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Dorian Gray Notes:

Context:

Oscar Wilde was born on October 16, 1854, in Dublin, Ireland. He was educated at Trinity College in Dublin and at Magdalen College, Oxford, and settled in London, where he married Constance Lloyd in 1884. In the literary world of Victorian London, Wilde fell in with an artistic crowd that included W. B. Yeats, the great Irish poet, and Lillie Langtry, mistress to the Prince of Wales. A great conversationalist and a famous wit, Wilde began by publishing mediocre poetry but soon achieved widespread fame for his comic plays. The first, *Vera; or, The Nihilists,* was published in 1880. Wilde followed this work with *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), *An Ideal Husband* (1895), and his most famous play, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). Although these plays relied upon relatively simple and familiar plots, they rose well above convention with their brilliant dialogue and biting satire.

Wilde published his only novel,*The Picture of Dorian Gray,*before he reached the height of his fame. The first edition appeared in the summer of 1890 in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine.* It was criticized as scandalous and immoral. Disappointed with its reception, Wilde revised the novel in 1891, adding a preface and six new chapters. The Preface (as Wilde calls it) anticipates some of the criticism that might be leveled at the novel and answers critics who charge *The Picture of Dorian Gray*with being an immoral tale. It also succinctly sets forth the tenets of Wilde's philosophy of art. Devoted to a school of thought and a mode of sensibility known as aestheticism, Wilde believed that art possesses an intrinsic value—that it is beautiful and therefore has worth, and thus needs serve no other purpose, be it moral or political. This attitude was revolutionary in Victorian England, where popular belief held that art was not only a function of morality but also a means of enforcing it. In the Preface, Wilde also cautioned readers against finding meanings "beneath the surface" of art. Part gothic novel, part comedy of manners, part treatise on the relationship between art and morality, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*continues to present its readers with a puzzle to sort out. There is as likely to be as much disagreement over its meaning now as there was among its Victorian audience, but, as Wilde notes near the end of the Preface, "Diversity of opinion about a work of art shows that the work is new, complex, and vital."

In 1891, the same year that the second edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was published, Wilde began a homosexual relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas, an aspiring but rather untalented poet. The affair caused a good deal of scandal, and Douglas's father, the marquess of Queensberry, eventually criticized it publicly. When Wilde sued the marquess for libel, he himself was convicted under English sodomy laws for acts of "gross indecency." In 1895, Wilde was sentenced to two years of hard labor, during which time he wrote a long, heartbreaking letter to Lord Alfred titled *De Profundis* (Latin for "Out of the Depths"). 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, but, in 1898, he did publish under a pseudonym *The Ballad of Reading Gaol,* a lengthy poem about a prisoner's feelings

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toward another prisoner about to be executed. Wilde died in Paris on November 30, 1900, having converted to Roman Catholicism on his deathbed.

Plot:

In the stately London home of his aunt, Lady Brandon, the well-known artist Basil Hallward meets Dorian Gray. Dorian is a cultured, wealthy, and impossibly beautiful young man who immediately captures Basil's artistic imagination. Dorian sits for several portraits, and Basil often depicts him as an ancient Greek hero or a mythological figure. When the novel opens, the artist is completing his first portrait of Dorian as he truly is, but, as he admits to his friend Lord Henry Wotton, the painting disappoints him because it reveals too much of his feeling for his subject. Lord Henry, a famous wit who enjoys scandalizing his friends by celebrating youth, beauty, and the selfish pursuit of pleasure, disagrees, claiming that the portrait is Basil's masterpiece. Dorian arrives at the studio, and Basil reluctantly introduces him to Lord Henry, who he fears will have a damaging influence on the impressionable, young Dorian.

Basil's fears are well founded; before the end of their first conversation, Lord Henry upsets Dorian with a speech about the transient nature of beauty and youth. Worried that these, his most impressive characteristics, are fading day by day, Dorian curses his portrait, which he believes will one day remind him of the beauty he will have lost. In a fit of distress, he pledges his soul if only the painting could bear the burden of age and infamy, allowing him to stay forever young. After Dorian's outbursts, Lord Henry reaffirms his desire to own the portrait; however, Basil insists the portrait belongs to Dorian.

Over the next few weeks, Lord Henry's influence over Dorian grows stronger. The youth becomes a disciple of the "new Hedonism" and proposes to live a life dedicated to the pursuit of pleasure. He falls in love with Sibyl Vane, a young actress who performs in a theatre in London's slums. He adores her acting; she, in turn, refers to him as "Prince Charming" and refuses to heed the warnings of her brother, James Vane, that Dorian is no good for her. Overcome by her emotions for Dorian, Sibyl decides that she can no longer act, wondering how she can pretend to love on the stage now that she has experienced the real thing. Dorian, who loves Sibyl *because* of her ability to act, cruelly breaks his engagement with her. After doing so, he returns home to notice that his face in Basil's portrait of him has changed: it now sneers. Frightened that his wish for his likeness in the painting to bear the ill effects of his behaviour has come true and that his sins will be recorded on the canvas, he resolves to make amends with Sibyl the next day. The following afternoon, however, Lord Henry brings news that Sibyl has killed herself. At Lord Henry's urging, Dorian decides to consider her death a sort of artistic triumph—she personified tragedy—and to put the matter behind him. Meanwhile, Dorian hides his portrait in a remote upper room of his house, where no one other than he can watch its transformation.

Lord Henry gives Dorian a book that describes the wicked exploits of a nineteenth-century Frenchman; it becomes Dorian's bible as he sinks ever deeper

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into a life of sin and corruption. He lives a life devoted to garnering new experiences and sensations with no regard for conventional standards of morality or the consequences of his actions. Eighteen years pass. Dorian's reputation suffers in circles of polite London society, where rumours spread regarding his scandalous exploits. His peers nevertheless continue to accept him because he remains young and beautiful. The figure in the painting, however, grows increasingly wizened and hideous. On a dark, foggy night, Basil Hallward arrives at Dorian's home to confront him about the rumours that plague his reputation. The two argue, and Dorian eventually offers Basil a look at his (Dorian's) soul. He shows Basil the now-hideous portrait, and Hallward, horrified, begs him to repent. Dorian claims it is too late for penance and kills Basil in a fit of rage.

In order to dispose of the body, Dorian employs the help of an estranged friend, a doctor, whom he blackmails. The night after the murder, Dorian makes his way to an opium den, where he encounters James Vane, who attempts to avenge Sibyl's death. Dorian escapes to his country estate. While entertaining guests, he notices James Vane peering in through a window, and he becomes wracked by fear and guilt. When a hunting party accidentally shoots and kills Vane, Dorian feels safe again. He resolves to amend his life but cannot muster the courage to confess his crimes, and the painting now reveals his supposed desire to repent for what it is—hypocrisy. In a fury, Dorian picks up the knife he used to stab Basil Hallward and attempts to destroy the painting. There is a crash, and his servants enter to find the portrait, unharmed, showing Dorian Gray as a beautiful young man. On the floor lies the body of their master—an old man, horribly wrinkled and disfigured, with a knife plunged into his heart.

MAJOR CONFLICT · Dorian Gray, having promised his soul in order to live a life of perpetual youth, must try to reconcile himself to the bodily decay and dissipation that are recorded in his portrait.

RISING ACTION · Dorian notices the change in his portrait after ending his affair with Sibyl Vane; he commits himself wholly to the "yellow book" and indulges his fancy without regard for his reputation; the discrepancy between his outer purity and his inner depravity surges.

CLIMAX · Dorian kills Basil Hallward.

FALLING ACTION · Dorian descends into London's opium dens; he attempts to express remorse to Lord Henry; he stabs his portrait, thereby killing himself.

Analysis: The Preface–Chapter Two

The Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a collection of epigrams that aptly sums up the philosophical tenets of the artistic and philosophical movement known as aestheticism. Aestheticism, which found its footing in Europe in the early nineteenth century, proposed that art need not serve moral, political, or otherwise didactic ends. Whereas the romantic movement of the early and mid-nineteenth century viewed art

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as a product of the human creative impulse that could be used to learn more about humankind and the world, the aesthetic movement denied that art must necessarily be an instructive force in order to be valuable. Instead, the aestheticists believed, art should be valuable in and of itself—*art for art's sake.* Near the end of the nineteenth century, Walter Pater, an English essayist and critic, suggested that life itself should be lived in the spirit of art. His views, especially those presented in a collection of essays called *The Renaissance,* had a profound impact on the English poets of the 1890s, most notably Oscar Wilde.

Aestheticism flourished partly as a reaction against the materialism of the burgeoning middle class, assumed to be composed of philistines (individuals ignorant of art) who responded to art in a generally unrefined manner. In this climate, the artist could assert him- or herself as a remarkable and rarefied being, one leading the search for beauty in an age marked by shameful class inequality, social hypocrisy, and bourgeois complacency. No one latched onto this attitude more boldly, or with more flair, than Oscar Wilde. His determination to live a life of beauty and to mould his life into a work of art is reflected in the beliefs and actions of several characters in Wilde's only novel.

The Picture of Dorian Gray has often been compared to the famous German legend of Faust, immortalized in Christopher Marlowe's sixteenth-century play *Doctor Faustus* and in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's nineteenth-century poem *Faust.* The legend tells of a learned doctor who sells his soul to the devil in return for knowledge and magical abilities. Although Dorian Gray never contracts with the devil, his sacrifice is similar: he trades his soul for the luxury of eternal youth. For its overtones of supernaturalism, its refusal to satisfy popular morality, and its portrayal of homoerotic culture, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was met with harsh criticism. Many considered the novel dangerously subversive, one offended critic calling it "a poisonous book, the atmosphere of which is heavy with the mephitic odours of moral and spiritual putrefaction."

