**Gide Seminar One:**

**Before the seminar:**

Have a look at the passages in *L’Immoraliste* which precede the main body of Michel’s narrative:

* The epigraph from Psalms CXXXIX, 14: ‘Je te loue, ô mon Dieu, de ce que tu m’as fait créature si admirable’.
* The author’s preface (beginning ‘Je donne ce livre pour ce qu’il vaut’…)
* The letter from Michel’s friend (addressed ‘A Monsieur D.R. Président du Conseil’)

What is the effect of prefacing the text with these excerpts? How do they prepare us for the narrative to follow? What problems are raised in the author’s preface? What images and themes are evoked in the letter to the Prime Minister?

Questions about the narrative:

1. What kind of a childhood did Michel have? What role will this play in the story?
2. Name two or three scenes in which the theme of initiation is evoked.
3. Have a look at the last chapter of Part I, chapter 9. What is the role of this chapter? What does it tell us about the relationship between Michel and Marceline? Why does Michel invoke the story of the young king Athalaric?

During the seminar:

Read the Guardian book-club piece, below, on *L’Immoraliste*. Do you agree with the comments about the text as ‘terrifying’?

Reading group: A slap in the face from André Gide's The Immoralist

Gide's novel remains subversive and threatening over 100 years after its publication. But did anyone actually like it?

[**Sam Jordison**](https://www.theguardian.com/profile/samjordison)

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Last week, I noted that The Immoralist "caused a scandal" on its first publication in 1902. Which is the kind of thing you do when you get most of your knowledge about a book from Wikipedia and loose scraps of knowledge on the internet. Now I've dug a bit deeper, I doubt that statement. For a start, the book apparently sold only 200-odd copies in the first few years of its existence. Also, most of the early reviews appear to have been favourable – not least because they were generally written by friends of Gide's. If there was a scandal, it must have been fairly limited in scope.

Even so, I wouldn't be surprised if The Immoralist had ruffled a few feathers. As Dylanwolf noted, ["the book is terrifying!"](http://www.guardian.co.uk/discussion/comment-permalink/17018095) Over 100 years on, it still seems subversive and threatening. The sadomasochism of Fifty Shades of Grey barely merits a raised eyebrow nowadays, but I'd definitely take another look at anyone I spotted reading The Immoralist on public transport.

I say that especially because I read quite a bit of the book on public transport and out in the open and often thought to myself, "If people only knew what I was reading". In particular, I imbibed a healthy part of the book last week over breakfast in a business hotel, and felt a real frisson, as if just by reading the book I was doing something of which the majority of people would not approve. If those respectable men in suits had known about the Nietzschean assertions that were being put forward at my table – the declarations that the strong must have primacy over the weak; the obsessing over beautiful and economically vulnerable boys – if they had known about Michel they might well have been horrified.

Dylanwolf again:

*"[The book] mocks, jeers and laughs at you – all that you hold most true and unshakeable is shown to be as mere straw – blown away by the wind. I was, and still am, the most pseudo of petit-bourgeois, so pampered and spoilt by modern convenience and comfortable middle-class existence and sheltered in my untempered, unearned, woolly socialist-liberalism (though not so liberal)."*

When Michel takes his journey into self-knowledge and decides to follow his desires at the expense of his wife and his fortune, to shun conventional society and intellectual work and to enact his fantasies with so many underage men, he poses serious problems. The Immoralist makes us newly aware of our boundaries, asks us to redraw them – and brings into question why we have them in the first place. None of which is an easy process. It's made all the more unsettling by the cool, eloquent way Michel makes his case. It isn't just that the ideas are shocking. It's that Michel is trying to seduce and convince us, just as he is trying to justify himself to the friends who hear his strange story. He doesn't so much challenge us as suggest that we might feel the same. Discussing his pleasures in the same way as he describes "the awakening of the fields", the smell of wet leaves and the joys of nature and health, he makes a compelling case for himself and his new philosophy.

We'll discuss what to make of that philosophy next time – alongside the thorny questions relating to how much credence we should give Michel, and how much of Gide we should see in him (or not). For now, I'm interested to hear how the book strikes you. Personally, it felt like a slap in the face: a challenge akin to being led into Hassan's rumpus room in [Naked Lunch](http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/data/book/fiction/9780007320905/naked-lunch) or asked by Aldous Huxley to [consider The Doors Of Perception](http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/series/reading-group+aldoushuxley); to think about the fire of Humbert Humbert's loins in [Lolita](http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/data/book/classics/9780241951644/lolita), or (to mention one of the book's most obvious descendants), to witness the killing of the Arab in Camus' [L'Etranger](http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/data/book/literary-criticism/9780415025867/letranger). In other words, I thought it was great. Although I'm not sure how much I liked it ...