



The picture of Dorian Gray

Oscar Wilde





R A I N B O W S

Oscar Wilde

The Picture of Dorian Gray

Adaptation, dossiers and activities
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edisco

The Picture of Dorian Gray

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The author

Oscar Wilde



Oscar Wilde was born in Dublin, Ireland, on October 16th, 1854. His parents were middle-class people, his father a well-known eye and ear doctor, his mother an eccentric and ambitious literary woman. At the age of twenty Wilde went to Oxford University where he spent four happy years and distinguished himself as a brilliant talker, as a scholar¹ and for his eccentricity. Two of his teachers at Oxford influenced his future life and work very deeply: John Ruskin and Walter Pater. Wilde liked Ruskin's prose style and passion for beauty and was influenced by Pater's conception of art. He wrote poems and when he left Oxford he was well-known as an aesthete² and a poet. In 1878 he also won the Newdigate Prize for poetry. In 1884 he married Constance Lloyd and had two children, but their marriage was unhappy, also because of money problems. In London Wilde became famous for his eccentric way of dressing and was often invited to social occasions for his witty³ conversations. In 1888 he published *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* written for his children. In 1891 he published his only novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* followed by a collection of short stories, *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Stories*. In 1892 he wrote the play *Salomé* in French; it was rejected in Great Britain because it was considered scandalous.

Wilde became successful with the so-called 'society-plays': *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), *An Ideal Husband* (1895) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), the most famous among his comedies, which revolves around the adventures of two young men from the London upper-class. It is a satire on Victorian hypocrisy, full of witty sayings and puns⁴. In 1895 Oscar Wilde was accused of homosexual relations with Lord Alfred Douglas by the Marquis of Queensberry (Alfred's father). Wilde was arrested, tried⁵ and sentenced⁶ to two years' imprisonment with hard labour⁷ at Reading Gaol. After being released⁸ from prison he changed his name to Sebastian Melmoth, wrote the long poem *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898) about his prison experience and spent the last years of his life in bad health and financial conditions. In 1900 he died in Paris.

1. *scholar*: person who knows and studies a lot about a particular subject.

2. *aesthete*: person who cares about beauty.

3. *witty*: clever and funny.

4. *pun*: a joke using words that have two meanings.

5. *try*: to judge a person or case in a court of law.

6. *sentence*: punish in a court of law.

7. *hard labour*: very hard physical work as a form of punishment.

8. *release*: let someone leave, free someone.



BEFORE READING

- 1 What is a picture? Read its definition in a monolingual dictionary. Then read the following sentences and discuss its different meanings with the teacher.

He painted a large picture of Venice.

We took a picture of the children while they were playing in the garden.

The pictures of the war on TV were horrible.

I have a very vivid picture of the first time I kissed him.

- 2 Tick the characteristics you consider most important for a work of art.

realistic

skilfully coloured

conveying feelings

pleasant to look at

abstract

- 3 The words below are key words from Chapter 1. They all refer to art. Find out their meanings in a monolingual dictionary and then fill in the sentences.

portrait – exhibit – painter – sitter – inspiration – artist

- a. His innocent and pure face provided the for the painting.
b. The Modern Gallery will several famous paintings.
c. The mixed the colours and started the
d. The Pre-Raphaelites were a group of young who reacted against the materialism of their age.
e. Dorian is a wonderful and I always feel excited when I look at him.



Dorian Gray

At Basil's studio

Chapter 1

There was a strong smell of roses in the studio and a heavy scent¹ of lilacs was carried through the open door by the light summer breeze. Lying on the sofa Lord Wotton was smoking as usual, looking outside at the blossomed branches² in the garden. In the middle of the room stood the full-length portrait of an extremely beautiful young man. Basil Hallward, the painter, was sitting in front of it smiling with pleasure.

“It is the best work you have ever done, Basil”, said Lord Henry. “You should send it to the Grosvenor gallery, which is the only suitable place for it.”

“No, I won't send it anywhere” he answered. “Why?” asked Lord Henry, looking at him in a perplexed way. “What strange people you painters are. You would do anything to become famous and when you are you throw it away: remember that it's far better being talked about than not being talked about. And this picture would make you the most outstanding³ artist in England.”

“I can't exhibit it,” Basil replied, “I have put too much of myself into it.”