The fear of a bad—or good—influence is, in fact, one of the novel's primary concerns. As a work that sets forth a philosophy of aestheticism, the novel questions the degree and kind of influence a work of art can have over an individual. Furthermore, since the novel conceives of art as including a well-lived life, it is also interested in the kind of influence one person can have over another. After all, the artful Lord Henry himself has as profound an effect upon Dorian's life as Basil's painting does.

While Lord Henry exercises influence over other characters primarily through his skilful use of language, it is Dorian's beauty that seduces the characters with whom he associates. Basil, a serious artist and rather dull moralist, admits that Dorian has had "[s]ome subtle influence" over him; it is this influence that Basil is certain that his painting reveals. As he confides to Lord Henry, "I have put into it some expression of all this curious artistic idolatry." Ultimately, however, Lord Henry's brilliant speech is a much more influential force than aesthetic beauty. His witty and biting epigrams threaten to seduce not only the impressionable young Dorian but the reader as well.

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Lord Henry's ironic speech cuts through social convention and hypocrisy to reveal unexpected, unpleasant truths.

The characters whose lifestyles Lord Henry criticizes resist his extreme theories. Basil's resistance to Lord Henry's argument that scandal is a function of class typifies the reactions of the characters whom Lord Henry criticizes; after all, their position and comfort depend upon the hypocrisies he tends to expose. To some degree, every character in the novel is seduced by Lord Henry's philosophies, Dorian Gray more so than anyone else. In these opening chapters, Dorian emerges as an incredibly impressionable young man, someone who Basil fears is open to the "influence" of Lord Henry, which will "spoil" him. Basil's fear is well founded, as before the end of his first conversation with Lord Henry, Dorian is "dimly conscious that entirely fresh influences were at work within him."

Analysis: Chapters Three–Four

The Picture of Dorian Gray is a curious mixture of different genres. It displays Wilde's incomparable talent for social comedy and satire, even as it veers toward the formula for Gothic literature. Gothic fiction, which was tremendously popular in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, focused on tales of romance, cruelty, and horror. By the end of the nineteenth century, the formula had changed considerably, but these basic tenets remained intact. Dorian's mysterious and melodramatic heritage alludes to conventions of the Gothic novel: his wicked grandfather, his parents' cursed elopement, his father's murder, and his mother's early death represent a type of moody romance popular among Gothic authors. As the critic Donald Lawler points out, Dorian's ancestry is identical to that of the main characters in three of Wilde's short stories.

The first two chapters of the novel show Lord Henry's powers of seduction, but in Chapters Three and Four Lord Henry himself is seduced. Strictly speaking, it is not a person who draws Lord Henry in, but the possibility of having a profound effect on a person, namely Dorian: "there was something terribly enthralling in the exercise of influence." To project his soul onto Dorian and seize his spirit just as Dorian has seized Basil's imagination becomes Lord Henry's greatest desire. In Lord Henry's mind, life and art are not only connected but interchangeable. By moulding Dorian into "a marvellous type" of boy, Lord Henry believes that he is countering the effects of "an age so limited and vulgar" as his own. He imagines that he will take his place among such masters as the great Italian artist Michelangelo, with whom he shares the imperative to create something of beauty. The fact that Lord Henry considers the life of another human being a viable medium for artistic expression indicates "[t]he new manner in art" that Wilde so tirelessly advocated. Indeed, many readers might find Lord Henry heartless, given his willingness to watch Dorian's development with practically no thought of consequence. After all, Dorian's beauty is all that matters to him, and "[i]t was no matter [to Lord Henry] how it all ended, or was destined to end." This behaviour merely links Lord Henry to the tenets of aestheticism, whereby beauty is of primary importance, and vice and virtue—as Wilde states in the novel's preface—are nothing more than "materials for an art."

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If the opening chapters position the three main characters in a triangular relationship, wherein Lord Henry and Basil vie for Dorian's soul and affections, Lord Henry quickly wins at the end of Chapter Three. In Dorian's declaration that he will miss his appointment with Basil in order to hear Lord Henry speak, we see that Lord Henry's hopes to dominate and influence the young man have more or less been fulfilled. Dorian gives his affections over largely because of Lord Henry's conversational skill; he asks Lord Henry to "promise to talk to me all the time." Indeed, Lord Henry is a great talker, a wonderful philosopher of "the new Hedonism," but, unlike Dorian, he acts on nothing that would damage his respectable reputation or life.

Analysis: Chapters Five–Six

Critical reception of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was mixed, with many readers condemning the novel as decadent or unmanly. The relationship between Lord Henry and Dorian, as well the one of Basil and Dorian, is clearly homoerotic, and must have shocked readers who valued Victorian respectability. Although Wilde stops short of stating that Basil and Lord Henry have sexual feelings for Dorian, the language he uses to describe their devotion to Dorian is unmistakably the language of deep, romantic intimacy. Wilde's language of irony facilitates dodging direct statements; in one scene, for example, although the ostensible topic of conversation is Dorian as a subject for portraits, the exchange between Basil and Lord Henry betrays the romantic nature of Basil's feelings:

> *[Lord Henry:] "Tell me more about Mr Dorian Gray. How often do you see him?"*
> *[Basil Hallward:] "Every day. I couldn't be happy if I didn't see him everyday. He is absolutely necessary to me."*

Men do have relationships with women in the novel—Dorian falls in love with Sibyl and Lord Henry himself is married—but the novel's heterosexual relationships prove to be rather superficial and short-lived. If the novel is homoerotic, it is also misogynistic. Victoria Wotton, like most of the women in the novel, is depicted with no real depth: she is briefly (and not kindly) introduced, never to be heard from again. The most significant female character in the novel is Sibyl, who seems to fulfill Lord Henry's observation that "[w]omen are a decorative sex." There is precious little substance to Sibyl's character, as becomes clear in following chapters when she so easily gives up her greatest talent in order to pursue a relationship with Dorian. In this section, as she strolls through the park with James, she emerges as a rather foolishly romantic young woman. She is perfectly content to fall in love with a stranger whom she knows only by the fairy-tale name with which she has christened him. Indeed, Sibyl is little more than a placeholder in a prefabricated romance. Dorian says nearly as much when he describes the thrill of seeing her placed "on a pedestal of gold . . . to see the world worship the woman who is mine." This sentiment confirms Lord Henry's ego-driven philosophy of women as ornaments as well as the male-centred focus of Wilde's narrative gaze: men—particularly their relationships and the influence they bring to bear upon one another—matter most in *The Picture of Dorian Gray.*

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More important than Lord Henry's philosophy of the role of women, however, is his insistence on the necessity of individualism. As a mode of thinking, individualism took centre stage during the nineteenth century. It was first celebrated by the Romantics, who, in the early 1800's, decided that free and spontaneous expression of the self was the true source of art and literature. The Romantics rejected the eighteenth-century sensibility that sought to imitate and reproduce the classical models of ancient Greece and Rome, which were perceived as too stylized to allow for the expression of anything genuine or relevant. Holding the self as the centre of creation, Romanticism inevitably emphasized personal freedom, sensory experience, and the special status of the artist. By the time Wilde wrote *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* however, the romantic belief that man could realize these things in himself by returning to nature had largely faded. Indeed, Wilde's novel marks an interesting shift in the changing philosophy of the times. For although the residue of the Romantic movement can be seen in Dorian's story—Lord Henry advocates that nothing should hinder the freedom of the artistic individual's development—the means by which that development occurs in the story is noticeably different. In the world of *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* art is to be made by submerging oneself in society rather than escaping from it.

Analysis: Chapters Seven–Eight

Dorian's romance with Sibyl represents the possibility that he will not accept Lord Henry's philosophy and will instead learn to prize human beings and emotions over art. His love for her allows him to resist Lord Henry's seductive words, noting to Lord Henry, "When I am with her, I regret all that you have taught me. . . . [T]he mere touch of Sibyl Vane's hand makes me forget you and all your wrong, fascinating, poisonous, delightful theories." But just as Lord Henry appreciates Dorian as a work of art rather than as a human being, what Dorian values most about Sibyl is her talent as an actress—her ability to portray an ideal, not her true self. The extent of Lord Henry's influence is painfully clear as Dorian heartlessly snubs Sibyl, who claims that her real love for him prohibits her from acting out such emotions onstage. Surely, to modern readers, Sibyl's devotion to Dorian—not to mention her grief over losing him—seems a bit melodramatic. She is a rather thinly drawn character, but she serves two important functions. First, she forces us to question what precisely art is and when its effects are good. Second, she shows the pernicious consequences of a philosophy that places beauty and self-pleasure above consideration for others. Sibyl's tragic fate enables us to be as critical of Wilde's philosophies as he himself was at the end of his life.

Sibyl's claim that Dorian gives her "something higher, something of which all art is but a reflection" stands in undeniable contrast to Lord Henry's philosophy, in which art is the highest experience and life imitates art rather than vice versa. Indeed, time and again, Lord Henry delights in ignoring the significance of human emotions. Even though Sibyl's conception of art as a reflection of grand emotions counters Lord Henry's (and Wilde's) philosophy of art, it resonates throughout the remainder of the novel. Indeed, Sibyl's philosophy is echoed in the very portrait of Dorian, since it is a reflection of Dorian's true self.

