

THE PICTURE OF  
DORIAN GRAY

by Oscar Wilde



PRESTWICK HOUSE LITERARY TOUCHSTONE CLASSICS



UNABRIDGED WITH GLOSSARY AND NOTES

# THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY



Oscar Wilde



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# Notes

## What is a literary classic and why are these classic works important to the world?

A literary classic is a work of the highest excellence that has something important to say about life and/or the human condition and says it with great artistry. A classic, through its enduring presence, has withstood the test of time and is not bound by time, place, or customs. It speaks to us today as forcefully as it spoke to people one hundred or more years ago, and as forcefully as it will speak to people of future generations. For this reason, a classic is said to have universality.

Oscar Wilde was born on October 16, 1854, in Dublin, Ireland. He received his education at Trinity College in Dublin and at Magdalen College, Oxford, and eventually settled in London after marrying Constance Lloyd. In London, Wilde found himself socializing with the great Irish poet, William Butler Yeats, and Lillie Langtry, mistress to the Prince of Wales. Wilde adhered to a school of thought known as *aestheticism*, which taught that art was valuable for its own sake. At the heart of that philosophy is the belief that art that is beautiful does not need to serve any other moral or political purpose: beauty is the ideal and an end unto itself. This was a radical departure from the prevalent trend in Victorian England, which stated that art was both a function of morality and a means of enforcing it.

Wilde's most famous works include *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), *A Woman Of No Importance* (1893), *An Ideal Husband* (1895), and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). These plays were all extremely well received and firmly established him as a major playwright.

Wilde's theories of art, however, were not the only areas in which he ran counter to prevalent Victorian morality. Wilde was arrested, tried, and convicted of "gross indecency," for which he was sentenced to two years of hard labor; this experience led him to write "The Ballad of Reading Goal." 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.

Oscar Wilde died in Paris on November 30, 1900, having converted to Roman Catholicism on his deathbed.

# Pointers

## READING POINTERS

### Reading Pointers for Sharper Insights

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde's only novel, is at once a gothic romance (in the tradition of *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*), a comedy of manners like his witty plays that made him England's most popular playwright for a time, and a treatise on the relationship between art and morality. The novel still presents its readers with a puzzle. There is as much disagreement over its meaning now as there was among its Victorian readers, but, as Wilde himself wrote in the Preface of his revised edition of the book, "Diversity of opinion about a work of art shows that the work is new, complex, and vital."

Modern readers who come to this controversial and puzzling work will find it helpful to note the following concepts developed throughout the work:

#### **The Worship of Beauty**

Throughout *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, beauty reigns. It is Dorian's physical beauty that first attracts Basil and Lord Henry. It is loss of beauty that Dorian laments and motivates the plea that sets the novel in motion. Only at the end of the book does Dorian regret his decision to trade beauty for the excesses of life. Part of Lord Henry's success in society is his ability to convince others that he values the beautiful much more than the good.

#### **Evidence of Wilde's Aestheticism in the Work**

Although the aestheticists believed that art existed for its own sake, the novel can be interpreted to contradict that view. The very premise of the novel is that Dorian will lose his youthful, innocent beauty—not only because of age, but also because the quality of his soul will be reflected in his appearance. Certainly Dorian becomes aware the morning after breaking up with Sibyl that his portrait shows his spiritual and psychological deterioration.

Thus, the painting, the actual work of art, is not merely an object of beauty, but it is also a direct reflection and manifestation of Dorian Gray's soul. Basil, too, recognizes it as revealing too much of *his* soul. This is why he refuses to display it and gives it to Dorian instead.

# Preface

T H E P R E F A C E

**T**HE ARTIST is the creator of beautiful things.

To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim.

The critic is he who can translate into another manner or a new material his impression of beautiful things.

The highest as the lowest form of criticism is a mode of autobiography.

Those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt without being charming. This is a fault.

Those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated. For these there is hope.

They are the elect to whom beautiful things mean only Beauty.

There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all.

The nineteenth century dislike of Realism is the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in a glass.

The nineteenth century dislike of Romanticism is the rage of Caliban not seeing his own face in a glass.

The moral life of man forms part of the subject-matter of the artist, but the morality of art consists in the perfect use of an imperfect medium.

