

THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY

by Oscar Wilde



THE AUTHOR

Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) was born into a prominent family in Dublin, Ireland. His unusual talents were evident at an early age, though it was also at an early age that his later proclivities were shaped - as a child, his mother loved to dress him like a little girl. He went on to great success at Magdalen College, Oxford, where he won a distinguished degree in classics along with the university's poetry prize.

After graduation from the university, he traveled in Italy and Greece, where he became enamored of the beauty of the classical age. His obsession with aesthetics eventually led him in the direction of decadence in his personal life as well as in some of his writing. His search for beauty led him to champion the outrageous, twitting the standards of Victorian society wherever possible. Wilde himself engaged in perverted sexual behavior, including a celebrated homosexual affair with Lord Alfred Douglas, the son of the Marquess of Queensbury. This affair led eventually to a public trial after Wilde sued the Marquess for slander in 1895, and the subsequent revelations of Wilde's excesses destroyed his public reputation. After being sentenced to two years at hard labor for sodomy, his health failed and he died in Paris, in destitute condition, in 1900. He converted to Catholicism on his deathbed.

Wilde was perhaps the most celebrated wit of his day, and today is best known for his stage comedies. *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), and *An Ideal Husband* (1895) were Victorian drawing-room comedies that stretched the boundaries of the genre by incorporating Wilde's personal aesthetic values as well as his criticism of what he considered to be hypocritical Victorian morality and worthless upper-class lifestyles. His greatest theatrical achievement, however, is the farce *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), in which he twits the British aristocracy with a style that has rarely been matched on the stage. His only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), told of a man who, while engaged in a life of increasing perversion and violence, aged not a day, while his portrait increasingly showed the decay of the protagonist's soul. The story was published a mere five years after the appearance of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, which deals with a similar theme.

The character of Dorian Gray shares many characteristics with the author. Wilde lived a life of corruption and in the process corrupted others. It was in the year that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was published that Wilde began his notorious affair with Lord Douglas. At the end of the novel Dorian struggles to repent, but is unable to do so. His failure to change his ways leads ultimately to his death. One might surmise that Wilde felt the same sort of hopelessness as expressed by his protagonist. An indicator of this is that many of the witticisms placed in the mouth of Lord Henry Wotton in the novel later appear in the words of Algernon Moncrieff in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, written four years later. What is pictured as destructive cynicism in the novel becomes a source of light humor in the play. One might conclude that Wilde, having given up on the possibility of change, decided to immerse himself fully in what he had originally deplored in his own life.

PLOT SUMMARY

The story opens in the home of painter Basil Hallward, who is showing his friend Lord Henry Wotton a portrait on which he has been working. The picture is of an attractive young man by the name of Dorian Gray, with whom Hallward has become infatuated. As the conversation draws to a close, Gray himself arrives on the scene, and Henry demands to be introduced to him. As Basil continues to paint, Henry speaks to the young man about the infinite value of youth; Dorian seems to be much moved. Later, they go out into the garden and continue the discussion. Basil calls them in to announce that he has finished the portrait. Henry declares it a masterpiece, but Dorian mourns the fact that, while the picture will remain the same forever, a portrait of eternal youth, he must change and decay; in fact, he declares that he would give his soul were matters to be reversed. Henry then invites Dorian to accompany him to the theater, and he accepts; Basil, however, is pained by the obvious fact that Dorian, whom he adores, is more attracted to Henry than to him.

The next day, Henry visits his uncle, George Fermor, to seek information about Dorian Gray. He discovers that Dorian is an orphan, the son of a beautiful woman named Margaret Devereux and a young man far beneath her station with whom she became infatuated. Dorian's father was killed in a duel instigated by Margaret's father Lord Kelso months after the marriage, and Margaret died shortly after giving birth. Later that day, Henry and Dorian lunch with Henry's Aunt Agatha, and Henry dominates the conversation with brilliant riffs on the centrality of pleasure. As they leave, Dorian asks to be able to accompany Henry rather than going to Basil's as he planned.

