

THE S. MARK TAPER FOUNDATION PRESENTS  
A NOISE WITHIN'S REPERTORY THEATRE SEASON

STUDY GUIDE

# A PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY

Based on the novella by Oscar Wilde • Adapted & Directed by Michael Michetti

SEPTEMBER 23—NOVEMBER 16, 2018

 aNoiseWithin  
Classic Theatre, Modern Magic

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- Scholarly articles
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*All the best,*

Alicia Green  
DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION



Pictured: Donnlia Hughes, *Romeo and Juliet*, 2016. PHOTO BY CRAIG SCHWARTZ.

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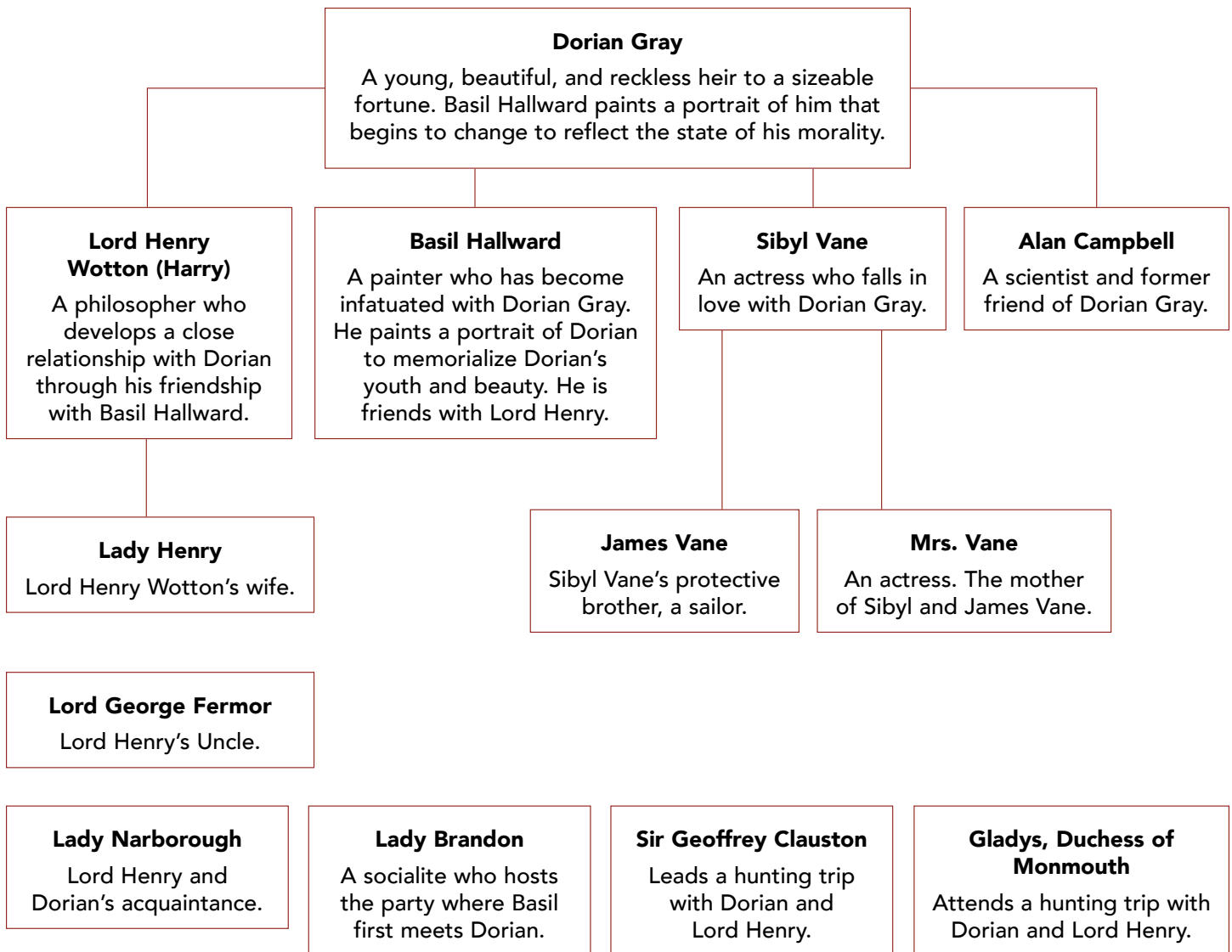
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# CHARACTER MAP



## SYNOPSIS

**Basil Hallward** has found a new source of artistic inspiration. He is just putting the finishing touches on the latest portrait of his new muse when Lord Henry Wotton (known as Harry) pays Basil a visit. The subject of the portrait is a young man named Dorian Gray. Basil admits to Harry that since he first met Dorian at a party, he has become infatuated with and devoted to Dorian. Harry can see why—the image of the young man in Basil’s painting is striking—he is young, innocent and beautiful. Basil has not revealed his feelings to Dorian, and tells Harry that he can never show the portrait in fear that the world will see in it his affection for Dorian.

Dorian arrives at Basil’s studio to model for the portrait, and Harry understands Basil’s infatuation even more. While Dorian sits for the portrait, Harry tempts him with a provocative theory about living life in hedonistic pursuit of pleasure and sensations. Harry flatters Dorian by praising his youth and beauty but warns him that they will not last, and encourages him to live his life fully before he loses them.

Basil finishes the portrait and Harry and Dorian come to admire it. However, Dorian begins to grow jealous of the figure in the painting—his portrait will forever exude his present youth while he, himself, is destined to grow old. He desperately wishes that it could be the other way around: that the painting could grow old and he could stay young. For such an arrangement, Dorian says he would give everything, even his own soul. The thought of aging terrifies Dorian to such an extent that he resolves to kill himself as soon as his beauty has faded. Basil begs Dorian not to say such things and says that he will put a varnish on the portrait so that the painting will last forever, and that he will soon deliver the painting to Dorian to keep.