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The answer to the narrator's question as to whether the changing portrait "[w]ould … teach [Dorian] to loathe his own soul" is yes, as Dorian grows increasingly uncomfortable over the course of the novel with what the disfigured portrait signifies about himself. As the novel progresses and the painting continues to register the effects of time and dissipation, we see the degree to which Dorian is undone by the sins that his portrait reflects and the degree to which he suffers for allowing the painting to act as a "visible emblem of conscience." The aging of Dorian's likeness in the portrait ultimately contradicts some of Lord Henry's—and Wilde's—beliefs about art: the painting does *not* exist in a moral vacuum. Instead, the painting both shows the deleterious effects of sin and gives Dorian a sense of freedom from morality; it thus influences and is influenced by morality.

Analysis: Chapters Nine–Ten

Sibyl's death compels Dorian to make the conscious decision to embrace Lord Henry's philosophy of selfishness and hedonism wholeheartedly. The contrast between Dorian's and Basil's reactions to Sibyl's death demonstrates the degree to which Lord Henry has changed Dorian. Dorian dismisses the need for grief in words that echo Lord Henry's: Sibyl need not be mourned, he proclaims, for she has "passed . . . into the sphere of art." In other words, Dorian thinks of Sibyl's death as he would the death of a character in a novel or painting, and chooses not to be affected emotionally by her passing. This attitude reveals one way in which the novel blurs the distinction between life and art. Dorian himself passes "into the sphere of art" when his portrait reflects the physical manifestations of age and sin. While it is usually paintings that never age and people who do, it is the other way around with Dorian, as he has become more like a work of art than a human.

Basil's declaration of his obsession with Dorian is in many ways a defence and justification of homosexual love. In 1895, five years after *Dorian Gray* was published, Wilde was famously convicted of sodomy for his romantic relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas. Wilde defended homosexual love as an emotion experienced by some of the world's greatest men. He insisted that it had its roots in ancient Greece and was, therefore, fundamental to the development of Western thought and culture. In his trial, when asked to describe the "love that dare not speak its name," Wilde explained it as:

> *such a great affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan, such as Plato made the very basis of his philosophy, and such as you find in the sonnets of Michelangelo and Shakespeare. . . . It is beautiful, it is fine, it is the noblest form of affection. There is nothing unnatural about it.*

This testimony is strikingly similar to Dorian's reflection upon the kind of affection that Basil shows him:

> *[I]t was really love—[it] had nothing in it that was not noble and intellectual. It was not that mere physical admiration of beauty that is born of the senses,*

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> *and that dies when the senses tire. It was such love as Michael Angelo had known, and Montaigne, and Winckelmann, and Shakespeare himself.*

Basil translates these highly emotional and physical feelings into his art; his act of painting is an expression of his love for Dorian. This romantic devotion to Dorian becomes clear when he admits his reason for not wanting to exhibit the painting: he fears that people will see his "idolatry."

Dorian reflects, for a moment, that with this love Basil might have saved him from Lord Henry's influence, but he soon resigns himself to living a life dictated by the pursuit of passion. He devours the mysterious "yellow book" that Lord Henry gives him, which acts almost as a guide for the journey on which he is to travel. Like the protagonist of that novel, Dorian spirals into a world of self-gratification and exotic sensations. Although Wilde, in letters, identified the novel as imaginary, it is based in part on the nineteenth-century French novel *À Rebours* ("Against the Grain" or "Against Nature"), by Joris-Karl Huysmans, in which a decadent and wealthy Frenchman indulges himself in a host of bizarre sensory experiences. The yellow book has profound influence on Dorian; one might argue that it leads to his downfall. This downfall occurs not because the book itself is immoral (one need only recall the Preface's insistence that "[t]here is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book") but because Dorian allows the book to dominate and determine his actions so completely. It becomes, for Dorian, a doctrine as limiting and stultifying as the common Victorian morals from which he seeks escape. After all, Lord Henry is a great fan of the yellow book, but, to his mind, it is no greater or more important than any other work of notable art. He does not let it dominate his life or determine his actions, which, in turn, allows him to retain the respectability that Dorian soon loses.

Analysis: Chapters Eleven–Twelve

In the eighteen years that pass over the course of these two chapters, Dorian undergoes a profound psychological and behavioural transformation, though he remains the same physically. Although his behaviour is, in part, a function of the Gothic nature of Wilde's tale—his mysterious, potentially dangerous behaviour contributes to the novel's darkness—Dorian does not simply devolve into a villain. Though he exhibits inhuman behaviour as he carelessly tosses aside his protégés (and his sins are only to become worse), he never completely sheds his conscience. This divide further manifests itself in that when Dorian looks at the painting of his dissipated self, he "sometimes loath[es] it and himself," while at other times he is overwhelmed by "that pride of individualism that is half the fascination of sin, and smil[es] with secret pleasure at the misshapen shadow that had to bear the burden that should have been his own." This tension points to the conflicted nature of Dorian's character.

We might consider Dorian's search for artistic and intellectual enlightenment—much of which is catalogued in Chapter Eleven—an attempt to find refuge from the struggle between mindless egotism and gnawing guilt. Indeed, Dorian lives a life marked by fear and suspicion. He finds it difficult to leave London, giving up the country villa he shares with Lord Henry for fear that someone will stumble upon the

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dreaded portrait in his absence. One can argue that Dorian turns to the study of perfumes, jewels, musical instruments, and tapestries as a source of comfort.

Certainly Dorian's greatest reason for indulging in the studies that Wilde describes at length is his disenchantment with the age in which he lives. Commonly referred to as the fin-de-siècle (French for "end of the century") period, the 1890's in England and Europe were marked by a world-weary sensibility that sought to free humanity from "the asceticism that deadens the senses." In art, this so-called asceticism referred primarily to artistic styles known as naturalism and realism, both of which aimed at reproducing the world as it is and ascribed a moral purpose to art. Dorian, taking the teachings of Lord Henry and the mysterious yellow book as scripture, believes that hedonism is the means by which he will rise above the "harsh, uncomely puritanism" of his age. This philosophy counters "any theory or system that would involve the sacrifice of any mode of passionate experience," which echoes the Preface's insistence that artists should not make distinctions between virtue and vice.

According to this line of thinking, an experience is valuable in and of itself, regardless of its moral implications. Certainly, as Dorian lives his life under the rubric of aesthetic philosophy, he comes to appreciate the seductive beauty of the darker side of life, feeling "a curious delight in the thought that Art, like Nature, has her monsters, things of bestial shape and with hideous voices."

A possible seed of Dorian's undoing might be his intellectual development. Dorian is supposedly the personification of a type—a perfect blend of the scholar and the socialite—who lives his life, as Lord Henry dictates, as an individualist. Indeed, we are told that "no theory of life seemed to him to be of any importance compared with life itself." But, paradoxically, even the tenets of Dorian's "new Hedonism" prove constricting. It appears that he may have allowed himself to be too strongly influenced by Lord Henry and the yellow book, and that the philosophy of hedonism, meant to spare its followers from the conformities of dulling Victorian morality, may have simply become another, equally limiting doctrine.

Analysis: Chapters Thirteen–Fourteen

Chapters Thirteen and Fourteen take a decided turn for the macabre: the murder of Basil and the gruesome way it is reflected in the portrait—"as though the canvas had sweated blood"—root the novel firmly in the Gothic tradition, where darkness and supernatural horrors reign. In this setting, it becomes a challenge for Wilde to keep his hero from becoming a flat archetype of menacing evil. Much to his credit, he manages to keep Dorian a somewhat sympathetic character, even as he commits an unspeakable crime and blackmails a once dear friend to help him cover it up. Dorian remains worthy of sympathy because we see clearly the failure of his struggle to rise above a troubled conscience. With a murder added to his growing list of sins, Dorian wants nothing more than to be able to shrug off his guilt: he perceives Basil's corpse as a "thing" sitting in a chair and tries to lose himself in the lines of a French poet. The most telling evidence of Dorian's guilt can be seen as he sits waiting for the arrival of Alan Campbell; Dorian draws and soon remarks that "every face that he drew seemed to have a fantastic likeness to Basil Hallward." This scene resonates

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with the Chapter Nine scene in which Dorian asks the artist to draw a picture of Sibyl Vane so that he may better remember her: in both instances, the hedonistic Dorian betrays his gnawing conscience.

Throughout the novel, Basil acts as a sort of moral ballast, reminding Lord Henry and Dorian of the price that must be paid for their pleasure seeking. In these chapters, he provides a fascinating counterpoint to the philosophy by which Dorian lives. Refusing to believe that the dissipation of a soul can occur without notice, he claims that "[i]f a wretched man has a vice, it shows itself in the lines of his mouth, the droop of his eyelids, the moulding of his hands even." The introduction of such an opposing view discloses Wilde's love of contradiction. In his essay "The Truth of Masks," Wilde wrote that "[a] Truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true." Indeed, the truth of *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* if one is to be found, emerges from oppositions. After all, as Dorian reflects while gazing upon his ruined portrait, art depends as much upon horror as it does upon "marvellous beauty," just as one's being is always the synthesis of a "Heaven and Hell."