A month later, Dorian visits Henry and tells him about his love for Sybil Vane, a young actress he had seen in a variety of Shakespearean roles in a small theater. He invites Henry and Basil to come see her act, and they agree. That night, Henry receives a telegram from Dorian announcing his engagement to Sybil. Meanwhile, Sybil is at home being chided by her overly-dramatic mother and her younger brother James about her relationship with Dorian, whose name she does not even know. Both fear that the young aristocrat is merely trying to use her - a realistic fear given the fact that Sybil's parents never married, and her father left them shortly after the children were born. James, who is only sixteen and is going to sea with plans to settle in Australia, warns Sybil that he will kill Dorian if he takes advantage of her. As Henry, Dorian, and Basil dine together prior to going to the theater, Dorian tells them of the engagement, but admits that their professions of love had never included the actual mention of marriage. Henry responds cynically, maintaining that watching Dorian go through some new experience, even if he tires of Sybil in a few months, will be worthwhile in itself, while Basil becomes increasingly depressed as he sees himself losing touch with Dorian, who seems to be finding other friends more attractive.

When they attend the play, Sybil acts dreadfully, with no feeling at all. Henry and Basil leave in disgust. When Dorian goes backstage after the play, Sybil tells him that her horrible acting was because she could no longer feign love now that she knew the real thing. Dorian cruelly rejects her, telling her that her art was the only reason he loved her, and that he never wants to see her again. When he returns home after wandering around the city for some time, he finds Basil's portrait of him subtly changed - the mouth now has a touch of cruelty about it. He realizes that he has somehow gotten his wish - that he will remain forever youthful while the portrait will reflect all his sins. He determines to use the picture as a conscience and sin no more. The next day, he must make amends with poor Sybil. He sleeps in the next morning, and after rising in the early afternoon again bemoans his horrible treatment of Sybil, considers the dreadful truth of the altered portrait, and in general mopes away the entire day. Later, Henry arrives and informs him that Sybil has committed suicide, poisoning herself shortly after Dorian had left the theater. Henry tells him not to worry himself too much because she was such a bad actress anyway, and invited Dorian to accompany him to the opera. Dorian, despairing of ever doing good again, decides to give up his life to dissipation and allow his portrait to suffer the consequences. He then meets Henry at the opera. The next day, Basil visits Dorian to console him for the loss of Sybil, but is shocked to find that Dorian shows no emotion whatsoever, and wishes to put all thoughts of his former love behind him. Furthermore, when Basil asks to see the portrait he painted, Dorian panics and refuses absolutely. Basil then says that he intends to exhibit the picture in Paris, and Dorian says he may never set eyes on it again, and that he will never sit for another portrait. Basil is again flabbergasted, but complies with his friend's request, even going so far as to admit his hopeless love for the young man. After he leaves, Dorian decides to hide the portrait in a place where his friends can never find it. He covers it with an old cloth and carries it up to the schoolroom at the top of the house, where he intends to leave it, unobserved by himself or others. He then reads a copy of the *St. James's Gazette* sent to him by Henry, and is fascinated by the variety of sins described in its pages. He finally puts it down and goes to have dinner with Henry at his club.

As the years pass, Dorian becomes increasingly corrupt while his beauty remains unchanged. He becomes a sampler of varieties of experiences - the sensual beauties of the Catholic Mass, the raptures of perfumes, the splendors of jewels and tapestries, even ecclesiastical vestments. Meanwhile, he engages in the worst forms of profligacy late at night, in the process destroying his reputation in society. Strangely, he becomes increasingly reluctant to travel, being unwilling to distance himself from the portrait - his "true self." One day near his thirty-eighth birthday, Basil visits him and confronts him with the gossip circulating about his behavior, challenging him to deny the accusations. Dorian refuses to respond, claiming to care nothing about what others think or say, but finally invites Basil upstairs to see what has become of the portrait he had painted twenty years earlier. When Basil sees the picture he is both shocked and shamed by the consequences of his idolatry and Dorian's wickedness. He begs Dorian to repent, insisting that it is never too late. Dorian, however, in a fit of rage seizes a knife and stabs Basil repeatedly in the neck, leaving him dead in a chair. He then calmly goes downstairs and hides Basil's things, intending to burn them later, then locks himself out of the house and knocks, waking his butler and giving the impression that he had just returned from a night on the town. For all the servant knew, Basil had left for Paris as he had intended to do.

