

THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY

MAIN CHARACTERS:

DORIAN GRAY - a young, rich, extraordinary handsome, debauched dandy in the sinridden London of the 1890's

Lord HENRY WOTTON - Dorian's witty, cynical mentor in sensuality

BASIL HALLWARD - a serious artist whose haunting portrait of Dorian is his master-piece

SIBYL VANE - a naive young actress who catches Dorian's fancy

JAMES VANE - Sibyl's vengeful brother, a sailor

ALAN CAMPBELL - a tormented young scientist being blackmailed by Dorian Gray

THE STORY

Lord HW, a cynical man about town, pays a visits to the luxurious studio of his painter friend, BH. There he sees the full-length portrait of a very handsome young man whose features are marked by purity an innocence. He wants to know who the young man is and the artist tells him the name: Dorian Gray. While they are talking, Dorian Gray arrives an Hallward introduces him to Lord Henry. Lord Henry engages the youth in charming, cynical banter. He tells Dorian to make the most of his youth and beauty while he has it. He impresses the young man with his sophistication and epigrammatic wit.

Before long the portrait is finished and the three men admire it. Dorian is disturbed because the picture will remain eternally young and handsome while he will grow old and ugly. He says he would give his soul if only the portrait would age and he would remain forever young.

In the next few months Lord Henry takes Dorian under his wing. Dorian comes from a wealthy family and is completely unspoiled. Lord Henry begins to change him. He takes him about London - to parties, plays and operas . He introduces him to society and to a life of pleasure and self-indulgence.

Lord Henry's influence is checked when Dorian falls in love with the innocent seventeen-year-old actress, Sybil Vane, whom he sees playing Juliet in a tenth rate theatre. Dorian does not want to let know his name so she calls him "Prince Charming". Her mother approves of the affair but Sibyl's brother, James, necomes furious when he hears of it. James is a sailor, soon to leave England. He warns his sister against the mysterious admirer. He threatens to kill him if he betrays her innocence.

Lord Henry and Basil Hallward react coolly when Dorian tells them that he is engaged to Sibyl. They see it as the unfortunately but necessary first affair of an insperiened youth. They are sure Dorian would soon leave Sibyl for someone more worthy of his wealth and social position.

Dorian insist that they come with him to the theatre where she is acting to see her. That night Sibyl gives a stiff performance and Lord Henry and Basil Hallward leave the theatre before the final curtain. Suddenly Dorian realizes that his friends are right: Sibyl is "common". He brutally tells her he no loger loves her and leaves her weeping in the dressing room.

At home Doria receives a terrible shock: he notices that the portrait of himself has changed slightly. Acruel grimace distorts his mouth. He hastily writes a letter to Sibyl begging her to forgive him and assuring her of his love for her. The next afternoon, however, Lord Henry arrives with the news that the Sibyl Vane had taken poison in her dressinf room immediately after Dorian had left her. The girl is dead but Lord Henry assures Dorian that he is well rid of her; she was unworthy of him anyway. Furthermore, he will be spared any scandal because nobody connects his name with hers.

Basil Hallward calls to offer sympathy and asks to see the portrait. He wants to exhibit it but Dorian refuses to let him see the painting. Later he hides the portrait in an unused room. He is fascinated by the idea that the picture will be a mirror of his soul but terrified that anyone should see it and learn of its power.

During the next few years, Dorian falls deeply under the spell of Lord Henry Wotton. Lord Henry gives him a "poisonous" French book to read (J.K. Huysman's "A Rebours") which details the infinitive variety of sins and sensual pleasures in which a rich, selfish young man can indulge himself. Under its influence, Dorian collects rare gems and perfumes, flirts with Catholic ritual, and even frequents low haunts and opium dens. He takes pleasure in leading young men into a life of debauchery and soon finds himself barred from London society where evil rumors about him are circulating.

Dorian's greatest interest in life is to compare his still youthful, unravaged face in the mirror with the coarse, cruel face emerging in the portrait. Nobody in London can understand how Dorian manages to remain physically young.

Late one night, Dorian is visited by Basil Hallward. The artist tells him he is leaving for Paris, where he will spend at least six months painting, trying to recover the inspiration that left him when Dorian and he became estranged. Before he leaves he tries to talk to Dorian out of his evil ways but Dorian angrily reveals the picture to the artist who painted it. Basil is appalled by the loathsome visage of evil soul, but Dorian, in a sudden fury, grabs a knife and stabs Hallward to death.

Since Hallward was supposed to be going to Paris, Dorian is sure the murder will not be discovered if he can only dispose of the corpse. He enlists the aid of an old friend, Alan Campbell, a chemist. Dorian pleads with him to destroy the body of Basil Hallward. When Campbell angrily refuses to do so, Dorian threatens to blackmail him for some secret sin of the past. Resigned to his fate, Campbell orders large quantities of nitric acid and in a few hours destroys the artist's body.

