



The picture of Dorian Gray

By Oscar Wilde

First published in 1890

Genre & subject

Psychological fiction

Classical fiction

Synopsis

'How sad it is! I shall grow old, and horrid, and dreadful. But this picture will remain always young! If it was only the other way!' Wilde's first and only published novel recounts the story of handsome Dorian Gray who upon having his portrait painted desires that it will age and grow ugly while he may remain eternally beautiful. The painting, which reflects each of Gray's sins and transgressions in its hideousness, haunts him until it finally becomes unbearable. In this dark tale of duplicity and mortality, Wilde creates a world where art and reality collide.

Author biography

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde (16 October 1854 – 30 November 1900) was an Irish writer and poet. After writing in different forms throughout the 1880s, he became one of London's most popular playwrights in the early 1890s. Today he is remembered for his epigrams, his only novel *The picture of Dorian Gray*, his plays, and the circumstances of his imprisonment and early death.

Oscar Wilde was born in Dublin, the second of three children born to Sir William Wilde and Jane Francesca Wilde. Jane Wilde, under the pseudonym "Speranza" (the Italian word for 'Hope'), wrote poetry for the revolutionary Young Irelanders in 1848 and was a lifelong Irish nationalist. She read the Young Irelanders' poetry to Oscar. Lady Wilde's interest in the neo-classical revival showed in the paintings and busts of ancient Greece and Rome in her home. William Wilde was Ireland's leading ear and eye surgeon and was knighted in 1864 for his services as medical adviser and assistant commissioner to the censuses of Ireland. He also wrote books about Irish archaeology and peasant folklore.

Until he was nine, Oscar was educated at home. He then attended Portora Royal School in Enniskillen, County Fermanagh. Until his early twenties, Wilde summered at the villa, Moytura House, his father built in Cong County Mayo.

At the height of his fame and success, while his masterpiece, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), was still on stage in London, Wilde had the Marquess of Queensberry prosecuted for libel. The Marquess was the father of Wilde's lover, Lord Alfred Douglas. The trial unearthed evidence that caused Wilde to drop his charges but led to his own arrest and trial. He was convicted and imprisoned for two years' hard labour.

In 1897, in prison, he wrote *De Profundis* which was published in 1905, a long letter which discusses his spiritual journey through his trials. Upon his release he left for France, never to return to Ireland or Britain. There he wrote his last work, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898). He died destitute in Paris at the age of forty-six.

Discussion starters

- In the preface (be sure to read this), Wilde writes that "there is no such thing as a moral or immoral book." In other words, art has no effect, other than aesthetic, on individuals or society. Do you agree with Wilde's premise? Does this novel adhere to his statement?
- What is the relationship between Basil and Dorian...from beginning to end?
- Talk about Lord Henry: what code or set of beliefs does he live by? How does he view conventional morality and in what ways does he challenge it? Why, for instance, does he believe it is futile and wrong for the individual to resist temptation?
- In what way does Lord Henry affect Dorian's character? Why does Lord Henry choose Dorian as his disciple? And what impels Dorian to follow his guidance? What is it that Dorian fears?
- Is Lord Henry's belief in the freedom of the individual truly evil? Or does Dorian misconstrue it? Does Lord Henry actually practice the ideas he espouses? Does he understand the real life consequences his ideas would have, or does he exhibit a sort of naiveté?
- Talk about the role of the yellow book. (Although Wilde never gives it a title, critics believe it is based on Joris-Karl Huysman's novel, *A Rebours*, meaning "Against the Grain" or "Against Nature.")
- Why does Sibyl commit suicide and what impact does her death have on Dorian?
- Discuss Dorian's portrait. What does it represent? What does it suggest about the effect of experience on the soul? Why does Dorian hide it in the attic?
- Dorian's scandalous behaviour shocks his peers, yet he remains welcome in social circles? Why? What is Wilde suggesting about "polite" London society?
- Dorian desires to reform his life after the death of James Vane. Why doesn't he succeed?
- Discuss the ending: what does it mean?
- Do you find any of these characters believable? Why or why not? (If not, do you think Wilde might have purposely drawn them as such?)
- If you know the story of Faust, what parallels do you find in Wilde's novel?

If you liked this book, you may also like...

Perfume : the story of a murderer by Patrick Süskind

Blood canticle by Anne Rice

Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde : and other stories by Robert Louis Stevenson



If you are looking for something new to read try **NoveList**! It is a free database to help you find that perfect book. Visit www.ryde.nsw.gov.au/library

Author biography from wikipedia. Discussion starters from litlovers www.litlovers.com. Read-a-likes from NoveList.