Some time later at Dorian’s introduction to society, Harry begins to ask around about Dorian’s past. He learns that Dorian is heir to a large sum of money, and Harry’s interest in the young man grows. Harry and Dorian become quite close. One evening, Dorian invites Harry and Basil to accompany him to a theatrical production of *Romeo and Juliet* at a small hole-in-the-wall theatre. Dorian had stopped there before in an effort to quell a passion for sensational pleasures. There, he had fallen in love with the actress playing Juliet, a young woman named Sibyl Vane. After seeing her perform three nights in a row, Dorian had decided to visit Sibyl backstage. She had been as fascinated with Dorian as he was with her—and she had begun to call him “Prince Charming.” However, when Dorian brings Basil and Harry to the theatre, Sibyl’s performance is amateurish and embarrasses Dorian in front of his friends. Dorian berates Sibyl brutally, and tells her that he must abandon all relations with her. Dorian’s cruelty leads Sibyl to take her own life.

After he leaves the theatre, Dorian decides to look at the portrait Basil painted of him. When Dorian peels back the

curtain covering the painting, he notices that something has changed: the painting does not quite look the way he remembered. When Dorian confronts Basil about the painting, Basil reluctantly confesses his love for Dorian—and rather than receiving this news empathetically, Dorian responds dismissively to Basil’s confession.

Dorian takes the portrait, which is now beginning to age and reflect the ugliness of his behavior, and hides it away in his attic.

Dorian begins to act recklessly and selfishly—he seduces lovers for pleasure only to quickly cast them aside, he uses people for money, he destroys relationships—and all the while, he appears unaffected by his actions. Drugs have no effect on him, he shows no remorse for casting lovers aside, and he shows no guilt for using others for money. In fact, as eighteen years pass, he does not even appear to age.

One night, Basil stops by Dorian’s home to say goodbye before he heads to Paris to focus on a new painting. Basil shares stories he has heard about Dorian’s depraved and unseemly behavior, and in response Dorian lures Basil to the attic to show him the portrait—the image of Dorian now old, gnarled and hideous by sin and vice. Basil is shocked by what he sees, but before he can leave, Dorian kills him, the creator of the monstrous painting.

Dorian continues to act recklessly—looking for pleasure anywhere he can. At a brothel one night, he is called “Prince Charming.” James Vane, Sibyl Vane’s brother, happens to be at the brothel and hears this. James has vowed to avenge the death of his sister by killing the Prince Charming that destroyed her eighteen years earlier. James threatens to kill Dorian, who reasons with James, arguing that the man responsible for Sibyl’s death would be a middle-aged man by now. James spares his life, acknowledging that the man who is responsible for his sister’s death would be much older than Dorian appears.

Having avoided death at the hands of James Vane, Dorian is given a second chance at life. He has felt the weight of his actions, his hedonism, and his obsession with youth. He tells Harry that he has decided to reform, to become a better person. Harry, however, rejects Dorian’s renunciation, and tells him he believes that he’s incapable of changing.

Dorian remains determined to turn his life around, but is haunted by the people he has hurt. Finally, he takes a knife and goes to his portrait, which now depicts the image of an old, disfigured man. With a cry, he slashes the portrait. His servants, responding to a scream in the middle of the night, make their way up the stairs to the attic and unlock the door. There, on the floor, they find the body of a hideously wrinkled old man; above him, the portrait of their beautiful young master as he was when he first modeled for Basil: young, innocent and beautiful. ♦

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR: **OSCAR WILDE**

**Oscar Wilde** was born on October 16, 1854 in Dublin to Sir William Wilde and Lady Jane Francesca Elgee Wilde. His father was a successful surgeon, and his mother was a writer. Oscar Wilde grew up surrounded by writers and artists. Lady Wilde wrote popular poetry under the pseudonym “Speranza” and often hosted salons for other writers, poets, and other creatives to discuss key questions of the time.

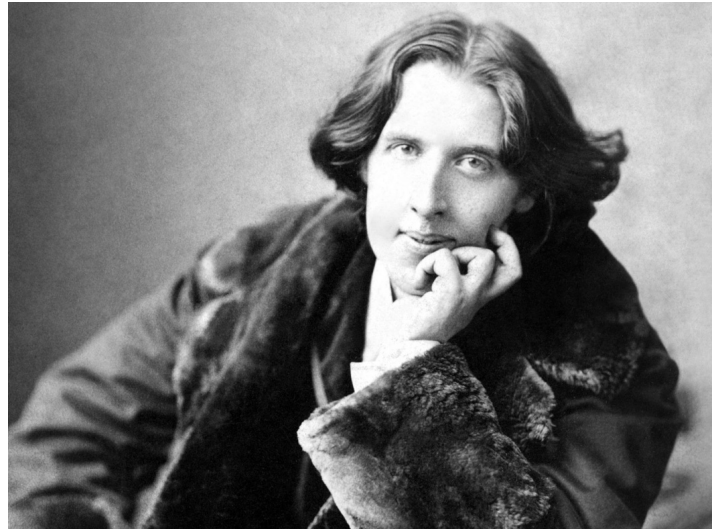
“Some said my life was a lie but I always knew it to be the truth; for like the truth it was rarely pure and never simple.”

—Oscar Wilde

Wilde was exposed to a premier education. At the age of ten, he began attending the exclusive Portora Royal School. When he was sixteen, Wilde attended Trinity College in Dublin where he began to develop an interest in classics. While he was there, he was awarded the Berkeley Gold Medal for his achievements in his study of classics. After attending Trinity College, Wilde was granted a scholarship to continue his education at Magdalen College in Oxford, England. While at Magdalen, Wilde was particularly inspired by his professor, Walter Pater, who stressed the importance of art in life. Wilde’s exposure to Pater’s ideas of art as essential to life eventually led Wilde to become part of the Aesthetic Movement in literature.