No artist desires to prove anything. Even things that are true can be proved.

No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style.

No artist is ever morbid. The artist can express everything.

Thought and language are to the artist instruments of an art.

Vice and virtue are to the artist materials for an art.

From the point of view of form, the type of all the arts is the art of the musician.

From the point of view of feeling, the actor's craft is the type.

All art is at once surface and symbol.

Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril.

Those who read the symbol do so at their peril.

It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors.

Diversity of opinion about a work of art shows that the work is new, complex, and vital.

When critics disagree the artist is in accord with himself.

We can forgive a man for making a useful thing as long as he does not admire it.

The only excuse for making a useless thing is that one admires it intensely.

All art is quite useless.

OSCAR WILDE.



# C H A P T E R I

**T**HE STUDIO WAS FILLED with the rich odor of roses, and when the light summer wind stirred amid the trees of the garden there came through the open door the heavy scent of the lilac, or the more delicate perfume of the pink-flowering thorn.

From the corner of the divan of Persian saddle-bags on which he was lying, smoking, as was his custom, innumerable cigarettes, Lord Henry Wotton could just catch the gleam of the honey-sweet and honey-colored blossoms of a laburnum, whose tremulous branches seemed hardly able to bear the burden of a beauty so flame-like as theirs; and now and then the fantastic shadows of birds in flight flitted across the long tussore-silk curtains that were stretched in front of the huge window, producing a kind of momentary Japanese effect, and making him think of those pallid jade-faced painters of Tokio who, through the medium of an art that is necessarily immobile, seek to convey the sense of swiftness and motion. The sullen murmur of the bees shouldering their way through the long unmown grass, or circling with monotonous insistence round the dusty gilt horns of the stragglng woodbine, seemed to make the stillness more oppressive. The dim roar of London was like the bourdon note of a distant organ.

In the center of the room, clamped to an upright easel, stood the full-length portrait of a young man of extraordinary personal beauty, and in front of it, some little distance away, was sitting the artist himself, Basil Hallward, whose sudden disappearance some years ago caused, at the time, such public excitement, and gave rise to so many strange conjectures.

As the painter looked at the gracious and comely form he had so skilfully mirrored in his art, a smile of pleasure passed across his face, and seemed

about to linger there. But he suddenly started up, and, closing his eyes, placed his fingers upon the lids, as though he sought to imprison within his brain some curious dream from which he feared he might awake.

"It is your best work, Basil, the best thing you have ever done," said Lord Henry, languidly. "You must certainly send it next year to the Grosvenor. The Academy is too large and too vulgar. Whenever I have gone there, there have been either so many people that I have not been able to see the pictures, which were dreadful, or so many pictures that I have not been able to see the people, which was worse. The Grosvenor is really the only place."

"I don't think I shall send it anywhere," he answered, tossing his head back in that odd way that used to make his friends laugh at him at Oxford. "No, I won't send it anywhere."

Lord Henry elevated his eyebrows, and looked at him in amazement through the thin blue wreaths of smoke that curled up in such fanciful whorls from his heavy opium-tainted cigarette. "Not send it anywhere! My dear fellow, why? Have you any reason? What odd chaps you painters are! You do anything in the world to gain a reputation. As soon as you have one, you seem to want to throw it away. It is silly of you, for there is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about. A portrait like this would set you far above all the young men in England, and make the old men quite jealous, if old men are ever capable of any emotion."

"I know you will laugh at me," he replied, "but I really can't exhibit it. I have put too much of myself into it."

Lord Henry stretched himself out on the divan and laughed.

"Yes, I knew you would; but it is quite true, all the same."

"Too much of yourself in it! Upon my word, Basil, I didn't know you were so vain; and I really can't see any resemblance between you, with your rugged, strong face and your coal-black hair, and this young Adonis,<sup>†</sup> who looks as if he was made out of ivory and rose-leaves. Why, my dear Basil, he is a Narcissus,<sup>†</sup> and you—well, of course, you have an intellectual expression, and all that. But beauty, real beauty, ends where an intellectual expression begins. Intellect is in itself a mode of exaggeration, and destroys the harmony of any face. The moment one sits down to think, one becomes all nose, or all forehead, or something horrid. Look at the successful men in any of the learned professions. How perfectly hideous they are! Except, of course, in the Church. But then in the Church they don't think. A bishop keeps on saying at the age of eighty what he was told to say when he was a boy of eighteen, and as a natural consequence he always looks absolutely delightful. Your mysterious young friend, whose name you have never told me, but whose picture really fascinates me, never thinks. I feel quite sure of that. He is some brainless, beautiful creature, who should be always here in winter when we have no flowers to look at, and always here in summer when we want something to chill our

intelligence. Don't flatter yourself, Basil: you are not in the least like him."

