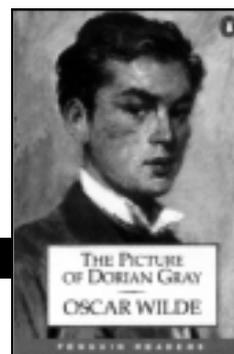


## Teacher's notes

# The Picture of Dorian Gray

by Oscar Wilde



## SUMMARY

**P**ublished 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 since.

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 realizes that his wish has come true - the portrait is beginning to show a corrupted man while he remains unchanged. 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.

## ABOUT OSCAR WILDE

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. Oscar married and had two children, but he secretly loved men, something which was considered disgusting and was a serious crime. Oscar 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, criticized the cruel morality of his time.

When Oscar 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.

## BACKGROUND AND THEMES

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* is often described as a melodrama, in other words a work in which everything is larger than life. It is more like a myth or a morality tale than the realistic novels which modern readers are accustomed to. 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 enormously successful plays in the three years following its publication, including his masterpiece *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

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. The portrait symbolizes Dorian's soul or personal 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

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escape from the consequences of his own immoral life because the portrait will take the blame for him. But, of course, he goes too far by killing his old friend Basil Hallward and begins to suffer from guilt. Wilde is showing us that nobody can ever escape the moral consequences of their actions.

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.

*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.

## Communicative activities

The following teacher-led activities cover the same sections of text as the exercises at the back of the reader, and supplement those exercises. For supplementary exercises covering shorter sections of the book, see the photocopiable Student's Activities pages of this Factsheet. These are primarily for use with class readers but, with the exception of discussion and pair/groupwork questions, can also be used by students working alone in a self-access centre.

## ACTIVITIES BEFORE READING THE BOOK

Put students into small groups to discuss these questions: Some tribes in the Amazon rainforest do not allow scientists to take photographs of them. They believe that each time you take a photograph of someone you take a little bit of their soul away. Can the class explain why this is? Do they share these feelings?

## ACTIVITIES AFTER READING A SECTION

## Chapters 1–3

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.

## Chapters 4–6

1 Put students into small groups to answer these questions:

- Why does Dorian change his mind about Sibyl?
- '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?

## Chapters 7–8

Put students into pairs. They write as many adjectives as they can to describe Basil Hallward and as many adjectives as they can to describe Lord Henry. After 5–10 minutes, put two pairs together to compare ideas. They make a list of adjectives they all agree with. Write all adjectives on the board.

## Chapters 9–10

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.

## Chapters 11–13

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:

- Do you believe what Dorian says above?
- Can you think of ways people can get forgiveness for earlier bad behaviour?

## ACTIVITIES AFTER READING THE BOOK

Students discuss this question in small groups:

What is the lesson of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*? Is there a lesson for people today in it?

## Glossary

It will be useful for your students to know the following new words. They are practised in the 'Before You Read' sections of exercises at the back of the book. (Definitions are based on those in the Longman Active Study Dictionary.)

## Chapters 1–3

**charming** (adj) very pleasing or attractive  
**exhibit** (v) to put something in a public place so that people can see it  
**extraordinarily** (adv) in an unusually good or special way  
**fascinating** (adj) extremely interesting  
**flatter** (v) to say nice things to someone in order to please them  
**frown** (v) to look angry  
**influence** (v) to have an effect on the way someone behaves or thinks  
**passion** (n) a very strong feeling of love  
**portrait** (n) a painting, drawing or photograph of a person  
**soul** (n) the part of a person that contains their deepest thoughts and feelings and which many people believe continues to exist after death  
**worship** (v) to love and admire someone very much

## Chapters 4–6

**absurd** (adj) seeming completely silly  
**scandal** (n) something that happens that people think is bad or shocking behaviour  
**tragedy** (n) an extremely sad event in which something terrible happens

## Chapters 7–8

**corrupt** (v) to make someone dishonest and behave very badly

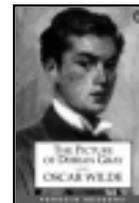


## Student's activities

### Photocopiable

These activities can be done alone or with one or more other students. Pair/group-only activities are marked.

## The Picture of Dorian Gray



### Activities before reading the book

Read the Introduction at the front of the book. Then close the book and try to answer these questions.

- When was Oscar Wilde born?
- Who was Constance Lloyd?
- Who was Lord Alfred Douglas?
- How long did Wilde spend in prison?
- Where did he spend the last years of his life?
- When did he die?

### Activities while reading the book

#### CHAPTERS 1-3

##### Chapter 1

- Are these statements about Basil Hallward true or false?
  - He is an artist.
  - He went to Oxford University.
  - He is going to exhibit the painting of Dorian Gray at the Grosvenor.
  - He met Dorian Gray at a party.
  - He wants Lord Henry to meet Dorian.
- Write a paragraph or discuss with another student: Do you think Lord Henry will be a good or a bad influence on Dorian? Why? Why not?

##### Chapter 2

- Answer these questions.
  - How does Lord Henry know Basil?
  - What advice does Lord Henry give to Dorian?
  - What does Basil do at the bottom of his painting?
  - Why is Dorian jealous of the painting?
  - What does Lord Henry want to do that night?
- Dorian makes a wish about the painting on page 11. Fill the gaps:  
 'If I could stay ..... and the picture grow ..... ! For that – for that – I would give ..... ! Yes, there is ..... in the whole world I would not give! I would give my ..... for that!'
- If you were Dorian, would you make the same wish? Why/Why not? Talk to another student.

