

# The Picture of Dorian Gray



by Oscar Wilde

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## The Picture of Dorian Gray: Introduction

Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was published simultaneously in Philadelphia's *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* and by Ward, Lock and Company in England, in July, 1890. In England, the novella was condemned by many reviewers as shocking and immoral. Wilde tried to address some of these criticisms as he worked on an expanded version of the story, which was published as a full-length novel in 1891, along with a

preface in which Wilde stated his artistic credo.

The novel centers on Dorian Gray, a young man of great beauty. When he meets Lord Henry Wotton, Lord Henry inspires him with a vision of life in which the pursuit of beauty through sensual pleasure is valued above ethical or moral concerns. Another friend of Dorian, the artist Basil Hallward, awakens Dorian's vanity. After admiring a portrait of himself painted by Basil, Dorian declares that he would give his own soul if he could remain eternally young while the portrait grows old. He gets his wish, and the picture shows the gradual disfigurement of his soul as he sinks into a life of degradation and crime.

As a variation on the Faust legend, with echoes of the fall of man and the Adonis myth, and as an examination of the relationship between art and life, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* fascinated readers into the early 2000s and gave rise to many different interpretations.

## The Picture of Dorian Gray: Oscar Wilde Biography

Irish poet, novelist, and playwright Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde was born on October 16, 1854, the son of Sir William Wilde, a distinguished doctor, and Jane Francesca Elgee, a poet and journalist. Wilde attended the Portora Royal School at Enniskillen, where he excelled at classics. In 1871, he was awarded the Royal School Scholarship to attend Trinity College in Dublin. He excelled there also, winning the college's Berkeley Gold Medal for Greek and being awarded a Demyship scholarship to Magdalen College in Oxford. At Oxford, Wilde won the Newdigate prize for his poem, "Ravenna," and was awarded a First Class degree in 1878.

After graduation, Wilde moved to London, where he became famous in fashionable and intellectual circles for his witty conversation and outlandish dress. He quickly established himself as one of the leaders of the Aesthetic Movement, and in 1881 he published his first collection of poetry, *Poems*. In January 1882, he began a lecture tour of the United States. On his arrival he famously told customs officers that he had nothing to declare but his genius. During the course of nearly a year, Wilde delivered over 140 lectures on aesthetics.

The following year, Wilde's play *Vera* was produced in New York, and Wilde became engaged to Constance Lloyd, whom he married in 1884. They had two sons, Cyril in 1885 and Vyvyan in 1886. To support his new family, Wilde became editor of *The Woman's World* magazine, from 1887 to 1889.

Wilde then embarked on the most creative period of his life. In 1888, he published a collection of children's stories, "*The Happy Prince*" and *Other Tales*. In 1890, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde's only novel, was published in serial form in an American magazine. The following year it was expanded and published in book form. In 1892, another collection of children's stories, *The House of Pomegranates*, appeared.

Wilde then wrote a series of highly successful plays. The first of these society comedies was *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), followed by *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), *An Ideal Husband* (1895), and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), all of which were highly acclaimed by public and critics alike. But *Salomé*, a poetic drama Wilde wrote in French in 1891, was refused a license by the Lord Chamberlain. It was never produced in England in Wilde's lifetime.

In 1895, the series of events that was to lead to Wilde's downfall began. Since 1891, he had been close friends with Lord Alfred Douglas, and Douglas's father, the Marquis of Queensberry, now accused him of homosexuality. Wilde responded by suing the marquis for criminal libel. The marquis was acquitted, but Wilde was arrested and convicted of gross indecency. He was sentenced to two years hard labor. After he was released, he traveled to France and never returned to England. *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898) was a response to his prison experience. Wilde wandered around Europe, staying with friends, until 1900, when he

returned to Paris. He died of meningitis on November 30, 1900.

## The Picture of Dorian Gray: Summary

### Chapters 1–5

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* begins on an afternoon in London, in the studio of the artist Basil Hallward. Basil discusses his latest portrait, of an extremely handsome young man named Dorian Gray, with Lord Henry Wotton. Basil says he will not exhibit the painting because he has put too much of himself in it. After they go into the garden, Basil explains how captivated he has been by Dorian since he first met him a couple of months earlier. Lord Henry makes some witty, cynical remarks about life, and Basil chides him that he does not really believe what he is saying. Then Basil expands on how Dorian's personality has suggested to him an entirely new manner in art; he sees and thinks differently now and envisions a new school of art, in which soul and body are in perfect harmony.

They return to the house, where Dorian is waiting. Basil puts the finishing touches to his painting as Lord Henry expounds his philosophy of how to live a full life, which is not to be afraid of passion and sensuality as a way to fulfillment of the soul. Dorian is moved by Henry's words, and Henry goes on to speak of the beauty of youth and how it is destroyed by time. When Dorian looks at the finished portrait of himself, he is struck by his own beauty in a way he has never felt before. He feels sad that he will grow old and his beauty will be spoiled. He then says he would give everything, even his own soul, if he could always remain young, and the picture grow old instead.

A month later, Dorian informs Henry that he has fallen in love with a young actress named Sibyl Vane, who plays Shakespearean roles in a tawdry theater in the London back streets. Henry regards this attachment as an interesting psychological phenomenon, and he resolves to study the nature of Dorian's sudden passion. Later, he receives a telegram from Dorian announcing that he is engaged to marry Sibyl.

Sibyl explains to her mother about her love for Dorian, whom she calls Prince Charming. Her mother thinks she is too young to fall in love. James Vane, Sibyl's sixteen-year-old brother, who is about to leave for Australia, is concerned for her welfare. He is suspicious of Prince Charming and tells his sister that if the man ever wrongs her, he will kill him.

### Chapters 6–10

Dorian, Henry, and Basil go to see Sibyl play Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet*. Her performance is awful, and Henry and Basil leave after the second act. After the performance, Sibyl admits to Dorian that she acted poorly. She explains that now she is in love with him, she knows what real love is, and all the dramatic roles she has acted seem unreal. She can no longer believe in them. But Dorian says he only loves her because she is able to bring great art to life, and he does not wish to see her again. When he goes home he notices the picture of himself has changed. There is an expression of cruelty in the smile. He hides the picture behind a screen and resolves to go back to Sibyl, make amends, and marry her.

The following afternoon, Lord Henry brings him the news that Sibyl is dead. Henry makes some cynical remarks about love and encourages Dorian to view Sibyl's death as resembling a scene from a play. Dorian quickly overcomes his grief and vows to enjoy remaining young. He convinces himself he does not care what happens to the picture.

The next morning, Basil reproaches Dorian for his callousness and attributes it to the influence of Lord Henry. Dorian says he can never sit for him again and refuses to allow Basil to look at the picture he painted. Basil wants to exhibit it, but he reluctantly accepts Dorian's decision. Dorian arranges for the picture to be hidden away in an upper room that has not been used for years.

## **Chapters 11–15**

As the years go by, rumors circulate in London about Dorian's lifestyle, but his charming appearance makes it hard for anyone to think ill of him. The picture, however, grows more horrible, as he continually searches for new sensations and frequents disreputable areas of London. People start to distrust him. There are whispers of scandals.

When he is thirty-eight years old, he meets Basil by chance in a London street. He has not seen the artist for a long time. Dorian invites Basil into his house, where Basil confronts him with the stories about how he has ruined so many people's reputations. Scandal follows him everywhere. Basil wonders whether he really knows Dorian and remarks that to find out, he would have to see his soul. Dorian says he will show Basil his soul, and he takes the bemused artist to the room where the picture is stored. He removes the curtain that covers the picture and shows it to Basil, who is horrified. Dorian feels a rush of hatred for the artist and stabs him with a knife, killing him. He goes downstairs to the library and ponders how he can get away with his crime.

The next day he summons Alan Campbell, who used to be his close friend, to his house. Campbell is an expert in chemistry, with a reputation for undertaking unusual experiments. Dorian tells Campbell that he has murdered a man and asks him to destroy the body so that no trace of it remains. Campbell refuses until Dorian threatens to blackmail him over some shameful secret that Dorian knows about him.

That night, after attending a dinner party, Dorian burns Basil's coat and bag. At midnight he goes out and hires a hansom cab.