Like the other secondary characters in the novel, Alan Campbell is introduced and rather quickly ignored. His appearance, however, plays a vital role in establishing the darkening mood of the novel. The macabre experiments that he is accustomed to conducting as a chemist provide him with the knowledge that Dorian finds so necessary. Furthermore, the secrets that surround his personal life contribute to the air of mystery that surrounds Dorian. It is significant that the reader never learns the details of the circumstances by which Dorian blackmails Campbell. Given Wilde's increasingly indiscreet lifestyle and the increasingly hostile social attitudes toward homosexuality that flourished at the end of the nineteenth century, the reader can assume that Campbell's transgression is of a sexual nature. In 1885, the British Parliament passed the Labouchere Amendment, which widened prohibitions against male homosexual acts to include not only sodomy (which was punishable by death until 1861) but also "gross indecency" (meaning oral sex), an offense that carried a two-year prison term. Oscar Wilde himself was eventually found guilty of the latter offense. This new law was commonly known as the Blackmailer's Charter. Thus, Alan Campbell, a seemingly inconsequential character, serves as an important indicator of the social prejudices and punishments in Wilde's time.

Analysis: Chapters Fifteen–Sixteen

When Lord Henry alludes to the "*[f]in de siècle*" (or "end of the century") in Chapter Fifteen, he refers more to the sensibilities that flourished in the 1890s than the chronological time period. In this decade, many people in continental Europe and England felt an unshakable sense of discontent. The values that once seemed to structure life and give it meaning were apparently lost. Two main reasons for this disenchantment were linked to the public functions of art and morality, which, in Victorian England, seemed inextricably connected. Art, it was thought, should function as a moral barometer; to the minds of many, this dictum left room for only the most restrictive morals and the most unimaginative art. The term "fin de siècle" therefore came to describe a mode of thinking that sought to escape this

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disenchantment and restore beauty to art and reshape (and broaden) public understandings of morality.

In a way, though Dorian lives a life very much in tune with fin-de-siècle thinking, he rejects Victorian morals in favour of self-determined ethics based on pleasure and experience, and he retains—and is tortured by—a very Victorian mind-set. Indeed, by viewing the painting of himself as "the most magical of mirrors," Dorian disavows the tenets of aestheticism that demand that art be completely freed of its connection to morality. The picture becomes the gauge by which Dorian measures his downfall and serves as a constant reminder of the sins that plague his conscience. If we understand Dorian as a victim of this Victorian circumstance, we can read his drastic course of action in a more sympathetic light. Indeed, by Chapter Sixteen, he is a man desperate to forget the sins for which he believes he can never be forgiven. As he sinks into the sordidness of the London docks and their opium dens, he reflects:

> *Ugliness was the one reality. The coarse brawl, the loathsome den, the crude violence of disordered life, the very vileness of thief and outcast, were more vivid, in their intense actuality of impression, than all the gracious shapes of Art, the dreamy shadows of Song.*

Here, Dorian's thoughts echo French poets like Charles Baudelaire and Arthur Rimbaud, who believed that the description of intense experience was the key to true beauty, even (or perhaps especially) when the experience itself was something sordid, ugly, or grotesque. Indeed, in this trip to the opium den, Dorian intends to do nothing less than "cure the soul by means of the senses, and the senses by means of the soul."

Of course, what Dorian finds in the opium den has a far less curative effect than he hopes. The presence of Adrian Singleton, a young man whose downfall and subsequent drug addiction is at least partially Dorian's fault, pains Dorian's conscience and makes it impossible for him to "escape from himself." The reintroduction of James Vane makes this idea of escape quite literal. The avenging brother is, admittedly, a rather weak (albeit convenient) plot device that Wilde added to his 1891 revision of the novel. If Dorian fears and wishes to escape from himself, we can consider James the physical incarnation of that fear: James exists to precipitate the troubled Dorian's final breakdown.

Analysis: Chapters Seventeen–Eighteen

Lord Henry's belief, uttered after the fatal hunting accident, that "[d]estiny does not send us heralds. She is too wise or too cruel for that," contrasts with Dorian's experience. In many ways, Basil's portrait of Dorian illustrates how destiny shapes Dorian's life, for while Dorian himself remains immune to the effects of time, his ever-deteriorating likeness in the portrait is indeed an undeniable herald of his ultimate downfall. The picture interrupts the pleasant reality of Dorian's life to remind him of his soul's dissipation. Although the aestheticists believed that art existed for its own sake, Dorian's experience demonstrates the limitations of that view. The painting becomes almost immediately a physical manifestation of conscience; it shows Dorian what is right and what is wrong in a very literal sense, and he

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frequently inspects the painting after committing an immoral or unethical act to see exactly how his conscience interprets that act. Ultimately, then, and in contrast to Lord Henry's philosophies, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* emphasizes the relationship between art and morality.

In addition to complicating the reader's understanding of art, which, as the novel draws to its close, becomes complex and somewhat paradoxical, Wilde demonstrates his characteristic flair for comedy and biting social satire. In Chapter Seventeen, Dorian's conversation with the Duchess of Monmouth and Lord Henry testifies to one of the skills that made Wilde the most celebrated playwright of his day. His brilliantly witty dialogue is responsible for his status as one of the most effective practitioners of the comedy of manners. A comedy of manners revolves around the complex and sophisticated behaviour of the social elite, among whom one's character is determined more by appearance than by moral behaviour. Certainly, by this definition, Lord Henry becomes something of a hero in the novel, as, even by his own admission, he cares much more for the beautiful than for the good.

Given the increasing seriousness of Dorian's plight and the ever-darkening state of his mind, the bulk of Chapter Seventeen serves as comic relief, as the dialogue between the duchess and Lord Henry is light and full of witticisms. Their exchange points to the relatively shallow nature of their society, in which love and morality amount to an appreciation of surfaces: as another lady of society reminds Dorian in Chapter Fifteen, "you are made to be good—you look so good." Here, morality is a function not of action or belief but of mere appearances.

Lord Henry's dismissive conception of England as a land founded on beer, the Bible, and repressive, unimaginative virtues serves as biting commentary of traditional, middle-class English morality. According to Lord Henry, a population whose tastes run to malt liquor and whose morality is determined by Christian dogma is doomed to produce little of artistic value. His sentiments align with the aesthetics' desire to free themselves (and art) from the bonds of conventional morality and sensibilities. Sympathetic as Wilde himself was to Lord Henry's opinions, he provides here a vital counterpoint to these opinions: the duchess's criticism that Lord Henry values beauty too highly begs us to ask the same question of Dorian and the aesthetic philosophy that dominates his life.

Analysis: Chapters Nineteen–Twenty

The contrast between Lord Henry and Dorian in Chapter Nineteen is instructive. When the novel begins, Lord Henry appears as a figure of worldly wisdom who seduces the naïve Dorian with fawning compliments and a celebration of selfishness and hedonism. Now that Dorian has actually *lived* the philosophy that Lord Henry so eloquently champions, however, he stands as proof of the limitations—indeed, even the misguided notions—of that philosophy. In the novel's final pages, Dorian is world-weary and borne down by the weight of his sins, while Lord Henry seems almost childishly naïve as he repeats his long-held but poorly informed beliefs. When Dorian all but confesses to Basil's murder, Lord Henry flippantly dismisses him, since

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his worldview holds that “[c]rime belongs exclusively to the lower orders.” Only Lord Henry, who has never actually done any of the things he has inspired Dorian to do, could have the luxury of this thought. By keeping himself free from sin, even as he argues the virtues of sinning, Lord Henry lacks the terrible awareness of guilt and its debilitating effects. While the street preacher’s rhetorical question about earthly gain at the cost of spiritual loss (from the New Testament, Mark 8:36) haunts Dorian, it holds no real meaning for Lord Henry.

At this stage, however, not even truthful self-awareness is enough to save Dorian. In his final moments, he attempts to repent the murder of Basil, the suicides of Sibyl Vane and Alan Campbell, and his countless other sins by refraining from seducing and ruining a naïve village girl. The discrepancy between the enormity of his crimes and this minor act of contrition is too great. Furthermore, he realizes that he does not want to confess his sins but rather have them simply go away. The portrait reflects this hypocrisy and drives him to his final, desperate act. He decides it is better to destroy the last evidence of his sin—the painting of his soul—than face up to his own depravity. The depravity he seeks to destroy is, in essence, himself; therefore, by killing it, he kills himself.

The end of the novel suggests a number of possible interpretations of Dorian’s death. It may be his punishment for living the life of a hedonist, and for prizing beauty too highly, in which case the novel would be a criticism of the philosophy of aestheticism. But it is just as possible that Dorian is suffering for having violated the creeds of aestheticism. In other words, one can argue that Dorian’s belief that his portrait reflects the state of his soul violates the principles of aestheticism, since, within that philosophy, art has no moral component. This reading is more in keeping with Wilde’s personal philosophies and with the events of his life. In fact, elements of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* have an almost prophetic ring to them. Like Basil Hallward, Wilde would meet a tragic end brought about by his unrestrained worship of a beautiful young man. Additionally, like Alan Campbell, whom Dorian blackmails with vague threats of exposed secrets, Wilde would be punished for sexual indiscretions. Given the public nature of Wilde’s trial and entire life—he was, in many ways, the first celebrity personality—it is impossible to ignore these parallels while reading *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In *De Profundis,* Wilde’s long letter to his lover, written from prison, he admits the limitations of the modes of thought and living that structured his life:

> *I let myself be lured into long spells of senseless and sensual ease. I amused myself with being a flaneur, a dandy; a man of fashion. . . . Tired of being on the heights, I deliberately went to the depths in the search for new sensation. What the paradox was to me in the sphere of thought, perversity became to me in the sphere of passion. Desire, at the end, was malady, or a madness, or both. I grew careless of the lives of others, I took pleasure where it pleased me, and passed on. I forgot that every little action of the common day makes or unmakes character, and that therefore what one has done in the secret chamber one has someday to cry aloud on the house-tops. I ceased to be lord over myself. I was no longer the captain of my soul, and did not know it. I allowed pleasure to dominate me. I ended in horrible disgrace.*

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The philosophy that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* proposes can be extremely seductive and liberating. But Wilde's words here reveal that society, conscience, or more likely both together ultimately make living that philosophy extremely difficult and even painful.