The next day, Dorian summons a former friend, Alan Campbell, an expert in chemistry, to dispose of the body in a way that leaves no trace. Campbell refuses, but Dorian threatens him with exposure of a scandalous secret, and he agrees to do the deed. When Dorian takes him upstairs, he finds that the portrait has blood on its hands. At dinner that night at the home of a dowager, Dorian

meets Henry, and after an evening of empty witticisms, Henry casually mentions that Dorian must have gotten home at about eleven the night before. Dorian denies getting home before 2:30, but is frightened by Henry's knowledge of the truth. He rushes home and immediately burns Basil's coat and briefcase, then takes a green pasty substance out of a secret compartment in his cabinet and hires a cab to take him toward the river. He visits an opium den, where he meets several acquaintances - largely people he had years before led into lives of debauchery. One of the women calls him "Prince Charming" - Sybil's pet name for him, and a drugged-out sailor responds immediately. It is James Vane, Sybil's brother. He pursues Dorian into a nearby alley and is about to kill him when Dorian asks him to look closely at his face. Since Dorian still appears to be in his early twenties, James lets him go with urgent apologies, but then the woman from the dive tells him that Dorian had been coming to the place for at least eighteen years.

A week later Dorian is hosting a party, much of which consists of Henry and the Duchess of Monmouth exchanging witticisms. Dorian goes to the conservatory to get some orchids for the duchess, and soon a crash is heard. They rush to the conservatory and find that Dorian has fainted, the reason being that he saw the face of James Vane staring at him through the window. For three days he lives in terror of death, then finally decides to go to a shooting party at his country estate. While walking with Sir Geoffrey Clouston, the latter spots a hare. Dorian tells him not to shoot it, but when he does, the cry of a man is heard in the thicket. They rush forward to find that the man is dead. Later, Dorian discovers that the man was James Vane, who had come after him with a revolver, hoping to kill him during the hunt.

Later, when Dorian visits Henry, the former indicates that he intends to turn over a new leaf and start being good. His first step in this new direction is to break off a relationship with Hetty, a young peasant girl he had been seeing, before she has a chance to be corrupted by him. Henry scoffs and tells him that he can never change, nor should he seek to do so. He mentions that his own wife has divorced him and that their old friend Alan Campbell has committed suicide. Talk then turns to Basil's disappearance, and Dorian goes so far as to advance the theory that he has been murdered, perhaps by Dorian himself; Henry refuses to consider it. They then discuss the reality of the soul, which Dorian affirms and Henry denies. They then arrange to meet the following morning for a ride in the park. When Dorian arrives at home, he begins to wonder whether his reformation of life would make the portrait begin to regain its youth. He hurries upstairs, eager to see some sign of positive change because of his treatment of Hetty. Instead, he is shocked to find that the picture looks even worse, now having taken on the leer of the hypocrite. Dorian decides that the real solution to his problem is to destroy the portrait, the source and reminder of all his problems. He seizes the knife with which he murdered Basil and attacks the canvas. He then emits a horrible scream, and when the servants break into the locked room, they find a beautiful portrait of their master in his youth on the wall, and a wrinkled, ugly old man on the floor with a knife in his heart.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Dorian Gray - An attractive but dissipated young man who engages in increasingly corrupt behavior, but never seems to be affected by it outwardly. His portrait, which captures the soul of the man, ages and decays as its subject becomes increasingly corrupt.
- Basil Hallward - A painter who creates the titular portrait of Dorian Gray; Dorian ultimately murders him after showing him the secret of the painting.