## **Chapters 16–19**

Dorian is taken to an opium den in a disreputable part of the city. There he encounters Adrian Singleton, one of his former friends who has been disgraced. As he leaves, a woman yells at him, calling him Prince Charming. A sailor hears this and follows Dorian outside. The sailor is James Vane, who accosts Dorian and intends to kill him. But when the still-youthful-looking Dorian points out that whoever deserted Sibyl must be many years older than he, Vane lets him go. But then the woman who called Dorian Prince Charming tells Vane that she first encountered him eighteen years earlier. Vane rushes after Dorian, intending to kill him, but Dorian has vanished.

A week later, Dorian is attending a dinner party when he thinks he sees Vane peering in at the window. He fears for his life and does not go out for three days. Then he joins a shooting-party led by Sir Geoffrey Clouston, the brother of the Duchess of Monmouth. The hunt is called off after Sir Geoffrey accidentally shoots and kills a man. The man turns out to be James Vane.

Dorian now bitterly regrets his life and desires to change. He tries to do good by breaking off a relationship with a working-class girl named Hetty, whom he has been deceiving. But Lord Henry mocks his desire to change, saying he is perfect as he is. Later, tormented by his corrupt life, Dorian takes a knife and slashes the picture. The servants then hear a terrible cry. Dorian is discovered dead, with a knife in his heart, but the picture is as perfect as the day it was painted, and shows Dorian in all his youthful beauty.

# **The Picture of Dorian Gray: Characters**

## **Alan Campbell**

Alan Campbell is a former close friend of Dorian Gray. The friendship lasted for eighteen months and ended for unknown reasons. After the split between the two men, Campbell became melancholy and gave up playing music, which had been his delight. After he murders Basil, Gray summons Campbell, who is an expert in chemistry, to dispose of the body. Campbell agrees to do it only after Gray indicates he will blackmail him if

he does not cooperate. Campbell later commits suicide by shooting himself in his laboratory.

### **Lord Fermor**

Lord Fermor is the uncle of Lord Henry Wotton. He is a bachelor and former diplomat who devotes himself to what the narrator describes as “the great aristocratic art of doing absolutely nothing.” He informs Lord Henry about Dorian Gray’s family background.

### **Dorian Gray**

Dorian Gray is twenty years old when the novel begins. He is the grandson of Lord Kelso, and his mother was the beautiful Lady Margaret Devereux. Margaret married a man Lord Kelso did not approve of, and her father arranged for the man to be killed in a duel. Dorian’s mother died within a year, and Dorian was raised by his grandfather. When Dorian comes of age at twenty-one, he will inherit enough money to enable him to live comfortably.

Dorian possesses great physical beauty, and the artist Basil Hallward is infatuated with him. When Dorian meets Lord Henry Wotton, he falls under the influence of Henry’s new hedonism, in which the goal of immediate sensual pleasure is valued above ethics or morality. Soon after Dorian meets Lord Henry he falls in love with the actress Sibyl Vane but rejects her when she declares that since she has fallen in love with him, she no longer cares for creating art. It is Dorian’s callous response to Sibyl’s resulting suicide that produces the first change in the portrait that Basil painted of him: a distinctly cruel expression appears on the face. After this, Dorian pursues a life of pleasure in which he courts all manner of sensual enjoyments, searching for beauty in fleeting sensations and objects of art.

But since he does not balance his love of beauty with a sense of morality, he sinks into selfish behavior. He leads many of his friends to ruin or disgrace, and as the years go by, rumors circulate in London about his objectionable behavior, and people start to shun him. In his physical appearance, however, he remains as youthful as the day the portrait was painted. The degradation of his soul is registered only in the picture.

Dorian sinks to his lowest point when he murders his friend Basil, who has made the mistake of inquiring too closely into the nature of his activities. Dorian effectively covers up his crime, and when James Vane, who has been trying to kill him, is killed in a hunting accident, it appears that Dorian is safe. But he is weighed down by his dissolute life and desires to change it, a goal for which he receives no encouragement from his friend Lord Henry. Eventually, driven to desperation, Dorian slashes the picture on which his sins are visible, but in a mysterious act of transference, Dorian himself dies of a knife wound through his heart, and the picture is restored to its original condition.

### **Basil Hallward**

Basil Hallward is an artist who paints the picture of Dorian Gray. He is completely captivated by the beautiful Dorian, whom he has known for two months, and paints him in many different guises. He secretly worships Dorian and later confesses this adoration to him. He believes that Dorian has inspired him to create the best work of his life. Through Dorian he has discovered a new style of painting and hopes it will be the beginning of a new school that will combine the best of the Greek and Romantic spirit, presenting a harmony of spirit and passion, body and soul. Basil does not intend to exhibit the painting because he says he has put too much of himself into it. Instead, he presents it to Dorian.

Unlike his friend Lord Henry, whose cynicism he regards as a mere pose, Basil does not take an amoral approach to life. He tries to console Dorian after the death of Sibyl Vane and is shocked by the callousness of his friend. He attributes Dorian’s attitude to the bad influence of Lord Henry.

After this exchange, Basil and Dorian meet seldom. Eighteen years after their first meeting, they run into each other by chance. Basil demands to know from Dorian the truth regarding the many rumors about Dorian’s

bad behavior. Dorian resents his criticism. He decides to show Basil the real state of his soul, which is revealed in the picture. Basil only has time to express his horror at the alteration in the picture before Dorian stabs him to death with a knife. Since Basil had been due to depart for Paris that same night and planned to remain there for six months, he is not missed for some time.

### **Adrian Singleton**

Adrian Singleton is a former friend of Gray's. Dorian encounters him again at the opium den, and it is clear that Singleton has been disgraced as a result of his association with Dorian. None of his friends will speak to him, and he takes refuge in an opium addiction.

### **James Vane**

James Vane is the sixteen-year-old brother of Sibyl Vane. He becomes a sailor, but not before he has vowed that if Sibyl's aristocratic admirer, whom he knows only by the name of Prince Charming, ever wrongs her, he will kill him. Eighteen years later, he spots Dorian Gray in an opium den, follows him out to the street, and is ready to kill him, but Dorian convinces him that he has got the wrong man. Vane soon realizes his mistake, and eventually tracks Dorian down, but he is accidentally shot and killed when he intrudes on a hunting expedition.

### **Mrs. Vane**

Mrs. Vane is the mother of Sibyl and James Vane. Like her daughter, she is an actress, but she is a tired woman who has had a hard life. The family lives in poverty because Mrs. Vane was not married to the father of her children, and he died without making provision for them.

### **Sibyl Vane**

Sibyl Vane is a seventeen-year-old girl who excels as an actress. She performs many of the great Shakespearean roles in a tawdry theater in the back streets of London. Dorian Gray falls in love with her, and she with him. But he rejects her after she performs badly, and she is so distressed by his rejection she commits suicide.

### **Lord Henry Wotton**

Lord Henry Wotton, an aristocratic man of thirty, is a friend of Basil Hallward. He has a languid manner and smokes cigarettes constantly. He is married, but later his wife runs away with another man. When he meets Dorian Gray, he makes such an impression on the younger man that Dorian tries to put into practice the kind of life that he thinks Lord Henry espouses. Lord Henry, however, although he advocates the pursuit of sensual experience for its own sake, tries to remain a spectator of life. Although he and Dorian become friends, he watches Dorian's life as if he is observing a psychological experiment conducted by himself. He is amoral and cynical in his attitudes and expresses no sympathy after the death of Sibyl Vane or the disappearance of Basil. Lord Henry likes to apply his keen intelligence to making epigrams at dinner parties or in conversation with Basil and Dorian. He seems to prefer coming up with witty sayings that reverse conventional notions or morality than getting involved in the realities of life. Basil sometimes says that Lord Henry does not really believe a word he says. Late in the novel, Lord Henry does admit that he would like to be young again, but typically, he immediately takes refuge in a witticism that effectively disguises his real feelings: "To get back my youth I would do anything in the world, except take exercise, get up early, or be respectable."

## **The Picture of Dorian Gray: Themes**

### **Homoerotic Love**

Although the theme of homoerotic love is never stated explicitly (and could not be, given the conventions of the day), it may be present in Basil's feelings for Dorian. He tells Lord Henry that he cannot be happy if he does not see Dorian every day. He is upset when Dorian becomes engaged to Sibyl. Later, he confesses to

Dorian that from the first moment they met, he worshipped him. He says, “I grew jealous of every one to whom you spoke. I wanted to have you all to myself. I was only happy when I was with you.” He is completely dominated by his feelings for the younger man, which also transfigure his perception of the entire world. Everything becomes wonderful to him because of Dorian. Basil presents what may be homoerotic attraction in different terms, as the lure of an aesthetic ideal. He worships Dorian because the beautiful young man allows him to fulfill his highest ideals as an artist. He tells Lord Henry that Dorian is to him “simply a motive in art.”