Important Quotes:

1.

> *We are punished for our refusals. Every impulse that we strive to strangle broods in the mind, and poisons us. The body sins once, and has done with its sin, for action is a mode of purification. . . . Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden to itself, with desire for what its monstrous laws have made monstrous and unlawful. It has been said that the great events of the world take place in the brain. It is in the brain, and the brain only, that the great sins of the world take place also.*

Lord Henry begins his seduction of Dorian's mind with these words in Chapter Two. Lord Henry advocates a return to the "Hellenic ideal," to the sensibilities of ancient Greece where the appreciation of beauty reigned. He strikes a contrast between those glory days and the present mode of living, which, he believes, is marked by a morality that demands self-denial. The outcome of denial, he goes on to say, is only a stronger desire for that which has been denied. This passage is a bold challenge to conventional and restrictive Victorian morality; it dismisses the notion of sin as a figment of the imagination. Interestingly, if sin is relegated to the mind, as Lord Henry would have it, then it should follow that the body is free from the effects of sin. According to this line of thinking, Dorian's tragedy, then, is that he is unable to purge his "monstrous and unlawful" acts from his conscience. One must remember, however, that Lord Henry has failed to put his philosophy to the test. Although he is a great advocate of sin, he is hardly a sinner, and his understanding of the soul—sickened or otherwise—never incorporates the knowledge that Dorian gradually acquires.

2.

> *"To be good is to be in harmony with one's self," he replied, touching the thin stem of his glass with his pale, fine-pointed fingers. "Discord is to be forced to be in harmony with others. One's own life—that is the important thing. As for the lives of one's neighbours, if one wishes to be a prig or a Puritan, one can flaunt one's moral views about them, but they are not one's concern. Besides, Individualism has really the higher aim. Modern morality consists in accepting the standard of one's age. I consider that for any man of culture to accept the standard of his age is a form of the grossest immorality."*

As Dorian prepares, in Chapter Six, to escort Lord Henry and Basil to the theare to see Sibyl Vane perform, Lord Henry chastises Dorian for dismissing, in the face of love, all of his "wrong, fascinating, poisonous, delightful theories." Here, Lord Henry expounds on the virtues of individualism, which dictate that one develop according to one's own standards. His outlook relies on Darwinism, a fashionable theory at the time that asserted that an organism's development would be altered or impaired if it were made to adjust to the standards of another organism. Lord Henry fancies that

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he and Dorian are creatures that require different standards than the masses in order to develop fully. Thus, he readily rejects modern morality, which governs the many, in avour of a self-determined morality that applies only to himself. Although far from a prig or a Puritan, Lord Henry does spend an inordinate amount of time worrying over Dorian's development. Contrary to the principle of individualism he takes the time to relate, he not only does his best to insinuate himself between Dorian and Sibyl, but he also takes up Dorian's proper social development as his pet cause.

3.

> *Yes: there was to be, as Lord Henry had prophesied, a new Hedonism that was to re-create life, and to save it from that harsh, uncomely puritanism that is having, in our own day, its curious revival. It was to have its service of the intellect, certainly; yet it was never to accept any theory or system that would involve the sacrifice of any mode of passionate experience. Its aim, indeed, was to be experience itself, and not the fruits of experience, sweet or bitter as they might be. Of the asceticism that deadens the senses, as of the vulgar profligacy that dulls them, it was to know nothing. But it was to teach man to concentrate himself upon the moments of a life that is itself but a moment.*

This passage from Chapter Eleven describes how Dorian, adjusting to the strange privilege that his portrait affords him, devotes himself to acquiring as many experiences as possible. Here, in order to discover "the true nature of the senses," Dorian studies rare musical instruments, the arts of jewellery and embroidery, and the psychological effects of perfume. In addition to these pursuits, he begins to devote his time to more sordid affairs, the nature of which is never perfectly clear. We learn, from Basil's subsequent confrontation, that Dorian is connected with the downfall of numerous youths, all of whom have been brought to shame (and some even driven to suicide) by their associations with Dorian. Whether the outcome of these experiences is "sweet or bitter" is not the point of the philosophy by which Dorian lives; on the contrary, the experience itself is what matters. This "new Hedonism" is a form of resistance against the conventional morality that Lord Henry spends so much of his time criticizing.

4.

> *Society, civilized society at least, is never very ready to believe anything to the detriment of those who are both rich and fascinating. It feels instinctively that manners are of more importance than morals, and, in its opinion, the highest respectability is of much less value than the possession of a good chef. And, after all, it is a very poor consolation to be told that the man who has given one a bad dinner, or poor wine, is irreproachable in his private life. Even the cardinal virtues cannot atone for half-cold entrées, as Lord Henry remarked once, in a discussion on the subject; and there is possibly a good deal to be said for his view. For the canons of good society are, or should be, the same as the canons of art. Form is absolutely essential to it. It should have the dignity of a ceremony, as well as its unreality, and should combine the insincere character of a romantic play with the wit and beauty that make*

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> *such plays delightful to us. Is insincerity such a terrible thing? I think not. It is merely a method by which we can multiply our personalities.*

This passage, taken from Chapter Eleven, is important because it contains the novel's only lapse into first-person narration. Here, Wilde appears from behind the scenes to comment on civilized society. He asks the reader if the insincerity necessary to conduct oneself in polite society is "such a terrible thing," and admits that, in his opinion, it is not. He points, rather unapologetically, to the surface nature of the society in which he lives and repeats a favorite epigram that he also includes in his play *Lady Windermere's Fan*: "manners are of more importance than morals." Indeed, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* fully supports the observations that Wilde makes in this paragraph. Despite the corrupt nature of Dorian's soul and despite his utter lack of an acceptable moral code, he continues to be welcomed into society merely because he looks good.

5.

> *"[Y]ou poisoned me with a book once. I should not forgive that. Harry, promise me that you will never lend that book to anyone. It does harm."*
> *"My dear boy, you are really beginning to moralize. You will soon be going about like the converted, and the revivalist, warning people against all the sins of which you have grown tired. You are much too delightful to do that…. As for being poisoned by a book, there is no such thing as that. Art has no influence upon action. It annihilates the desire to act. It is superbly sterile. The books that the world calls immoral are books that show the world its own shame."*

This exchange between Dorian and Lord Henry takes place in Chapter Nineteen, as Dorian, flayed by his conscience, pledges to live a reformed life. Reflecting on the course of his past twenty years, he confronts Lord Henry, whom he believes is responsible for leading him astray. Dorian criticizes the yellow book that, years before, had such a profound influence over him, claiming that this book did him great harm. This accusation is, of course, alien to Wilde's philosophy of aestheticism, which holds that art cannot be either moral or immoral. Lord Henry says as much, refusing to believe that a book could have such power. While there is something seductive in his observation that "the world calls immoral . . . books that show the world its own shame," Lord Henry's words here are less convincing than other statements to the same effect that he makes earlier in the novel. In the latter stages of the novel, we know of Dorian's downfall, and we know that he is anything but "delightful." At this point, Lord Henry's praising of Dorian makes Lord Henry seem hopelessly naïve, the victim of a philosophy whose consequences elude him.

Characters:

Dorian Gray

At the opening of the novel, Dorian Gray exists as something of an ideal: he is the archetype of male youth and beauty. As such, he captures the imagination of Basil Hallward, a painter, and Lord Henry Wotton, a nobleman who imagines fashioning the impressionable Dorian into an unremitting pleasure-seeker. Dorian is

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exceptionally vain and becomes convinced, in the course of a brief conversation with Lord Henry, that his most salient characteristics—his youth and physical attractiveness—are ever waning. The thought of waking one day without these attributes sends Dorian into a tailspin: he curses his fate and pledges his soul if only he could live without bearing the physical burdens of aging and sinning. He longs to be as youthful and lovely as the masterpiece that Basil has painted of him, and he wishes that the portrait could age in his stead. His vulnerability and insecurity in these moments make him excellent clay for Lord Henry's willing hands.
Dorian soon leaves Basil's studio for Lord Henry's parlour, where he adopts the tenets of "the new Hedonism" and resolves to live his life as a pleasure-seeker with no regard for conventional morality. His relationship with Sibyl Vane tests his commitment to this philosophy: his love of the young actress nearly leads him to dispense with Lord Henry's teachings, but his love proves to be as shallow as he is. When he breaks Sibyl's heart and drives her to suicide, Dorian notices the first change in his portrait—evidence that his portrait is showing the effects of age and experience while his body remains ever youthful. Dorian experiences a moment of crisis, as he weighs his guilt about his treatment of Sibyl against the freedom from worry that Lord Henry's philosophy has promised. When Dorian decides to view Sibyl's death as the achievement of an artistic ideal rather than a needless tragedy for which he is responsible, he starts down the steep and slippery slope of his own demise.

