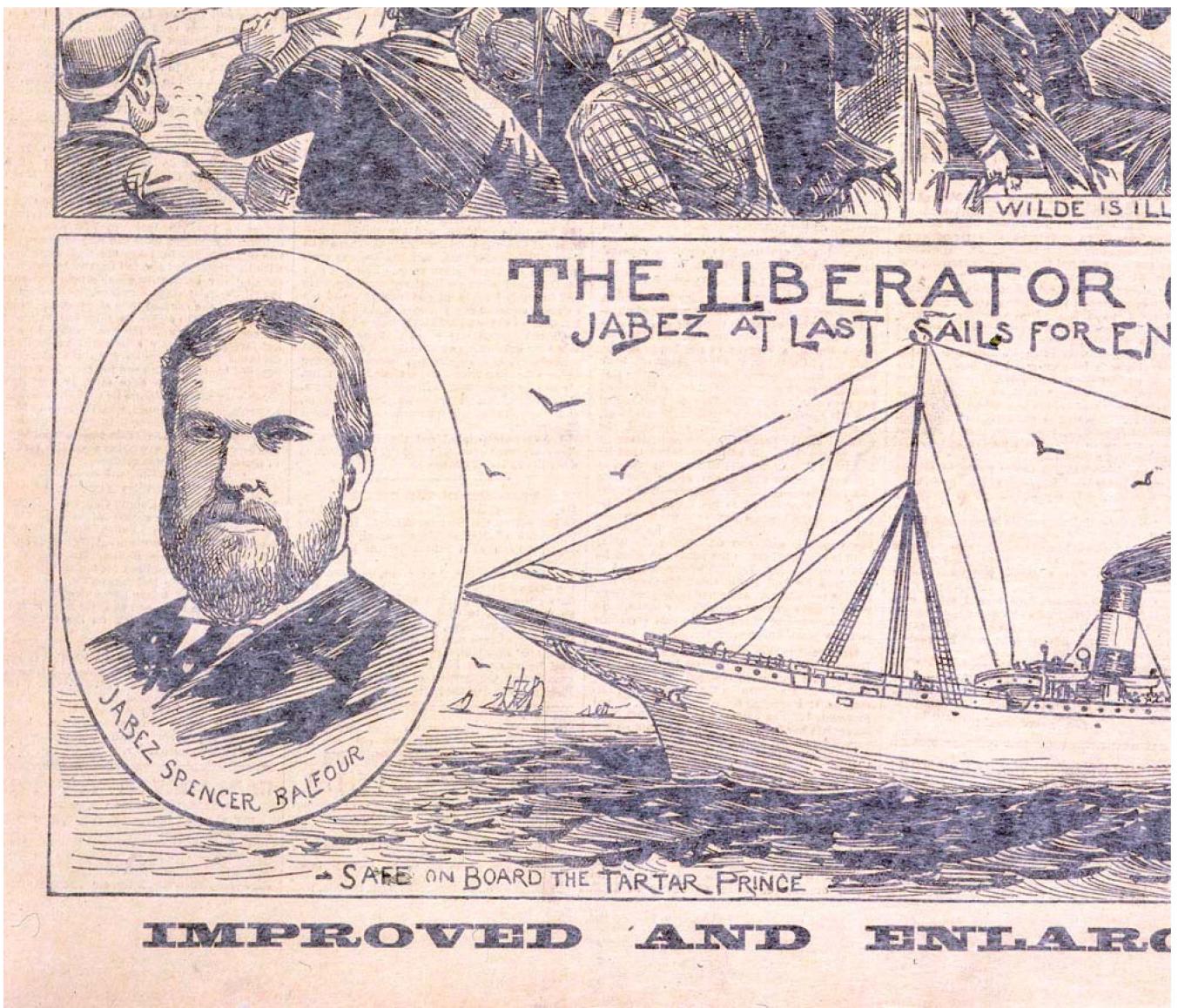
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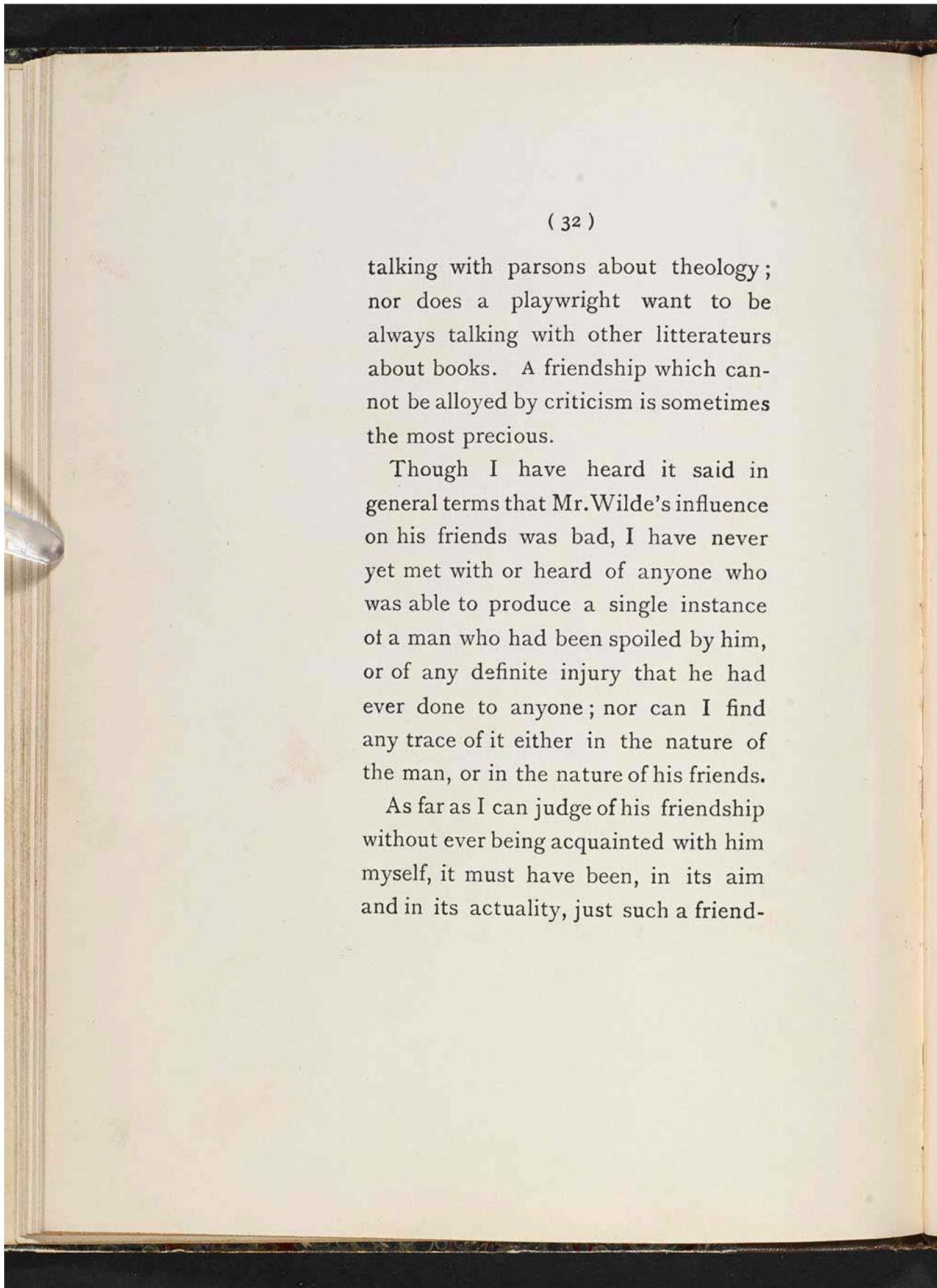
No. 1627. [REGISTERED FOR CIRCULATION IN THE UNITED KINGDOM AND ABROAD.] SATURDAY, APRIL 20, 1895.

