Oscar Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray

**Biography**

**Dates:** Oct 16, 1854 to Nov 30 1900  
**Hometown:** Dublin, Ireland  
**Place of Death:** Paris, France

Oscar Wilde born Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Willis Wilde was born in Dublin Ireland, October 16, 1854. Wilde attended Portora Royal School for high school and for college Trinity College and Magdalen College. He is regarded as one of the greatest playwrights in the Victorian Era, publishing nine plays. However he has only published one novel, “The Picture of Dorian Gray” in 1891. (Ingram)
Introduction

In the mist of the Victorian Era, Basil Hallward paints a portrait of a vain aristocrat, Dorian Gray. Dorian trades his soul for infinite youth, the painting ages instead of Dorian. He idolizes Lord Henry’s pessimistic but realistic views of the world and society. Consequently Dorian becomes a heartless man hurting those he becomes close with with either his ignorance or blackmail. “The Picture of Dorian Gray” is about the pain vanity can bring with homoerotic undertones.

Character List

Dorian Gray - The main character of the novel who is obsessed with vanity and materialism. He lives his life with the mentality that one can only be happy if they live in a self riotous way. He adapted this mentality from Lord Henry.

Lord Henry Wotton - Dorian's close friend that is of noble background. He frequently points out the hypocrisy in Victorian Society. He also is a large influence on Dorian's views of society and women.

Basil Hallward - Painted the infamous picture of Dorian. Thinks very highly of Dorian to the extent there are erotic undertones. In the beginning of the novel he is the one that Dorian takes advise from and listens to.

Sybil Vane - Gray's fiance, she is an actress who plays characters for Shakespeare plays. She is very vain much like Grey. Once she realizes she is just acting and doesn't feel the true emotions that the Shakespeare characters have, she plays herself and her emotions. Gray doesn't like her poor performance and calls of the wedding. She commits suicide after Grey calls off the wedding.

James Vane - Sybil's protective brother, who is killed by one of Dorian's companions. He was always suspicious of Dorian's behaviors.

Alan Campbell - The scientist that is blackmailed by Dorian. Dorian blackmails him so he can help dispose of Basil's body.

(Wilde)
Preface

The Picture of Dorian Gray was originally published in July 1890 in Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine. An editor of Lippincott’s, J.M. Stoddart, asked Arthur Conan Doyle and Rudyard Kipling to contribute to the magazine, as well as Wilde. Doyle submitted The Sign of Four and Kipling, The Light that Failed.

The opportunity to be published in Lippincott’s was attractive to Wilde both for the payment they offered him and for the potential exposure it could give his literary career. The initial story that Wilde offered Stoddart was titled “The Fisherman and His Soul”. Stoddart asked for a lengthier piece so Wilde took up the conceit of the man and soul divided and the issues that Joseph Bristow says in the introduction of the text that “explored how horrifying forms of vice haunted the refined world of upper-class London” (Wilde, x).

After its publication in the monthly, Wilde expanded his novella by six chapters and republished it as a deserialized novel with Ward, Lock, and Co. in 1891. Reviewers condemned the serialized story of Dorian Gray which appeared in Lippincott’s due to its scandalous nature. Therefore, in addition to making a number of changes which toned down moments of the text which could have been, and were, read as homoerotic undertones, Wilde added a preface to his novel. As Bristow notes, “The Preface’ reads like a manifesto that steers readers away from making moral judgments on the novel toward appreciating its aesthetic quality” (Wilde, xxvi).

Quotes from ‘The Preface’ often serve as a disclaimer such as “It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors” (Wilde, 3). This aphorism is important because it acts to distance Wilde from the content in that it suggests that the scandalous readings which people gave his book would then merely reflect the reader’s own repressed desires rather than any moral standpoint of himself. It is also important due to the fact that we as readers are only given hints of Gray’s moral debauchery as we are never told what his crimes are, other than that he becomes an opium addict. But it is more to the homophobic criticisms of the novel, however, this disclaimer would have been aimed. Another important defense that ‘The Preface’ provides is the statement, “[t]here is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all” (Wilde, 3).