Aestheticism is an artistic movement that arose in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The crux of the movement was the creation of “art for art’s sake.” This was a revolutionary idea in Victorian society which was concerned with the maintenance of morality. Aestheticism claimed that art should not be created to uphold morals. Wilde became a key player in the Aesthetic movement.

In 1882, Wilde travelled from England to New York City to lecture. He toured the United States and delivered 140 lectures in the course of about nine months. After his American tour, Wilde entered the English and Irish lecture



“Oscar Wilde in His Favorite Coat” by Napoleon Sarony, 1881.

circuit. In his lectures, he established himself as a staunch supporter of the Aesthetic Movement.

In 1884, Wilde married Constance Lloyd. They had two children together: Cyril and Vyvyan. It was only in the last decade of his life that Wilde began to write and publish the works for which he is now known. While *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was met with criticism for its apparent lack of morality, Wilde had the greatest success with his comedies that satirized Victorian society: *Lady Windemere’s Fan*, *An Ideal Husband*, *Salomé*, *A Woman of No Importance*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which is his most popular work.

In 1891, Wilde met Lord Alfred Douglas, and the two became romantically involved. In 1895, Lord Douglas’s father, the Marquis of Queensberry, discovered the affair and called Wilde a sodomite. Wilde decided to sue the Marquis of Queensberry for criminal libel. However, the law suit led to disaster for Wilde. The libel case fell through when his lawyers brought up evidence of Wilde’s homosexuality, and Wilde was then arrested for indecency and sentenced to two years of hard labor.

When Wilde left prison, he was bankrupt. He fled to France where he published one final work—*The Ballad of Reading Gaol*—before he died of acute meningitis on November 30, 1900 at the age of 46. ♦

## TIMELINE: OSCAR WILDE

- 1854** Oscar Wilde is born.
- 1857** Isola Wilde, Oscar Wilde's sister, is born.
- 1864** William Wilde, Oscar Wilde's father, is knighted. Oscar Wilde begins his education at Portora Royal School in Enniskillen.
- 1867** Isola Wilde dies.
- 1871** Wilde goes to Trinity College in Dublin. He is also named a Queen's Scholar.
- 1873** Wilde is awarded a Foundation Scholarship.
- 1874** Wilde is awarded a scholarship to attend Magdalen College in Oxford.
- 1876** Sir William Wilde, Oscar Wilde's father, dies.
- 1877** Wilde publishes "The Tomb of Keats" in *The Irish Monthly*.
- 1878** Wilde wins the Newdigate Prize for his poem, "Ravenna." Wilde receives his B.A. at Oxford.
- 1879** Wilde publishes "To Sarah Bernhardt" and "Queen Henrietta Maria" in *The World*.
- 1880** The first cartoon of Wilde by George du Maurier appears in *Punch*.
- 1881** Wilde publishes *Poems*, a collection of his poetry. Wilde embarks for America.
- 1882** Wilde arrives at U.S. Customs with nothing to declare but his genius. Wilde delivers lectures across the United States and Canada, and meets Louisa May Alcott, Walt Whitman, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.
- 1883** Wilde finishes writing the play *The Duchess of Padua*. Wilde begins to tour England and Ireland, giving lectures. Wilde becomes engaged to Constance Lloyd.
- 1884** Wilde and Constance Lloyd are married.
- 1885** Wilde begins to publish articles for the *Pall Mall Gazette*. Cyril Wilde, Oscar Wilde's son, is born.
- 1886** Wilde meets George Bernard Shaw. Vyvyan Oscar Beresford Wilde, Oscar Wilde's son, is born.
- 1887** Wilde becomes the editor of *Woman's World* magazine.
- 1888** Wilde publishes a book of fairy tales entitled *the Happy Prince and Other Tales*.
- 1891** Wilde meets Lord Alfred Douglas. Wilde Publishes *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.
- 1892** Wilde writes *Lady Windemere's Fan*.
- 1893** Wilde's play, *A Woman of No Importance*, premieres.
- 1894** Queensberry, Lord Alfred Douglas's father, sees Lord Alfred Douglas and Wilde together and threatens them. Wilde finishes writing *The Importance of Being Earnest*.
- 1895** Wilde receives a threatening card from Queensberry. Wilde obtains a warrant for Queensberry's arrest. Queensberry is acquitted. Wilde is arrested and tried for gross indecency. Wilde is sentenced to two years of hard labor.
- 1896** Lady Jane Wilde, Oscar Wilde's mother, dies.
- 1897** Wilde finishes writing *De Profundis*. Wilde is released. Wilde reunites with Lord Alfred Douglas for one week.
- 1898** Constance Wilde, Oscar Wilde's wife, dies.
- 1900** Oscar Wilde dies of acute meningitis.

## OSCAR WILDE'S WORLD: THE VICTORIAN ERA

**The Victorian Era** is considered the time from when Queen Victoria ascended to the British throne in 1837 to the time of her death in 1901. This era is marked by a distinct delineation of socio-economic classes and a deep concern for ethics and morality—or at least the appearance of morality. During the Industrial Revolution prior to the Victorian Age, England saw a large boom in city populations. Families who had spent generations working and living in the countryside moved to large

“The books that the world calls immoral are books that show the world its own shame.”

