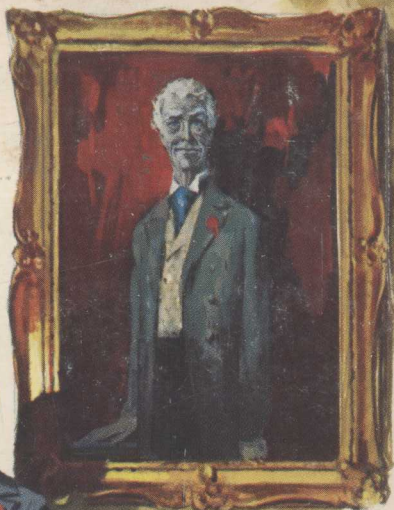


OSCAR WILDE

*The
Picture of*
**DORIAN
GRAY**

with an introduction by
ALLAN DONALDSON

Complete
and Unabridged



The
Picture of
DORIAN
GRAY



OSCAR WILDE



AIRMONT PUBLISHING COMPANY, INC.
22 EAST 60TH STREET • NEW YORK 22

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An Airmont Classic
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Introduction

The Picture of Dorian Gray was first published in *Lippincott's Magazine* in 1890, and it was republished in book form with revisions, a preface and additional chapters in the following year. Thus it stands appropriately at the very beginning of the decade with which Wilde's reputation is most closely associated, and more completely than any other work of the period it embodies the spirit of the aesthetic movement of the Nineties and traces the operation of that fatal inherent logic which was to destroy both Wilde himself and the movement as a whole.

Oscar Wilde was born in 1854 in Dublin into a family and a country already richer in eccentrics than either could perhaps afford. After a casually brilliant career at Trinity College in Dublin, he moved in 1874 to an equally casual and brilliant career at Oxford, where he met both Walter Pater and John Ruskin, the chief theorists of the aesthetic movement in England. ("The two great turning points in my life," Wilde said later, "were when my father sent me to Oxford, and when society sent me to prison.") Although the ideas of Pater and Ruskin vied with each other in Wilde's mind all through his life, it was to the detached and

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intensely subjective aestheticism of Pater, rather than to the socialistic aesthetics of Ruskin, that he was primarily attracted, and when he left Oxford for London in 1879, it was as an apostle, self-anointed, of Pater.

By a calculated extravagance of dress and manner and by the brilliant iconoclasm of his conversation, Wilde quickly established himself as a celebrity, at once lionized by fashionable society and caricatured by *Punch* and Gilbert and Sullivan. As a writer, however, his success during the Eighties was slight, and it was only near the beginning of the Nineties that he emerged as more than a dandy and a conversationalist. Success, when it did come, was spectacular and brief. Between 1888 and 1891, besides *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, he published three volumes of stories and a volume of essays. In 1892 the first of his comedies of fashionable life, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, was produced, and this was followed by *A Woman of No Importance* in 1893, by *Salome* in 1894, and by *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which were produced within weeks of each other early in 1895.

The greatest triumph of Wilde's career was succeeded almost immediately by its total collapse. Wilde's aestheticism had always been regarded with suspicion by large sections of the Victorian press and publics, but to this undefined suspicion there had recently been added specific rumors about his personal life, and these rumors became the substance of a public scandal when Wilde sued the Marquess of Queensbury for libel in the spring of 1895. Queensbury's defense was that the libel was true, and the trial of Queensbury became, in effect, the trial of Oscar Wilde, during which he was cross-examined not only upon his personal life, but also upon his writings and particularly upon *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which the defense sought to establish as an immoral book. As a result of the cross-examination and of evidence assembled by Queensbury, Wilde's council abandoned the prosecution, and Wilde himself was arrested on charges of gross immorality and was subsequently convicted, amid scenes of unrestrained public jubilation, and sentenced to two years' hard labor.

With the exception of the long confessional letter *De Pro-*

fundis and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, Wilde wrote nothing after his conviction. After his release from prison in 1897, he lived, broken and virtually destitute, on the continent, and when he died in Paris in 1900, the movement of which he had been the symbol had ended, and most of its leading members were already dead.