##### Chapter 3

- Complete each sentence with one word.
  - Dorian is in ..... with an actress.
  - Dorian saw Sibyl in 'Romeo and .....

- Sibyl is ..... years old.
- Dorian wants Lord Henry and Basil to come and watch Sibyl ..... night.
- Lord Henry read in the ..... that Dorian was going to marry Sibyl.

- Look at the picture on page 18 and write a short description of Lord Henry.

#### CHAPTERS 4-6

##### Chapter 4

Who says these words?

- 'I hope this girl is good.'
  - 'Oh, she is better than good – she is beautiful.'
  - 'But how can Dorian marry an actress ...? It is absurd.'
  - 'I have never been so happy.'
  - 'You have annoyed Dorian. He is not like other men.'
  - 'Pleasure is the only thing worth having ideas about.'
  - 'I know what pleasure is. It is to worship someone.'
- Do you agree with (g) above? If you don't agree, what do YOU think pleasure is?

##### Chapter 5

- Answer these questions.
  - What does Lord Henry think of Sibyl?
  - Why does Sibyl act so badly?
  - How is Dorian cruel to Sibyl?
  - How has the portrait changed?
  - What does Dorian do with the mirror?
  - What does the mirror show him?
  - What has the portrait taught him?
  - What does he decide to do?

##### Chapter 6

- Put these events into the correct order.
  - Dorian writes a letter to Sibyl.
  - Dorian and Lord Henry go to the theatre.
  - Lord Henry tells Dorian that Sibyl is dead.
  - Dorian looks at the portrait and decides it is time to choose.
  - Lord Henry knocks on Dorian's door.
  - Dorian goes for breakfast feeling happy.
  - Lord Henry tells Dorian to keep his name out of any scandal.
- Imagine that Sibyl writes a letter to Dorian before she kills herself. Write the letter.

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## Student's activities

## CHAPTERS 7-8

## Chapter 7

Answer these questions.

- Who does Basil think has changed Dorian?
- How does Basil think he has changed?
- How does Dorian say he has changed since Basil knew him?
- What does Dorian ask Basil to do?
- What does Dorian say he will do if Basil looks at the portrait?
- Why does Basil decide not to exhibit the portrait of Dorian Gray?
- What does Dorian decide to do at the end of the chapter?

## Chapter 8

- Complete the sentences.
  - Basil decides to put the portrait in the .....
  - When he looks around the room he thinks about .....
  - Dorian feels safe now because no other .....
  - In the library there is a note from .....
  - In the newspaper report Sibyl's death is described as .....
- On page 40 Dorian says 'Every moment of his lonely childhood came back to him as he looked around.' What do you think Dorian's childhood was like? Talk about it with a friend or write a paragraph.

## CHAPTERS 9-10

## Chapter 9

- Are these statements true or false?
  - Although many years pass, Dorian still looks young and pure.
  - Basil is planning to go to Paris on the eleven o'clock train.
  - Basil says there are rumours about Dorian's life.
  - Some of Dorian's friends have killed themselves.
  - Basil thinks Dorian has killed them.
  - Basil wants to see Dorian's soul.
  - Dorian is pleased that someone is going to share his secret.
- What do you think will happen next? Compare your ideas with another student.

## Chapter 10

- Put these events into the correct order.
  - Basil says that Dorian must be even worse than people say.
  - Dorian hides Basil's bag and coat in a cupboard.
  - Dorian takes the knife and sticks it into Basil's neck.
  - Dorian takes Basil into the room.

- Francis tells Dorian about Basil's visit.
- Dorian starts to hate Basil.
- Dorian shows Basil the portrait.
- Dorian goes out of the house and then comes back.

## CHAPTERS 11-13

## Chapter 11

- Who says these words, Dorian Gray or Alan Campbell?
  - 'You don't need to know how or why he died.'
  - 'You are mad ...'
  - 'It is impossible for you to refuse now.'
  - 'Let us never see each other again.'
  - 'You have saved me ...'
- What happens to the portrait after the death of Basil Hallward?

## Chapter 12

- Answer these questions.
  - What is the only thing that frightens Lord Henry?
  - What does Dorian say has happened to the painting?
  - Why doesn't Dorian want to go to the club with Lord Henry?
  - What does Dorian promise to do the next day?
- Lord Henry says 'One should never do anything one cannot talk about after dinner.' Do you agree with this? Talk to another student or write a paragraph.

## Chapter 13

- Answer these questions.
  - Why does Dorian break the mirror?
  - Why does he want to see the portrait again?
  - How has the painting changed?
  - Why does he want to destroy the painting?
  - How do the servants get into the room?
  - What does the painting look like?
  - Who is lying on the floor?
- The title of this chapter is 'To Kill the Past'. Do you think people can change even if they have done terrible things? Talk to another student.

## Activities after reading the book

- Work with another student.  
Imagine you are Dorian Gray's servant and the servant's friend. Dorian's servant tells the story of what he finds in the attic. His friend asks questions.
- Discuss with another student. Look up *consequence* (n) in your dictionary.  
This book shows that people can not escape from the consequences of their actions. Do you agree? Why/Why not?