### **The Indulgence of the Senses**

Dorian attempts to live according to the view of life presented to him by Lord Henry. Lord Henry believes that nothing is gained by self-denial. He tells Dorian that people should not be afraid of their own desires and impulses, because in them lie the seeds of fulfillment and joy. His credo is “to cure the soul by means of the senses, and the senses by means of the soul.” To live a full life, it is necessary to savor with the senses every passing moment. It is better to experience everything the world has to offer than to spend time worrying about ethics or morals. It is better to seek beauty, in the contemplation of art and beautiful objects, than to tie up the mind in intellectual concerns and with education. Lord Henry calls this philosophy a “new Hedonism.” (Hedonism is defined as pleasure-seeking as a way of life.)

The novel presents at least two different ways of interpreting this theme. Since Dorian, who attempts to follow Lord Henry’s advice, ends up destroying many people’s lives, committing murder and suicide, and also corrupting his own soul, there is either something intrinsically wrong with Lord Henry’s new Hedonism, or Dorian has failed to understand it or erred in the way he has put it into practice.

Both views are possible. The novel can be read in moralistic terms as a condemnation of Dorian’s self-indulgent life. In a letter to the *Daily Chronicle* on June 30, 1890 (quoted in *The Artist as Critic*), Wilde himself sought to counter charges that the book was immoral and stated that it did have a moral: “All excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its own punishment.” Wilde refers not only to Dorian but also to Basil and Lord Henry. Basil (said Wilde) worships physical beauty too much and creates an overweening vanity in Dorian, whereas Lord Henry seeks to be merely a spectator in life and is even more wounded by that stance than are those, like Dorian, who enter into life with more vigor. However, Wilde’s explanation is not in keeping with the preface to the novel, which he added after the negative reviews were published. The preface states in a number of different epigrammatic ways that art should have nothing to do with morality.

The second possible interpretation is that Dorian fails to understand Lord Henry’s credo. Indeed, it seems that Lord Henry himself does not live according to it either. As Wilde stated, he remains largely a spectator in life. His manner is languid, and he cultivates an ironic detachment from everything, even as he advocates passionate involvement. Lord Henry seems to do very little during the course of the novel other than exert psychological dominance over Dorian and attend dinner parties for the sole purpose of shocking people with his epigrams. But near the end he confides in Dorian: “I have sorrows, Dorian, of my own, that even you know nothing of.”

It seems that Lord Henry’s ideal is to take exquisite pleasure in the experience of the senses, to be wide awake sensually in every single moment of existence, while at the same time remaining undisturbed, keeping an evenness of mind. This is a paradox, since the proclaimed ideal is to be simultaneously involved and uninvolved in life. Lord Henry’s error is to cultivate one ideal—detachment— at the expense of the other. Dorian makes the opposite mistake. Neither is able to fulfill the theoretical goal of the new Hedonism.

## **The Picture of Dorian Gray: Style**

## Epigram

An epigram is a short, witty statement in prose or verse. Wilde is famous for his epigrams, and the novel furnishes many examples, almost all of them uttered by Lord Henry Wotton. “A man cannot be too careful in the choice of his enemies,” he tells his friend Basil. The humorous effect is gained by a reversal of the expected meaning, since it would be natural to expect to hear “friends” instead of “enemies.” The reversal creates a comic surprise. Lord Henry uses the same reversal of expectations when he says, “The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it.” This can also be described as a paradox, which is a statement that appears to be contradictory or absurd but on examination may prove to be true. Wilde’s preface to the novel also contains many epigrams, many of which show his eagerness to undermine conventional ideas, as in “No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style.”

## Myth

Underlying the narrative are suggestions of several myths, including the fall of man as described in Genesis. Dorian, as an innocent, beautiful young man, newly created (in a sense) by Basil Hallward, the artist/God, is the equivalent of Adam in the Garden of Eden before the Fall. Lord Henry Wotton plays the role of Satan. He tempts Dorian with the promise of a fuller, richer life, if he will only follow his, Henry’s, credo. Dorian has too much pride and egoism to resist the temptation, and so he falls.

There is also an allusion to the medieval legend of Faust. Faust is a man who sells his soul to the devil in exchange for knowledge and power, just as Dorian makes a bargain to keep his eternal youth even if it means the loss of his soul.

Another allusion is to the classical myth of Narcissus, who falls in love with himself after seeing his reflection in a pool. When Lord Henry first sees the picture he compares Dorian to Narcissus. This gives a clue to the vanity inherent in Dorian’s nature. Lord Henry may tempt him, but in a sense he is only drawing out the qualities that are already present in Dorian.

# The Picture of Dorian Gray: Historical Context

## Aestheticism and Decadence

Aestheticism was a literary movement in late nineteenth-century France and Britain. It was a reaction to the notion that all art should have a utilitarian or social value. According to the Aesthetic Movement, art justifies its own existence by expressing and embodying beauty. The slogan of the movement was “art for art’s sake,” and it contrasted the perfection possible through art with what it regarded as the imperfections of nature and of real life. The artist should not concern himself with political or social issues.

In France, Aestheticism was associated with the work of Charles Baudelaire, Gustave Flaubert, and Stéphane Mallarmé. In England, its chief theorist was Walter Pater (1839–1894), who was a professor of classics at Oxford University. In contrast to the usual Victorian emphasis on work and social responsibility, Pater emphasized the fleeting nature of life and argued that the most important thing was to relish the exquisite sensations life brings, especially those stimulated by a work of art. The aim was to be fully present and to live vividly in each passing moment. As Pater put it in the “Conclusion” to his work *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), which is in effect a manifesto of the Aesthetic Movement in England, “To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life.” This is in complete opposition to the prevailing Victorian mentality, with its emphasis on hard work, moral earnestness, and material success.

Wilde was an admirer of Pater, and it was Wilde who later became the representative figure of Aestheticism. Pater’s influence on *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was profound. When Dorian adopts Lord Henry’s belief that the aim of the new Hedonism “was to be experience itself, and not the fruits of experience” he is virtually quoting Pater’s “Conclusion,” in which he writes, “Not the fruit of experience, but experience



itself, is the end.”

Pater was a key figure in the emergence of the later movement in England and France known as Decadence. This movement flourished in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, a period also known as *fin de siècle* (end of the century). Decadent writers believed that Western civilization was in a condition of decay, and they attacked the accepted moral and ethical standards of the day. The theory of Decadence was that all “natural” forms and behaviors were inherently flawed; therefore, highly artificial, “unnatural” forms and styles were to be cultivated, in life as well as art. Many Decadent writers therefore experimented with lifestyles that involved drugs and depravity (just as Dorian does in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*).

One influential work of the Decadent movement was *À Rebours (Against the Grain)*, a novel by French writer, J. K. Huysmans, published in 1884. The protagonist is estranged from Parisian society and continually seeks out strange and new experiences. It is generally accepted that *À Rebours* is the novel that Lord Henry sends to Dorian Gray and which fascinates and grips Dorian for years.

Another example of Decadent literature is Wilde’s play *Salomé*, with its lurid subject and imagery of blood, sex, and death. In addition to Wilde, Decadence in England was associated with the poets Algernon Swinburne and Ernest Dowson, and the painter, Aubrey Beardsley.

## The Picture of Dorian Gray: Critical Overview

When first published in England, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* met with a storm of negative reviews, many of which attacked the book in virulent terms for its alleged immorality. The *Daily Chronicle*, for example, assailed its “effeminate frivolity, its studied insincerity, its theatrical cynicism, its tawdry mysticism, its flippant philosophisings and the contaminating trail of garish vulgarity” (quoted in Norbert Kohl’s *Oscar Wilde: The Works of a Conformist Rebel*). The anonymous critic for the *St. James’s Gazette* affected a manner of even greater disgust when he wrote, “not wishing to offend the nostrils of decent persons, we do not propose to analyse [the novel] . . . that would be to advertise the developments of an esoteric prurience” (quoted in Michael Patrick Gillespie’s “*The Picture of Dorian Gray: What the World Thinks Me*”). This critic even ventured the opinion that he would be pleased to see Wilde or his publishers prosecuted for publishing the novel.