Like the other writers of the English Decadence, Wilde had a profound admiration for such French writers as Gautier, Baudelaire, Verlaine, Mallarmé, and Huysmans, whose novel *A Rebours* Wilde identified during his trial as "the yellow book" given to Dorian Gray by Lord Henry. The influence of French literature on Wilde, however, has been exaggerated, as it was often exaggerated by Wilde himself, and the dominant influence on *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is not Huysmans' *A Rebours*, which may be said to begin where *The Picture of Dorian Gray* leaves off, but Pater's *The Renaissance*—"that book," Wilde wrote in *De Profundis*, "which has had such a strange influence over my life."

The Renaissance was first published in 1873, the year before Wilde went to Oxford. It consisted of a number of essays on aspects of Renaissance art and poetry, to which were added a preface and a conclusion, and it was the conclusion which was to become the virtual manifesto of the English Decadence. In an age when traditional certainties were being dissolved by scientific skepticism, Pater asks in this conclusion what there is in human experience which remains indubitably real, and he replies that all that can be said to be real is the individual consciousness, not in the totality or continuity of its identity, but only in the intensity with which from moment to moment it responds to the impressions which reach it through the senses. Thus, for Pater, to be is not so much to think as to feel, and the pursuit of new impressions and experiences becomes an end in itself.

The idea that intensity of emotion was the criterion of success in art was a commonplace of Romantic aesthetic theory. Pater's originality lay in the single-mindedness with which he made intensity of emotion for its own sake the criterion also of success in life, so that, by an inversion

popular in the Nineties, life came to be an imitation of art. For Pater himself, the transformation of life into art was to be accomplished primarily by attuning the sensibilities to the most refined nuances of art itself, but throughout *The Renaissance*, he suggests that this effect may also be accomplished directly through the pursuit of 'novel experiences. It was this suggestion which was taken up and expanded by Wilde and others into an aesthetic justification of vice—a development of his ideas which so alarmed Pater that he dropped the conclusion from the second edition of *The Renaissance*, explaining later that he "conceived it might possibly mislead some of those young men into whose hands it might fall."

It is with this unauthorized version of Pater's creed that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is concerned. The "new Hedonism" to which Lord Henry converts Dorian is derived, in some places word for word, from Pater's philosophy as it appears in *The Renaissance* and in the novel *Marius the Epicurean*, where Pater calls it, more circumspectly, the "new Cyrenaicism." In both Lord Henry and Dorian, however, the pursuit of "new impressions" and "exquisite passions" has been shifted from the sphere of art to that of life itself, and shifted so decisively that art, of primary importance to Pater, is given a secondary rôle. "Good artists," Lord Henry remarks of Basil Hallward, "exist simply in what they make, and consequently are perfectly uninteresting in what they are."

In Lord Henry the art of life assumes the form of a mere dandyism of dress and intellect, and his ideas, like his clothes, are ornamental. In Dorian it assumes a more sinister form. Freed superficially from the consequences of his actions by the granting of his wish about the portrait, he sets himself to live out Lord Henry's ideas in all their implications, and he passes beyond aestheticism and dandyism into a form of satanism.

The supernaturalism through which Dorian is granted an eternal youth is a variation of the Faust legend in which Lord Henry figures as an unconscious Mephistopheles minus Hell and Dorian as a modern Faust, concerned like Faust with consuming the whole of experience. It is impossible not

to feel an element of wish-fulfillment in Wilde's handling of Dorian's unfading youth and his infinite opportunities for experience, and it was partly this which made the novel a subject of cross-examination during the trials. Nevertheless, the novel is not a mere phantasy of forbidden pleasure. Nor is the ending a mere concession to conventional morality, as has been sometimes suggested, for Dorian's damnation does not, in fact, take place as the result of an externally imposed moral code, but as a result of the disintegration of his identity through weaknesses inherent in the cult of sensation to which he has dedicated himself. These weaknesses are two-fold, and they are worked out by Wilde with some care. The first lies in the fact that the pursuit of sensation as interpreted by Dorian involves an inevitable process of escalation in which experiences increasingly bizarre are needed to maintain the same level of sensational effect, so that Dorian finds himself caught, like the Byronic hero, in an endless alternation between boredom and violent stimulation. The second weakness lies in the fact that the identity is not reducible, as Dorian assumes, to isolated moments of sensation, but is defined by the accumulation of its choices, so that at the end of the novel it is really only in appearance that Dorian and the portrait differ. Like Faust, Dorian finds that he has been cheated.

