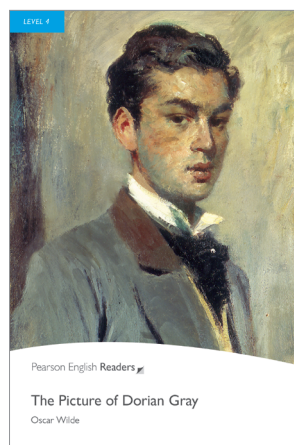


The Picture of Dorian Gray

Oscar Wilde



About the author

Oscar Wilde is one of the best-known characters of British literary history. Wilde grew up in a professional middle-class family in Dublin. He was a brilliant student and came to England to study at Oxford University. He was very ambitious and wanted to join English high society. He soon became famous for his witty conversation, especially his ironic epigrams or amusing sayings. Oscar Wilde was flamboyant and eccentric from an early age. At a time when men only wore black or grey he put on colourful clothes, grew his hair long and wore a green flower in his buttonhole. He was a founder member of the influential 'aesthetic' movement which believed in 'art for art's sake' and rejected the strict morality of Victorian society which regarded all sexual matters as 'dirty' and immoral. In Victorian England all men were expected to get married and have a family. Wilde married and had two children, but he secretly loved men, something which was considered disgusting and was a serious crime. Wilde kept his love affairs with men a secret and between 1892 and 1895 his plays made him the most successful and popular writer in Britain. He loved mixing with the aristocracy yet his works made fun of the English upper classes and, in a subtle way, criticised the cruel morality of his time. When Wilde was found guilty of having a sexual relationship with a man, nearly all his friends dropped him, his plays and books were withdrawn and his possessions were sold to pay his creditors. He came out of prison a broken man and spent the final years of his life in poverty, unable to write and forced to live in exile.

Summary

Published in 1891, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is Oscar Wilde's only novel. An immediate and popular success, it has never been out of print. The story is set in London

towards the end of the 19th century. Basil Hallward has painted a portrait of a handsome young man, Dorian Gray. Thrilled by the beauty of the painting, Dorian Gray wishes that he could always stay as young as his image in the picture. He gives up his soul to achieve this wish. Dorian sets out on a life of self-indulgence and evil. His behaviour seems to be reflected in the portrait and he realises that his wish has come true – the portrait is beginning to show a corrupted man while he remains unchanged physically. Frightened of what is happening, Dorian hides the picture in a locked room. The years pass and Dorian leads an increasingly depraved life, but the years have no effect on him; he looks as young and beautiful as ever. Then one evening he meets the artist once more and, after he has shown him the evil-looking portrait, Dorian kills him in a fit of hatred. Dorian tries to carry on with his immoral life but he is tormented by feelings of guilt and decides that the only way he can make up for what he has done is to destroy the painting. In the climax of the story Dorian tries to kill the man in the portrait, but kills himself in the process.

Chapters 1–2: Dorian Gray, a young and beautiful man has his portrait painted by his artist friend, Basil Hallward. The picture is so beautiful that the artist loves it as he also loves Dorian. Dorian also admires the way the portrait reflects his beauty but becomes frightened when his new-found friend, Lord Henry, tells him that his beauty will fade with age. Dorian makes a passionate wish that he would remain young and beautiful forever; he would give up his soul for this.

Chapters 3–6: Dorian falls in love with the actress Sibyl Vane because of her beauty and acting ability. When he takes his friends to a performance she acts very badly, which disturbs him so much that he breaks up with her, hurting her cruelly. After the break-up, Dorian notices that the picture has changed; it shows cruelty in the face, while his own face remains pure and innocent looking. He realises that he can live a corrupt life without his face showing the effects, while the picture will show ageing and the ugliness of his soul. Dorian decides to go back to Sibyl and ask her to marry him but Sibyl has already killed herself as a result of Dorian's cruelty.