However, the artistic manifesto of ‘The Preface’ did not keep Wilde from being prosecuted. Along with being accused of “solicit[ing] and incit[ing]” numerous men “to commit sodomy and other acts of gross indecency and immorality with him the said Oscar Fingal O’Flahertie Wills Wilde”, Wilde was charged with writing “a certain immoral and obscene work in the form of a narrative entitled The Picture of Dorian Gray which said work was designed and intended… and was understood by the readers thereof to describe the relations intimacies and passions of certain persons of sodomitical and unnatural habits tastes and practices” (Hyde, 334).
**Topics for Discussion**

**The Aesthetic Movement**

“What is a picture? Primarily, a picture is a beautifully coloured surface, merely, with no more spiritual message or meaning for you than an exquisite fragment of Venetian glass or a blue tile from the wall of Damascus. It is, primarily, a purely decorative thing, a delight to look at. All archaeological pictures that make you say ‘How curious!’ all sentimental pictures that make you say, ‘How sad!’ all historical pictures that make you say ‘How interesting!’ all pictures that do not immediately give you such artistic joy as to make you say ‘How beautiful!’ are bad pictures.”

**Décadent Movement**

“'All that is beautiful and noble is the result of reason and calculation. Crime, the taste for which the human animal draws from the womb of his mother, is natural in its origins. Virtue, on the contrary, is artificial and supernatural, since gods and prophets were necessary in every epoch and every nation to teach virtue . . . the good is always the product of some art’

**Oscar Wilde Trials**

"I have nothing to declare but my genius"
Basil’s painting of Dorian takes the emotional and physical burden of aging from him. When Dorian kills Basil, the painting bares blood. Making the reference that Basil’s blood is on Dorian’s hands when the “canvass has sweated blood” (Wilde, 142), Dorian wishes he could remain forever young and never age and has traded his soul for youth and vanity but vanity has consumed his life (13). When Dorian takes off a year to travel the world and buy expensive souvenirs, not only that but he also takes the year off so he doesn’t have to think about all the wrong doings he has committed (138). Once he had returned from his adventures, Dorian takes up Opium Dens “where one could buy oblivion, dens of horror where the memory of old sins could be destroyed by the madness of the sins that were new” (151). Dorian realizes the wretchedness of his portrait (96) and when Basil insists on seeing the painting, he murders Basil (130). Not only does he murder someone but also he continues to blackmail the scientist Alan Campbell to dispose of Basil’s body. Dorian’s actions exemplify the fact that he is self-consuming, vain, and yet naïve at the same time.

Dorian’s selfish nature and mannerisms affect not only the painting, which encompasses his soul, but also those that become close with him. The three prime examples are: Sybil Vane, Basil, and Alan Campbell. To start things off, once Dorian realizes that he does not love Sybil for whom she is but instead the characters she portrays, he calls off the marriage (72, 81). Much like in Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet she drinks a poison, committing suicide. Following the fact that Dorian murdered Basil, who had once been his best friend. Then continues to blackmail scientist Alan Campbell so he can dispose of Basil’s body (138). Campbell can no longer take the stress of being blackmailed so he shoots himself committing suicide. The two suicides and one murder can all be attributed to the fact that Dorian epitomizes the word vain and narcissistic.

To tie this back with the Hamlet quote, Basil’s picture has taken all of Dorian’s sorrows and left him to be a heartless man. Where his face does not show the consequence of his wretched actions but rather his undying love to look forever young. The end chapters of the novel Dorian truly starts to understand the consequences of his actions, along with the fact that he cannot put all of his consequences for the portrait to bear. With the quote from “Hamlet” he truly realizes the horror of his vain desires. At the very end of the novel, Dorian can no longer take it. Consequently, he takes a knife and stabes the portrait. To which the servants finds an old man “with a knife in his heart” (184). “They had to examine the rings” in order to “recognized who it was” (184). With the old man being Dorian; the only way that he could be recognized what by his materialistic possessions.

“’No,’ she answered, wondering at the harsh simplicity of life.” (Wilde, 62)

In this line Mrs. Vane admits to her son that his father was not her husband. In a book that has so many elegant and rich phrasings, the blunt one word answer, “No,” does indeed feel harsh. Mrs. Vane wonders how, despite her attempts to dramatize her life by carrying her appreciation for the stage into her real life, harsh and simple the realities of life are. This is important because only members of the lower-classes are truly brought face-to-face with these simple truths as the members of “society” are able to construct their lives as if they were constructing works of art. Even when Dorian goes down to the docks and the opium dens he admits that “Ugliness was the one reality” (156) and the lives of the lower-class are portrayed as ugly and therefore all the more real. Dorian can choose when to cross the border between the upper and lower classes but it is a border that is only permeable to the wealthy. People such as Mrs. Vane are then denied any means of escape and are constantly brought back to the “harsh simplicities of life”.