—Oscar Wilde (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*)

urban centers to seek out industrial jobs. These industrial jobs presented the former agrarian population with a new rhythm of life—unlike farm and village life which required a constant participation in work projects, industrial jobs began at a certain time of day and ended at a certain time of day. This new clock in and clock out-type of life opened the doors to greater amounts of leisure time for the working class. Out of this newfound leisure time, the entertainment industry began to bloom, and people of all classes began to flock to sensational and spectacular displays for entertainment. Consumption of this type of entertainment—full of gossip, grotesque tales, burlesque shows, and death-defying stunts—often directly contradicted the strict morality code.

The Victorian Era is an era of contradiction. On one hand, the desire to exhibit and practice morality dominated day-to-day interactions. On the other hand, the desire to consume flashy and gossip-filled entertainment led to a degree of corruption in Victorian society.

This world—the Victorian world of social contradictions—is the world of Oscar Wilde and the backdrop to his novella, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. ♦

Edited from: <http://www.victorian-era.org/victorian-era-morality.html> and [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians/pleasure\\_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians/pleasure_01.shtml)

MORAL EXPECTATIONS	ENTERTAINMENT
Acting honestly	Scandal Sheets (similar to today's tabloids)
Working hard	Sensational novels with plots concerning bigamy, murder, and adultery
Displaying propriety and politeness	Celebrity Gossip
Practicing frugality	Theatrical productions with special effects depicting burning buildings, collapsing bridges, and simulated waterfalls
Performing charitable acts for those less well-off	The exhibition of human oddities ("Freak Shows")
Practicing sobriety	



## AESTHETICISM

*Aestheticism is an artistic movement that emerged during the Victorian era that valued the creation of "art for art's sake."*



"Harmony in Grey and Green: Miss Cecily Alexander" by James Abbot McNeill Whistler 1872-4.



"Flying Figure" by Edward Burne-Jones c.1870.



"A Garden" by Albert Moore 1869.

**The Aesthetic Movement's** interest in the creation of art for no other purpose but to exhibit beauty contradicts the traditional idea that art has an obligation to convey a specific moral or lesson. This traditional view of art can be traced back to Horace, an ancient Roman lyric poet who said that art is meant to instruct as well as delight an audience. As the Victorian Era is one marked by a distinct concern with the appearance of morality, the obligation of art to instruct was at the forefront of Victorian appreciation of art. However, Aesthetes—those who were a part of the Aesthetic Movement—rebelled against that view of art. Instead, they saw art as autonomous: an entity whose value is not connected to morality or even reason.

## OSCAR WILDE AND AESTHETICISM

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“All art is quite useless”

—Oscar Wilde  
(preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*)

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Oscar Wilde is considered one of the prominent voices of the Aesthetic Movement. In his essay, “Decay of Lying,” Wilde says: “Art never expresses anything but itself. It has an independent life, just as Thought has, and develops purely its own lines.” Art is what it appears to be, nothing more.

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However, Wilde goes on to discuss the role of art in society in his essay “The English Renaissance of Art”: “Art never harms itself by keeping aloof from the social problems of the day: Rather, by doing so, it more completely realizes for us that which we desire. For to most of us the real life is the life we do not lead.” In this sense, Wilde argues that art, when it does not work to intersect directly with social or moral ideals, works almost like a reverse mirror—by keeping distant from social ills and morality, art shows us what we do not have; it shows us the life we do not lead.

## THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY AND AESTHETICISM

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde seems to contradict his own beliefs about the Aesthetics of art. On the one hand, the characters in Wilde’s work exhibit an obsession with appearances and beauty that is clearly rooted in Aesthetic thought. On the other hand, in Wilde’s story, art and life are inexplicably connected: as Dorian becomes increasingly reckless and destructive in his everyday life, the more this portrait changes. In Aestheticism, a work of art is a thing, unchanging. All that the work of art is, is illustrated within work’s medium. The changes in the portrait seem to reflect the decline Dorian’s morality—the more harm Dorian does to others, the older the portrait appears. However, the Aesthetic Movement is one that attempts to separate art

from morality. In this sense, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, does not fit cleanly within the bounds of the principles of Aestheticism—the work appears to be more of a combination of Aestheticism and traditional, morally-based art. This combination of opposing views of art makes *The Picture of Dorian Gray* difficult to define in terms of labeling it as a specific genre or type of work. But after all, as Harry says, “to define is to limit.” Perhaps that is the point. ♦

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## RECEPTION OF **THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY**

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* first appeared in print in 1890 in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*. However, before it was ever published, Wilde's text had been substantially censored by editor J.M. Stoddart. After reading Wilde's original typescript, Stoddart determined that the work contained "a number of things which an innocent woman would take an exception to." He explained this to Craige Lippincott and assured his employer that he would edit the novel to "make it acceptable to the most fastidious taste." Stoddart focused on censoring the descriptions and suggestions of romantic feelings between Basil and Dorian as well as the descriptions of Dorian's sexuality. Stoddart also removed mention of Dorian's female love interests as "mistresses" so as to eliminate the element of adultery from the work. Wilde first saw the changes Stoddart had made when he opened up his copy of the July 1890 publication of *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*.

After the *Lippincott* publication, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* received quite a bit of backlash. Even though the mentions of adultery and homosexuality had been significantly cut down, the novel was still met with scathing reviews. The *Daily Chronicle* in London called Wilde's work "unclean," "poisonous," and "heavy with the mephitic odours of moral and spiritual putrefaction." More seriously, the *Scots Observer* stated that although *Dorian Gray* was a work of literary quality, it dealt in "matters only fitted for the Criminal Investigation Department or a hearing *in camera*" and would be of interest mainly to "outlawed noblemen and perverted telegraph-boys." This particular review went on to act as evidence against Wilde in his trial for gross indecency.

