

# Analysis of oscar wilde's the picture of dorian gray



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By Jessica Shelby Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a prime example of hedonism, a movement in the late 1800's that claims pleasure to be the prime goal in one's life. The focus of the novel is the beauty of Dorian Gray, his self-destructive search for pleasure, and the corruption of both the lives he has encountered and his own soul. Beauty and pleasure are the focus of all characters and scenes depicted in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Wilde's timeless novel vividly portrays the hedonism ideals as the theme of the *Picture of Dorian Gray* with its characters' mentality, roles, and eventual demise. The hero of the novel, Dorian Gray, is introduced as an innocent, beautiful young boy until he-in a mad instant- prays that his beauty shall live on while his portrait bares the resemblance of his shame and disgrace. Basil Hallward, the painter of the doomed portrait, praises Dorian for his timeless beauty and innocence. Basil is obsessed with Dorian, and his pleasure is found with the ideal of Dorian that allows him to paint so elusively. The corruption of Dorian begins with Basil's adoration, but it is lofted with Lord Henry's hedonistic ideals and all around negative influence. Lord Henry teaches Dorian to cherish his youth and beauty, all the while filling Dorian's mind with selfish ideals of pleasure and beauty. "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... return to Hellenic ideal- to something finer, richer, than the Hellenic ideal." With musings such as this, Lord Henry begins his takeover of young Dorian's mind, ideals, and eventually his soul. Dorian tries to redeem himself, but with a few words from Lord Henry, he is back in the pursuit of pleasure. For example, Dorian realizes his injustice to Sybil Vane and intends to apologize.

Then, Lord Henry tells him of her death and makes it sound glorious- like the perfect ending to a delightful play. Rather than dwelling in the death of a loved one, Dorian tosses the matter aside. Dorian develops in the novel. He begins lofty collections, but eventually bores of them. Then, Dorian searches for pleasure in religion; he even considers converting to Catholicism-not because of any interest in God, but because he fancies the customs. However, Dorian soon grows weary of that and begins to seek refuge with opium, experimentation, and the finding and destroying of romances. All of the lives that Dorian touches are blasphemies, banished, or buried. The women who have met Dorian cannot walk about shamelessly, because "Prince Charming"-as Sybil Vane christened young Dorian- has taught them shame, has disgraced them, and found pleasure with his shameless use of them. The men who have befriended Dorian either are banished from London, living in Opium dens like Adrian Singleton, or have taken their own lives like Alan Campbell. Meanwhile, Dorian remains gorgeous, but his picture grows hideous. Even in the growing bestial creature on the unfortunate canvas gives Dorian pleasure. Dorian is so pleased that he bares no shame; the thing behind the cloth that lives in the canvas is destined to that. Not Dorian, however, he can seek pleasure with no outward consequences. Not until Dorian-in, yet another fit of rage- stabs the portrait transferring all of his sins, shame, and corruption to his own flesh and blood and his once luminous beauty takes its place on the canvas. The Picture of Dorian Gray by Oscar Wilde, not only depicts the hedonistic ideals, but it also portrays why the movement cannot last in society. Yes, the novel is factual, and it is highly unlikely that a portrait will bare a man's shame while he remains forever young. However, " sin is a thing that writes itself across a

man's face," and if all of society was in pursuit of selfish pleasure, not only will there be no society, but those who did live such lives would be outcast. For example, all of those in the novel not as fortunate as Dorian to be forever innocent looking were banished from London, not able to show their face, or so ashamed that they resorted to taking their own lives. Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a prime example of hedonistic ideals because of the characters, their actions, and demise. Dorian as Faust ..... And so Gray, it appears, becomes a sort of Faust, and that evening he goes to the opera with his Mephistopheles, Lord Henry. In the following days, Wotton indeed proves a "bad influence," for Dorian begins following him in the pursuit of pleasure for the sake of pleasure. They engage in scandalous activities which erode Dorian's innocence. .... One evening, while attending the Royal Theatre in the Holborn district of London, Gray becomes enthralled with a young woman playing Juliet in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Her name is Sibyl Vane. She is quite striking, Dorian thinks. She is a portrait in beauty, like the portrait of himself, and a wonderful actress. After they meet, she becomes equally enthralled with Dorian. In a short while, they pledge their love for each other. .... Meanwhile, Wotton visits his uncle, Lord George Fermor, to find out about the history of Gray's family. Fermor, an old bachelor who owns two townhouses and a colliery business, lives in chambers at the Albany Hotel and is well connected in aristocratic circles. When told that Gray is the grandson of a certain Lord Kelso, Fermor says he knew Kelso and Dorian's mother. .... "She was an extraordinarily beautiful girl, Margaret Devereux, and made all the men frantic by running away with a penniless young fellow—a mere nobody, sir, a subaltern in a foot regiment, or something of that kind. " .... Margaret, who had inherited a fortune from

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one side of her family, could have had her choice of established young men but shocked her father, Kelso, when she married a cipher. So enraged was Lord Kelso that he hired a Belgian thug to pick a fight with his son-in-law, and the Belgian killed him in a duel. Margaret died less than a year later. Dorian thus became heir to his mother's fortune—and later, apparently, was designated to receive a goodly sum from old Kelso. .... Wotton believes Dorian's family history makes him all the more interesting: " Behind every exquisite thing that existed, " he muses, " there was something tragic. " And he would seek to take advantage of Gray and " make that wonderful spirit his own. " .... Gray takes Wotton and Hallward to the theatre to show off Sibyl Vane. Mr. Isaacs, the fat Jewish manager of the theatre, greets them at the door and escorts them to a box. Dorian despises Isaacs, thinking of him as a Caliban (a beast-man in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*), but Lord Henry likes him because of his sponsorship of the arts. When Sybil recites her lines, Dorian is surprised that she is not the actress she was when he first saw her. Her performance is perfunctory, incompetent—just plain bad. Apparently her fervid love for Dorian has made her feigned stage love for Romeo seem hopelessly artificial. .... But she is a happy young lady, nonetheless, and she tells her mother all about Dorian, calling him a true " Prince Charming. " Mrs. Vane, who knows nothing of Dorian's background, frowns on the relationship, suggesting that Sibyl pay more attention to Mr. Isaacs, who has provided the Vanes 50 pounds to pay debts and buy clothing for Sibyl's brother, James. James cautions Sybil about Dorian, noting that she hardly knows him. But Sibyl says her heart is set on him. .... However, when he next visits her, he criticizes her severely for her poor stage performance, calling her " shallow and stupid" and a " third-rate actress" who embarrassed

him before his friends. He then ends their relationship. She turns white with disbelief. " You are not serious, Dorian, " she says. " You are acting. " He assures her he is serious. When she begs him not to leave her, he walks out. .... At his elegant residence he glimpses the painting as he enters. The expression on the face has changed! It cannot not be possible, yet there it is " with the touch of cruelty in the mouth. " The portrait " had taught him to love his own beauty. Would it teach him to loathe his own soul? . . . . Here was a visible symbol of the degradation of sin" into which Dorian had plunged. Suddenly afraid, Dorian decides it would be best to redeem himself. So, even though he no longer truly loves Sibyl, he writes her a love letter in which he begs forgiveness.