Chapters 7–8: Basil is shocked by Dorian's apparent indifference to Sibyl's death. He wants to see the picture but Dorian refuses and tells him the picture has changed and has a life of its own. Dorian also refuses to sit for Basil for another painting. They argue and Dorian says that Basil has taught him to love only his own beauty. Dorian decides

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to hide the picture away in the old schoolroom so that nobody would ever see it again and discover his secret.

Chapters 9–11: Many years pass with terrible changes to his soul because of his corrupt ways. He meets Basil in the street one night and invites him home. They argue about rumours Basil has heard of Dorian's terrible life. Finally, Dorian shows Basil the picture, which Basil finds shocking. Suddenly, Dorian feels hatred for Basil and kills him. Later, Dorian forces Campbell, a scientist he knows, to destroy all traces of the body using chemicals.

Chapters 12–13: Dorian decides to become a good person. He discusses this with Lord Henry, who convinces him that people cannot change. Later Dorian becomes angry about the wish he once made and begins to fear for his soul. He decides he must start a new life and to do this he must destroy the picture. He stabs the picture and a terrible crash and scream are heard. The police arrive to find the dead body of an old and ugly man lying next to a portrait of the young and beautiful Dorian Gray.

Background and themes

The Picture of Dorian Gray is often described as a melodrama – a work in which everything is larger than life. It is more like a myth or a morality tale than the realistic novels which readers are accustomed to nowadays. It contains so much dialogue that it is almost as if it is a written version of a stage play. This is not surprising as Wilde went on to write a series of very successful plays in the three years following its publication, including his masterpiece *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Faust: The theme of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a recurring one in European culture, most famously expounded in Faust. In the story of Faust, the devil tempts a man to sell his soul in exchange for all the things he desires. The result is disaster and the lesson is that a man's soul is more valuable than anything he could possibly gain in the material world. In Oscar Wilde's version, Lord Henry represents the devil figure and Dorian Gray is Faust.

Morality: The portrait symbolises Dorian's soul or morality. Lord Henry tempts Dorian to indulge in an immoral lifestyle, carelessly disregarding the feelings of the people he seduces and then rejects. Dorian thinks that he can escape from the consequences of his immoral life because the portrait takes the blame for him. But he goes too far by killing his old friend Basil Hallward and then suffers from guilt. Wilde is showing us that nobody can escape the moral consequences of their actions.

Undercurrent of sexuality: To this familiar moral fable, Wilde adds the extra ingredient of sexual scandal. Although the novel never actually describes it, the reader is aware that there is an undercurrent of sexuality in many of the relationships. Apart from the story of Sibyl Vane, we do not know exactly what Dorian does that is so 'immoral', as in Victorian England it was impossible for a writer to be honest about sexual matters. In the end, good triumphs over evil when Dorian kills himself. This is the type of moral ending that was expected in 19th century literature.

Wit and humour: *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is not simply a moral fable. It is full of Oscar Wilde's unique wit and humour. The dialogue sparkles with numerous examples of Wilde's epigrams, those short witty sayings which have now become part of the English language. These epigrams are often based on irony or a reversal of logic, a typical example of which is when Lord Henry says 'I choose my friends for their beauty and my enemies for their intelligence. A man cannot be too careful in choosing his enemies.' Wilde's own conversation was full of this wit, and it gives the novel an extra dimension which most Victorian stories lack.

Discussion activities

Chapters 1–2

Before reading

- Discuss:** Ask the students to look at the picture on the cover of the book. *Have you ever had your portrait done? Have you ever painted someone else's portrait? What can you tell about a person by looking at their face? What kind of person do you think this man is? Do you think you would like him? Say why or why not.*
- Pair work:** Put the students into pairs and ask them to read the title of Chapter 1 '*An Extraordinarily Beautiful Young Man*'. Have them list specific qualities that make someone appear beautiful. When they have finished, have some of the pairs read their lists to the class. See if other students agree, or have different qualities on their lists.

After reading

- Pair work:** In pairs, have the students take turns saying: How Basil feels about Dorian; How Lord Henry feels about Dorian; How Dorian feels about Lord Henry; and How Dorian feels about Basil.
- Discuss:** Write this famous epigram (clever, witty or funny saying) from the book on the board: 'I choose my friends for their beauty and my enemies for their intelligence. A man cannot be too careful in choosing his enemies.' Ask students to work in pairs. Do they agree with this saying or not? Each student finds one more epigram from these chapters.