- Lord Henry Wotton - A young friend of Basil who is the first to see the portrait; he first puts into Dorian's mind the desire for perpetual youth, and is the major agent of corruption in his life.
- Sybil Vane - A seventeen-year-old actress with whom Dorian falls in love, and she with him; he rejects her when she loses her acting skill, and she commits suicide.
- James Vane - Sybil's sixteen-year-old brother who, before going off to sea, vows to kill Dorian if he takes advantage of Sybil. Eighteen years after Sybil's death he tries, but is accidentally shot and killed by a hunter on Dorian's estate.
- Alan Campbell - A former friend of Dorian who had dropped him in disgust long ago, Dorian summons him to dispose of Basil's body after the murder. He refuses, but Dorian blackmails him by threatening to reveal some compromising information, and he agrees to do the deed, then later commits suicide.
- Geoffrey Clouston - While on a hunting party, he accidentally shoots and kills James Vane, who had been intending to kill Dorian Gray.
- Hetty Merton - A peasant girl Dorian chooses not to seduce when he tries to reform his life.

NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all.” (Oscar Wilde, preface)

“I hate the way you talk about your married life, Harry. 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.” (Basil, ch.1, p.12)

“Every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion. It is not he who is revealed by the painter; it is rather the painter who, on the colored canvas, reveals himself. The reason I will not exhibit this picture is that I am afraid that I have shown in it the secret of my own soul.” (Basil, ch.1, p.13)

“I turned halfway round and saw Dorian Gray for the first time. When our eyes met, I felt that I was growing pale. A curious sensation of terror came over me. I knew that I had come face to face with someone whose mere personality was so fascinating that, if I allowed it to do so, it would absorb my whole nature, my whole soul, my very art itself.” (Basil, ch.1, p.14)

“Conscience and cowardice are really the same thing, Basil. Conscience is the trade name of the firm. That is all.” (Henry, ch.1, p.14)

“Then I feel, Harry, that I have given away my whole soul to someone who treats it as if it were a flower to put in his coat, a bit of decoration to charm his vanity, an ornament for a summer’s day.” (Basil, ch.1, p.19)

“There was something in his face that made one trust him at once. All the candor of youth was there, as well as all youth’s passionate purity. One felt that he had kept himself unspotted from the world.” (Henry’s thoughts, ch.2, p.23)

“The aim of life is self-development. To realize one’s nature perfectly - that is what each of us is here for.” (Henry, ch.2, p.25)

“I believe that if one man were to live out his life fully and completely, were to give form to every feeling, expression to every thought, reality to every dream - I believe that the world would gain such a fresh impulse of joy that we would forget all the maladies of medievalism, and return to the Hellenic ideal - to something finer, richer, than the Hellenic ideal, it may be.” (Henry, ch.2, p.25)

“Because you have the most marvelous youth, and youth is the one thing worth having.” (Henry, ch.2, p.28)

“It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances.” (Henry, ch.2, p.29)

“The sense of his own beauty came on him like a revelation. He had never felt it before.” (Dorian’s thoughts, ch.2, p.32)

“How sad it is! I shall grow old and horrible and dreadful. But this picture will remain always young. It will never be older than this particular day of June. If it were only the other way! If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old! For that - for that - I would give everything! Yes, there is nothing in the whole world I would not give! I would give my soul for that!” (Dorian, ch.2, p.33)

“Appreciate it! I am in love with it, Basil. It is part of myself. I feel that.” (Dorian, ch.2, p.34)

“There was something terribly enthralling in the exercise of influence. No other activity was like it.” (Henry’s thoughts, ch.3, p.42)

“Yes; he would try to be to Dorian Gray what, without knowing it, the lad was to the painter who had fashioned the wonderful portrait. He would seek to dominate him - had already, indeed, half done so. He would make that wonderful spirit his own. There was something fascinating in this son of Love and Death.” (Henry’s thoughts, ch.3, p.43)

“To get back one’s youth, one has merely to repeat one’s follies.” (Henry, ch.3, p.47)

“I cannot help telling you things. You have a curious influence over me. If I ever did a crime, I would come and confess it to you. You would understand me.” (Dorian, ch.4, p.57)

“One could never pay too high a price for any sensation.” (Henry’s thoughts, ch.4, p.63)

“The separation of spirit from matter was a mystery, and the union of spirit with matter was a mystery, also.” (Henry’s thoughts, ch.4, p.64)

“To see him is to worship him, to know him is to trust him.” (Sybil, ch.5, p.73)