In letters to the editor of the *St. James’s Gazette*, Wilde defended himself against such charges. He insisted that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* had a very clear moral and that his main problem in writing the book had been to keep the obvious moral from subverting the artistic effect.

Although not all early reviews were unfavorable, the negative impression created by those who denounced the book affected how people responded to it for decades. Passages from the novel were read in court by the prosecution during Wilde’s trial for homosexuality in 1895. The habit of interpreting the novel, and other works by Wilde, in the context of his life dominated early scholarship about Wilde. Some twentieth-century and twenty-first-century critics continued to use biographical details to shed light on *The Picture of Dorian Gray*; others examined it in relation to the cultural context in which it was written or used archetypal criticism, in which the novel was analyzed in terms of myths and legends such as the Faust story. Some critics interpreted the novel by examining issues of sexual orientation.

## The Picture of Dorian Gray: Criticism

## Sibyl Vane, Basil and Dorian

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* presents three intriguing characters, all of whom represent in different ways the relationship between art and life, contemplation and action, beauty and ethics. But neither Lord Henry Wotton nor Basil Hallward nor Dorian Gray embodies the ideal to which each aspires, and they all fail catastrophically in one way or another. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is not a novel for the optimist.

Lord Henry is often pilloried by critics as a cynic who manipulates Dorian into doing the things that he advocates but is too withdrawn and too frightened to do himself. In this view, Henry is a tired man who wants to live vicariously through a younger, more beautiful specimen who has the ability (or so Lord Henry supposes) to experience life as Lord Henry believes it ought to be experienced.

No doubt all this is true. But Lord Henry certainly has his appeal, since he is the chief vehicle in the novel for Wilde's dazzling epigrammatic wit, and his aesthetic ideal needs to be taken seriously. What, then, does Lord Henry stand for? A clue to his governing aesthetic can be found in the opening scene of the novel, which takes place in Basil's studio. The door of the studio is open, and the rich sights, sounds, and smells of the adjoining garden, as the light summer wind blows, are vividly described. Henry is characteristically taking it easy by lying on the divan, but he is aware of all the sensory life going on around him—the heavy scent of the lilac, the almost unbearable beauty of the laburnum blossoms, the “sullen murmur” of the bees. Just as importantly, he is aware of the shadows cast on the curtains by the flight of birds, which reminds him of Japanese artists, who “through the medium of an art that is necessarily immobile, seek to convey the sense of swiftness and motion.”

This passage suggests Lord Henry's ideal, which is to cultivate an intensity of experience whilst paradoxically remaining undisturbed and untroubled by it. This ideal is fully realized through the contemplation of art, which permits the observer the privilege of being at once involved and uninvolved in the experience. It is in this sense that art is superior to life, as Wilde so often claimed, and this is what Henry is driving at when he instructs the malleable mind of Dorian on how to react to the suicide of Sibyl. He must view it, says Lord Henry, from the perspective of art, as a scene from some Jacobean tragedy. What he means is that tragic drama has the power to evoke in the spectator a full and sympathetic response but one that does not engulf him or her in actual grief. Lord Henry is here a spokesman for the position Wilde staked out in his essay, “The Critic as Artist”:

Art does not hurt us. The tears that we shed at a play are a type of the exquisite sterile emotions that it is the function of Art to awaken. We weep, but we are not wounded. We grieve, but our grief is not bitter.

In this view, art shields people from the harshness of actual existence. It is to be preferred to life because, as Wilde writes earlier in the same essay, life, unlike art, lacks form:

Its catastrophes happen in the wrong way and to the wrong people. There is a grotesque horror about its comedies, and its tragedies seem to culminate in farce. One is always wounded when one approaches it.

Dorian is convinced by Henry's argument. Changing his way of responding to Sibyl's death, he recovers his equanimity (or so he thinks). Of course, Dorian's fatal mistake, according to Lord Henry's philosophy, is to get his emotions tied up with Sibyl in the first place, because that has inflicted a wound on the invisible level of life (the level of soul, or conscience, as reflected in the changing picture) that extracts a bitter price further down the road.

It is to avoid wounds such as these that Wilde argues, in “The Critic as Artist,” for the superiority of contemplation over action, being (or more precisely, becoming) over doing. And this is why art, he says, can have nothing to do with ethics, since ethics applies only to the sphere of action. This is why Lord Henry appears to withdraw from life and seek perfection only in art.

And yet there is another side to Lord Henry’s philosophy. In contrast to the inward impulse is the push outward, the desire for the sensory world. He advocates a life of passionate personal experience, to be enjoyed most fully in youth, while the senses are at their sharpest. He will have nothing of self-denial. As he tells Dorian, “Every impulse that we strive to strangle broods in the mind and poisons us.” Henry’s “new Hedonism,” in which novel sensations are sought in order to keep the flame of life from going out in the dullness of habit and routine, demands the courage to yield to temptation (another Wildean paradox). “Resist it,” he explains to Dorian, “and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden to itself, with desire for what its monstrous laws have made monstrous and unlawful.”

To remain a spectator of life and at the same time to fulfill every desire of one’s sensual nature is a paradox; it suggests the co-existence of opposite values. It is the art of feeling life without feeling it, the art of touching whilst remaining untouched. Paradoxes such as these lead often to the sphere of mysticism. Indeed, the book that Lord Henry gives Dorian, and which fascinates and influences him so deeply, sometimes seems to him like a work of mystical philosophy. But neither Wilde nor any of his characters were mystics. It is the concrete material form, shaped into beauty, which holds their attention. As Wilde put it, attributing the thought to Walter Pater, in “The Critic as Artist”: “Who . . . would exchange the curve of a single rose-leaf for that formless intangible Being which Plato raises so high?”

If in his personal life, as opposed to what he advises Dorian, Henry embraces the first rather than the second part of the paradox—detachment rather than involvement—his protégé Dorian leans to the other side. Totally under Lord Henry’s spell, this refined young man with high ideals adopts his mentor’s words to the best of his ability. He tells Basil that he understands what Henry says about art and the “artistic temperament,” and he quotes Henry approvingly that “To become the spectator of one’s own life . . . is to escape the suffering of life.” And even though Dorian has few original thoughts in his head, he still manages to think in lofty terms about the new Hedonism leading to the birth of a new spirituality, dominated by an instinct for beauty.

But Dorian does not succeed in living the paradox. More involved in the world than Lord Henry and giving full rein to his love of beauty and his quest for novel sensations, he allows himself to become a poisonous influence on those around him. He becomes indifferent to the effects of his actions, which not only destroy others (in ways never specified) but also leave him fatally marred, despite the illusion—for that, ultimately is what it is—generated by his unchanging youthful, beautiful appearance. Detached contemplation becomes callous disregard. In his attempt, following Lord Henry’s dictum, “to cure the soul by means of the senses, and the senses by means of the soul,” Dorian succeeds only in satiating the one and corrupting the other. In terms of the Art/Life dichotomy, he deserts the calm serenity of art in favor of the sordidness of life. This becomes crystal clear as Dorian takes the hansom cab to the opium den the day after he murders Basil:

Ugliness that had once been hateful to him because it made things real, became dear to him now for that very reason. Ugliness was the one reality. The coarse brawl, the loathsome den, the crude violence of disordered life, the very vileness of thief and outcast, were more vivid, in their intense actuality of impression, than all the gracious shapes of Art, the dreamy shadows of Song.

The third main character in the novel, Basil Hallward, can also be analyzed in terms of this dichotomy between art and life, detachment and involvement. He confesses to Dorian in chapter 9 that when he first began to paint portraits of him, he managed to retain the proper artistic distance from his subject: “it had all been what art should be, unconscious, ideal, and remote.” But then when he painted Dorian not in classical

costume but as himself, his personal feelings entered into the painting; he revealed too much of himself in it. This is why he initially decides he cannot exhibit the painting.

When Basil allows himself to become infatuated with Dorian, he commits the same error (from Lord Henry's perspective, that is) that Dorian does with Sibyl Vane. He allows himself to be drawn out of the sphere of Art into that of Life, and no good results from it. As Dorian later reproaches him, "You met me, flattered me, and taught me to be vain of my good looks." Basil, then, must bear his share of responsibility for encouraging Dorian on the path that proves so destructive for him as well as others. However, Basil, unlike Lord Henry and Dorian, does not divorce his principles as an artist from his moral and ethical awareness. This is what makes him the most sensible, and perhaps also the least interesting, of the three main characters. His is the voice of conscience that speaks to Dorian when the younger man is intent on ignoring his own conscience. Basil is shocked by Dorian's callous demeanor after Sibyl Vane's death, and his moral concern about Dorian's dissolute life is what precipitates Basil's murder, since Dorian cannot bear to listen to Basil's insistence that Dorian should pray for repentance.