"You don't understand me, Harry," answered the artist. "Of course I am not like him. I know that perfectly well. Indeed, I should be sorry to look like him. You shrug your shoulders? I am telling you the truth. There is a fatality about all physical and intellectual distinction, the sort of fatality that seems to dog through history the faltering steps of kings. It is better not to be different from one's fellows. The ugly and the stupid have the best of it in this world. They can sit at their ease and gape at the play. If they know nothing of victory, they are at least spared the knowledge of defeat. They live as we all should live, undisturbed, indifferent, and without disquiet. They neither bring ruin upon others, nor ever receive it from alien hands. Your rank and wealth, Harry; my brains, such as they are—my art, whatever it may be worth; Dorian Gray's good looks—we shall all suffer for what the gods have given us, suffer terribly."

"Dorian Gray? Is that his name?" asked Lord Henry, walking across the studio towards Basil Hallward.

"Yes, that is his name. I didn't intend to tell it to you."

"But why not?"

"Oh, I can't explain. When I like people immensely I never tell their names to any one. It is like surrendering a part of them. I have grown to love secrecy. It seems to be the one thing that can make modern life mysterious or marvelous to us. The commonest thing is delightful if one only hides it. When I leave town now I never tell my people where I am going. If I did, I would lose all my pleasure. It is a silly habit, I dare say, but somehow it seems to bring a great deal of romance into one's life. I suppose you think me awfully foolish about it?"

"Not at all," answered Lord Henry, "not at all, my dear Basil. You seem to forget that I am married, and the one charm of marriage is that it makes a life of deception absolutely necessary for both parties. I never know where my wife is, and my wife never knows what I am doing. When we meet—we do meet occasionally, when we dine out together, or go down to the Duke's—we tell each other the most absurd stories with the most serious faces. My wife is very good at it—much better, in fact, than I am. She never gets confused over her dates, and I always do. But when she does find me out, she makes no row at all. I sometimes wish she would; but she merely laughs at me."

"I hate the way you talk about your married life, Harry," said Basil Hallward, strolling towards the door that led into the garden. "I believe that you are really a very good husband, but that you are thoroughly ashamed of your own virtues. You are an extraordinary fellow. You never say a moral thing, and you never do a wrong thing. Your cynicism is simply a pose."

"Being natural is simply a pose, and the most irritating pose I know," cried Lord Henry, laughing; and the two young men went out into the garden

together, and ensconced themselves on a long bamboo seat that stood in the shade of a tall laurel bush. The sunlight slipped over the polished leaves. In the grass, white daisies were tremulous.

After a pause, Lord Henry pulled out his watch. "I am afraid I must be going, Basil," he murmured, "and before I go, I insist on your answering a question I put to you some time ago."

"What is that?" said the painter, keeping his eyes fixed on the ground.

"You know quite well."

"I do not, Harry."

"Well, I will tell you what it is. I want you to explain to me why you won't exhibit Dorian Gray's picture. I want the real reason."

"I told you the real reason."

"No, you did not. You said it was because there was too much of yourself in it. Now, that is childish."

"Harry," said Basil Hallward, looking him straight in the face, "every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion. It is not he who is revealed by the painter; it is rather the painter who, on the colored canvas, reveals himself. The reason I will not exhibit this picture is that I am afraid that I have shown in it the secret of my own soul."

Lord Henry laughed. "And what is that?" he asked.

"I will tell you," said Hallward; but an expression of perplexity came over his face.

"I am all expectation, Basil," continued his companion, glancing at him.

"Oh, there is really very little to tell, Harry," answered the painter; "and I am afraid you will hardly understand it. Perhaps you will hardly believe it."

