

The Picture of Dorian Gray

by Oscar Wilde



Oscar Wilde, and still from the 1945 movie version

Often considered the most ingenious work of the great Irish poet and playwright Oscar Wilde, and a hymn to his 'aesthetic' appreciation of the young male form.

Abridged: Unknown, partly paraphrased.

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The studio was filled with the rich odour of roses, and when the light summer wind stirred amidst the trees of the garden there came through the open door the heavy scent of the lilac, or the more delicate perfume of the pink-flowering thorn.

From the corner of the divan of Persian saddle-bags on which he was lying, smoking, as usual, innumerable cigarettes, Lord Henry Wotton savoured the summer day as he gazed at the easel before which his friend stood. On the easel was the full-length portrait of a young man of extraordinary physical beauty. Lord Henry was trying to persuade Basil to send the picture to the next year's exhibition at the Grosvenor Gallery.

Basil refused, saying he had put too much of himself into the picture. Only because of a slip of the tongue did he tell his friend the name of the model, Dorian Gray. When he liked people immensely, he never told their names to anyone, as it seemed like surrendering a part of them. This secrecy seemed to make life more mysterious and marvellous to him.

Henry answered that as a married man, he understood the value of secrecy, even of deception. When Basil charged him with posing as a cynic, Lord Henry answered that being natural was only a pose, the most irritating he knew. Being pressed, Basil told his friend of his first meeting with Dorian Gray.

When he had first seen the boy at Lady Brandon's, he had felt a curious sensation of terror and tried to avoid meeting him. Basil had always been very independent by nature, and he felt that this new personality was so fascinating that it would absorb his whole nature. He was, however, introduced to Dorian, who became so necessary to him that he saw him every day. Somehow the boy suggested to him an entirely new manner in art, so that Basil saw things and recreated them differently from the way in which he had done before.

Lord Henry expressed a desire to meet Dorian. As Basil answered that he did not want the two to meet, a servant announced that Dorian had arrived. Basil had only time to tell Lord Henry not to try to influence the boy, not to try to spoil him.

Lord Henry saw that he was wonderfully handsome, with his frank blue eyes, his crisp gold hair, and the candour and passionate purity of youth in his face. Dorian took an instant liking to Lord Henry because he had such a beautiful voice and because he was such a delightful contrast to Basil, and insisted that he stay during the sitting.

As Basil painted, Lord Henry chatted on in his cynical vein about one of his favourite topics—the need of self-development. Each one of us is here to realize one's nature perfectly, he believed, and were one man to live out his life completely, were he to give form to every feeling and expression to every thought, the world would gain a fresh impulse to joy. We are afraid of ourselves. The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it.

As he spoke, Dorian felt new influences at work within him; the words touched a secret chord which had not stirred before. Lord Henry spoke to him of his beauty—told him Beauty is a form of Genius. When the boy laughed, he told him he would not laugh at the idea when his beauty had fled, that he must remember youth would last such a little time, and then come no more—that there is absolutely nothing in the world but youth.

That afternoon Basil finished the portrait. When he saw it, Dorian flushed with pleasure. He had never believed Basil's compliments, but Lord Henry's panegyric and his warning of the brevity of youth had stirred him, and he saw at last how beautiful he was. He envied the picture, for it would never be any older. "If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old! I would give my soul for that!" he cried. "Some day the picture will mock me!" and he burst into tears.

Basil, seeing his friend's anguish, picked up a knife to destroy the picture, but the boy rushed at him: "I am in love with it, Basil! It is part of myself." Basil told him that he could have the picture. Then Dorian went off to the theatre with Lord Harry, despite Basil's invitation to stay and dine with him.

The next day Lord Henry went to call on his uncle, Lord Fermor, who knew everybody and everything, to ask him about Dorian.