“Don’t forget that you will only have one child to look after, and believe me that if this man wrongs my sister, I will find out who he is, track him down, and kill him like a dog. I swear it.” (James, ch.5, p.77)

“To be good is to be in harmony with one’s self. Discord is to be forced to be in harmony with others. One’s own life - that is the important thing.” (Henry, ch.6, p.83)

“Yes, Dorian, you will always be fond of me. I represent to you all the sins you have never had the courage to commit.” (Henry, ch.6, p.84)

“She crouched on the floor like a wounded thing, and Dorian Gray, with his beautiful eyes, looked down at her, and his chiseled lips curled in exquisite disdain. There is always something ridiculous about the emotions of people whom one has ceased to love.” (ch.7, p.93)

“In the dim, arrested light that struggled through the cream-colored silk blinds, the face appeared to him to be a little changed. The expression looked different. One would have said that there was a touch of cruelty in the mouth.” (ch.7, p.94)

“But the picture? What was he to say of that? It held the secret of his life, and told his story. It had taught him to love his own beauty. Would it teach him to loathe his own soul?” (Dorian’s thoughts, ch.7, p.96)

“But he would not sin. The picture, changed or unchanged, would be to him the visible emblem of conscience. He would resist temptation.” (Dorian’s thoughts, ch.7, p.96)

“She had no right to kill herself. It was selfish of her.” (Dorian, ch.8, p.103)

“He felt that the time had really come for making a choice. Or had his choice already been made? Yes, life had decided that for him - life, and his own infinite curiosity about life. Eternal youth, infinite passion, pleasures subtle and secret, wild joys and wilder sins - he was to have all these things. The portrait was to bear the burden of his shame; that was all.” (ch.8, p.109)

“This portrait would be to him the most magical of mirrors. As it had revealed to him his own body, so it would reveal to him his own soul. And when winter came upon it, he would still be standing where spring trembles on the verge of summer. When the blood crept from its face, and left behind a pallid mask of chalk with leaden eyes, he would keep the glamour of boyhood. Not one blossom of his loveliness would ever fade. Not one pulse of his life would ever weaken. Like the gods of the Greeks, he would be strong, and fleet, and joyous. What did it matter what happened to the coloured image on the canvas? He would be safe. That was everything.” (ch.8, p.110-111)

“Beneath its purple pall, the face painted on the canvas could grow bestial, sodden, and unclean. What did it matter? No one could see it. He himself would not see it. Why should he watch the hideous corruption of his soul?” (Dorian’s thoughts, ch.10, p.126)

“Often, on returning home from one of those mysterious and prolonged absences that gave rise to such strange conjecture among those who were his friends, or thought that they were so, he himself would creep upstairs to the locked room, open the door with the key that never left him now, and stand, with a mirror, in front of the portrait that Basil Hallward had painted of him, looking now at the evil and ageing face on the canvas, and now at the fair young face that laughed back at him from the polished glass. The very sharpness of the contrast used to quicken his sense of pleasure. He grew more and more enamored of his own beauty, more and more interested in the corruption of his own soul. He would examine with minute care, and sometimes with a monstrous and terrible delight, the hideous lines that seared the wrinkling forehead, or crawled around the heave, sensual mouth, wondering sometimes which were the more horrible, the signs of sin or the signs of age.” (ch.11, p.131)

“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.” (ch.11, p.134)

“For these treasures, and everything that he collected in his lovely house, were to be to him means of forgetfulness, modes by which he could escape, for a season, from the fear that seemed to him at times to be almost too great to be borne.” (ch.11, p.143)

“He hated to be separated from the picture that was such a part of his life.” (ch.11, p.144)

“Dorian Gray had been poisoned by a book. There were moments when he looked on evil simply as a mode through which he could realize his conception of the beautiful.” (ch.11, p.149)

“Sin is a thing that writes itself across a man’s face. It cannot be concealed. People sometimes talk of secret vices. There are no such things. If a wretched man has a vice, it shows itself in the lines of his mouth, the droop of his eyelids, the molding of his hands, even.” (Basil, ch.12, p.152)