The Picture of Dorian Gray is not a great novel, and its failings are often the failings of an amateur uncertain of the imaginative atmosphere which his characters must inhabit if they are to remain credible. Many of the descriptive passages, written under the half-absorbed influence of Huysmans, are artificial and silly. The episodes involving Sybil Vane and her family are mostly mechanical melodrama. Even the precise significance of the final scene is uncertain. Nevertheless, the novel survives while other, abstractly better, novels of the period have been forgotten. That it does survive is due partly to the brilliance of the scenes of fashionable life, partly to the ingenuity of the central symbolism of the portrait, but finally to the fact that it deals, however imperfectly, with an important aspect of the modern sensibility. In its widest implications, it

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represents one phase of the attempt of modern man to create for himself a mode of life based purely upon subjective experience. It is this which connects Dorian backward to Faust and Childe Harold and forward to the literature of the Lost Generation of the Twenties and the Beats of the Fifties.

ALLAN DONALDSON,
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Preface

The artist is the creator of beautiful things. To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim.

The critic is he who can translate into another manner or a new material his impression of beautiful things.

The highest as the lowest form of criticism is a mode of autobiography.

Those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt without being charming. This is a fault.

Those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated. For these there is hope.

They are the elect to whom beautiful things mean only beauty.

There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written.

That is all.

The nineteenth century dislike of realism is the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in a glass.

The nineteenth century dislike of romanticism is the rage of Caliban not seeing his own face in a glass.

The moral life of man forms part of the subject-matter of the artist, but the morality of art consists in the perfect use of an imperfect medium.

No artist desires to prove anything. Even things that are true can be proved.

No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style.

No artist is ever morbid. The artist can express everything.

Thought and language are to the artist instruments of an art.

Vice and virtue are to the artist materials for an art.

From the point of view of form, the type of all the arts

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is the art of the musician. From the point of view of feeling, the actor's craft is the type.

All art is at once surface and symbol.

Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril.

Those who read the symbol do so at their peril.

It is the speculator, and not life, that art really mirrors.

Diversity of opinion about a work of art shows that the work is new, complex, and vital.

When critics disagree, the artist is in accord with himself.

We can forgive a man for making a useful thing as long as he does not admire it. The only excuse for making a useless thing is that one admires it intensely.

All art is quite useless.

OSCAR WILDE

Chapter I

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, of 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 was his custom, innumerable cigarettes, Lord Henry Wotton could just catch the gleam of the honey-sweet and honey-coloured blossoms of a laburnum, whose tremulous branches seemed hardly able to bear the burden of a beauty so flamelike as theirs; and now and then the fantastic shadows of birds in flight flitted across the long tussore-silk curtains that were stretched in front of the huge window, producing a kind of momentary Japanese effect, and making him think of those pallid, jade-faced painters of Tokyo who, through the medium of an art that is necessarily immobile, seek to convey the sense of swiftness and motion. The sullen murmur of the bees shouldering their way through the long unmown grass, or circling with monotonous insistence round the dusty gilt horns of the straggling woodbine, seemed to make the stillness more oppressive. The dim roar of London was like the bourdon note of a distant organ.

In the centre of the room, clamped to an upright easel, stood the full-length portrait of a young man of extraordinary personal beauty, and in front of it, some little distance away, was sitting the artist himself, Basil Hallward, whose sudden disappearance some years ago caused, at the time, such public excitement and gave rise to so many strange conjectures.

As the painter looked at the gracious and comely form he had so skilfully mirrored in his art, a smile of pleasure passed across his face, and seemed about to linger there. But he suddenly started up, and closing his eyes, placed his fingers upon the lids, as though he sought to imprison

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within his brain some curious dream from which he feared he might awake.

"It is your best work, Basil, the best thing you have ever done," said Lord Henry languidly. "You must certainly send it next year to the Grosvenor. The Academy is too large and too vulgar. Whenever I have gone there, there have been either so many people that I have not been able to see the pictures, which was dreadful, or so many pictures that I have not been able to see the people, which was worse. The Grosvenor is really the only place."

"I don't think I shall send it anywhere," he answered, tossing his head back in that odd way that used to make his friends laugh at him at Oxford. "No, I won't send it anywhere."

Lord Henry elevated his eyebrows and looked at him in amazement through the thin blue wreaths of smoke that curled up in such fanciful whorls from his heavy, opium-tainted cigarette. "Not send it anywhere? My dear fellow, why? Have you any reason? What odd chaps you painters are! You do anything in the world to gain a reputation. As soon as you have one, you seem to want to throw it away. It is silly of you, for there is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about. A portrait like this would set you far above all the young men in England, and make the old men quite jealous, if old men are ever capable of any emotion."