His uncle told him that the boy's mother, the daughter of Lord Kelso, had been an extraordinarily beautiful girl who had run away with a penniless young nobody in a foot regiment who had been killed in a duel a few months after the marriage. An ugly rumour said that Kelso had got some adventurer to insult his son-in-law and kill him; certainly it was known that his daughter never spoke to him again, and died soon after her child was born. The boy was supposed to have inherited a large fortune.

The romance of the story appealed to Lord Henry, and made him more interested than ever in Dorian. Talking to the boy was like playing on a violin—there was something entralling in exercising influence upon him. He would try to make that wonderful spirit his own.

That day he met Dorian at a luncheon party. Dorian was fascinated anew at his friend's conversation. Taking the idea that the only things one does not regret are one's mistakes, he played with it, until praise of folly soared into a philosophy, and his listeners were charmed out of themselves.

Dorian sat like one in a spell, never taking his eyes off him. That afternoon he did not go to see Basil, as he had promised, but went walking with Lord Henry. A month after that, as Dorian was waiting for his host in Lord Henry's Mayfair flat, Lady Henry fluttered in to talk to him.

She was a silly, sentimental woman. As she went out, Lord Henry told Dorian never to marry, since marriage was only a disappointment. Dorian, blushing, told him that he was in love with an actress, Sibyl Vane.

Three weeks before, filled with the desire Lord Henry had given him to know everything about life, he had been wandering about London at night. Lost his way in grimy streets, he had come upon a shabby little theatre and had gone in. The play was *Romeo and Juliet*, and at first he had been annoyed at the idea of seeing such a play in such a tawdry place, but when he saw Juliet, he was lost. She was hardly seventeen, with a little flower-like face, and the loveliest voice in the world.

After that he went to see her night after night; she was everything in life to him. He wanted Lord Henry and Basil to see her act. He had not seen Basil for a long time-had, in fact, been rather bored by his good advice-but he did want him to see the girl act. That night, Dorian became, engaged to Sibyl Vane.

Sibyl's mother, a shallow, theatrical woman, was pleased that her daughter was sought after by the handsome young man. But Sibyl's brother James, who was just going off to the colonies, was bothered by the news that a gentleman was calling to see his sister every night after the theatre. James was a rough, rather harsh lad; but he loved his sister, and somehow feared that this young dandy who was making love to her could mean her no good.

He told his sister that if her Prince Charming (she knew Dorian by no other name) did her any wrong, he would kill him. Before they went to the theatre, Basil, Lord Henry and Dorian dined together. Dorian was full of his love. He said that when he was with her, he forgot all Lord Henry's fascinating, poisonous, delightful theories. Lord Henry took pleasure in watching the lad's enthusiasm; he took pleasure in watching people's emotions.

Basil felt sorry to lose his friend, but felt that this marriage was better than many other things that might have happened to the boy. When the curtain rose, and Sibyl Vane stepped on the stage as Juliet, even Lord Henry was forced to say that the girl was one of the loveliest creatures he had ever seen. But she was curiously listless; her speeches, though the voice was exquisite, were delivered in a thoroughly artificial manner. She seemed to be absolutely incompetent.

Dorian's friends were horribly disappointed. The staginess of the girl's acting grew worse as she went on. Dorian grew more and more pale. Sibyl was a cocomplete failure. Even the pit and gallery lost interest in the play and began to hiss. Basil and Lord Henry left after the second act, but Dorian remained to the end.

As soon as it was over, Dorian rushed to the greenroom. To his amazement, he found Sibyl pleased that she had been so bad. In him she had at last found reality. Before, she had felt that the theatre and acting were the one reality, but now that she knew love, she saw how silly and hollow they were. She knew now something higher, something of which all art is only a reflection, and she knew she could never act well again.

Dorian went to the door. "You have killed my love," he said. "I loved you because you were marvellous; I would have made you magnificent. Now you are only a third-rate actress with a pretty face. I can't see you again." And though she wept bitterly, he went out into the night.