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Chapters 3–5

Before reading

- 5 **Predict:** Have the students read the heading for Chapter 3 'Dorian in Love'. Then have them write about these questions: *What kind of person do you think Dorian would fall in love with? Why do you think this? How do you think he would treat someone he was in love with?*

After reading

- 6 **Discuss:** Have the students compare their predictions from activity 5.
- 7 **Debate:** Divide the class into two groups and hold a debate on one of these sayings from Lord Henry:
- 'No woman is an artist. Women never have anything to say, but they say it charmingly.'
 - 'The reason we like to think so well of others is because we are afraid for ourselves.'
 - 'When we are happy we are always good, but when we are good we are not always happy.'

Chapters 6–7

Before reading

- 8 **Predict:** Ask the students to read the title of Chapter 6 'Love Becomes Tragedy' and have them write down what they think will happen to Dorian and Sibyl.

After reading

- 9 **Check:** Have the students read their predictions about what would happen in Chapter 6. Were they correct?
- 10 Put students into small groups to answer these questions: (a) *Why does Dorian change his mind about Sibyl?* (b) *'He felt the time had come to choose. Or had he already chosen?'* (p. 32). *What is this choice? What would you choose if you were in the same situation?*
- 11 **Pair work:** In pairs, ask the students to list adjectives that describe Basil Hallward and Lord Henry. After ten minutes, ask each pair to compare their lists with the class. Write the adjectives, that they all agree with, on the board.
- 12 **Artwork:** Put students into pairs and have them draw each other's portrait. The student who is posing should put on a cruel face so the other can draw a picture showing cruelty, like the picture of Dorian's face in the portrait. Then have the students show their pictures to the class. The class votes on whose drawing looks the cruellest.

Chapters 8–10

Before reading

- 13 **Role play:** Put the students into pairs to role play the conversation on pages 32–33. One student will be Dorian and the other will be Basil. Then have some of the pairs role play their conversations in front of the class.

- 14 **Discuss:** Put this sentence on the board: 'Corruption is a thing that writes itself across a man's face. It cannot be hidden.' (p. 45). Put students into small groups. They discuss this statement and whether they agree with it or not.

After reading

- 15 **Write:** Put students into small groups and get them to write two sentences to describe what happens in Chapter 8, two sentences to describe what happens in Chapter 9 and two sentences to describe what happens in Chapter 10. When they are finished, have some of the groups read their sentences to the rest of the class.

Chapters 11–12

Before reading

- 16 **Predict:** Have the class read the heading for Chapter 11 'The Problem of the Body'. Then have the students form small groups and predict what Dorian might do with the body.

After reading

- 17 **Discuss:** Dorian says 'I have done too many terrible things in my life. I am not going to do any more.' (p. 56). In small groups, students answer these questions: (a) *Do you believe what Dorian says above?* (b) *Can you think of ways people can get forgiveness for earlier bad behaviour?*

Chapter 13

Before reading

- 18 **Predict:** Have the students think about why Chapter 13 is called *To Kill the Past*. Then put them into small groups to discuss who they think would like to kill the past, why he would want to, and how he might go about doing it.

After reading

- 19 **Check:** Review students' predictions in activity 18.
- 20 **Role play:** Put the students into groups of three and have them pretend to be the people on the street when the terrible crash and scream were heard from Dorian's house. Have them guess what is happening. Have them discuss Dorian Gray and the kinds of rumours they have heard about him. Then have them make a list of all the different things they have heard about Dorian Gray, including the following: *The different bad things he has done. / The kind of person he is. / The ways he has been a bad influence on his friends. / How they feel about Dorian. / Why they think Dorian is able to stay so young and pure looking.*
- 21 Students discuss this question in small groups: *What is the lesson of The Picture of Dorian Gray? Is there a lesson in it for people today?*