After receiving this criticism, Wilde edited *Dorian Gray* himself before publishing the work as a book in 1891. However, even after his edits, the work was still met with backlash. ♦

Edited from: [http://harvardpress.typepad.com/hup\\_publicity/2011/02/textual-history-picture-of-dorian-gray-frankel.html](http://harvardpress.typepad.com/hup_publicity/2011/02/textual-history-picture-of-dorian-gray-frankel.html) ,

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"Lippincott's Monthly Magazine July 1890 Cover" British Library Collection.

## THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY THEMES

### YOUTH AND INNOCENCE

“There is absolutely nothing in the world but youth!” Harry says this to Dorian after Dorian finishes modeling for Basil’s painting. Youth is inextricably linked to the appearance of innocence and beauty, and in Victorian society, which sported strict sets of social codes, the appearance of innocence and beauty are assets.

There is hope in youth—hope for the future. We see this hope in Sibyl Vane, a young actress who plays Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet*. Like Juliet, Sibyl is optimistic about love. She is an idealist. We see her idealism when we learn that she only knows Dorian as “Prince Charming.” It is only when Dorian breaks Sibyl’s heart that she loses her childlike idealism and poisons herself.

Dorian has an obsession with youth. The moment Basil finishes his portrait, Dorian grows jealous of his likeness in the portrait. He says: “How sad it is. I shall grow old, and horrid, and dreadful. But this picture will remain always young. It will never be older than this particular day of June... If only it were 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. I would give my soul for that.” And in many ways, he does. As Dorian begins to do harm to others, his portrait begins to age, but he does not. He maintains his youth and his beauty at the cost of his innocence.

### MORALITY AND CORRUPTION

Morality—or at least the appearance of morality—was of the utmost importance in the Victorian Era. Throughout the novel and the play, Dorian’s selfishness leads to the peril of others. While he is able to maintain the appearance of morality through the maintenance of his youth and beauty, his likeness in Basil’s painting begins to physically change to display the decay of Dorian’s moral compass. Dorian attempts to hide the decay of his morality by covering the painting and stashing it in his attic. However, the figure of Dorian in the painting continues to age at a rapid rate. Despite his efforts to hide the deterioration of his morality, Dorian’s façade eventually crumbles when he slashes his portrait with a knife—his inner corruption leads to his downfall.

### APPEARANCE AND IDENTITY

Throughout the novel and the play, characters place each other on pedestals: Basil confesses that he worships Dorian, Dorian states that he would like to put Sibyl “on a pedestal of gold and to see the world worship the woman who is [his],” Sibyl only refers to Dorian as

“Prince Charming,” and Harry claims that “the world will always worship [Dorian.]” These displays of devotion are in large part based upon appearances—Basil and Harry worship Dorian for his beauty just as Dorian worships Sibyl for hers. However, worshipping another based on their appearance leads to an idealistic and unrealistic understanding of that person’s core identity.

When Dorian invites Harry to attend *Romeo and Juliet* and to meet the woman with whom he is in love, he describes Sibyl:

DORIAN: Tonight she is Rosalind, and tomorrow night she will be Juliet.

HARRY: When is she Sibyl Vane?

DORIAN: Never.

Dorian holds a romanticized and unrealistic view of Sibyl that she cannot and does not live up to just as Basil, Harry, and Sibyl hold idealized views of Dorian that he cannot and does not live up to. This tension between how characters appear to each other and their true core identities proves deadly.

### LOVE AND SEXUALITY

Throughout the novel and the play, many of the male characters seem to struggle with love and sexuality. Although he is married, Harry has a somewhat bleak, unromantic view on the institution of marriage. He says, “the one charm of marriage is that it makes a life of deception absolutely necessary.” This suggests that Harry has not found happiness in his marriage to Lady Henry. He even goes on to say that women “spoil every romance by making it last forever.” Even further, Harry expresses a degree of interest in Dorian as he frequently praises Dorian’s beauty.

It is also suggested that Basil is interested in Dorian romantically. When Basil first describes Dorian to Harry, he says, “Don’t take away from me the one person that makes life absolutely lovely to me.” In fact, when Wilde edited *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in response to reviews that said the romance depicted in it was too “vulgar” for the public, he trimmed Basil’s displays of affection toward Dorian, making his infatuation less overt. However, Basil’s interest in Dorian is still present in the work even if it is slightly more ambiguous.

Dorian seems to have a tumultuous relationship with his sexuality. He expresses outright interest in women, and even considers marrying Sibyl. However, after committing murder, Dorian calls up an old friend, Alan Campbell, for assistance. The past Alan and Dorian share is ambiguous, and when Dorian tries to bring it up, Alan responds by

## THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY THEMES CONTINUED...

saying, "Don't speak about those days, Dorian, they are dead." Alan's recoil from a discussion of the past suggests that there is great pain in their shared past—perhaps the pain of heartbreak.

It is important to understand Oscar Wilde's sexuality when considering the role sexuality plays in the story. Wilde himself was married with two children, yet he identified as gay. However, due to the strict laws and social codes of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, he was eventually imprisoned for his sexuality. When discussing his connection to the characters in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde says this: "Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry is what the world thinks of me: Dorian is what I would like to be – in other ages, perhaps."