It was dawn when he arrived home. As he went into his library, his eye fell upon the portrait Basil had painted of him, and he started. Around the mouth were clearly drawn lines of cruelty. He picked up a mirror and examined his face, but no line warped his lips. He looked again at the painting; there was no doubt that the whole expression had altered. Suddenly he remembered what he had said that day in Basil Hallward's studio—he had wished that he himself might remain young, and the portrait grow old. Surely this wish had not been fulfilled?

He was overcome with remorse. He would not sin; no longer would he listen to Lord Henry's wicked words; he would make amends to Sibyl for the wrong he had done her. Thinking that, he drew a screen before the portrait and went to bed, dreaming of Sibyl.

When he awoke, he went to look at the portrait again. It was true—it had changed. He saw more than ever how he had injured the girl. Leaving his morning mail unread, he covered pages of letter-paper with a letter of self-reproach, asking her to forgive him.

He was interrupted by Lord Henry, who came to tell him that the girl had committed suicide. After his first outburst of pained surprise, Dorian wondered that he could not feel the tragedy as much as he wanted to; it all seemed like a wonderful play in which he had taken a great part, but by which he had not been wounded. Lord Henry consoled him with facile and cynical words, until he ceased regretting even the marring of the beautiful portrait, and took pleasure in thinking at it would bear his sins, while his own beauty would not fade.

Basil came the next day, sad because of the girl's death, he was horrified at Dorian's indifference at the whole tragedy. But he could not long reproach Dorian; there was so much of good in the boy that he had great hope for him. Before he left, he asked Dorian to let him see the portrait, which was still covered by the screen. He was amazed when the boy, white with rage, told him that if he looked at the portrait, their friendship would be over.

He said that he had wanted to exhibit the picture in Paris, and asked Dorian if he had noticed anything strange about the picture. Dorian was terrified, but learned that Basil wanted to know if he had painted into it his own adoration of the boy. When Dorian said that there was something curious about the picture, Basil thought that his own secret was shown there, and agreed that the picture should not be exhibited. After he went, Dorian, fearing that others might ask questions, had the picture borne away to his old schoolroom, which was never opened, and covered it with a great piece of embroidered satin.

Downstairs again, Dorian found that Lord Henry had sent him a book. It was a psychological study of a young Parisian, who spent his life trying to realize in the nineteenth century all the passions and modes of thought that belonged to every century except his own.

It was a poisonous book. For years, he could not free himself from its influence. Strange rumours about him floated around London, but in the face of his wonderful, changeless beauty one could not help believing in his purity. But upstairs in the schoolroom, the evil and aging face of the portrait showed what was happening to his soul. At times, he felt a selfish pity for himself, but these moments were brief, for the more he fed his mad hunger for life, the more it grew.

Society knew him as a charming host, as a collector of all beautiful objects; it knew nothing of the nights he spent in sordid little ill-famed taverns near the docks. On his return, he would sit in front of the picture, partly loathing it, partly smiling with secret pleasure on the misshapen shadow that had to bear the burden that should have been his own. After a few years, he could not endure to be long out of England, or even out of London, lest in his absence someone gain access to the room where the portrait was.

He feared that it might be stolen, and that the world would know his secret. Perhaps it was already suspected. Curious stories became current about him, and his strange absences from society became notorious. It was remarked that some of those who had been most intimate with him appeared after a time to shun him. Yet these whispers only increased his charm, in the eyes of many.

On the eve of his thirty-eighth birthday, as he was walking home late in the evening, Dorian met Basil Hallward. Basil was taking a train shortly after midnight, and was to be out of England for six months, but before he went he wanted a talk with Dorian. He thought Dorian should know the dreadful things that were being said about him in London. Basil did not believe them, for he knew a man's vices are written on his face, but people were whispering hideous things about Dorian. Why was it that so many gentlemen would not go to his house or invite him to theirs? Why was his friendship fatal to young men? Dorian replied that in England it was enough for a man to have distinction and brains for every tongue to wag about him. But Basil was not to be turned thus lightly aside. It was said that Dorian corrupted everyone with whom he became intimate.