One night in an opium den, Dorian comes close to death. James Vane, returned from the voyages, has overheard a woman calling Dorian "Prince Charming", which he remembers as his sister's name for her lover. When Dorian comes out of the den, Vane is waiting for him with a pistol. Dorian's quick thinking, however, saves him from the brother's vengeance. He reminds Vane that Sibyl had died eighteen years ago, and then asks the sailor to look at his face under a street lamp. Since Dorian has not aged at all, he seems to be only twenty, and the would-be avenger goes away. Later Vane realizes his mistake. He stalks Dorian at a fashionable hunting party but is accidentally killed himself.

Dorian now thinks himself completely safe. The interest about the disappearance of Basil Hallward has subsided, Sibyl's brother is dead, Alan Campbell has committed suicide. No one can possibly accuse Dorian of murder. Sick of the past and grateful for his new lease on life, he tells Lord Henry that he is determined to lead a better, less selfish existence. Lord Henry laughs but Dorian insists that he has already begun to lead a better life by refraining from seducing a peasant girl. He wonders if his noble act will be recorded on the portrait. Perhaps it will not be so horrible now. He looks at the picture but the face is even worse. In addition to its grossness and cruelty, he can see a hypocritical smirk on the lips and blood dripping from the hand.

He seizes a knife and slashes passionately at the picture. The servants below hear an agonized cry. They break down the locked door. On the wall they can see the picture of Dorian Gray like it looked originally - godlike in its beauty and purity. But on the floor is the real Dorian Gray who, in the stabbing portrait, has actually killed himself. He is old, debauched and withered, unrecognizable to his own servants. They can identify him by the rings on his gnarled, grasping fingers.

CRITICAL OPINION

"The Picture of Dorian Gray" is Wilde's only full-length novel. It is a curious reworking of the Faust legend in which Dorian is Faust; Lord Henry is Mephistoles; Sibyl Vane is Gretchen and her brother is Valentine. The major Difference is that while Faust wishes for eternal youth in order to experience all that life has to offer, including unselfish work for good - Dorian wishes to remain young only to be admired and to experience all the lusts of the flesh.

Wilde had very little talent for fiction: the plotting is heavy-handed, the characters are one-dimensional; thus the vigor stems not from its allegorical treatment of the wages of sin but from its sparkling epigrams and its charms as a period piece of late-Victorian London.

Lord Henry's epigrams are still entertaining. "The only way to get rid of temptation is yield to it", he says to Dorian, and (later in the novel), "A man can be happy with a woman, as long as he does not love her". The pervasive sense of sin is largely unconvincing today, because Wilde is too conventionally Victorian to be specific about it. We are not told, for instance, just why Dorian can blackmail Alan Campbell, although we may assume that much of the sin talked about in the book is pederasty. As a period piece, "The Picture of Dorian Gray" paints the fog-muffled streets, the dandies and the langours of London in the 1890's. The atmosphere of the book is still entrancing even if the basic plot has less impact today.

THE AUTHOR

No other sensation in the literary and social world of the 1890's matches the meteoric rise and fall of Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde. Born in Dublin on October 15, 1856, Wilde inherited his artistic tastes from his eccentric mother, a minor literary luminary of the time. He went to Oxford in 1874, where he came under the influence of the aesthetic theories of John Ruskin and Walter Pater.

On leaving Oxford, Wilde made it his mission in life to bring a simplified version of the doctrine of art for art's sake to the philistine middle-class, which he tried to accomplish not only by means of brilliant essays, plays and stories, but by his own behaviour. He dressed extravagantly, usually clutching some such "aesthetic" object as a lily in his hand and he propagandized for an art free of any moral considerations.

Wilde published a volume of poems that increased his notoriety, although they were little more than pastiches of Swinburne and Pre-Raphaelite poets. In 1891, under the influence of the French decadent writer J.K.Huysmans, he published "The Picture of Dorian Gray".

Wilde's real popularity came, however from the series of comedies he wrote, starting with "Lady Windermere's Fan", produced in 1892, and reaching a climax with perhaps the most brilliant farce in the English language, "The Importance of Being Earnest", in 1895. Here all of Wilde's gifts for self-dramatization, for sophisticated dialogue and for gay absurdity reached fruition. He revitalized the English stage, which had lain dormant for over a century and laid the groundwork for the plays of George Bernard Shaw.

But disaster closed in on Wilde in the same year. Married and the father of two sons, Wilde had for years been indulging in homo-sexual practices with a variety of young men ranging from the elegant, spoiled Lord Alfred Douglas, who resembled Dorian Gray, to male prostitutes in the lowest strata of the London underworld. When Lord Alfred's father, the Marquess of Queensbury, insulted Wilde at his club one day, Wilde sued him for slander. He lost the suit and in turn was prosecuted by the crown for his sexual crimes. The trial became the scandal of the age. Wilde answered flippantly to the prosecution's charges, rejected the advice of his friend to escape to France and was condemned to two years at hard labour.

A broken man when he was released from Reading Gaol in 1898, Wilde went to France to live. His wife had left him, his plays had been immediately taken off stage, his property had been sold at auction. His spirit was broken by the years in prison. Only two more works worth noting came from his pen: the long, self-explanatory letter "De Profundis", written to Lord Alfred Douglas and the poem "The Ballad of Reading Gaol".

In Francewilde lived two years in squalor and poverty and died on November 30, 1900, a broken man, a victim both of his own weakness and folly and of a hypocritical, vengeful society.