“One has a right to judge of a man by the effect he has over his friends. Yours seem to lose all sense of honor, of goodness, of purity. You have filled them with a madness for pleasure. They have gone down into the depths. You led them there.” (Basil, ch.12, p.154)

“Each of us has Heaven and Hell in him, Basil.” (Dorian, ch.13, p.159)

“The prayer of your pride has been answered. The prayer of your repentance will be answered, also. I worshiped you too much. I am punished for it. You worshiped yourself too much. We are both punished.” (Basil, ch.13, p.160)

“Her capacity for family affection is extraordinary. When her third husband died, her hair turned quite gold from grief.” (Henry, ch.15, p.179) [Note that a very similar witticism is placed in the mouth of Algernon Moncrieff in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.]

“Innocent blood had been spilled. What could atone for that? Ah! For that there was no atonement; but though forgiveness was impossible, forgetfulness was possible still, and he was determined to forget, to stamp the thing out, to crush it as one would crush the adder that had stung one.” (Dorian’s thoughts, ch.16, p.186)

“Ugliness that had once been hateful to him because it made things real, became dear to him now for that very reason. 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.” (Dorian’s thoughts, ch.16, p.187)

“There goes the devil’s bargain.” (Woman in an opium den, ch.16, p.191)

“There are moments, psychologists tell us, when the passion for sin, or for what the world calls sin, so dominates a nature, that every fiber of the body, as every cell of the brain, seems to be instinct with fearful impulses. Men and women at such moments lose the freedom of their will. They move to their terrible end as automatons move. Choice is taken from them, and conscience is either killed, or, if it lives at all, lives but to give rebellion its fascination, and disobedience its charm. For all sins, as theologians weary not of reminding us, are sins of disobedience. When that high spirit, that morning-star of evil, fell from heaven, it was as a rebel that he fell.” (ch.16, p.191)

“Actual life was chaos, but there was something terribly logical in the imagination. It was the imagination that set remorse to dog the feet of sin. It was the imagination that made each crime bear its misshapen brood. In the common world of fact the wicked were not punished, nor the good rewarded. Success was given to the strong, failure thrust upon the weak. That was all.” (Dorian’s thoughts, ch.18, p.201)

“I have a new ideal, Harry. I am going to alter. I think I have altered.” (Dorian, ch.19, p.210)

“The soul is a terrible reality. It can be bought and sold and bartered away. It can be poisoned or made perfect. There is a soul in each one of us. I know it.” (Dorian, ch.19, p.215)

“Then it must be an illusion. The things one feels absolutely certain about are never true. That is the fatality of Faith, and the lesson of Romance.” (Henry, ch.19, p.216)

“Better for him that each sin of his life had brought its sure, swift penalty along with it. There was purification in punishment.” (Dorian’s thoughts, ch.20, p.220)

“His beauty had been to him but a mask, his youth but a mockery.” (Dorian’s thoughts, ch.20, p.220)

“When they entered 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 until they had examined the rings that they recognized who it was.” (ch.20, p.224)

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. In Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the author alludes to the story of Narcissus, a young man in Greek mythology who, upon seeing his own image in a pool of water, fell in love with himself and died because he refused to be parted from his beloved. To what extent does the myth fit the story of the novel? Is Dorian Gray a modern Narcissus? Support your argument with details from the book.
2. Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* alludes to the Faust legend, in which a man sells his soul to the devil in order to obtain what he desires, despite the fact that the devil does not actually appear in Wilde’s novel. In the various incarnations of the Faust story, that for which the protagonist sells his soul is indicative of the values of the age, or at least those of the author. For what is Dorian Gray willing to sell his soul? What does this tell you about the values of Oscar Wilde and his circle of friends, the so-called aesthetes? Describe those values using specific quotations from the novel and evaluate them on the basis of Scripture.
3. Near the end of Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Lord Henry quotes Jesus’ words from Mark 8:36 - “What does it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?” Discuss the extent to which the novel is a commentary on this verse. Did Wilde believe Jesus’ words to be true? Support your conclusion with details from the story.
4. Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* contains many autobiographical elements. In particular, the three major characters - Dorian Gray, Henry Wotton, and Basil Hallward - all reflect in different ways the character, views, and experiences of the author. Analyze these connections, describing how each major character displays an aspect of Oscar Wilde. Include details from the author’s life as well as from the novel to support your answer.
5. Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* contains many epigrams, most of which are spoken by Lord Henry Wotton. Interestingly, a number of these epigrams reappear in the author’s best-known play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which was written four years later. Choose three epigrams that appear in both works and analyze their contexts. In what ways does Wilde use these witty sayings differently? What do these differences indicate about the alteration in Wilde’s thinking in the period between the two works?
6. When Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was first published, it was condemned as an immoral book. Do you agree? Assess the moral content of the novel, using Scripture as your standard for doing so. Be sure to cite details from the book to support your argument.