### LIFE AND ART

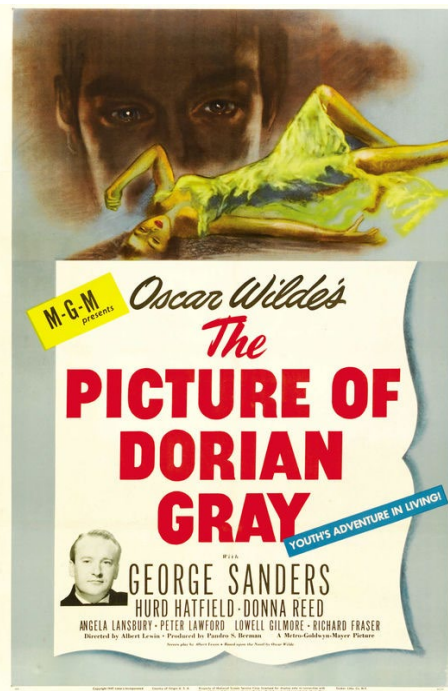
"I am so glad that you have never done anything, never carved a statue, or painted a picture, or produced anything outside of yourself. Life has been your art." Harry says this to Dorian near the end of the story. Throughout the novel and the play, we see, quite obviously, that for Dorian, life and art are interconnected—a portrait of Dorian changes and ages as Dorian begins to commit increasingly heinous acts. Dorian even states his opinion about the connection between life and art. When speaking to Sibyl, Dorian says, "without your art, you are nothing." This mirrors Dorian's own relationship to art: without his portrait, he is nothing. Dorian's portrait provides him with a picture of the state of his soul. Without his soul, he is nothing—"A face without a heart." ♦



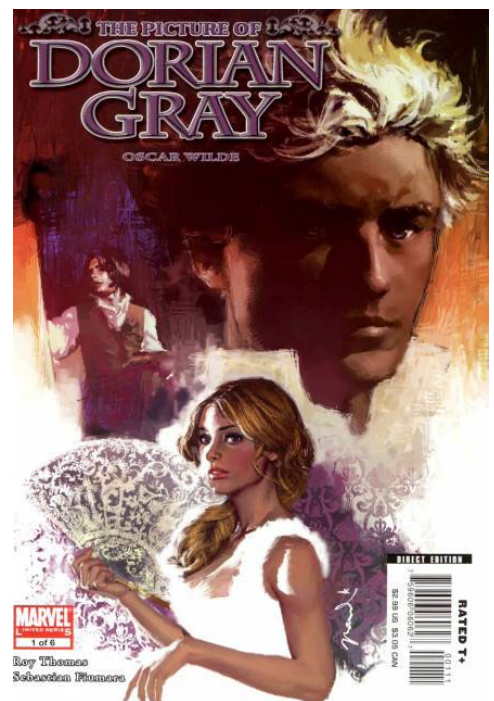
"Picture of Dorian Gray" by Ivan Albright 1943-4.

ADAPTATIONS OF **THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY**

"Poster for *Dorian Gray*" Ealing Studios, Alliance Films, Fragile Films, and UK Film Council, 2009.



"Poster for *The Picture of Dorian Gray*" MGM Studios, 1945.



"Cover of Marvel Illustrated's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* #1" Gerald Parel, 2008.

**Oscar Wilde's story** has been adapted countless times since *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was originally published as a book in 1891. The first film adaptation of the novel premiered in 1910— *Dorian Gray's Portræet*, a silent Danish film based on Oscar Wilde's work. Since then, the story of Dorian Gray has been the basis for several films, television shows, playscripts, and even comic books.

The most popular film adaptation of Wilde's story is the 1945 film directed by Albert Lewin starring Hurd Hatfield as Dorian Gray, George Sanders as Lord Henry Wotton, and Angela Lansbury as Sibyl Vane.

Recently, there have been two Dorian Gray films released: one in 2005 starring Josh Duhamel and one in

2009 featuring Colin Firth.

In 2007, Marvel Illustrated released a comic book series following the story of Oscar Wilde's work.

The character of Dorian Gray is also prominently featured in the television series, *Penny Dreadful*.

The sheer number of adaptations of Oscar Wilde's novel indicates that there is a universality to the tale of Dorian Gray. Wilde's work touches on the struggle to maintain true morality and inner beauty in a world obsessed with appearances. How do we reconcile the difference between our inner and outer identities? Wilde's work does not give us an answer to that question, but rather gives us more questions to ask. ♦

## Q&A WITH **MICHAEL MICHETTI** ABOUT HIS ADAPTATION AND A NOISE WITHIN'S PRODUCTION

### **Q: What was the process of adapting the story like?**

A: The process of adapting *A Picture of Dorian Gray* for the stage began by transcribing all the dialogue from the novella. Fortunately, Oscar Wilde loved the spoken word, and the vast amount of the story told through dialogue foreshadows his career as a playwright which was to flourish following the publication of *Dorian Gray*. Few of the dramatic sequences were told exclusively through narrative. I decided not to attempt to supply "Wildian" dialogue to fill in the holes, but rather to use theatrical devices—movement, narrative dance, music, visual images, Greek Chorus, etc.—to complete the story. The final result is a script which, while in many ways different from the novella, is almost entirely Wilde. In fact, only maybe a couple dozen words in the entire play are not lifted directly from the original sources. The hope is that this adaptation remains true to Wilde's story while making it feel vital and relevant for the contemporary stage.

### **Q: What drew you specifically to this story?**

A: Usually *Dorian Gray* is treated as a melodrama or a sort of Gothic horror story. But the thing that draws me to this tale is the psychological truth behind it. This is not the story of a rotting portrait; it is the story of a rotting soul. All elements of melodrama, therefore, take a back seat to the emotional honesty of the characters and the situations. The playing style, while highly theatrical, is extremely truthful.

### **Q: Can you tell us more about the style of this specific production?**

A: The production has a sensual tone, emphasizing the story's subject of hedonism, with an erotic tension throughout. Like Wilde's novella itself, the production has it both ways—reproaching the pursuit of sensual overindulgence while seducing the audience with the aesthetic appeal of that very excess.

