

The Picture of Dorian Gray

by Oscar Wilde · Language: EN

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Overview

The Picture of Dorian Gray is Oscar Wilde's only novel, a philosophical and Gothic tale about beauty, morality, and the corrupting influence of vanity. The story follows Dorian Gray, a strikingly handsome young man whose portrait is painted by the artist Basil Hallward. Under the influence of the hedonistic Lord Henry Wotton, Dorian wishes that the portrait would age and bear the marks of his sins while he remains forever youthful. The wish is granted, and Dorian embarks on a life of pleasure and cruelty, while the portrait becomes increasingly hideous, reflecting the decay of his soul.

The novel traces Dorian's descent into moral corruption, as he causes the suicide of his lover Sibyl Vane, leads others into ruin, and ultimately murders Basil when he confronts him about the portrait. Despite his outward innocence, Dorian's reputation becomes tainted, and he lives in fear of discovery. In the end, he attempts to destroy the portrait, but in doing so, he kills himself, and the portrait reverts to its original beauty while Dorian's body is found aged and withered. The book is a sharp critique of Victorian society's obsession with appearance and its hypocrisy regarding morality and sin.

Wilde's novel is significant for its exploration of aestheticism, the relationship between art and life, and the consequences of living a life devoid of ethical responsibility. It remains a classic of English literature, celebrated for its wit, its philosophical depth, and its chilling portrayal of the duality of human nature. The book was controversial upon publication for its homoerotic undertones and its challenge to conventional morality, but it has since been recognized as a masterpiece of the decadent movement.

Key Takeaways

- The pursuit of beauty and pleasure without moral restraint leads to spiritual decay, even if outward appearances remain unchanged.
- Art and life are intertwined; the portrait symbolizes the hidden truth that society refuses to see.
- Influence can be dangerous: Lord Henry's hedonistic philosophy corrupts Dorian, showing that ideas have consequences.
- Guilt and conscience cannot be escaped; Dorian's attempts to bury his sins only intensify their hold on him.

- Hypocrisy is a central theme: Dorian's flawless exterior masks a corrupt soul, mirroring Victorian society's double standards.
- The novel warns that a life devoted solely to sensory experience and self-indulgence is ultimately empty and self-destructive.
- True beauty is not merely physical; the portrait's ugliness reflects the ugliness of Dorian's actions and character.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1

Basil Hallward is painting a portrait of Dorian Gray, and his friend Lord Henry Wotton observes. Basil explains that Dorian has become the inspiration for his art, and he fears that Lord Henry's cynical influence will corrupt the young man. Lord Henry dismisses Basil's concerns and expresses his belief that beauty and youth are the only things worth pursuing. The chapter establishes the central conflict between aestheticism and morality.

Chapter 2

Dorian Gray arrives at Basil's studio and meets Lord Henry, who captivates him with a speech about the fleeting nature of youth and the importance of living for pleasure. When Dorian sees the finished portrait, he is overwhelmed by his own beauty and, in a moment of envy, wishes that the portrait would age instead of him. Basil gives the portrait to Dorian, and Lord Henry begins to exert his influence over Dorian's mind.

Chapter 3

Lord Henry visits his uncle, Lord Fermor, to learn about Dorian's background, discovering that Dorian comes from a tragic family history. Later, Lord Henry dines with Dorian and others, where he continues to expound his hedonistic philosophy, encouraging Dorian to pursue every experience and emotion without restraint. Dorian is deeply affected, and the seeds of his moral corruption are planted.

Chapter 4

Dorian falls in love with Sibyl Vane, a poor actress who performs Shakespearean roles in a run-down theater. He tells Lord Henry about his engagement, praising Sibyl's talent and beauty. Lord Henry is amused and skeptical, but Dorian is earnest. Sibyl's mother and brother, James, are wary of Dorian's intentions, fearing he will break Sibyl's heart. James vows to protect his sister.

Chapter 5

Sibyl Vane is overjoyed about her engagement to Dorian, but her brother James is suspicious and warns her that Dorian may not be honorable. James plans to leave for Australia, and he threatens to kill Dorian if he harms Sibyl. Sibyl dismisses her brother's concerns, believing in Dorian's love.

The chapter highlights the contrast between Sibyl's innocence and Dorian's growing selfishness.

Chapter 6

Basil and Lord Henry discuss Dorian's engagement, with Basil expressing concern that Dorian is making a mistake. Lord Henry is indifferent, viewing marriage as a social convention. Dorian arrives and announces that he has broken off the engagement because Sibyl performed poorly the previous night, and he realized he only loved her for her acting. He is cruel and dismissive, showing his growing callousness.