7. Oscar Wilde was one of the leading proponents of a school of thought known as Aestheticism, which argued that the sole purpose of art was beauty - that it needed no other justification, either moral or functional. Discuss the role played by this philosophy in his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In what ways are the ideas of Aestheticism expressed in the book? What role do they play in the plot?
8. Oscar Wilde was one of the leading proponents of a school of thought known as Aestheticism, which argued that the sole purpose of art was beauty - that it needed no other justification, either moral or functional. Evaluate the philosophy of Aestheticism from Scripture and support your answer by using references to it in the author's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.
9. Oscar Wilde was one of the leading proponents of a school of thought known as Aestheticism, which argued that the sole purpose of art was beauty - that it needed no other justification, either moral or functional. Discuss the extent to which this philosophy is followed in his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Does Wilde contradict his own worldview by producing a novel with a moral purpose? Support your answer with specifics from the book.
10. In Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the author tells us that Lord Henry thought, "There was something terribly enthralling in the exercise of influence. No other activity was like it." Discuss the role of influence in the novel. Who is influenced by whom, and in what ways? Is influence ever pictured as a positive force in a person's life? What are the consequences of the radical individualism the novel espouses?
11. Given the author's sexual orientation, one should not be surprised that Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a male-centered novel. Support this contention by describing, not only the relationships among men in the story, but also the ways in which women are incorporated into the narrative.
12. Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in many ways expresses a reaction against the views of art and morality that characterized the Victorian era. Though the artistic ideas of Romanticism had long gone out of style, some resurface in Wilde's story. Discuss the extent to which the ideals of Romanticism may be found in the novel. In what ways are the themes of the book contrary to Romanticism?
13. In Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, discuss the different ways in which Dorian is shaped by his picture. How does the amazingly accurate portrait ultimately gain control of the life of its subject? Use details from the novel to support your conclusions.
14. Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* has much to say about hedonism, and certainly demonstrates the outworkings of that philosophy. Use the plot details and dialogue of the novel to determine the author's attitude toward hedonism. Does Wilde emerge as an advocate of what Lord Henry calls the New Hedonism, or does the novel serve as a cautionary tale against it?

15. In his *De Profundis*, a letter written to his lover from prison in 1897, Oscar Wilde wrote the following: “I let myself be lured into long spells of senseless and sensual ease.... 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 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 housetops. 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.” To what extent does this description match that of the protagonist in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, written five years earlier, before he had begun the homosexual affair that led to his imprisonment? In what sense is the novel autobiographical, and in what sense is it prophetic?
16. Discuss the meaning of the protagonist’s death at the end of Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Why did Dorian decide to attack the picture? Why did this action cause his death? What does this conclusion lead one to conclude about the fundamental message of the book?
17. In the preface to Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the author states that “there is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book.” Does the novel itself support his argument or refute it? Support your conclusion with specifics from the book.
18. In Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the protagonist twice attacks and tries to destroy his conscience, first by killing Basil Hallward and then by taking a knife to his portrait. What do these actions tell us about Dorian Gray’s condition? Compare his situation to the description of false teachers given by Paul in I Timothy 4:2 as men “whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron.” Are his actions indicative of a man with a seared conscience, or one whose conscience is so active that he can no longer tolerate what it is telling him? Support your answer with specifics from the novel.
19. In Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the protagonist appears to have stumbled onto a way of sinning without suffering the consequences, since his decadence changes his portrait without changing him. According to the three major characters in the story, is it possible to sin without consequences? What about the author’s perspective on the subject? Use details from the novel to support your answer.
20. Compare and contrast the central plot devices of Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. In your essay, note key similarities and differences, not only in how the plot devices function, but also in the themes developed by the authors in using those devices.
21. Compare and contrast the endings of Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. How do the similarities and differences reflect the views of the authors about human nature and the possibility of redemption?

