

The picture of Dorian Gray

THE AUTHOR



Oscar Wilde was born on October 16, 1854, in Dublin, Ireland. He was educated at Trinity College in Dublin, and then he settled in London, where he married Constance Lloyd in 1884. In the literary world of Victorian London, Wilde fell in with an artistic crowd that included W. B. Yeats, the great Irish poet. A great conversationalist and a famous wit, Wilde began by publishing mediocre poetry but soon achieved widespread fame for his comic plays. The first, *Vera; or, The Nihilists*, was published in 1880. Wilde followed this work with *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), *An Ideal Husband* (1895), and

his most famous play, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). Although these plays relied upon relatively simple and familiar plots, they rose well above convention with their brilliant dialogue and biting satire.

Wilde published his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, before he reached the height of his fame. When the **first edition** appeared in the summer of **1890** in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*, it was hardly criticized as scandalous and immoral. Disappointed with its reception, Wilde revised the novel in 1891, adding a preface and six new chapters. Devoted to a school of thought and a mode of sensibility known as **aestheticism**, Wilde believed that art possesses an intrinsic value—that it is beautiful and therefore has worth, and thus needs serve no other purpose, be it moral or political. This attitude was revolutionary in Victorian England, where popular belief held that art was not only a function of morality but also a means of enforcing it. In the Preface, Wilde also cautioned readers against finding



meanings “beneath the surface” of art. Part gothic novel, part comedy of manners, part essay on the relationship between art and morality, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* continues to present its readers with a puzzle to sort out. There is as likely to be as much disagreement over its meaning now as there was among its Victorian audience, but, as Wilde notes near the end of the Preface, “Diversity of opinion about a work of art shows that the work is new, complex, and vital.”

In **1891**, the same year that the **second edition** of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was published, Wilde began a homosexual relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas, an aspiring but rather untalented poet. The affair caused a scandal, and Douglas’s father, the marquis of Queensberry, eventually criticized it publicly. Wilde was then sued by English sodomy laws for acts of “gross indecency.” In 1895, Wilde was sentenced to two years of hard labour, during which time he wrote a long, heart breaking letter to Lord Alfred titled *De Profundis*(Latin for “Out of the Depths”). After his release, Wilde left England and divided his time between France and Italy, living in poverty. He never published under his own name again. Wilde died in Paris on November 30, 1900, having converted to Roman Catholicism on his deathbed.

THE PLOT

In the London house of his aunt, Lady Brandon, the well-known artist Basil Hallward meets Dorian Gray. Dorian is a cultured, wealthy, and impossibly beautiful young man who immediately captures Basil’s artistic imagination. Dorian sits for several portraits, and Basil often depicts him as an ancient Greek hero or a mythological figure. When the novel opens, the artist is completing his first portrait of Dorian as he truly is, but, as he admits to his friend Lord Henry Wotton, the painting disappoints him because it reveals too much of his feeling for his subject. Lord Henry, a famous wit who enjoys scandalizing his friends by celebrating youth, beauty, and the selfish pursuit of pleasure, disagrees, claiming that the portrait is Basil’s masterpiece. Dorian arrives at the studio, and Basil reluctantly introduces him to Lord Henry, who he fears will have a damaging influence on the impressionable, young Dorian.

Basil's fears are well founded; before the end of their first conversation, Lord Henry upsets Dorian with a speech about the transient nature of beauty and youth. Worried that these, his most impressive characteristics, are fading day by day, Dorian curses his portrait, which he believes will one day remind him of the beauty he will have lost. In a fit of distress, he pledges his soul if only the painting could bear the burden of age and infamy, allowing him to stay forever young. After Dorian's outbursts, Lord Henry reaffirms his desire to own the portrait; however, Basil insists the portrait belongs to Dorian.

Over the next few weeks, Lord Henry's influence over Dorian grows stronger. The youth becomes a disciple of the "new Hedonism" and proposes to live a life dedicated to the pursuit of pleasure. He falls in love with Sibyl Vane, a young actress who performs in a theatre in London's slums. He adores her acting; she, in turn, refers to him as "Prince Charming" and refuses to heed the warnings of her brother, James Vane, that Dorian is no good for her. Overcome by her emotions for Dorian, Sibyl decides that she can no longer act, wondering how she can pretend to love on the stage now that she has experienced the real thing. Dorian, who loves Sibyl because of her ability to act, cruelly breaks his engagement with her. After doing so, he returns home to notice that his face in Basil's portrait of him has changed: it now sneers. Frightened that his wish for his likeness in the painting to bear the ill effects of his behaviour has come true and that his sins will be recorded on the canvas, he resolves to make amends with Sibyl the next day. The following afternoon, however, Lord Henry brings news that Sibyl has killed herself. At Lord Henry's urging, Dorian decides to consider her death a sort of artistic triumph—she personified tragedy—and to put the matter behind him. Meanwhile, Dorian hides his portrait in a remote upper room of his house, where no one other than he can watch its transformation.

