

OSCAR WILDE • *THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

## OSCAR WILDE

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde was born in Dublin in 1854 into an aristocratic family.

He studied at Trinity College in Dublin and later at Magdalen College in Oxford. A brilliant classicist, he won the Newdigate Prize in 1878 for his poem *Ravenna*. He followed the Aesthetic Movement, declared himself a socialist and went to the United States on a lecture tour. In 1883, he attended the first night of his play *Vera* in New York, but it was unsuccessful.

In 1888, he wrote *The Happy Prince and Other Fairy Tales* for his two sons, then in 1890 his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. He is best remembered for his plays, especially *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (both 1895).

He was prosecuted and imprisoned for homosexuality in 1895 and his poem *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898) was a reaction to the pain of imprisonment. On his release, in 1897, he went to Paris, where he died in 1900.



Oscar Wilde

## ABOUT THE NOVEL

*THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY*

The novel, which is set in London at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is a representation of the traditional myth of a man who sells his soul to the Devil in exchange for youth and beauty.

Dorian Gray, the protagonist, is an extremely handsome young man, and a painter, Basil Hallward, fascinated by his beauty, decides to paint his portrait.



However, something strange happens. The image on the portrait grows older, while Dorian does not show any sign of age despite the passing of time. Moreover, the portrait carries the signs of Dorian's deprived life. For this reason, Dorian hides the portrait, but when the painter discovers it, Dorian kills him.

Later, Dorian decides to destroy the portrait and stabs it, but, by doing so, he kills himself. The portrait returns to its original purity, while on the floor is the body of an old and ugly man.

## THE TEXT

### THE PORTRAIT

*This is an extract from chapter 2, when Basil Hallward has just finished Dorian's portrait.*

Dorian made no answer, but passed **listlessly** in front of his picture, and turned towards it. When he saw it he drew back, and his cheeks flushed for a moment with pleasure. A look of joy came into his eyes, as if he had recognised himself for the first time. He stood there motionless and in wonder, **dimly** conscious that Hallward was speaking to him, but not catching the meaning of his words. The sense of his own beauty came on him like a revelation.

He had never felt it before. Basil Hallward's compliments had seemed to him to be merely the charming exaggerations of friendship. He had listened to them, laughed at them, forgotten them. They had not influenced his nature. Then had come Lord Henry Wotton with his strange panegyric on youth, his terrible warning of its brevity. That had stirred him at the time, and now, as he stood gazing at the shadow of his own loveliness, the full reality of the description flashed across him. Yes, there would be a day when his face would be **wrinkled** and **wizen**, his eyes dim and colourless, the grace of his figure broken and deformed. The scarlet would pass away from his lips, and the gold steal from his hair. The life that was to make his soul would mar his body. He would become dreadful, **hideous** and **uncouth**.

As he thought of it, a sharp pang of pain struck through him like a knife, and made each delicate fibre of his nature quiver. His eyes deepened into amethyst, and across them came a mist of tears. He felt as if a hand of ice had been laid upon his heart.

"Don't you like it?" cried Hallward at last, stung a little by the lad's silence, not understanding what it meant.

"Of course he likes it," said Lord Henry. "Who wouldn't like it? It is one of the greatest things in modern art. I will give you anything you like to ask for it. I must have it."

"It is not my property, Harry."

"Whose property is it?"

"Dorian's, of course," answered the painter.

"He is a very lucky fellow."

"How sad it is!" murmured Dorian Gray, with his eyes fixed upon his own portrait.

"How sad it is! I shall grow old, and horrible, and dreadful. But this picture will remain always young. It will never be older than this particular day of June... If it were only the

other way! If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old! For that – for that – I would give everything! Yes, there is nothing in the whole world I would not give! I would give my soul for that!"

"You would hardly care for such an arrangement, Basil," cried Lord Henry, laughing. "It would be rather hard lines on your work."

"I should object very strongly, Harry," said Hallward.

Dorian Gray turned and looked at him. "I believe you would, Basil. You like your art better than your friends. I am no more to you than a green bronze figure. Hardly as much, I dare say."

The painter stared in amazement. It was so unlike Dorian to speak like that. What had happened? He seemed quite angry. His face was flushed and his cheeks burning.

"Yes," he continued, "I am less to you than your ivory Hermes or your silver Faun. You will like them always. How long will you like me? Till I have my first wrinkle, I suppose. I know, now, that when one loses one's good looks, whatever they may be, one loses everything. Your picture has taught me that. Lord Henry Wotton is perfectly right. Youth is the only thing worth having. When I find that I am growing old, I shall kill myself."

Hallward turned pale, and caught his hand.

"Dorian! Dorian," he cried, "don't talk like that. I have never had such a friend as you, and I shall never have such another. You are not jealous of material things, are you? – you who are finer than any of them!"

"I am jealous of everything whose beauty does not die. I am jealous of the portrait you have painted of me. Why should it keep what I must lose? Every moment that passes takes something from me, and gives something to it. Oh, if it were only the other way! If the picture could change, and I could be always what I am now! Why did you paint it? It will mock me some day – mock me horribly!"

The hot tears welled into his eyes; he tore his hand away, and, **flinging** himself on the divan, he buried his face in the cushions, as though he was praying.

**dimly:** *vagamente*  
**fling:** *lanciarsi*  
**hideous:** *orribile*  
**listlessly:** *fiaccamente*  
**uncouth:** *sgraziato*  
**wizen:** *raggrinzito*  
**wrinkled:** *rugoso*

## COMPREHENSION

### 1 Read the extract and answer the following questions.

1. What was Dorian's reaction when he first saw his portrait?
2. Was Dorian aware of his beauty?
3. What did Dorian understand after seeing the portrait?
4. What would happen to Dorian's beautiful body?
5. What was Dorian's physical reaction?
6. What is the reason for Dorian's sadness?
7. What is Dorian's wish?
8. What does Dorian think of Basil's art?
9. What is Dorian jealous of?
10. What did Dorian do when he flung himself on the divan?

## ANALYSIS

### 2 Read the text again and answer the questions.

1. Who is the narrator?
2. The first part of the text is mainly descriptive, but at a certain point there is a change and the author introduces Dorian's thoughts. Can you find the passage?
3. Find the part of the text when Dorian makes his "deal with the Devil". What are the terms of the deal?
4. What idea of beauty emerges from the text?
5. What is the relationship between time and beauty?

## DISCUSSION

### 3 GROUP WORK. Discuss.

The first principle of Aestheticism, the philosophy of art by which Wilde lived, is that Art serves no other purpose than to offer beauty. Do you agree, or do you rather believe that art should have a purpose and that artists should be politically or socially engaged, or at least have something to teach?