22. Compare and contrast the motives that drive the protagonists to plumb the depths of evil in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. What do the differences in motivation indicate about the concerns of the respective authors with the plight of man and society?
23. As a story of a man seeking to distance himself from the powers of corruption within while still enjoying the pleasures of dissipation, Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* has much in common with Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Compare and contrast the two works in terms of their understanding of human nature, their conception of man's inner corruption, and the possibility of man controlling his evil desires.
24. Victorian Englishmen often took seriously the "science" of physiognomy - the idea that a person's traits could be read by observing his bodily, and especially facial, features. To what extent is this concept central to the plot of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*? To what extent is it undermined by Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*? To what extent do people act on such assumptions today, though they would openly disavow such unscientific thinking?
25. In chapter two of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Lord Henry says, "The aim of life is self-development. To realize one's nature perfectly - that is what each of us is here for." To what extent is the novel an explication of doing exactly that? Given the teaching of Scripture on the subject, would you agree with Wilde's conclusion?
26. Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* contains numerous biblical allusions. Choose three of these and discuss the way the author uses them. Is he faithful to the meanings of the passages? Do these passages throw light on the themes of the novel, or does Wilde merely use them as fodder for his flippant, witty epigrams?
27. Oscar Wilde was one of the literary world's most flamboyant homosexuals, despite the fact that he married and fathered two children. Given his sexual orientation, did he have any real understanding of the love between men and women? Use evidence from his greatest play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, to answer the question.
28. In Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which of the three central characters do you believe is intended to be the mouthpiece of the author? Why do you think so? In answering the question, be sure that you both support your own conclusion and argue why the other two characters do not fit the requirement as well as the one you chose.
29. In a letter to a friend concerning *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde wrote, "I am so glad you like that strange coloured book of mine: it contains much of me in it. Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry what the world thinks of me: Dorian what I would like to be - in other ages, perhaps." What does this assertion tell you about the way in which Wilde perceived himself? How does this perception affect the ways in which he draws the three central characters of the novel?

30. Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* was written four years after *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Though the two differ markedly in tone, they contain many similar ideas; even some of the witticisms are similar. Analyze the extent to which the practice of Bunburying in the play is a comic version of the escape from real-life responsibilities portrayed by the protagonist in the novel. What is the author's opinion of this practice? What are its consequences in both stories? Would the teachings of Scripture support or refute Wilde's conclusions?
31. In the sixth chapter of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Dorian says to Henry, "I cannot help telling you things. You have a curious influence over me. If I ever did a crime, I would come and confess it to you. You would understand me." Later in the story, Dorian actually does confess his murder of Basil Hallward to Lord Henry. Was Dorian right in his assumption? Did Lord Henry understand him, or did he not? Use specifics from the novel to support your answer.
32. In chapter six of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Lord Henry says, "To be good is to be in harmony with one's self. Discord is to be forced to be in harmony with others. One's own life - that is the important thing." What are the consequences of the radical individualism represented by this quotation as it is expounded in the novel? Why would the teachings of Scripture lead us to anticipate this conclusion?
33. In chapter twelve of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Basil Hallward says, "One has a right to judge of a man by the effect he has over his friends." To what extent is this true? Support your conclusion, both from the novel and from the teachings of Scripture.
34. The theme of external uprightness accompanied by internal corruption appears often in the nineteenth century. Two examples are Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Compare and contrast the treatment of this theme in the two novels. Do both authors treat the causes and consequences of inner corruption in the same way? What conclusions may be drawn from the differences? Remember that the first book was written forty years before the second one.
35. Compare and contrast the portrayals of the corrupting nature of power in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Consider both the nature of the power that is in view and the effects of that power on the ones who possess it. Which tale most effectively illustrates the inevitably evil nature of unfettered power? Support your conclusion with specifics from both works.