It is in this moment, through the agency of Basil, that a thematic framework quite different from the concerns of art and life, contemplation and action, beauty and ethics, enters the novel. This is the Christian scheme of sin, followed by repentance and the possibility of redemption. When Dorian finally does feel remorse and desires to change his life, he moves into a different sphere than Lord Henry, who refuses to take seriously anything Dorian says on that subject. Lord Henry, apparently ignorant of the course that Dorian's life has taken, believes him still to be as perfect as his handsome appearance suggests. This failure of Lord Henry to respond to the events of the real world is presented in extreme form when Dorian all but confesses to the murder of Basil; Lord Henry's response is prompted by his aesthetics, rather than any moral or practical concern. He says that Dorian does not have the vulgarity to commit a murder. This last glance at Lord Henry may be Wilde's way of demonstrating that Lord Henry's detachment involves him in illusions no less damaging than those which Dorian has for long entertained about his own life. The worship of art and beauty may have its place, but it proves to be an inadequate guide through the troubled maze of real human experience.

Source: Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in *Novels for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

## Oscar Wilde

... In the following two years he produced several reviews, essays, and lectures, and he and his wife produced two children, Cyril on 5 June 1885 and Vyvyan on 3 November 1886. In 1886 Wilde met a young Canadian, Robert Ross, and according to fairly well-accepted opinion began his involvement in the disordered, destructive homosexual life-style so luridly suggested in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) and catalogued in his sensational trials. In April 1887 Wilde became the editor of *The Lady's World* magazine. He stated that his aim was to provide "for the expression of women's opinions on all subjects of literature, art, and modern life" and changed the name to *The Woman's World*.

In 1887 some of his best short stories appeared, notably "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime" in the 11, 18, and 25 May issues of *Court and Society Review*. In this story the moral complications resulting from efforts to conform to the demands of a stagnant and corrupt society are grimly and satirically understated, with the spooky, suprarational involvement of a "Professional Cheiromantist." *The Picture of Dorian Gray* would develop a similar suprarational situation with far deeper and more complex personal and social effects. In 1888 his fairy tales *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* and "The Young King," revealing another approach to moral situations and human relationships, interested and delighted adults as well as children—and puzzled some, as they still do.

In 1889 the first of his critical essays, so deeply influential for some great artists of the twentieth century, appeared. All his most important critical essays were published on 2 May 1891 under the title *Intentions*. This collection forms one of the profoundest, healthiest, and most graceful nineteenth-century investigations into the nature of literary art. Victorian criticism subjected literature to the demands of morality and utility; Matthew Arnold was the best, and thus the worst, of such critics. Wilde strove to dislodge that burden.

Wilde was dismissed as editor of *The Woman's World* in July 1889; the same month saw the appearance of "*The Portrait of Mr. W. H.*," a brilliant commentary on Shakespeare's sonnets. In this story Wilde created a character so vivid and alive that Shakespeare scholars, a solemn crew, still feel obliged to devote a footnote or two to killing him off—Willie Hughes. Wilde perceptively satirizes Matthew Arnold's "touchstone" approach to literature in developing from sonnet twenty a theory about Hughes. Cyril Graham, the central character in Wilde's story, which skillfully affects a documentary realism, intuits "on a kind of spiritual and artistic sense" that Willie was the sonnets' "Onlie Begetter," the "Mr. W. H." of the title page of Shakespeare's work. Many kinds of artistic trickery in poetry and in painting complicate the plot. There is no more detailed, more illuminating, and perhaps more eerily degenerate analysis of those glorious sonnets in all of the vast critical writing dealing with them.

"*The Portrait of Mr. W. H.*," usually classified with Wilde's critical essays, could equally well be approached as a story or novella. Its structure, involving a beautiful youth (Willie Hughes), two older men (Shakespeare and the Rival Poet), and a homosexual ambience (slightly disturbed by an interfering Dark Lady) foreshadows Wilde's only novel. The revised "Mr. W. H." of 1893 in turn shows a considerable influence of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in its stressing of an intellectual nobility in the love of man for boy, in adverting to the influence of the unconscious, and in the development of a Platonic idealism in the fruitful "marriage of true minds."

The first version of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* appeared in July 1890 in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*. In his essays, Wilde had preached Pater's doctrine with glib grace and triumphant success. In his novel, that eloquent doctrine, mixing with human realities, ran into considerable trouble.

Wilde posited quite a simple plot. A remarkably attractive twenty-year-old, upper-class Englishman faces his future, and after the passage of time—twelve years in the short *Lippincott* version, eighteen years in the longer version published in book form the following year—concludes his development in abrupt and destructive fashion.

The *Lippincott* version has only three main characters; three others appear briefly. The novel begins with the artist Basil Hallward painting a portrait of Dorian; Lord Henry Wotton, an elegant man-about-town, a "Prince of Paradox," comes in to meet the subject of the picture. Basil fears that he is putting too much of his intense love for the young man into the painting; Lord Henry sees in the youth an opportunity to observe the higher life, the welcoming of every sensation, the fullest development of soul and sense in a beautiful human being.

The homosexual undertones of Wilde's development of his plot roused a critical eruption, mostly of indignation and vilification. The plot was reputedly (but probably not actually) based on an experience Wilde had had in the studio of Basil Ward, an artist friend, where Wilde expressed regret that a beautiful young man in one of Ward's paintings should ever grow old. (Another version places the incident in the studio of a woman painter who painted Wilde's portrait.) In the Gothic tone of his mother's granduncle, Charles Maturin—author of the model of all Gothic novels, *Melmoth the Wanderer*—Wilde introduces a painting which, after the subject of the painting offers his soul for the miracle, takes on the signs of age and moral decay while its lovely, criminal original remains unchanged.

The main characters, according to Wilde's later account, are three aspects of Wilde himself. Hallward is the suffering and sacrificed artist; Dorian is the youthful aesthete-about-town; Lord Henry is the mature

philosopher and wit. Their tortuous and fascinating wanderings in obscure psychological depths have kept readers, viewers of movies, psychiatrists, and critics mildly agog for a hundred years—and will no doubt continue to do so, in the company of Hamlet, Balzac's *Peau de Chagrin*, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Edgar Allan Poe's Usher family, Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, and James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus.

Turning the *Lippincott* version of the novel into a book required more bulk, better balance, and tighter unity. Wilde added six chapters and other characters, increased the scope and depth of the second half (Dorian's mature experience, James Vane's return), and toned down the homosexual implications of the first version. He also added a preface, to meet some of the charges made against the first version and to set forth some of the Paterian bases for the doctrine involved.

The preface upholds Pater's view of art as a reflecting function independent of the strictures of conventional morality. The surface of art, that smooth and lovely skin that all can see, conceals human experience; the symbol, the hidden meaning, of art expresses what the partaker of art finds beneath the surface if he dares to penetrate it—his own face confronting him. Those who rage and howl, like the critics of Wilde's novel, suffer from seeing their own savage faces reflected in the artist's creation. For the artist morality is of interest only as subject matter; ethics should not constrict his scope, nor does he concern himself with encouraging or discouraging moral behavior. The work of art is totally useless; it finds its goal within itself, a beautiful creation reflecting all things human. It should be contemplated for itself, and aims at no other use. Thus the critics who condemn it as having evil effects should look inside themselves for the causes of those effects, not in the work.

In his arrangement of the twenty chapters of his book, Wilde devotes ten chapters to the twenty-year-old Dorian, one remarkable bridge chapter to the eighteen following years, and nine chapters to Dorian at the age of thirty-eight. The ten chapters of the first section are divided into three groups. Chapters 1 through 3 establish the relationships among the three central characters. Chapters 4 through 7 set forth the effect of Sibyl Vane on the three men. Chapters 8 through 10 deal with the portrait—the change in it, the painter's attitude, the hiding of the picture.

Chapter 11 carries the reader by a most effective narrative device over eighteen years of Dorian's sybaritic life. Chapters 12 through 14 deal with Basil's murder, chapters 15 through 18 with James Vane's return. Chapter 19 echoes, in the talk of Henry and Dorian, the Paterian idealism of the early chapters, now with a sinister tonality. In the final chapter, Dorian kills his conscience.