The production, like the novella, is set in the late 19th century but avoids a slavishly period treatment. The production design in particular suggests the era while filtering it through an extremely modern, minimalist sensitivity. The design elements almost feel closer to an "invented world" concept than a Victorian period piece. The scenic design is stylish and elegant but spare, employing a combination of sleek-contemporary and ornate-baroque, with the repetition of empty gold frames throughout the set. Clothes evoke the period through their lines and silhouettes, but owe nearly as much to contemporary *haute couture* as to Victorian England. The musical score is eclectic, with predominantly twentieth century music played by string quartets. ♦

## PRE-SHOW PREPARATION: **RESEARCH**

### **Purpose:**

These research prompts will help students develop an understanding of the social and historical context of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

### **Prepare:**

Have students break into small groups and research the following topics, either in groups or individually. When they are finished, have students present their findings to the class.

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#### **The Victorian Era**

- Morals
- Forms of entertainment
- Gender roles and expectations
- The Aesthetic Movement
- Key literary figures
- Gothic literature

#### **Oscar Wilde**

- His childhood
- His education
  - ◆ His professors
- His lectures
- His imprisonment
- His other works:
  - ◆ *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*
  - ◆ *A Woman of No Importance*
  - ◆ *The Importance of Being Earnest*
  - ◆ *Lady Windemere's Fan*
  - ◆ *An Ideal Husband*



## PRE-SHOW PREPARATION: **ACTIVITIES**

### Purpose:

These activities will prompt students to think critically about the themes in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

### Plan an Adaptation

In this activity, students will have the opportunity to develop a well-thought out plan for how they might adapt the core story of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* into various media.

- Have students read Oscar Wilde's novella, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.
- Facilitate a discussion about the themes present in the novella and list the themes.
- Ask students to identify and list the core characteristics of each of the characters in the novella.
- Have students break into groups to discuss where they have seen characters and themes similar to those in the novella in other novels, news stories, films, paintings, songs, etc.
- In groups, ask students to devise a plan of how they would adapt *The Picture of Dorian Gray* into a different artistic medium (a play, a film, a song, a television series, etc.). The adaptation could involve transposing the setting from Victorian England to another time period.
- Ask students what new light would be shed on the original characters and themes in their adaptation.

### Spectrum

In this activity, students will have the opportunity to explore where they stand on various issues or themes.

- Set up the space so that one end of the space represents "strongly agree" and the other represents "strongly disagree." The entire space represents a spectrum of opinions between the two extremes with the center point representing a "neutral" opinion.
- Read out a list of statements related to the themes in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Examples:

*Inner beauty is more important than outer beauty*

*Beauty is important to success in life*

*Secrecy can be good*

*Good and bad are relative terms*

*Society tells us how we should act*

- After each statement, allow students to place themselves in the space according to how they feel about the statement.
- Discussion: How was doing this activity? Were there any surprises? Did you ever find yourself in a corner by yourself? How did that feel?

### Secret Allies and Enemies

This activity will help students explore secrecy through physicalization.

- Have students walk in the space as themselves. As they walk, instruct them to silently pick a person in the group who is their enemy. The students should not let anyone know who their enemy is. As they walk throughout the space, their goal is to stay as far away from their enemy as possible.
- After a moment, have students silently select a different person in the group to be their ally. Again, students should not let anyone know who their ally is. Their goal now, is to keep their ally in between them and their enemy at all times while staying as far away from their enemy as possible, and while not letting anyone know who their enemy is or who their ally is.
- Advanced level: Have students silently pick a third person in the group to be their role model. Students should follow this person as closely as they can, without letting them know that they are their role model. While following their role model, students should also try to keep their ally in between them and their enemy while staying as far from their enemy as possible.
- Discussion: How was this activity? Was it easy? Was it difficult? What was easy or difficult about it? How did it feel to keep those secrets? Were you successful at keeping who your enemy, ally, and role model were secret?

## ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Select one of the following quotes from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as well as Wilde's preface to the novella and write an essay in which you either defend or oppose the view presented. Be sure to use examples from the novella to defend your stance.
  - ♦ "The aim of life is *self*-development. To realize one's nature perfectly - that is what each of us is here for. People are afraid of themselves, nowadays. Courage has gone out of our race. The terror of society, which is the basis of morals, the terror of God, which is the secret of religion - these are the two things that govern us."  
—Lord Henry Wotton
  - ♦ "Youth is the one thing worth having."—Lord Henry Wotton
  - ♦ "Each of us has Heaven and Hell in him, Basil."—Dorian Gray
  - ♦ "People are very fond of giving away what they need most themselves."—Lord Henry Wotton
  - ♦ "All art is quite useless."—Oscar Wilde
  - ♦ "It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors."—Oscar Wilde
2. Is *The Picture of Dorian Gray* relevant today? In a thesis-driven essay develop a position either for or against *Dorian Gray's* relevance and support your position with examples from the text as well as examples of current social issues.
3. In a thesis-driven essay, analyze how Wilde explores the relationship between inner beauty and outer beauty in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.
4. In Aesthetic philosophy, philosopher R.G. Collingwood describes a distinction between Amusement Art and Magic Art. Amusement Art is art that helps an audience briefly escape from reality. Magic Art is art that helps the audience learn how to interact with the world's reality. In a well-developed essay, analyze the complex relationship between Amusement Art and Magic Art as presented in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Support your analysis with evidence from the text.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### ARTICLES:

Manganiello, Dominic. "Ethics and Aesthetics in 'The Picture of Dorian Gray.'" *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2, 1983, pp. 25–33. JSTOR, JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/25512571](http://www.jstor.org/stable/25512571)

Taghizadeh, Ali, and Mojtaba Jeihouni. "Aestheticism versus Realism? Narcissistic Mania of the Unheeded Soul in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*." *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, vol. 4, no. 7, 2014, doi:10.4304/tpls.4.7.1445-1451.

Ross, Alex. "Deceptive Picture: How Oscar Wilde Painted Over 'Dorian Gray.'" *The New Yorker*, 19 June 2017, [www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/08/08/deceptive-picture](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/08/08/deceptive-picture).