Lord Henry gives Dorian a book that describes the wicked exploits of a nineteenth-century Frenchman; it becomes Dorian's bible as he sinks ever deeper into a life of sin and corruption. He lives a life devoted to garnering new experiences and sensations with no regard for conventional standards of morality or the consequences of his actions. Eighteen years pass. Dorian's reputation suffers in circles of polite London society, where rumours spread regarding his scandalous exploits. His peers nevertheless continue to accept him because he remains young and beautiful. The figure in the painting, however, grows increasingly wizened and

hideous. On a dark, foggy night, Basil Hallward arrives at Dorian's home to confront him about the rumours that plague his reputation. The two argue, and Dorian eventually offers Basil a look at his (Dorian's) soul. He shows Basil the now-hideous portrait, and Hallward, horrified, begs him to repent. Dorian claims it is too late for penance and kills Basil in a fit of rage.

In order to dispose of the body, Dorian employs the help of an estranged friend, a doctor, whom he blackmails. The night after the murder, Dorian makes his way to an opium den, where he encounters James Vane, who attempts to avenge Sibyl's death. Dorian escapes to his country estate. While entertaining guests, he notices James Vane peering in through a window, and he becomes wracked by fear and guilt. When a hunting party accidentally shoots and kills Vane, Dorian feels safe again. He resolves to amend his life but cannot muster the courage to confess his crimes, and the painting now reveals his supposed desire to repent for what it is—hypocrisy. In a fury, Dorian picks up the knife he used to stab Basil Hallward and attempts to destroy the painting. There is a crash, and his servants enter to find the portrait, unharmed, showing Dorian Gray as a beautiful young man. On the floor lies the body of their master—an old man, horribly wrinkled and disfigured, with a knife plunged into his heart.

THE MAIN CHARACTERS

Dorian Gray - A radiantly handsome, impressionable, and wealthy young gentleman, whose portrait the artist Basil Hallward paints. Under the influence of Lord Henry Wotton, Dorian becomes extremely concerned with the power of his beauty and begins to pursue his own pleasure above everything else. He devotes himself to having as many experiences as possible, whether moral or immoral, elegant or sordid.

Lord Henry Wotton - A nobleman and a close friend of Basil Hallward. Urbane and witty, Lord Henry is perpetually armed and ready with well-phrased epigrams criticizing the moralism and hypocrisy of Victorian society. His pleasure-seeking philosophy of "new Hedonism," which consists of garnering experiences that stimulate the senses without regard for conventional morality, plays a vital role in Dorian's development.

Basil Hallward - An artist, and a friend of Lord Henry. Basil becomes obsessed with Dorian after meeting him at a party. He claims that Dorian possesses a beauty so rare that it has helped him realize a new kind of art; through Dorian, he finds “the lines of a fresh school.” Dorian also helps Basil realize his artistic potential, as the portrait of Dorian that Basil paints proves to be his masterpiece.

Sibyl Vane - A poor, beautiful, and talented actress with whom Dorian falls in love. Sibyl’s love for Dorian compromises her ability to act, as her experience of true love in life makes her realize the falseness of affecting emotions on stage.

James Vane - Sibyl’s brother, a sailor bound for Australia. James cares deeply for his sister and worries about her relationship with Dorian. Distrustful of his mother’s motives, he believes that Mrs. Vane’s interest in Dorian’s wealth disables her from properly protecting Sibyl. As a result, James is hesitant to leave his sister.

THE SUPREMACY OF YOUTH AND BEAUTY

The first principle of aestheticism, the philosophy of art by which Oscar Wilde lived, is that art serves no other purpose than to offer beauty. Throughout *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, beauty reigns. It is a means to revitalize the wearied senses, as indicated by the effect that Basil’s painting has on the cynical Lord Henry. It is also a means of escaping the brutalities of the world: Dorian distances himself from the horrors of his actions by devoting himself to the study of beautiful things—music, jewels, rare tapestries. In a society that prizes beauty so highly, youth and physical attractiveness become valuable commodities. Lord Henry reminds Dorian of as much upon their first meeting, when he laments that Dorian will soon lose his most precious attributes. For although beauty and youth remain of utmost importance at the end of the novel—the portrait is, after all, returned to its original form—the novel suggests that the price one must pay for them is exceedingly high. Indeed, Dorian gives nothing less than his soul.