To one terrible charge against his friend, Basil had answered that it was impossible, that he knew Dorian thoroughly. But now he wondered if he did know him; to be sure of this, he would have to see his soul. "You shall see it tonight!" cried Dorian. Leading his friend upstairs, he took him into the old schoolroom and flung aside the cover of the painting. An exclamation of horror burst from the painter's lips.

The hideous face on the canvas filled him with loathing and disgust. He knew that Dorian must be even worse than those who talked against him fancied him to be. He flung himself into a chair, begging Dorian to repent, to ask God for forgiveness, before it was too late. Suddenly an uncontrollable feeling of hatred came over Dorian, and seizing a knife which lay on a chest, he stabbed his friend behind the ear, stabbed him again and again.

Strangely calm, he went downstairs and hid Basil's hat and coat. After a night of dreamless sleep, he arose and sent a letter to Mr. Alan Campbell, asking him to come to see him at once. Campbell was a young scientist devoted to chemistry. He and Dorian had been great friends, but for many months now they had not spoken to one another. As Dorian waited, he became more and more anxious, until by the time Campbell arrived he was in a horror of fear. Then his fear passed, and quite coolly he demanded that Campbell, with his scientific knowledge, destroy the body in the room above.

Campbell refused, but he was trapped, for Dorian had information about him which he threatened to make known unless his request was obeyed. Campbell sent home for his materials, and was escorted upstairs by Dorian. As Dorian opened the door of the schoolroom, he saw that of one of the hands of the portrait loathsome red dew gleamed. Hastily he covered the picture.

A few hours later, the grisly occupant of the room had disappeared. That night, Dorian's soul was sick to death. Remembering Lord Henry's words, "To cure the soul by means of the senses, and the senses by means of the soul!" he drove to a horrid little tavern near the docks, to seek relief in opium. He was followed from the place by a sailor who heard him called Prince Charming by a woman he had long ago cast off.

The sailor was Sibyl Vane's brother, who had searched long years for the man who had caused his sister's death. He was about to send a bullet through Dorian's head when he decided that this youth could not be the criminal he was seeking. By the time he learned from the woman who had followed him that Dorian was no youth, his enemy had slipped away in the night.

A week later Dorian was with his guests at Selby Royal, his country house. But James Vane had followed him there, and he fainted in terror when he saw Vane's face peering through a window at him. Very fortunately for Dorian, Vane was killed in the hunt next day; he had enlisted as a beater, and had accidentally got in the way of the shooting. Dorian could breathe again; he was safe.

Soon Dorian went back to town, vowing to reform. He was pleased with himself, for he had at first planned to run away with a village maiden, but had then decided to leave her innocent. He found people in town talking about Basil's disappearance. Basil had often gone away quietly before—he disliked telling people where he was going—but now he seemed to have disappeared completely.

Sadness gradually came upon Dorian, not for Basil, nor for James Vane, nor for Alan Campbell, who had shot himself one night in his laboratory, but for himself, for the living death of his own soul. But he had spared the girl in the country; perhaps the portrait was not so ugly as it had been.

He went to look at it, and found no change, save that in the eyes there was a look of cunning, and in the mouth the curve of the hypocrite. Was the red stain larger than before? Had it dripped on the feet? If he could kill the picture, he could kill the past, he could be free. Seizing a knife, he stabbed the picture. There was a cry of agony, and a crash.

When the servants finally broke in, they found hanging upon the wall a splendid portrait of their master as they had last seen him, in all the wonder of his exquisite youth and beauty. Lying on the floor was a dead man, in evening dress, with a knife in his heart. He was withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage. It was not till they had examined the rings that they recognized who it was.

http://thehundredbooks.com/The_Picture_of_Dorian_Gray.htm

1. Prepare a list of 40 words that you looked up while reading
2. Go on the following website and to all the exercises

<https://quizlet.com/join/eNxEBXJ33>