As Dorian's sins grow worse over the years, his likeness in Basil's portrait grows more hideous. Dorian seems to lack a conscience, but the desire to repent that he eventually feels illustrates that he is indeed human. Despite the beautiful things with which he surrounds himself, he is unable to distract himself from the dissipation of his soul. His murder of Basil marks the beginning of his end: although in the past he has been able to sweep infamies from his mind, he cannot shake the thought that he has killed his friend. Dorian's guilt tortures him relentlessly until he is forced to do away with his portrait. In the end, Dorian seems punished by his ability to be influenced: if the new social order celebrates individualism, as Lord Henry claims, Dorian falters because he fails to establish and live by his own moral code.

Lord Henry Wotton

Lord Henry is a man possessed of "wrong, fascinating, poisonous, delightful theories." He is a charming talker, a famous wit, and a brilliant intellect. Given the seductive way in which he leads conversation, it is little wonder that Dorian falls under his spell so completely. Lord Henry's theories are radical; they aim to shock and purposefully attempt to topple established, untested, or conventional notions of truth. In the end, however, they prove naïve, and Lord Henry himself fails to realize the implications of most of what he says.

Lord Henry is a relatively static character—he does not undergo a significant change in the course of the narrative. He is as coolly composed, unshakable, and possessed of the same dry wit in the final pages of the novel as he is upon his introduction.

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Because he does not change while Dorian and Basil clearly do, his philosophy seems amusing and enticing in the first half of the book, but improbable and shallow in the second. Lord Henry muses in Chapter Nineteen, for instance, that there are no immoral books; he claims that "[t]he books that the world calls immoral are books that show the world its own shame." But since the decadent book that Lord Henry lends Dorian facilitates Dorian's downfall, it is difficult to accept what Lord Henry says as true.

Although Lord Henry is a self-proclaimed hedonist who advocates the equal pursuit of both moral and immoral experience, he lives a rather staid life. He participates in polite London society and attends parties and the theatre, but he does not indulge in sordid behaviour. Unlike Dorian, he does not lead innocent youths to suicide or travel incognito to the city's most despised and desperate quarters. Lord Henry thus has little notion of the practical effects of his philosophy. His claim that Dorian could never commit a murder because "[c]rime belongs exclusively to the lower orders" demonstrates the limitations of his understanding of the human soul. It is not surprising, then, that he fails to appreciate the profound meaning of Dorian's downfall.

Basil Hallward

Basil Hallward is a talented, though somewhat conventionally minded, painter. His love for Dorian Gray changes the way he sees art; indeed, it defines a new school of expression for him. Basil's portrait of Dorian marks a new phase of his career. Before he created this masterwork, he spent his time painting Dorian in the veils of antiquity—dressed as an ancient soldier or as various romantic figures from mythology. Once he has painted Dorian as he truly is, however, he fears that he has put too much of himself into the work. He worries that his love, which he himself describes as "idolatry," is too apparent, and that it betrays too much of himself.

Though he later changes his mind to believe that art is always more abstract than one thinks and that the painting thus betrays nothing except form and colour, his emotional investment in Dorian remains constant. He seeks to protect Dorian, voicing his objection to Lord Henry's injurious influence over Dorian and defending Dorian even after their relationship has clearly dissolved. Basil's commitment to Dorian, which ultimately proves fatal, reveals the genuineness of his love for his favourite subject and his concern for the safety and salvation of Dorian's soul.

Sibyl Vane

A poor, beautiful, and talented actress with whom Dorian falls in love. Sibyl's love for Dorian compromises her ability to act, as her experience of true love in life makes her realize the falseness of affecting emotions onstage.

James Vane

Sibyl's brother, a sailor bound for Australia. James cares deeply for his sister and worries about her relationship with Dorian. Distrustful of his mother's motives, he

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believes that Mrs. Vane's interest in Dorian's wealth disables her from properly protecting Sibyl. As a result, James is hesitant to leave his sister.

Mrs. Vane

Sibyl and James's mother. Mrs. Vane is a faded actress who has consigned herself and her daughter to a tawdry theatre company, the owner of which has helped her to pay her debts. She conceives of Dorian Gray as a wonderful alliance for her daughter because of his wealth; this ulterior motive, however, clouds her judgment and leaves Sibyl vulnerable.

Alan Campbell

Once an intimate friend, Alan Campbell is one of many promising young men who have severed ties with Dorian because of Dorian's sullied reputation.

Lady Agatha

Lord Henry's aunt. Lady Agatha is active in charity work in the London slums.

Lord Fermor

Lord Henry's irascible uncle. Lord Fermor tells Henry the story of Dorian's parentage.

Duchess of Monmouth

A pretty, bored young noblewoman who flirts with Dorian at his country estate.

Victoria Wotton

Lord Henry's wife. Victoria appears only once in the novel, greeting Dorian as he waits for Lord Henry. She is described as an untidy, foolishly romantic woman with "a perfect mania for going to church."

Victor

Dorian's servant. Although Victor is a trustworthy servant, Dorian becomes suspicious of him and sends him out on needless errands to ensure that he does not attempt to steal a glance at Dorian's portrait.

Mrs. Leaf

Dorian Gray's housekeeper. Mrs. Leaf is a bustling older woman who takes her work seriously.

Themes

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Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

The Purpose of Art

When *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was first published in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* in 1890, it was decried as immoral. In revising the text the following year, Wilde included a preface, which serves as a useful explanation of his philosophy of art. The purpose of art, according to this series of epigrams, is to have no purpose. In order to understand this claim fully, one needs to consider the moral climate of Wilde's time and the Victorian sensibility regarding art and morality. The Victorians believed that art could be used as a tool for social education and moral enlightenment, as illustrated in works by writers such as Charles Dickens and George Gissing. The aestheticism movement, of which Wilde was a major proponent, sought to free art from this responsibility. The aestheticists were motivated as much by a contempt for bourgeois morality—a sensibility embodied in *Dorian Gray* by Lord Henry, whose every word seems designed to shock the ethical certainties of the burgeoning middle class—as they were by the belief that art need not possess any other purpose than being beautiful.

If this philosophy informed Wilde's life, we must then consider whether his only novel bears it out. The two works of art that dominate the novel—Basil's painting and the mysterious yellow book that Lord Henry gives Dorian—are presented in the vein more of Victorian sensibilities than of aesthetic ones. That is, both the portrait and the French novel serve a purpose: the first acts as a type of mysterious mirror that shows Dorian the physical dissipation his own body has been spared, while the second acts as something of a road map, leading the young man farther along the path toward infamy. While we know nothing of the circumstances of the yellow book's composition, Basil's state of mind while painting Dorian's portrait is clear. Later in the novel, he advocates that all art be "unconscious, ideal, and remote." His portrait of Dorian, however, is anything but. Thus, Basil's initial refusal to exhibit the work results from his belief that it betrays his idolization of his subject. Of course, one might consider that these breaches of aesthetic philosophy mold *The Picture of Dorian Gray* into something of a cautionary tale: these are the prices that must be paid for insisting that art reveals the artist or a moral lesson. But this warning is, in itself, a moral lesson, which perhaps betrays the impossibility of Wilde's project. If, as Dorian observes late in the novel, the imagination orders the chaos of life and invests it with meaning, then art, as the fruit of the imagination, cannot help but mean something. Wilde may have succeeded in freeing his art from the confines of Victorian morality, but he has replaced it with a doctrine that is, in its own way, just as restrictive.

The Supremacy of Youth and Beauty

The first principle of aestheticism, the philosophy of art by which Oscar Wilde lived, is that art serves no other purpose than to offer beauty. Throughout *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* beauty reigns. It is a means to revitalize the wearied senses, as indicated by the effect that Basil's painting has on the cynical Lord Henry. It is also a means of escaping the brutalities of the world: Dorian distances himself, not to

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mention his consciousness, from the horrors of his actions by devoting himself to the study of beautiful things—music, jewels, rare tapestries. In a society that prizes beauty so highly, youth and physical attractiveness become valuable commodities. Lord Henry reminds Dorian of as much upon their first meeting, when he laments that Dorian will soon enough lose his most precious attributes. In Chapter Seventeen, the Duchess of Monmouth suggests to Lord Henry that he places too much value on these things; indeed, Dorian's eventual demise confirms her suspicions. For although beauty and youth remain of utmost importance at the end of the novel—the portrait is, after all, returned to its original form—the novel suggests that the price one must pay for them is exceedingly high. Indeed, Dorian gives nothing less than his soul.

The Superficial Nature of Society

It is no surprise that a society that prizes beauty above all else is a society founded on a love of surfaces. What matters most to Dorian, Lord Henry, and the polite company they keep is not whether a man is good at heart but rather whether he is handsome. As Dorian evolves into the realization of a type, the perfect blend of scholar and socialite, he experiences the freedom to abandon his morals without censure. Indeed, even though, as Basil warns, society's elite question his name and reputation, Dorian is never ostracized. On the contrary, despite his "mode of life," he remains at the heart of the London social scene because of the "innocence" and "purity of his face." As Lady Narborough notes to Dorian, there is little (if any) distinction between ethics and appearance: "you are made to be good—you look so good."

The Negative Consequences of Influence

The painting and the yellow book have a profound effect on Dorian, influencing him to predominantly immoral behaviour over the course of nearly two decades. Reflecting on Dorian's power over Basil and deciding that he would like to seduce Dorian in much the same way, Lord Henry points out that there is "something terribly enthralling in the exercise of influence." Falling under the sway of such influence is, perhaps, unavoidable, but the novel ultimately censures the sacrifice of one's self to another. Basil's idolatry of Dorian leads to his murder, and Dorian's devotion to Lord Henry's hedonism and the yellow book precipitate his own downfall. It is little wonder, in a novel that prizes individualism—the uncompromised expression of self—that the sacrifice of one's self, whether it be to another person or to a work of art, leads to one's destruction.

