



## THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY-A LITERARY MASTERPIECE

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### ABSTRACT :

*This paper reflects a few ideas of Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray as a literary masterpiece. Wilde's aesthetics of a classic as moral commentary through Dorian are discussed in this paper. The background, genre, writing style, some of the literary devices, plot and characterisation are also studied in this paper briefly.*

**KEYWORDS :** *Picture of Dorian Gray , writing style , plot and characterisation.*

### INTRODUCTION

"How horrible it is! I shall grow old and horrible and dreadful. But this portrait will remain always young" (Oscar Wilde, 1891)

-laments Dorian Gray, the protagonist of the novel 'The Picture of Dorian Gray'.

The only novel written by Oscar Wilde in his lifetime, 'The Picture of Dorian Gray' is an arresting and intriguing moral commentary as well as a classic example of Gothic fiction. With its unique depiction of a Faustian Bargain, this parable of aesthetic ideal still remains a literary masterpiece even though more than a century has passed since its first publication in 1891.

### Background and Genre:

Although 'The Picture of Dorian Gray' begins in mystery and deception as a novel of manners with witty and satirical dialogues from Lord Henry Wotton, it takes a sinister turn and ends up incorporating many Gothic elements. Specifically elements like a large house inherited from distant relatives, a curse, supernatural elements, a typical Byronic hero, a hidden chamber full of dark secrets, and horrific crimes lend a Gothic feel to the novel. The novel is set in Victorian age England when the Decadent artistic movement (author, year) had reached its zenith around the late 19th Century, making Dorian Gray a contemporary of his author, Oscar Wilde. His style of life reflected artistic pleasure based on the French influence and he was a major supporter of this movement in England.

### Writing Style and Literary Devices:

The portrait of Dorian Gray is a living allegory, a tangible interpretation of Dorian's soul which becomes uglier as he continues to engage in sinful pleasures. The life of Dorian as depicted by Oscar Wilde reflects the New Hedonistic lifestyle. Completely abandoning one's impulses Dorian in his new hedonistic lifestyle becomes insane. He does not align himself with the societal principles or dictates. In this novel Dorian is depicted as a person who is led gradually into complete madness because of hedonistic views and beliefs which leads to self-destruction and death. Many sections of the novel

depict the consequence of hedonism. Dorian meets Henry at the studio of a mutual friend Basil Hallward, who is an artist.

When Dorian Gray first meets Lord Henry at the studio of their mutual friend- Basil Hallward who is an artist, Lord Henry's witty comments and his radical social doctrines, fascinates and intrigues Dorian. Thereafter Dorian is easily manipulated and influenced by the ideals of Lord Henry Wotton. According to Lord Henry the goal of new hedonism is "to realise one's nature perfectly...to give form to every feeling, expression to every thought, reality to every dream" (Oscar Wilde, 1891). As far as philosophies go this seems to be quite harmless until Lord Henry clarifies that, "every impulse that we strive to strangle broods in the mind, and poisons us...the only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it. Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing" (Oscar Wilde, 1891). Lord Henry's advice entices the young, impressionable Dorian, who does not realize that although Lord Henry may advocate giving in to every impulse even those of destructive nature, he is quite shrewd when it comes to following them himself and those not follow the destructive ones as we come to know from the book when Basil Hallward informs Lord Henry that "you never say a moral thing, and you never do a wrong thing. Your cynicism is simply a pose" (Oscar Wilde, 1891). Dorian, however, takes Lord Henry's advice concerning new hedonism at face value without thinking about their true meaning and the results are disastrous which ultimately drives him insane with guilt and causes him to end his own life.

'The Picture of Dorian Gray' is also an exemplary example of the Faustian bargain. In this legend, Faust (a German astrologer) traded his soul to the devil in exchange for knowledge. To "strike a Faustian bargain" means to be willing to sacrifice anything-even one's own soul- to satisfy a limitless desire and hunger for knowledge or power or any other strong desire. (Britannica dictionary, 2015) Dorian Gray resembles a Faustian character in his desire to maintain his youth and beauty. His wish was to remain forever young while his portrait ages and he was even ready to sell his very soul for this. Lord Henry plays the role of the Devil with his witty and manipulative speeches which lures Dorian into a life of pleasure and ultimate tragedy.

The use of ornate prose throughout the novel is what makes this novel even more beautiful.

### Plot:

Dorian has an aunt Lady Brandon who stays in London. The fascinating Dorian meets the famous artist Basil Hallward in his aunt's home. His charismatic young personality and intellect captivates Basil. As Dorian sits for Basil, the painter becomes obsessed by his beauty and paints a portrait of Dorian and gifts it to him. Lord Henry Wotton, a friend of Basil's, also claims that the portrait of Dorian Gray was Basil's masterpiece and expresses his desire to meet the real life Dorian Gray in person. Meanwhile, Dorian arrives at the Basil's studio and he half-heartedly introduces Dorian to Lord Henry. Basil dreads that Lord Henry may have adverse effects on Dorian.

Basil's fears prove to be well formed as we come to see that influenced by the well-phrased epigrams of the hedonist, Lord Wotton, on the transience of youth and beauty, Dorian becomes jealous of his portrait and says- "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 anything! Even my soul." (Oscar Wilde, 1891)

Unfortunately, his wish becomes true! Lured into dissolution and degradation while his portrait is aging in the attic and bears the mark of his sins, the new disciple of hedonism, Dorian, engages in scandals and sinful pleasures. We find him changing from a good person to an evil man. However, this is at the cost of his own mental sanity as he is tortured by his conscience. His guilt eats him away and we find him roaming the unknown isolated streets of London where no one can recognise him, yearning to escape from his own self. Ultimately this ceaseless guilt drives him to end his own life.

### Characterisation:

Oscar Wilde (1894) had said in his letter to Ralph Payne, "Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry what the world thinks me: Dorian Gray what I would like to be-in other ages, perhaps". Dorian Gray in the beginning of the story is the ideal man -beautiful from both inside and outside and as such captures the artistic imagination of Basil Hallward. However, coming under the influence of

Lord Henry, he proves to be very vain and is easily influenced. Dorian who is a dynamic character seems to lack conscience. However, the repentance and self-loathing that he eventually feels towards the end of the novel proves that he is after all human but so strong was Lord Henry's influence upon him that he could not escape from it in spite of trying. Lord Henry Wotton is a fairly static character and remains coolly unshaken throughout the book. Lord Henry is a character having immoral, enthralling, venomous and appealing theories. He is an alluring speaker and has a sharp mind with extraordinary manipulative powers. His theories are radical and aim to shock and overthrow the untested established truth. Basil Hallward is a gifted artist, but a kind of traditional and unadventurous person. His love for Dorian Gray changes the way he sees Art and defines a whole new school of artistic expression for him. Basil's loyalty to Dorian even after their friendship shrivels, reveals the genuineness of his love for Dorian and his anxiety for the wellbeing and deliverance of Dorian's soul.

### CONCLUSION:

The book is a must read for people of any age group and a new meaning is discovered every time it is read. It is a strong, stirring, fast and tragic novel with an element of horror and an undercurrent of suspense as well. It reveals the weaknesses of human nature beautifully and poignantly and establishes the fact that

“Nowadays people know the cost of everything but the value of nothing.”(Oscar Wilde, 1891) and that

“Somethings are more precious because they don't last long.” (Oscar Wilde, 1891)

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