Chapter 7

Dorian goes to the theater to see Sibyl, but her performance is terrible because she is now truly in love and can no longer pretend. Dorian is disgusted and ends their engagement, telling her she has lost her value. Sibyl is heartbroken and later commits suicide. When Dorian returns home, he notices that the portrait has a cruel expression, and he realizes his wish has come true. He decides to hide the portrait and begin a life of sin.

Chapter 8

Dorian learns of Sibyl's death and initially feels remorse, but Lord Henry convinces him to see it as a dramatic and beautiful event, not a tragedy. Dorian locks the portrait in an old schoolroom and resolves to live a life of pleasure, using the portrait as a scapegoat for his sins. He becomes increasingly self-absorbed and begins to explore the darker side of London society.

Chapter 9

Basil visits Dorian to express his condolences about Sibyl, but Dorian is cold and dismissive. Basil asks to see the portrait, but Dorian refuses, fearing Basil will discover its secret. Dorian reveals that he has become obsessed with the portrait and that it holds the key to his soul. Basil leaves, troubled by Dorian's changed demeanor.

Chapter 10

Dorian moves the portrait to a locked room and hires a man to dispose of Basil's belongings. He becomes increasingly paranoid and begins to study the portrait's changes, which reflect his moral decline. He also becomes fascinated with a yellow book given to him by Lord Henry, which becomes a guide for his hedonistic lifestyle. The chapter shows Dorian's complete surrender to corruption.

Chapter 11

This chapter is a summary of Dorian's life over the next eighteen years, during which he indulges in every vice and pleasure, from opium dens to secret affairs. He remains youthful and beautiful, while the portrait grows increasingly hideous. He becomes a notorious figure in society, yet his reputation is never fully ruined because of his charm and appearance. The chapter emphasizes the theme of appearance versus reality.

Chapter 12

Basil confronts Dorian about the rumors of his immoral behavior, pleading with him to change his ways. Dorian, enraged, takes Basil to the locked room and reveals the portrait, which has become monstrous. Basil is horrified and begs Dorian to repent, but Dorian blames Basil for his downfall and murders him in a fit of rage. The chapter is a turning point, marking Dorian's final descent into evil.

Themes

- Aestheticism and morality
- Appearance vs. reality
- Corruption of the soul
- Influence and manipulation
- The nature of art
- Hypocrisy in society

Notable Quotes

- "The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it." — Lord Henry says this to Dorian early in the novel, articulating his hedonistic philosophy.
- "I am too fond of reading books to care to write them." — Lord Henry makes this witty remark during a conversation about art and literature.
- "You will always be fond of me. I represent to you all the sins you never had the courage to commit." — Lord Henry says this to Dorian, highlighting their relationship and Dorian's corruption.
- "The books that the world calls immoral are books that show the world its own shame." — Dorian says this to Basil, defending the yellow book and his lifestyle.
- "I have grown to love secrecy. It seems to be the one thing that can make modern life mysterious or marvellous to us." — Dorian reflects on his hidden life and the secret of the portrait.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is The Picture of Dorian Gray about?

The Picture of Dorian Gray is about a handsome young man who wishes that a portrait of him would age instead of him. He lives a life of pleasure and sin while the portrait becomes hideous, reflecting his moral decay. The novel explores themes of beauty, vanity, and the consequences of living without ethical restraint.

Is The Picture of Dorian Gray worth reading?

Yes, it is a classic of English literature, known for its wit, philosophical depth, and chilling exploration of human nature. It offers sharp social commentary and remains relevant today. The prose is elegant and the story is both engaging and thought-provoking, making it a rewarding read for most people.

How does The Picture of Dorian Gray end?

Spoiler: Dorian, tormented by guilt and the portrait's ugliness, stabs the portrait with a knife. He dies instantly, and the portrait reverts to its original beauty while Dorian's body becomes old and withered. The novel ends with the servants finding his corpse, with the portrait restored and untouched.

Who should read The Picture of Dorian Gray?

Readers who enjoy classic literature, philosophical fiction, and Gothic horror will appreciate this novel. It is also suitable for those interested in Victorian society, aestheticism, and moral dilemmas. The book is accessible to older teens and adults, though it contains mature themes.

How long does it take to read The Picture of Dorian Gray?

The book has about 80,000 words, so at an average reading speed of 250 words per minute, it takes roughly 5 to 6 hours to read. Most readers finish it in a few days of casual reading.