# Oscar Wilde at Bow Street

ARRIVAL OF WILDE (B24) AT BOW STREET  
HE IS HOOTED BY THE MOB -



3.



talking with parsons about theology ;  
nor does a playwright want to be  
always talking with other litterateurs  
about books. A friendship which can-  
not be alloyed by criticism is sometimes  
the most precious.

Though I have heard it said in  
general terms that Mr. Wilde's influence  
on his friends was bad, I have never  
yet met with or heard of anyone who  
was able to produce a single instance  
of a man who had been spoiled by him,  
or of any definite injury that he had  
ever done to anyone ; nor can I find  
any trace of it either in the nature of  
the man, or in the nature of his friends.

As far as I can judge of his friendship  
without ever being acquainted with him  
myself, it must have been, in its aim  
and in its actuality, just such a friend-

- Written by [Greg Buzwell](#) [/romantics-and-victorians/articles?authors\_sorted=Buzwell\*Greg]
- Greg Buzwell is Curator for Printed Literary Sources, 1801 – 1914 at the British Library; he is also co-curator of a major exhibition on Gothic literature, *Terror and Wonder: The Gothic Imagination*, which runs at the Library from October 2014 to 20 January 2015. His research focuses primarily on the Gothic literature of the Victorian fin de siècle. He is also editing a collection of Mary Elizabeth Braddon's ghost stories, *The Face in the Glass and Other Gothic Tales*, for publication this autumn.

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