Motifs

Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, and literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes.

The Picture of Dorian Gray

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The picture of Dorian Gray, “the most magical of mirrors,” shows Dorian the physical burdens of age and sin from which he has been spared. For a time, Dorian sets his conscience aside and lives his life according to a single goal: achieving pleasure. His painted image, however, asserts itself as his conscience and hounds him with the knowledge of his crimes: there he sees the cruelty he showed to Sibyl Vane and the blood he spilled killing Basil Hallward.

Homoerotic Male Relationships

The homoerotic bonds between men play a large role in structuring the novel. Basil’s painting depends upon his adoration of Dorian’s beauty; similarly, Lord Henry is overcome with the desire to seduce Dorian and mold him into the realization of a type. This camaraderie between men fits into Wilde’s larger aesthetic values, for it returns him to antiquity, where an appreciation of youth and beauty was not only fundamental to culture but was also expressed as a physical relationship between men. As a homosexual living in an intolerant society, Wilde asserted this philosophy partially in an attempt to justify his own lifestyle. For Wilde, homosexuality was not a sordid vice but rather a sign of refined culture. As he claimed rather romantically during his trial for “gross indecency” between men, the affection between an older and younger man places one in the tradition of Plato, Michelangelo, and Shakespeare.

The Colour White

Interestingly, Dorian’s trajectory from figure of innocence to figure of degradation can be charted by Wilde’s use of the colour white. White usually connotes innocence and blankness, as it does when Dorian is first introduced. It is, in fact, “the white purity” of Dorian’s boyhood that Lord Henry finds so captivating. Basil invokes whiteness when he learns that Dorian has sacrificed his innocence, and, as the artist stares in horror at the ruined portrait, he quotes a biblical verse from the Book of Isaiah: “Though your sins be as scarlet, yet I will make them as white as snow.” But the days of Dorian’s innocence are over. It is a quality he now eschews, and, tellingly, when he orders flowers, he demands “as few white ones as possible.” When the colour appears again, in the form of James Vane’s face—“like a white handkerchief”—peering in through a window, it has been transformed from the colour of innocence to the colour of death. It is this threatening pall that makes Dorian long, at the novel’s end, for his “rose-white boyhood,” but the hope is in vain, and he proves unable to wash away the stains of his sins.

Symbols

Symbols are objects, characters, figures, and colours used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

The Opium Dens

The opium dens, located in a remote and derelict section of London, represent the sordid state of Dorian’s mind. He flees to them at a crucial moment. After killing

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Basil, Dorian seeks to forget the awfulness of his crimes by losing consciousness in a drug-induced stupor. Although he has a canister of opium in his home, he leaves the safety of his neat and proper parlor to travel to the dark dens that reflect the degradation of his soul.

James Vane

James Vane is less a believable character than an embodiment of Dorian's tortured conscience. As Sibyl's brother, he is a rather flat caricature of the avenging relative. Still, Wilde saw him as essential to the story, adding his character during his revision of 1891. Appearing at the dock and later at Dorian's country estate, James has an almost spectral quality. Like the ghost of Jacob Marley in Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol,* who warns Scrooge of the sins he will have to face, James appears with his face "like a white handkerchief" to goad Dorian into accepting responsibility for the crimes he has committed.

The Yellow Book

Lord Henry gives Dorian a copy of the yellow book as a gift. Although he never gives the title, Wilde describes the book as a French novel that charts the outrageous experiences of its pleasure-seeking protagonist (we can fairly assume that the book in question is Joris-Karl Huysman's decadent nineteenth-century novel *À Rebours,* translated as "Against the Grain" or "Against Nature"). The book becomes like Holy Scripture to Dorian, who buys nearly a dozen copies and bases his life and actions on it. The book represents the profound and damaging influence that art can have over an individual and serves as a warning to those who would surrender themselves so completely to such an influence.

Study Questions

1. *Discuss the character of Lord Henry and his impact on Dorian.*

"Don't spoil him," Basil begs Lord Henry just before introducing him to Dorian. "Don't try to influence him. Your influence would be bad." But influence is what Lord Henry does best and what he enjoys most; inevitably, his charm, wit, and intellect hold tremendous sway over the impressionable Dorian. This influence, as Basil foresees, is primarily negative—if Dorian is like Faust, the fictional character who sells his soul for knowledge, then Lord Henry is something of a Mephistopheles, the devil who tempts Faust into the bargain. Lord Henry is a cynical aesthete, a lover of beauty with a contempt for conventional morality, and he views Dorian as a disciple with the potential to live out his philosophy of hedonism.

One must not overstate Lord Henry's role as a villain, however. Indeed, above all else, Lord Henry prizes individualism, which allows one to live one's life boldly, freely, and according to one's own edicts. Because Dorian so willingly assumes the role of disciple, the real source of his downfall rests in his willingness to sacrifice himself to another's vision. Following Lord Henry's advice and influenced by the "yellow book" that Lord Henry gives him, Dorian gradually allows himself to fall deep

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into a life of sin, all in the name of pursuing pleasure—which, according to Lord Henry, is the highest good. But, significantly, Lord Henry himself never seems to stray from the straight and narrow: he shocks cocktail guests with his ideas but never puts them into practice himself. He is a thinker, not a doer, and by the end of the novel, he seems curiously naïve about where his philosophy, if put into action, would lead him. Unwilling (or unable) to see the effects of his philosophy, he continues to champion his ideas even after they have ruined his protégé's life.

2. *Discuss the role of homoeroticism in the novel.*

While Wilde's own homosexual inclinations were well known in his day, there is no explicit mention of homosexuality in the novel. In conservative 1890's England, such openness in print would have made the novel unpublishable. Some critics attacked the novel—even in its present form—as unmanly. Still, the homoerotic relationships between the male characters are vital to the novel. Initially, Basil's affection for Dorian, which has about it the obsessive and adoring qualities of romantic love, produces the painting that forms the heart of the novel. Certainly, Lord Henry's relationship to Dorian is also marked by a profound affection and is likened to a seduction: "He would seek to dominate him—had already, indeed, half done so." Meanwhile, when Dorian gives in to a life of sin, there is a strong suggestion that his numerous friendships with young men contain a homosexual element. Nowhere is this element more boldly suggested than through the character of Alan Campbell, whom Dorian blackmails into helping dispose of Basil's body. Given the era's tightening legal strictures against homosexual acts between men and the passage of a sodomy law that came to be known as the Blackmailer's Charter, the implication here is that the indiscretion Dorian threatens to expose is of a homosexual nature. Despite the dangers often involved in these affairs, Wilde viewed homoerotic relationships between men as a paragon of social virtue. Returning to the teachings of ancient Greece, where men and boys shared in sexual relationships, Wilde asserted that there was nothing nobler than this love, which he considered a pillar of Western culture and art.

3. *"There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book," Wilde says in the Preface. "Books are well written, or badly written. That is all." Does the novel confirm this argument?*

The idea that there is no morality in art, only beauty (or an absence of beauty, in the case of bad art), is the central tenet of a movement known as aestheticism, which sought to free literature and other forms of artistic expression from the burden of being ethical or instructive. Wilde himself was associated closely with this creed, as the Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* makes clear. But the novel that follows grapples with the philosophy of art for art's sake in a complicated way. After all, the protagonist suffers from the lessons he has learned from the yellow book that has "poisoned" him. Lord Henry insists that a book can do no such thing, and we are left to decide how much blame one can place on a book and how much blame must be placed on the reader. Indeed, in one respect, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* seems to be a novel of extremely moral sensibilities, since Dorian suffers *because* he allows himself to be poisoned by a book. In other words, he defies the artistic principles that

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structure the yellow book. One must wonder, then, if there is such a thing as a book without some sort of moral or instruction.

Suggested Essay Topics

1. Discuss the relationship between Basil and Dorian.
2. Analyse the Gothic elements in *The Picture of Dorian Gray.*
3. Discuss the role of Sibyl Vane in the novel.
4. Discuss the parallels between Dorian's story and the Faust legend. Does Dorian make a pact with the devil?
5. Why does Dorian decide to destroy the painting at the end of the novel?
6. Compare and contrast the characters of Basil and Lord Henry. What is their relationship to one another? To Dorian?

Other "Takes" on Themes:

Art as a Mirror

This theme is exemplified by the titular portrait. Dorian Gray's image reflects his conscience and his true self, and serves as a mirror of his soul. This fact echoes Wilde's statement (found in the preface) that "It is the spectator...that art really mirrors." However, this theme first appears earlier in the preface, with Wilde's contention that "the nineteenth-century dislike of realism is the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in a glass." Realism is a genre of artistic expression that is said to have shown the 19th century its own reflection. The fear that Dorian expresses when viewing the painting, and the emotions that he seeks to escape through sin, drug addiction, and even murder, might be considered an expression of his rage at laying eyes upon his true self. The idea of reflectivity also recalls a major mythical influence on the novel: the story of Narcissus. Dorian, like Narcissus, falls in love with his own image, and is ultimately destroyed by it.