### BOOKS:

*A Face Without a Heart* by Rick R Reed—a modern retelling of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

*The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde* by Neil McKenna—a biography

### ONLINE RESOURCES:

Oscar Wilde's articles, lectures, and plays: [http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/search/?query=oscar+wilde&sort\\_order=title](http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/search/?query=oscar+wilde&sort_order=title)

### VIDEO CLIPS:

Aesthetics: Crash Course Philosophy #1: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gDL4Zf2yEa4>

### FILMS:

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1945) Directed by Albert Lewin

*Dorian Gray* (2009) Directed by Oliver Parker

Text of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Project Gutenberg <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/174/old/dgray10h.htm>

## ABOUT THEATRE ARTS: **KEY THEATRICAL TERMS**

Today, movies and television take audiences away from what was once the number one form of amusement: going to the theatre. But attending a live theatrical performance is still one of the most thrilling and active forms of entertainment.

In a theatre, observers are catapulted into the action, especially at an intimate venue like *A Noise Within*, whose thrust stage reaches out into the audience and whose actors can see, hear, and feel the response of the crowd.

Although playhouses in the past could sometimes be rowdy, participating in the performance by giving respect and attention to the actors is the most appropriate behavior at a theatrical performance today. Shouting out (or even whispering) can be heard throughout the auditorium, as can rustling paper or ringing phones.

After this *A Noise Within* performance, you will have the opportunity to discuss the play's content and style with the performing artists and director(s). You may wish to remind students to observe the performance carefully or to compile questions ahead of time so they are prepared to participate in the discussion.

**blocking:** The instructions a director gives actors that tell them how and where to move in relation to each other or to the set in a particular scene.

**character:** The personality or part portrayed by an actor on stage.

**conflict:** The opposition of people or forces which causes the play's rising action.

**dramatic irony:** A dramatic technique used by a writer in which a character is unaware of something the audience knows.

**genre:** Literally, "kind" or "type." In literary terms, genre refers to the main types of literary form, principally comedy and tragedy. It can also refer to forms that are more specific to a given historical era, such as the revenge tragedy, or to more specific sub-genres of tragedy and comedy such as the comedy of manners, farce or social drama.

**motivation:** The situation or mood which initiates an action. Actors often look for their "motivation" when they try to dissect how a character thinks or acts.

**props:** Items carried on stage by an actor to represent objects mentioned in or implied by the script. Sometimes the props are actual, sometimes they are manufactured in the theatre shop.

**proscenium stage:** There is usually a front curtain on a proscenium stage. The audience views the play from the front through a "frame" called the proscenium arch. In this scenario, all audience members have the same view of the actors.

**set:** The physical world created on stage in which the action of the play takes place.

**setting:** The environment in which a play takes place. It may include the historical period as well as the physical space.

**stage areas:** The stage is divided into areas to help the director to note where action will take place. Upstage is the area furthest from the audience. Downstage is the area closest to the audience. Center stage defines the middle of the playing space. Stage left is the actor's left as he faces the audience. Stage right is the actor's right as he faces the audience.

**theme:** The overarching message or main idea of a literary or dramatic work. A recurring idea in a play or story.

**thrust stage:** A stage that juts out into the audience seating area so that patrons are seated on three sides. In this scenario, audience members see the play from varying viewpoints. *A Noise Within* features a thrust stage.

## ABOUT **A NOISE WITHIN**

**A NOISE WITHIN** A Noise Within produces classic theatre as an essential means to enrich our community by embracing universal human experiences, expanding personal awareness, and challenging individual perspectives. Our company of resident and guest artists performing in rotating repertory immerses student and general audiences in timeless, epic stories in an intimate setting.

Our most successful art asks our community to question beliefs, focus on relationships, and develop self-awareness. Southern California audiences of all ages and backgrounds build community together while engaging with this most visceral and primal of storytelling techniques. ANW's production of classic theatre includes all plays we believe will be part of our cultural legacy. We interpret these stories through the work of a professional resident company—a group of artists whose work is critical to their community—based on the belief that trust among artists and between artists and audience can only be built through an honest and continuing dialogue. Our plays will be performed in rotating repertory, sometimes simultaneously in multiple spaces, and buttressed by meaningful supporting programs to create a symphonic theatrical experience for artists and audience.

In its 25 year history, A Noise Within has garnered over 500 awards and commendations, including the Los Angeles Drama Critics' Circle's revered Polly Warfield Award for Excellence and the coveted Margaret Hartford Award for Sustained Excellence.

More than 40,000 individuals attend productions at a Noise Within annually. In addition, the theatre draws over 15,000 student participants to its arts education program, *Classics Live!* Students benefit from in-classroom workshops, conservatory training, subsidized tickets to matinee and evening performances, post-performance discussions with artists, and free standards-based study guides. ♦

### Study Guides

A Noise Within creates study guides in alignment with core reading, listening, speaking, and performing arts standards to help educators prepare their students for their visit to our theatre. Study guides are available at no extra cost to download through our website: [www.anoisewithin.org](http://www.anoisewithin.org). The information and activities outlined in these guides are designed to work in compliance with the California VAPA standards, The Common Core, and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning Skills.

Study guides include background information on the plays and playwrights, historical context, textual analysis, in-depth discussion of A Noise Within's artistic interpretation of the work, statements from directors and designers, as well as discussion points and suggested classroom activities. Guides from past seasons are also available to download from the website.

### Study Guide Credits

Alicia Green .....	<i>Education Director and Editor</i>
Rebecca Wilson.....	<i>Education Associate</i>
Craig Schwartz .....	<i>Production Photography</i>
Teresa English .....	<i>Graphic Design</i>



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