Each chapter has a calculated task in the carefully planned whole. Chapter 1 sets forth, in the conversation of Basil Hallward and Lord Henry, their views on the aim of the artist, on the effect on the artist of his work of art, and on the danger for a young man of Henry's teaching of the value of the fullest possible self-development. Henry preaches "a new Hedonism" in which the doctrine of Pater is central. In his *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), Pater urged response to all sensations, intense concern for keeping always burning the "hard gemlike flame" of self-fulfillment. Lord Henry's advice to Dorian in chapter 2 echoes Pater: "'Yes,' continued Lord Henry, 'that is one of the great secrets of life—to cure the soul by means of the senses, and the senses by means of the soul.'" The mature Dorian of chapter 16 finds those words ringing in his ears, continuously repeats them with savage intensity as if they were a talismanic formula, and desperately wonders whether or not his senses could, after a life of total self-indulgence, cure his sick soul.

In chapter 2 the twenty-year-old Dorian finds Henry's words a clarion call to a brave new world. An apprehensive Basil moves to destroy the picture, but Dorian stops him. At the end of the chapter, Dorian leaves Basil to join Lord Henry.

Chapter 3, the first of the new chapters added to the *Lippincott* version, develops Henry's growing control of both Dorian and Basil. He preaches Plato's reality, the intellectually perfect form which gives reality to shadows. Thus style, the surface, is of prime importance to every artist—to Michaelangelo in stone, to Shakespeare in sonnets. So Henry, as an artist, in living aims to dominate and fashion Dorian. Echoing the attacks on the first version of the novel, Wilde introduces the proper Sir Thomas, who condemns with "tight lips" Henry's Paterian advocacy of freedom from conventional moral restraints. Henry defends his idea, and the narrator describes Henry's method (which is also Wilde's) of using fancy and language in his campaign to repel mere facts: "He played with the idea, and grew willful; tossed it into the air and transformed it; let it escape and recaptured it; made it iridescent with fancy, and winged it with paradox. The praise of folly, as he went on, soared into a philosophy, and Philosophy herself became young, and catching the mad music of Pleasure, wearing, one might fancy, her wine-stained robe and wreath of ivy, danced like a Bacchante over the hills of life, and mocked the slow Silenus for being sober. Facts fled before her like frightened forest things. Her white feet trod the huge press at which wise Omar sits, till the seething grape-juice rose round her bare limbs in waves of purple bubbles, or crawled in red foam over the vat's black, dripping, sloping sides." Again, and more definitely, Dorian deserts Basil to follow Henry.

In chapter 4, Dorian has acquired "a passion for sensations." He has "collected" Sibyl Vane, who resembles Wilde's wife Constance (as Wilde described his fiancée in a letter to Lillie Langtry in December 1883). Sibyl, Dorian thinks, escapes time; she is full of mystery, sacred. She is all great heroines, never an individual. Dorian seems to have persuaded himself that by joining her he, too, will exist in the world of art, the world created by Shakespeare. She seems divine to him, since she will lift him out of the crass world where imagination must be subject to animal necessities. Henry attempts to discourage Dorian: "Good artists exist simply in what they make, and consequently are perfectly uninteresting in what they are." Henry decides, however, to watch the situation as an experiment, to achieve "scientific analysis of the passions."

Chapter 5 is the second added chapter, and its mean style fits the situation—Sibyl's poverty-ridden and melodramatically sterile home life. The reader is told about her romantic dream, her mother's overacted apprehensions, her brother James's sincere concern and his violent threats to anyone who should harm her. In soap-opera terms, the reader learns, as James now finally does, that Sibyl and James are bastards, since the "highly connected" gentleman their mother had loved could not marry her. Mother and brother have listened to Sibyl declare her passion for a Prince Charming whose real name she does not know.

In chapter 6, Lord Henry and Basil discuss Dorian's determination to marry, and after his arrival, Dorian describes his infatuation. Henry doubts the quality of Dorian's "selfless" love, and asserts the superiority of selfish pleasure: "I should fancy that the real tragedy of the poor is that they can afford nothing but self-denial." They drive off to the theater, Basil gloomy and apprehensive.

Chapter 7 reveals that Sibyl's power of acting has deserted her. Dorian's love evanesces, his friends leave, he berates Sibyl as she sobs. She flings herself at his feet (people fling themselves throughout the novel). He coldly leaves her and wanders through the night. At dawn, returning home, he notes a new expression of hard cruelty on the face in the portrait. But maybe it is not so; maybe he can yet love Sibyl.

In the third subsection of the first half of the novel, chapter 8 sees Dorian, with Lord Henry's tutelage, transforming Sibyl's suicide into a triumph of art, a further help to his own self-development: "It has been a marvelous experience. That is all." The picture still mirrors his cruelty, bears "the burden of his shame: that was all." In chapter 9 Basil arrives at Dorian's house; they exchange views; Basil confesses the intense love he had expressed in the picture, the motive for his effort to destroy it. Dorian resolves to hide it away safely. He takes the painting in chapter 10 to the unused old schoolroom at the top of the house, where he had spent much of his childhood. Then he turns to the book Henry had sent to him, a volume resembling J. K. Huysmans's *A Rebours* (1884), a book written in "that curious jeweled style" which Wilde himself had admired. Here the voice of the narrator strongly suggests that he is Wilde himself; it is almost, but not quite,

identical with the voice of Lord Henry: “There were in it [the book Lord Henry had sent to Dorian] metaphors as monstrous as orchids, and as subtle in color. The life of the senses was described in terms of mystical philosophy. One hardly knew at times whether one was reading the spiritual ecstasies of some medieval saint or the morbid confessions of a modern sinner. It was a poisonous book.” This view of the operation of a work of art does not at all seem in accord with Wilde’s preface.

For his bridge chapter, chapter 11, Wilde hit upon the effective device of merging Dorian’s experience for the next eighteen years with the vast historical background, mostly deviously evil, of the beautiful objects he collects—manuscripts depicting sensual adventures and mystical theologies; perfumes; music of savage as well as of civilized traditions; exquisite jewels; embroideries, tapestries, and vestments; paintings; literature; poisons. Thus Wilde gives the effect of many passing years, bringing Dorian to the point at which he can look “on evil as a mode through which he could realize his conception of the beautiful.” The chapter brilliantly deals with time on two levels: general human historical experience with beautiful and poisonous things, and Dorian’s shifting interest in those same things.

The last half of the novel begins in chapter 12, on the eve of Dorian’s thirty-eighth birthday. On his way home through the fog from a party at Lord Henry’s, Dorian passes the hurrying figure of Basil Hallward, and attempts to avoid speaking to him. But Basil turns and requests an interview. He confronts Dorian with the stories of his moral corruption and urges him to reveal the truth. Dorian furiously agrees and invites Basil upstairs.

In chapter 13, Basil, horrified, sees the picture. He urges repentance. Dorian stabs him to death, then goes outside and rings the bell to establish an alibi (his valet had previously sent Basil on his way, and was unaware of his return with Dorian). Dorian looks into the Blue Book, a listing of notable persons, to find the address of Alan Campbell, a scientist.

In chapter 14 Dorian blackmails Campbell into destroying Basil’s body, apparently by reducing it to its elements. The florid style of these chapters continues the atmosphere of the elegantly evil bridge chapter, chapter 11.

In the four following chapters, added to the *Lippincott* version, Wilde fleshes out the lean earlier ending, particularly by bringing back Sibyl’s brother James to attempt to carry out his threat of vengeance. Wilde achieves far greater unity, as well, by reviving Dorian’s first vicious cruelty and depicting the cowardice and fear of Sibyl’s Prince Charming in his maturity.

In chapter 15 Dorian, fresh from his gruesome crime (or “tragedy,” as the narrator puts it) goes to a party at Lady Narborough’s. The narrator’s voice here is closer than ever to Lord Henry’s, and the narrator literally quotes Henry’s statements. Lord Henry arrives late, notes something changed in Dorian, and amuses the company with a series of paradoxes: “She is very clever, too clever for a woman. She lacks the indefinable charm of weakness. It is the feet of clay that makes the gold of the image precious. Her feet are very pretty, but they are not feet of clay. White porcelain feet, if you like. They have been through the fire, and what fire does not destroy, it hardens. She has had experiences.” The image has its application to Dorian, as does much of Henry’s persiflage. (Wilde refers to this image in *De Profundis*, his long letter from prison to Alfred Douglas: “When I wrote, among my aphorisms, that it was simply the feet of clay that made the gold of the image precious, it was of you that I was thinking.”)