The Art of Living (or Living through Art)

This theme is expressed most prominently in the character of Lord Henry, and in the "new hedonism" he espouses. Lord Henry openly approaches life as an art form, seeking to sculpt Dorian's personality, and treating even his most casual speeches as dramatic performances. Most notably, he pursues new sensations and impressions of beauty with the amorality of an artist: as Wilde writes in the preface, "No artist has ethical sympathies." This latter characteristic is the one that leaves the deepest impression on Dorian's character. However, although both men fancy themselves artists at living, their flaw lies in their blatant violation of the rule given in the first line of the preface: "To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim." Dorian and Lord Henry both strive to reveal themselves in their "art."

Wilde also explores this theme by blurring the line between life and art. Characters in the novel include actresses who live as though they are constantly on stage, and a painter who values a friendship predominantly because the relationship improves his

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ability to paint. Dorian himself consciously bases his life and actions on a work of art: a book given to him by Lord Henry.

Vanity as Original Sin

Dorian's physical beauty is his most cherished attribute, and vanity is, as a consequence, his most crippling vice. Once a sense of the preciousness of his own beauty has been instilled in him by Lord Henry, all of Dorian's actions, from his wish for undying youth at the beginning of the novel to his desperate attempt to destroy the portrait at the end, are motivated by vanity. Even his attempts at altruism are driven by a desire to improve the appearance of his soul. Throughout the novel, vanity haunts Dorian, seeming to damn his actions before he even commits them; vanity is his original sin. Dorian's fall from grace, then, is the consequence of his decision to embrace vanity - and indeed, all new and pleasurable feelings - as a virtue, at the behest of Lord Henry, his corrupter. In the preface to the novel, Wilde invites us to ponder the inescapability of vanity in our own relationship to art when he states that "it is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors." If we see ourselves in art, and find art to be beautiful, then it follows that we, like Dorian, are in fact admiring our own beauty.

The Duplicity of One's Public and Private Selves

This theme is prominent in much of Wilde's work. It plays a central role in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and is prominent throughout this novel, as well. In addition to the protagonist, many of the novel's characters are greatly concerned with their reputations. Lord Henry and Basil Hallward both counsel Dorian on how to best preserve his good status in the public eye. When crimes are committed, it is not personal absolution that anyone is concerned with, but whether or not the guilty party will be held responsible by the public. In this way, each character in the novel possesses an awareness of a split identity: one that is defined by the public, and one that they define themselves. The figure of Dorian is an allegorical representation of this condition. The portrait is a literal visualization of Dorian's private self, the state of his soul, while Dorian himself looks perpetually young, beautiful, and innocent. Much of Wilde's social commentary in the novel springs from his manipulation of this theme. People's responses to Dorian constantly highlight the overwhelming superficiality of Victorian London (if not people in general). Because Dorian always looks innocent, most of the people he encounters assume that he is a good, kind person. Dorian literally gets away with murder because people are automatically more willing to believe their eyes than anything else.

The Value of Beauty and Youth

Lord Henry claims to value beauty and youth above all else. It is this belief, when imparted to Dorian that drives the protagonist to make the wish that ultimately damns him. When Dorian realizes that he will keep his youthful appearance regardless of whatever immoral actions he indulges in, he considers himself free of the moral constraints faced by ordinary men. He values his physical appearance more than the state of his soul, which is openly displayed by the ever-increasing degradation of the

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portrait. This superficial faith in the ultimate value of youth and beauty is therefore the driving mechanism behind the protagonist's damnation. In this way, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* may be read as a moralistic tale warning against the dangers of valuing one's appearance too highly, and of neglecting one's conscience.
It is important to bear in mind that the beauty that Dorian incessantly pursues is a beauty defined by a purely artistic sensibility, as opposed to a humanitarian one. When faced with the news of his fiancé's suicide, Dorian views the event as satisfyingly melodramatic. His obsession with aesthetic beauty prevents Dorian from attending to the pangs of his own conscience.

Influence and Corruption

Dorian begins the novel as an innocent youth. Under Lord Henry's influence he becomes corrupt, and eventually begins corrupting other youths himself. One of the major philosophical questions raised by this novel is that of where to locate the responsibility for a person's misdeeds. If one engages in a moralistic reading, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* can be seen as a lesson in taking responsibility for one's actions. Dorian often points to Lord Henry as the source of his corruption. However, when contemplating the plights of others, Dorian lays the blame at their own feet rather than considering the role that he might have played in their downfall.

Homosexuality

This is the theme that Wilde was alluding to when he wrote of the "note of Doom that like a purple thread runs through the cold cloth of *Dorian Gray*" in a letter to his young lover, Bosie, following his ruinous court appearances. He calls the theme of homosexuality a "note of doom" because sodomy and homosexuality in general were severely punishable offenses in Victorian England, and it was under such charges that Wilde was brought to trial.
In the novel, there are strong homosexual undertones in the relationships between the three central characters (Dorian, Lord Henry, and Basil Hallward), as well as between Dorian and several of the young men whose lives he is said to have "ruined", most notably Alan Campbell. In his revision of the novel for its official release, after it appeared in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*, Wilde removed all of the most blatant references to homosexuality. However, the idea of sexual affection between men proved too integral to the characters and their interactions to be entirely expunged from the novel. This theme has prompted many critics to read the novel as the story of a man's struggle with his socially unacceptable proclivities. Indeed, some feel that Wilde was working out his own conflicted feelings on the subject through the novel.

The Mortality of Beauty and Youth

The trouble starts when Henry warns Dorian that his extraordinary beauty and youth will fade, and tells him to make the most of it. Dorian's beauty is such that people are astonished by it and all of his advantages seem to come from it, even if he has got an interesting personality and wealth. With Henry's words ringing in his ears, Dorian immediately views Basil's portrait of him in a new light. Rather than immortalize him,

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the picture suddenly seems to mock him for *not* being immortal—the picture won't change, but Dorian himself will. Dorian then becomes aware of time, and aware of his own beauty as a thing that will fade. Before Dorian's realization, when his beauty seemed to him simply a part of him, he was only vaguely aware of it. But once he realizes that it is not something he can hold on to, that it will be taken from him by time, he wants desperately to keep it. In this way, mortality doesn't just destroy beauty and youth, it makes them things to treasure and obsess over because eventually they will be destroyed.

Throughout the novel, beauty and death are linked. Dorian loves Sybil because he gets to watch her die onstage in all her passion and then, miraculously, be alive backstage. Her art makes her immortal each and every night. Sybil's actual death by suicide is tragic, but it also gives her a kind of eternal beauty because she was never allowed to age. Dorian, meanwhile, is similarly saved from aging by the supernatural transformation of his portrait, but while his appearance is now beyond mortality this freedom seems to drive Dorian to try to experience every kind of excess, to not care about consequences, to destroy lovers and friends through his influence and callousness. In this way that novel suggests that while mortality will always destroy beauty and youth, that beauty and youth in fact *need* to be destroyed—that immortal youth beauty, such as is preserved in art, is in fact monstrous in the real world. And, in fact, as Dorian's soul shrivels and he begins to seek and admire ugliness, his own beautiful face comes to seem to him just a hateful reminder of the innocence he has lost.

Surfaces, Objects and Appearances

Beauty is skin-deep in Dorian’s circle of friends. He is welcomed and adored because of his beautiful appearance and even when his sins ruin lives, he always has a certain power because of his attractiveness. Dorian is at his peak when he is unaware of his own beauty, but when conscious of it, his life becomes about surface and appearance. His taste for fashion grows; he loves tapestries and jewels, very flat, decorative objects.

The novel of course revolves around the portrait of Dorian but this is just one of the damaging surfaces that Wilde depicts. Characters’ identities and fates are entirely decided by their outward appearance. The owner of Sybil Vane’s theatre is reduced to a collection of Jewish features and hideous mannerisms, as is his theatre reduced to its shabby decor, and in turn it is all redeemed by the beautiful face of Sybil, who herself is putting on a costume. Veils of societal roles and costumes are worn by everybody in the novel and are made more fatal by the way the characters describe and stereotype each other, never letting each other escape from their narrow identities and appearances. To Lord Henry, even knowing Dorian’s sinful behaviour, he remains the beautiful boy that he met in Basil’s studio because appearance always wins out.

Women and Men

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Lord Henry's philosophies frequently criticize women and marriage, and the era of Dorian Gray's London society and indeed Oscar Wilde's, becomes vivid to us in his dialogue. He says that women are a "decorative sex", and that there are always only a few worth talking to. We see his marriage with Lady Victoria Wotton as a very separate affair, both parties leading distinct lives and meeting the other occasionally. When Victoria dies, Henry expresses sadness and misses her company. Though his description of sadness is far from a romantic declaration, it does seem that a lot of the women provide the male characters with essential and distracting company, and actually, it is the hostesses that at times enable the lifestyles of connection and fashion that men like Henry and Dorian boast of. Ladies like Lady Narborough and the Duchess are the connectors. Henry says of the Duchess Gladys that her clever tongue gets on his nerves, which is comically hypocritical. And she has the same disregard of her husband as the men have for women when she falls in love with Dorian. In this way, she is used to illuminate the actions and paradoxes of the men's world.

With women taking somewhat of a back seat in Dorian's tale, the romantic energy between the men takes centre stage. Though there are no explicitly homosexual relationships, there are definitely homoerotic ones, and words like admiration and fascination begin to acquire a double meaning. In a world where beauty is the ideal and knowledge is attractive, the older gentlemen's longing for Dorian and his admiration of them adds another layer of taboo to the secrecy of the characters' private lives.

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