"I know you will laugh at me," he replied, "but I really can't exhibit it. I have put too much of myself into it."

Lord Henry stretched himself out on the divan and laughed.

"Yes, I knew you would; but it is quite true, all the same."

"Too much of yourself in it! Upon my word, Basil, I didn't know you were so vain; and I really can't see any resemblance between you, with your rugged strong face and your coal-black hair, and this young Adonis, who looks as if he was made out of ivory and rose-leaves. Why, my dear Basil, he is a Narcissus, and you—well, of course you have an intellectual expression and all that. But beauty, real beauty, ends where an intellectual expression begins. Intel-

lect is in itself a mode of exaggeration, and destroys the harmony of any face. The moment one sits down to think, one becomes all nose, or all forehead, or something horrid. Look at the successful men in any of the learned professions. How perfectly hideous they are! Except, of course, in the Church. But then in the Church they don't think. A bishop keeps on saying at the age of eighty what he was told to say when he was a boy of eighteen, and as a natural consequence he always looks absolutely delightful. Your Mysterious young friend, whose name you have never told me, but whose picture really fascinates me, never thinks. I feel quite sure of that. He is some brainless beautiful creature who should be always here in winter when we have no flowers to look at, and always here in summer when we want something to chill our intelligence. Don't flatter yourself, Basil: you are not in the least like him."

"You don't understand me, Harry," answered the artist. "Of course I am not like him. I know that perfectly well. Indeed, I should be sorry to look like him. You shrug your shoulders? I am telling you the truth. There is a fatality about all physical and intellectual distinction, the sort of fatality that seems to dog through history the faltering steps of kings. It is better not to be different from one's fellows. The ugly and the stupid have the best of it in this world. They can sit at their ease and gape at the play. If they know nothing of victory, they are at least spared the knowledge of defeat. They live as we all should live—undisturbed, indifferent, and without disquiet. They neither bring ruin upon others, nor ever receive it from alien hands. Your rank and wealth, Harry; my brains, such as they are—my art, whatever it may be worth; Dorian Gray's good looks—we shall all suffer for what the gods have given us, suffer terribly."

"Dorian Gray? Is that his name?" asked Lord Henry, walking across the studio towards Basil Hallward.

"Yes, that is his name. I didn't intend to tell it to you."

"But why not?"

"Oh, I can't explain. When I like people immensely, I never tell their names to any one. It is like surrendering a part of them. I have grown to love secrecy. It seems to be

the one thing that can make modern life mysterious or marvellous to us. The commonest thing is delightful if one only hides it. When I leave town now I never tell my people where I am going. If I did, I would lose all my pleasure. It is a silly habit, I dare say, but somehow it seems to bring a great deal of romance into one's life. I suppose you think me awfully foolish about it?"

"Not at all," answered Lord Henry, "not at all, my dear Basil. You seem to forget that I am married, and the one charm of marriage is that it makes a life of deception absolutely necessary for both parties. I never know where my wife is, and my wife never knows what I am doing. When we meet—we do meet occasionally, when we dine out together, or go down to the Duke's—we tell each other the most absurd stories with the most serious faces. My wife is very good at it—much better, in fact, than I am. She never gets confused over her dates, and I always do. But when she does find me out, she makes no row at all. I sometimes wish she would; but she merely laughs at me."

"I hate the way you talk about your married life, Harry," said Basil Hallward, strolling towards the door that led into the garden. "I believe that you are really a very good husband, but that you are thoroughly ashamed of your own virtues. You are an extraordinary fellow. You never say a moral thing, and you never do a wrong thing. Your cynicism is simply a pose."

"Being natural is simply a pose, and the most irritating pose I know," cried Lord Henry, laughing; and the two young men went out into the garden together and ensconced themselves on a long bamboo seat that stood in the shade of a tall laurel bush. The sunlight slipped over the polished leaves. In the grass, white daisies were tremulous.

After a pause, Lord Henry pulled out his watch. "I am afraid I must be going, Basil," he murmured, "and before I go, I insist on your answering a question I put to you some time ago."

"What is that?" said the painter, keeping his eyes fixed on the ground.

"You know quite well."

"I do not, Harry."