“I believe that if one man were to live out his life fully and completely, were to give form to every feeling, expression to every thought, reality to every dream – I believe that the world would gain such a fresh impulse of joy that we would forget all the maladies of mediavalism and return to the Hellenistic ideal.” (Wilde 18-19)

Patrick Duggan’s critical essay “The Conflict Between Aestheticism and Morality in Oscar Wilde’s ‘The Picture of Dorian Gray’” argues that, as much as Dorian as a character is the Aesthetic Movement personified, he is also a cautionary figure whose story is to be taken as a warning against the perils of aestheticism unbound. Following the example outlined by Pater, most aesthete sought to live lives that mimicked art: “beautiful, but quite useless...concerned only with the individual living it.” This frame of mind naturally leads to a certain degree of selfishness with the true aesthete concerned only with that which will increase their own happiness. Morality, then, could not be a concern for members of the Aesthetic movement as moral restrictions would inevitably lead to the repression of desires that, if followed, could lead to happiness. Wilde, however, recognized that the goal of aestheticism was not merely to turn one’s own life into art, but to construct a world in which everything was beautiful and artistic. The unrestricted selfishness bred by hedonistic aestheticism could only lead to the violence and destruction wrought by Dorian Gray. In writing his novel, Duggan concludes, Wilde’s true intention was to alert other aesthetes to the fact that “if, in the pursuit of one’s desires and of the beautiful aspects of life, the condition of others’ or of one’s own intellect is jeopardized, the enjoyment garnered must sometimes be sacrificed for the greater good.” In the above quote from Dorian Gray the reader can see the evidence behind Duggan’s argument. Though these lines would seem to advocate an unquestioned returned to hedonism, they are spoken by Lord Henry Wotton, arguably the least aesthetic character in the book. Though Henry voices many opinions in line with Pater’s “Conclusion,” he is rarely seen acting on the ideas he espouses. He does not go to opium dens or spend his time carousing with prostitutes, but instead meets all of his social engagements and lives a life that, instead of destructive, is merely flamboyant. It would seem that Lord Henry is quite aware of the consequences of a life lived without some kind of restraint, and nurtures these ideas in Dorian merely to test a hypothesis. With his enlightened understanding of how to live an aesthetic life, it is Lord Henry and not Dorian, that Wilde wishes us to take as a model.
Adaptations

The story of Dorian Gray is iconic and has been adapted numerous times. The relation between the body and the soul, and the duality of human nature are preoccupations which have surfaced in art time and time again and are easily apparent in The Picture of Dorian Gray which makes the tale timeless and appealing for various forms of adaptations.

The Picture of Dorian Gray (1945)

Directed by: Albert Lewin
Starring: George Sanders, Hurd Hatfield, and Donna Reed
Trailer: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nNIR-dqoJk8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nNIR-dqoJk8)

The Picture of Dorian Gray (1976) (TV Series)

Directed by: John Gorrie
Starring: John Gielgud, Jeremy Brett, and Peter Firth
Video Clip: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LaqAEiQj0VQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LaqAEiQj0VQ)

Dorian Gray (2009)

Directed by: Oliver Parker
Starring: Ben Barnes, Colin Firth, and Rebecca Hall
Trailer: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5eAQWliCHHU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5eAQWliCHHU)


This film adaptation of the graphic novel series by Alan Moore includes the character of Dorian Gray among the ranks of its extraordinary gentlemen. However, Dorian Gray was only included in the film, he was never a character of the graphic novels.

Directed by: Stephen Norrington
Starring: Sean Connery as Allan Quartermain and Peta Wilson as Mina Harker. Dorian Gray is played by Stuart Townsend.

Trailer: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fJbcp1U1Sbc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fJbcp1U1Sbc)
Dorian Gray Montage: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j1e3MBZhcgs&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j1e3MBZhcgs&feature=related)