Lord Henry smiled, and, leaning down, plucked a pink-petaled daisy from the grass, and examined it. "I am quite sure I shall understand it," he replied, gazing intently at the little golden white-feathered disk, "and as for believing things, I can believe anything, provided that it is quite incredible."

The wind shook some blossoms from the trees, and the heavy lilac-blooms, with their clustering stars, moved to and fro in the languid air. A grasshopper began to chirrup by the wall, and like a blue thread a long thin dragon-fly floated past on its brown gauze wings. Lord Henry felt as if he could hear Basil Hallward's heart beating, and wondered what was coming.

"The story is simply this," said the painter after some time. "Two months ago I went to a crush at Lady Brandon's. You know we poor artists have to show ourselves in society from time to time, just to remind the public that we are not savages. With an evening coat and a white tie, as you told me once, anybody, even a stock-broker, can gain a reputation for being civilized. Well, after I had been in the room about ten minutes, talking to huge overdressed dowagers and tedious Academicians, I suddenly became conscious that some

## Glossary

### CHAPTER I

- Adonis** – in Greek mythology, a boy who was extremely handsome, and loved by Venus
- Narcissus** – in Greek mythology, a young man so in love with his own beauty that the gods turned him into a flower
- Antinous** – a very handsome man and friend of the Roman Emperor Hadrian

### CHAPTER II

- “Eton days”** – the times when Lord Henry attended Eton, a prestigious preparatory school outside of London
- Hellenic** – relating to ancient Greece; the Greek word *Hellas* referred to a specific area of Greece.
- “divine right of sovereignty”** – the belief that monarchs ruled through the will of God
- Hedonism** – the belief or philosophy that pleasure and happiness are the most important parts and purposes of life
- “Hermes or your silver Faun”** – Dorian refers to Hallward’s decorations: *Hermes* [Mercury] is the messenger of the gods, and a *faun* is a young satyr (part man and part goat or horse).

### CHAPTER III

- Tory** – a British political party favoring the monarchy
- Radical** – a group that wanted drastic changes in the British government; they were opposed to the Tories and the Liberals.
- English Blue-book** – the social registry of prominent citizens; also a British grammar book
- Titan** – in Greek mythology, relatives to and predecessors of the gods
- Dryad-like** – in Greek mythology, wood nymphs
- Plato** – (c.427-347 B.C.), a Greek philosopher
- Buonarotti** – Michelangelo Buonarotti (1475-1564), a famous Italian sculptor
- Parliament** – the group that governs the United Kingdom, consisting of the House of Commons and the House of Lords
- Liberals** – the other major British political party; opponents of the Tories
- Bacchante** – related to Bacchus, the god of wine
- Silenus** – in Greek mythology, the oldest satyr
- “wise Omar”** – most likely a reference to *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, a popular poem in late 19<sup>th</sup> century England
- Athenaeum** – the temple of Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom

## Vocabulary

### CHAPTER I

**bourdon** – the lowest note  
**conjectures** – odd opinions  
**disquiet** – unease, restlessness  
**divan** – a backless couch  
**dowagers** – widows with money or titles inherited from their husbands  
**enmity** – hatred, dislike  
**ensconced** – sheltered  
**languidly** – lazily  
**lionize** – to exalt; treat as a celebrity  
**listlessly** – without energy  
**précis** – a summary  
**proletariat** – low social class  
**scrupulous** – careful; precise  
**truculent** – stubborn

### CHAPTER II

**articulate** – expressible in words  
**candor** – honesty, openness  
**caprice** – a whim  
**dais** – a raised platform  
**degenerate** – to decline, deteriorate  
**fidelity** – loyalty, devotion  
**laden** – overloaded  
**languorous** – weariness; lethargy  
**moue** – a grimace, frown  
**pallid** – [pallid] pale  
**panegyric** – an oration; formal praise  
**petulant** – spoiled  
**philanthropy** – good will toward humanity; the act of giving money to those less fortunate  
**sallow** – yellowish  
**stellated** – resembling a star  
**superficial** – concerned only with the obvious; on the surface  
**varnished** – covered with a glossy finish  
**wanes** – lessens; becomes less intense  
**wizen** – dry; shrunken

### CHAPTER III

**arcade** – an archway  
**capital** – excellent  
**capricious** – impulsive; unpredictable  
**carnal** – relating to the senses; sexual