After the party, Dorian returns home, disquieted and craving forgetfulness. He collects some drugs and takes a hansom for the opium dens of Chinatown. When, in chapter 16, Dorian enters the squalid den, he sees a sailor “sprawled over a table.” An old crone, a woman Dorian had corrupted many years ago, calls after him, “Prince Charming.” The sailor, who by strange coincidence turns out to be James Vane, hears the name his sister had called the man she loved. He follows Dorian, threatens him, and Dorian steps into light to reveal the



face of “a lad of twenty summers.” Vane subsides in confusion, and Dorian departs. The crone, creeping up, informs Vane that that “lad” had ruined her “nigh on eighteen years since. . . .” Vane stares at empty streets.

In chapter 17, a week later, at a hunting party in the country, Lord Henry is entertaining the guests, earning the title of “Prince Paradox” from Dorian. There are hints of the future *Importance of Being Earnest*: “That is the reason I hate vulgar realism in literature. The man who would call a spade a spade should be compelled to use it. It is the only thing he is fit for.” Then Dorian, having seen through a window the white, staring face of James Vane, faints. In chapter 18, Dorian, though ill, goes out on the hunt. Over Dorian’s protest, since he was charmed by the hare’s grace of movement, Sir Geoffrey shoots into the bush—and kills the hiding James Vane. Dorian weeps with relief that he is now safe.

Chapter 19 returns to the material of the *Lippincott* version. Henry and Dorian return to the Paterian atmosphere of the first chapters, now without Basil. Dorian’s determination to reform and be good, evidenced by his refraining from corrupting altogether a village maid who reminded him of Sibyl, meets with tolerant incredulity from Lord Henry: “Crime belongs exclusively to the lower orders. . . . I should fancy that crime was to them what art is to us, simply a method of procuring extraordinary sensations.” They discuss Basil’s disappearance, his possible murder, Dorian’s life, the loss of the soul. For Dorian, Henry tells him, “Life has been your art.” As he leaves, Dorian hesitates, as if he had left something important unsaid. “Then he sighed and went out.”

In the final chapter, Dorian for the last time “throws himself” down on the sofa and thinks. The past overwhelms him. He determines to be good. Having accomplished one minor triumph by resisting a sexual urge, he goes to see if the picture looks better. It is more disgusting. He stabs it with the knife that had killed Basil. When the servants break in, they find a picture of an exquisite youth and an old, withered, loathsome corpse with a knife in its heart.

This second version of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a well-balanced and unified novel, expressed in a musical, clear, and flowing style, if flowery and overstuffed like stylish Victorian furniture. The imagery well serves the central insight, which contemplates the goal of existence in human beings involved with art. Wilde formally disavows a moral aim, but his book frustrates that disavowal. The human who serves only self, as a perfect work of art may do, may end murdered in horror like Basil, suicidal like Dorian stabbing his conscience, or vapidly mouthing entertaining aphorisms like the seemingly self-sufficient Lord Henry.

Wilde’s reputation as a novelist has to rest on this one work, but that is not a trivial base. The novel’s solid structure and other virtues have kept it alive for a century, tempting filmmakers and playwrights, as well as a steady stream of interested critics and readers.

James Joyce understood why Wilde failed to achieve the highest literary merit and fell short of revealing the ultimate human secret in his novel. In a letter to his brother in 1906 after reading *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Joyce laid his critical finger on Wilde’s literary fatal flaw: “Wilde seems to have some good intentions in writing it—some wish to put himself before the world—but the book is rather crowded with lies and epigrams. If he had had the courage to develop the allusions in the book it might have been better.” Wilde, in what he and Joyce both recognized as the goal of the literary artist—to express human experience in all its psychic complexity—lacked courage. In the young Joyce’s view, Wilde feared self-revelation.

An illustration of the difference as well as the likeness between the flawed artist and the toweringly successful one might be discerned in a comparison of artistic achievement in the creation of the somewhat similar characters of Dorian Gray and Stephen Dedalus. For example, in chapter 11 the young Dorian contemplates the sinister transformation of his portrait: “He grew more and more enamoured of his own beauty, more and more interested in the corruption of his own soul. He would examine with minute care, and sometimes with a monstrous and terrible delight, the hideous lines that seared the wrinkling forehead or crawled around the

heavy sensual mouth, wondering sometimes which were the more horrible, the signs of sin or the signs of age.” In chapter 3 of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), Joyce says of Stephen Dedalus: “He stooped to the evil of hypocrisy with others, sceptical of their innocence which he could cajole so easily. . . . If ever his soul, re-entering her dwelling shyly after the frenzy of his body’s lust had spent itself, was turned towards her whose emblem is the morning star, ‘bright and musical, telling of heaven and infusing peace,’ it was when her names were murmured softly by lips whereon there still lingered foul and shameful words, the savour itself of a lewd kiss.” Joyce could powerfully and unashamedly depict hypocrisy; Wilde, according to Joyce, crippled his art by a concern for concealing his own hypocrisy....

Source: Robert Boyle, “Oscar Wilde,” in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 34, *British Novelists, 1890–1929: Traditionalists*, edited by Thomas F. Staley, Gale Research, 1984, pp. 315–31.

## The Crucible

The structure of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is unambiguously, rigorously moral. Through the portrait, Wilde monitors Dorian’s steady, irreversible progress toward damnation. The murder of Basil Hallward constitutes the crisis of the novel and divides it into two fairly symmetrical halves, the second of which also ends on the climactic note of murder—though this time it is self-murder—committed with the same weapon. Wilde builds upon this foundation a system of analogous and contrasting characters and character relationships that he apportions between the halves of the plot so as to augment and clarify its moral symmetry. And he further enhances the balance between halves by carefully choreographing the entrances, exits, and reappearances of key characters.

At the outset, Basil Hallward and Lord Henry Wotton, essentially positive and negative moral influences, compete for Dorian’s allegiance. Wotton wins easily and, as the plot approaches the murder, his growing ascendancy is balanced by Hallward’s increasing estrangement. These shifting relationships provide an appropriate backdrop for the murder, which sets in motion the novel’s central irony. Prior to this crime, Dorian views his evil behavior as a positive means of self-realization. Using the portrait as a repository for his deeds, he thinks that he can act with impunity. He kills Basil in order to free himself from conscience, but his sense of guilt and spiritual anxiety increases instead. Too late he recognizes the validity of Basil’s moral position, as the relative influences of Basil and Henry begin to reverse themselves. Behavior that before stemmed from a positive, if perverse, philosophy now has for its sole purpose the escape from guilt. Each venture toward oblivion yields instead a confrontation with past sins. And, as he sinks deeper in corruption, Dorian takes Basil’s place in the moral debate with Harry. Just before the novel’s central crisis, in which Basil loses his life, he returns after a long absence to confront Dorian with the rumors about his wickedness. Dorian confesses to Basil, who attains to full awareness of both his and Dorian’s sins. When Henry returns prior to the novel’s final crisis, Dorian tentatively confesses to him also. But Henry refuses to believe him and, blind to Dorian’s spiritual anxiety, ironically expresses envy of the life Dorian has come to loathe.

Wilde carefully constructs the murder scene as the novel’s moral fulcrum. Basil’s confrontation with the altered portrait, which implicates him as well as Dorian, moves him to repent and seek mercy:

“Good God, Dorian, what a lesson! what an awful lesson!” There was no answer, but he could hear the young man sobbing at the window. “Pray, Dorian, pray,” he murmured. “What is it that one was taught to say in one’s boyhood? ‘Lead us not into temptation. Forgive us our sins. Wash away our iniquities.’ Let us say that together. The prayer of your pride has been answered. The prayer of your repentance will be answered also. I worshipped you too much. I am punished for it. You worshipped yourself too much. We are both punished.”

Moments after the unveiling, Basil and Dorian exchange the following remarks:

“Christ! what a thing I must have worshipped! It has the eyes of a devil.”

“Each of us has Heaven and Hell in him, Basil,” cried Dorian, with a wild gesture of despair.