“Basil, I didn't imagine you were so vain⁴: you are not like him at all. There's a big difference between your hard face and black hair and the delicate beauty of this young man. Of course, you have an intellectual expression but when one sits down to think, the harmony of any face is destroyed. Your mysterious young friend, whose name I don't know yet, never thinks, I'm sure. You are not in the least like him, Basil, believe me.”

“Of course I am not like him and I wouldn't like to be. Each one of us has been given gifts⁵ by the gods and we shall

1. *scent*: perfume.

2. *blossomed branch*: when flowers appears on parts of trees.

3. *outstanding*: impressive, important.

4. *vain*: a person who is very proud and thinks that they are attractive or special.

5. *gift*: present.



all suffer for what we have received: Dorian Gray's beauty, my art, your rank⁶ and wealth... Only the ugly and the stupid live undisturbed and without trouble."

"Dorian Gray? Is that his name?" asked Lord Henry.

"Yes, but I didn't intend to tell it to you."

"Why not?"

"Well, when I like people immensely, I never tell their names to anyone, because it is like losing a part of them. I love secrecy: it can make modern life mysterious and fascinating. The simplest thing becomes attractive if one only hides it. I know I may seem a bit foolish..."

"Not at all," replied Henry. "I am a married man and secrets are absolutely necessary for a charming marriage: I never know where my wife is, and my wife never knows what I am doing."

"I don't like the way you talk about your married life" said Basil. "I really think you are a very good husband and you don't want to show your virtues. You never do a wrong thing and your cynicism is only a pose⁷."

Then the two young men went out into the garden and sat under the shadow of a laurel tree⁸.

Then, before leaving, Henry said, "I want you to explain to me the real reason why you don't want to exhibit Dorian Gray's picture."

"Harry," said Basil, "every portrait reveals something of the artist, not of the sitter⁹ and I think I've shown in it the secret of my soul."



Lord Henry laughed and asked what it was.

"I'm afraid you will hardly understand," answered the painter.

"I will understand it", he replied, "but it must be quite incredible!"

After a few seconds Basil started to tell his story.

"Two months ago I went to a party at Lady Brandon's. After I had been in the room about ten minutes, I suddenly became conscious that someone was looking at me and I saw Dorian

6. *rank*: someone's position in society.

7. *pose*: behaviour that is not natural, intended to impress.

8. *laurel tree*: small tree with shiny dark green leaves.

9. *sitter*: someone who is painted.

The Picture of Dorian Gray

Gray for the first time. As soon as our eyes met I felt a strange sensation of terror because I realised his personality would absorb my whole soul, even my art. I've always been independent but something told me that Fate¹⁰ was reserving me both deep joys and sorrows. I grew afraid and turned to leave the room. But Lady Brandon stopped me and I couldn't get rid of¹¹ her. Suddenly my eyes met Dorian's eyes again and, inevitably, I asked Lady Brandon to introduce me to him."

"What did she say about Mr Dorian Gray?"

"Oh, she muttered¹² something like, 'Charming boy... plays the piano or the violin...' We both laughed and became friends."



"Laughter is the best way to begin a friendship, and it is also its best ending," said Lord Henry while picking a daisy¹³.

"You don't understand what friendship is, Harry."

"How horribly unjust of you, Basil," cried Lord Henry. "Anyway, I like people better than principles and I prefer people without principles to anything else in the world. But tell me something more about Dorian, how often do you see him?"

"Every day. He is absolutely necessary to me."

"Incredible! I was sure you only cared about your art."



"He is all my art to me now, Harry. He is much more to me than a model or a sitter. His personality has influenced me in such a way that I see things differently. If Dorian is with me I can paint extraordinary works of art. He is always present: I find him in the loveliness of the colours or in the curves of certain lines. He knows nothing about it, of course. But if people saw the portrait they could guess¹⁴ what is in my heart and I don't want them to look inside my soul. An artist should create beautiful things without putting his life into them: that is why the world shall never see my portrait of Dorian Gray."



"Tell me, Basil, does Dorian like you?"

"I know he likes me, he is charming to me. We sit together in the studio and talk of a thousand things. Sometimes he is

10. *fate*: destiny.

11. *get rid of*: send away someone annoying.

12. *mutter*: say something because you are annoyed.

13. *daisy*: small white flower with a yellow centre.

14. *guess*: say what you think is true without being certain about it.