Heaven and hell, pride and repentance, Christ and the devil—Wilde situates Dorian between these moral extremes and calls upon him to decide his fate. He must either turn from false worship—a theme that incorporates both his initial Faustian pact and Basil’s strange idolatry—to true, or be damned. Wilde stresses the possibility for salvation rather than the necessity for punishment. Basil calls upon Dorian to join him in the appeal for New Testament mercy. The artist represents and acts upon the positive force of conscience, which can bring about an inward change and lead to regeneration. But, at the crisis in his life, Dorian chooses rebellion rather than repentance, the hell rather than the heaven within. He blames Basil for the course his life has taken; and Wilde frames the accusation so that it extends implicitly to God:

“I wonder do I know you? Before I could answer that, I should have to see your soul. . . . But only God can do that.”

A bitter laugh of mockery broke from the lips of the younger man. “You shall see it yourself, to-night!” he cried, seizing a lamp from the table. “Come: it is your own handiwork.”

Dorian forces upon Basil the role of God, who alone can see the soul He has created. And he blames the divine surrogate for his evil nature rather than accepting responsibility for it himself. After he murders Basil, conscience, with its potential for salvation through repentance, becomes overpowering guilt that blocks out deliverance.

Dorian’s symbolic rejection of the Christian dispensation appeared in the *Lippincott’s* text. When Wilde added six chapters to form the book version, he contributed to the moral symmetry of the structure by developing that opposition between Old and New Testament codes which permeates his writings. By rejecting Basil, the spokesman for New Testament mercy, Dorian forces the confrontation with an angry God who judges and punishes. Since contrition can no longer be generated from within, vengeance must be imposed from above. In the added chapters Wilde therefore introduces James Vane, an agent of the Old Testament code who replaces Basil to become the living moral force in the novel’s second half. Whereas Basil, Dorian’s good angel, sought to lead him toward grace, Vane, the angel of wrath, increases the guilty man’s terror as he attempts to avenge an infuriated deity. After the murder, anxiety, supported by the relationship between hunter and hunted, sets the tone of *Dorian Gray*. The protagonist acknowledges the justice of Vane’s moral code shortly before his own death:

Ah! in what a monstrous moment of pride and passion he had prayed that the portrait should bear the burden of his days, and he keep the unsullied splendour of eternal youth! All his failure had been due to that. Better for him that each sin of his life had brought its sure, swift penalty along with it. There was purification in punishment. Not “Forgive us our sins,” but “Smite us for our iniquities,” should be the prayer of man to a most just God.

He explicitly recalls Basil’s appeal and brings the New and Old Testament perspectives on sin into sharp contrast. Having denied the former, he unwittingly replaces James Vane as agent of the latter when he stabs the portrait.

Though Vane and Hallward function as contrasting manifestations of moral order, Dorian uses similar, and only temporarily successful, tactics to evade them. When Basil requests permission to exhibit the portrait, Dorian protects his own secret by shifting the burden of guilt; he forces the painter to make a confession.

More blunt in manner than Basil, the sailor points a cocked pistol at Dorian's head and demands: "You had better confess your sin, for as sure as I am James Vane, you are going to die." But again Dorian turns the tables, this time by displaying his youthful countenance beneath a street lamp. Now he becomes the accuser and Vane the guilty party:

He loosened his hold and reeled back. "My God! my God!" he cried, "and I would have murdered you!"

Dorian Gray drew a long breath. "You have been on the brink of committing a terrible crime, my man," he said, looking at him sternly. "Let this be a warning to you not to take vengeance into your own hands."

"Forgive me, sir," muttered James Vane.

Dorian knows well what a "terrible crime" murder is, but he, who has committed it, never seeks forgiveness. And guilt can no more be transferred indefinitely to these two representatives of right than can the deeds that prompt it be forever imposed upon the portrait. The deceptive sense of release experienced by Dorian after the deaths of Basil and Vane soon gives way to renewed anxiety. He has denied the angel of mercy and tricked the angel of wrath. But he has wasted these efforts because he cannot, finally, escape himself. Dorian ironically punishes himself by an act characteristic of the very immorality through which he has tried to escape judgment.

Source: Philip K. Cohen, "The Crucible," in *The Moral Vision of Oscar Wilde*, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1978, pp. 123–27.

## The Picture of Dorian Gray: Compare and Contrast

**1890s:** Male homosexuality is a crime in England, punishable by imprisonment.

**Today:** Homosexuality is no longer a crime. In law, homosexual people are treated the same as everyone else. However, many people holding conservative and religious views based on the Bible still regard homosexuality as a sin.

**1890s:** Britain is the foremost power in the world but faces increasing rivalry from the growing industrial and military strength of Germany.

**Today:** Britain and Germany, having fought against each other in two world wars, are now allies within the European Community and NATO. Britain is no longer the leading power in the world.

**1890s:** Class divisions are emphatic in Britain, and there is a wide contrast in dress, manners, and way of life between those who are comfortably off and those who are poor. Families are large. Only working class women take employment outside the home. University education is not available for women of any class or for the working classes.

**Today:** Britain is a more egalitarian society than at any time in its history. The influence of mass culture, through television, films, and advertising, has tended to erode differences between classes in dress and manners. Women of all classes now make up a large percentage of the workforce, and higher education is open to all.

## The Picture of Dorian Gray: Topics for Further Study

Who is most to blame for the tragedy of Dorian Gray—Lord Henry, Basil Hallward, or Dorian himself?

Research how attitudes toward homosexuality have changed over the last hundred years. How and why did the changes occur? What are the issues facing the United States today regarding homosexuality?

What is the relationship between art and morality? Should art be moral? Should it serve some social good? Should the government have the right to censor works of art that it finds morally objectionable?

Imagine that you are Lord Henry Wotton and write three epigrams of your own. Remember that an epigram is a short, witty saying that works by inverting conventional expectations and sometimes using a paradox to create a surprise effect.

## The Picture of Dorian Gray: Media Adaptations

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* has been adapted to film in the following versions: the version starring George Sanders (Warner, 1945); the version directed by Glenn Jordan (1973); and the BBC version, directed by John Gorrie, with Sir John Gielgud as Lord Henry (1976).

## The Picture of Dorian Gray: What Do I Read Next?

*The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895; first published, 1899) was the last of Wilde's four stage comedies and is generally regarded as his masterpiece. It sparkles with that unique Wildean wit. Wilde's aim in writing it was to treat the trivial things in life seriously and the serious things with triviality.

Richard Ellmann's biography *Oscar Wilde* (1987) is indispensable for the study of Wilde's life. Ellmann presents Wilde as the tragic hero of his own life.

*Dorian: [An Imitation]* (2004), by British novelist Will Self, is a retelling of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* set in the last two decades of the twentieth century. All the same characters appear. Henry Wotton is a gay heroin addict, "Baz" Hallward is a video artist, and the narcissistic Dorian Gray is a seducer of both men and women. By 1997, all three are HIVpositive, but Dorian shows no sign of illness.

*Oscar Wilde: Myths, Miracles and Imitations* (1996), by John Stokes, shows how Wilde played a vital part in the development of modern culture. Stokes examines diaries, letters, dramatizations of Wilde's plays, and impersonations of the man himself, and discusses Wilde's relationship to fin-de-siècle and twentieth century ideas.

## The Picture of Dorian Gray: Bibliography and Further Reading

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### **Further Reading**

Cohen, Ed, "Writing Gone Wilde: Homoerotic Desire in the Closet of Representation," in *Critical Essays on Oscar Wilde*, edited by Regenia Gagnier, G. K. Hall, 1991, pp. 68–87. Cohen analyzes *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to show how even in the absence of explicit homosexual terminology or activity, a text can subvert the traditional standards and representations of appropriate male behavior.

Cohen, Philip K., *The Moral Vision of Oscar Wilde*, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1978, pp. 105–55. Cohen argues that Wilde's recurrent themes are sin and salvation and a conflict between the moral perspectives of Old and New Testament, judgment and love. He explores these themes in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Paglia, Camille, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*, Vintage, 1991, pp. 512–30. As part of her celebrated, controversial, and wideranging examination of Western culture, Paglia treats *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as the fullest study of the Decadent erotic principle: the transformation of person into *objet d'art*.

Raby, Peter, *Oscar Wilde*, Cambridge University Press, 1988, pp. 67–80. This is an introductory essay that emphasizes two major elements in the novel: the Sybil Vane episode and the yellow book that Lord Henry sends Dorian.

## **The Picture of Dorian Gray: Pictures**

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