

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

The Picture of Dorian Gray

by Oscar Wilde

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The Picture of Dorian Gray

Introduction

This novel is an example of a Gothic horror story; however, it deals with psychological horror instead of the “blood and gore” of modern horror stories. It was written in 1891 and reflects both the Victorian style of writing and the Victorian social attitudes of that period of time. But it is a story that deals with the theme of good (innocence) and evil (sin) that can be found in any period of time. It makes use of the *mirror motif* (the mirror is a reflection of either the outer or the inner nature of man) and the *doppelganger* (the two-sided nature of man, who is capable of both good and evil).

The novel deals with a handsome young man, Dorian Gray, who is obsessed with his own physical beauty. In a sense, he gives up his soul in order to retain his youth and beauty. As a result, he descends into the depths of evil and corruption from which he tries to escape at the end of the book.

It is recommended for eleventh and twelfth grade students who are mature enough to deal with both the content of the novel and some details of Oscar Wilde’s life that may be reflected in the novel.

Since this is a novel from the Victorian period, any references to sin are vague and suggested rather than described in graphic detail. There is some question about the element of homosexuality in the novel, since Wilde, a married man, is known historically to have been involved in this type of lifestyle. It is possible, however, to study the novel without dwelling on this aspect. The relationship between Basil and Dorian can be seen as one which develops between an artist and his source of inspiration; the relationship between Lord Henry and Dorian can be seen as the manipulation of a sardonic, effete nobleman who enjoys “vivisectioning others.” (Pg. 54)

In addition, there are some negative references to Jews in the novel.

There is a 1945 movie version of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which is in black and white with the portrait in color.

There is also a 1971 version, *The Secret of Dorian*, which is more accurate to the novel but is somewhat explicit, containing both nudity and sexual content.

Page references in the study guide are taken from the Prestwick House Literary Touchstone Press Edition copy of the novel, copyright 2005.

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to

1. recognize how the mores of Victorian society are reflected in this novel.
2. compare the “horror” aspect of this novel with horror stories today.
3. see how the literary element of the *doppelganger* is utilized in this novel.
4. evaluate Dorian Gray’s values of beauty and youth.
5. relate Oscar Wilde’s theory of art to the artistic element in the novel.
6. understand the light and dark sides of man’s nature and relate these to the characters of Basil and Lord Henry.
7. trace the use of the mirror as an image.
8. examine Oscar Wilde’s repeated use of the soul as an image.
9. recognize the use of sentiment and melodrama.
10. understand the structure of English society as it is reflected in the novel.
11. recognize certain literary techniques Wilde uses, including: allusion, simile, metaphor, irony, personification, and foreshadowing.

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Dorian Gray destroys three people before they die: Sibyl, Alan, and Basil. Write an essay in which you show how the relationship Dorian has with each one is responsible for their destruction.
2. The artist Basil Hallward says that he is overwhelmed by the power of absolute beauty. Choose four times that Basil encounters Dorian Gray; write an essay in which you characterize Basil based on these meetings.
3. Write an essay in which you compare and contrast the values of Basil Hallward to those of Lord Henry Wotton.
4. Write an essay in which you support or refute the following statement: *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a novel which makes use of the *doppelganger* motif.
5. Select scenes from Chapters 15, 17, and 18 that can be used to write an essay which reveals the upper classes as Oscar Wilde sees them. Include in your essay a comment concerning what Wilde is criticizing about this society.
6. Write an essay in which you examine how the portrait of Dorian Gray is used as a symbol in this novel.
7. Write an essay characterizing Lord Henry by choosing several cynical comments which he makes and analyzing whether he really means what he says or if these things are said for effect.
8. Select several ideas from the *Preface* to the novel; use these as the basis for an essay that either supports or refutes the ideas presented. Draw on your own personal experiences or reading experiences to develop this essay.
9. Point out ways in which women are depicted as being inferior to men.

Chapter One

VOCABULARY

bourdon – the lowest note
conjectures – odd opinions
disquiet – unease, restlessness
divan – a backless couch
dowagers – widows with money or titles inherited from their husbands
enmity – hatred, dislike
ensconced – sheltered
languidly – lazily
lionize – to exalt; treat as a celebrity
listlessly – without energy
précis – a summary
proletariat – low social class
scrupulous – careful; precise
truculent – stubborn

1. Identify the following characters:

a. Lord Henry Wotton

b. Basil Hallward

c. Dorian Gray

Chapter Four

VOCABULARY

arbitrary – random, illogical
abstruse – difficult to understand
aphorisms – witty sayings
consummate – of the highest degree; perfect
cornucopias – an abundance; also called “horns of plenty”
cosmopolitan – worldly; sophisticated
crucible – a nightmare, ordeal
début – a first appearance, usually of a performance
efficacy – efficiency; ease of accomplishment
esprit – wit; spirit; joy
frangipanni – a sweet-smelling perfume
frieze – a horizontally oriented sculpture
labyrinth – a maze
lethargy – weakness
maladies – problems
mean – low, inferior
myriads – many; uncountable numbers
pathos – sorrow, sadness
sensuous – relating to the senses, not the intellect
sordid – dirty, filthy
tawdry – cheap; showy but worthless
tempest – a storm
turbid – muddy; filled with confusion
vivisecting – cutting open to investigate
wainscoting – oak paneling

1. Where is Dorian Gray a month later?

Chapter Six

VOCABULARY

brougham, hansom – two types of carriages
degradation – shame, disgrace, humiliation
egotism – selfishness
incorrigible – incurably bad
invariably – without fail
irrevocable – unable to be changed
jerkin – a type of jacket
narcissus – a plant with yellow or white flowers
prig – a morally uptight person
reform – improve, reorganize
vermouth – a type of liquor

1. How does Basil react when Lord Henry tells him about Dorian’s engagement?

2. What is Lord Henry’s attitude?

3. Who is the person alluded to: “If he wedded Messalina he would be none the less interesting”? (Pg. 68)

Chapter Twelve

VOCABULARY

blasphemy – an act of disrespect

curate – a clergyman

marqueterie table – a table made of various colors of wood

prate – to babble

profligacies – excesses; great immoralities

siphons – rubber tubes or pipes

stanch – strong and steadfast; this word is sometimes spelled *staunch* and means the same; additionally, both words have the additional meaning of “to stop the flow of.”

ulster – a heavy overcoat

1. What are Basil Hallward's plans?

2. Why does he seek out Dorian Gray at his home?

3. What comment does Basil make that is ironic?

Chapter Sixteen

VOCABULARY

automatons – robots; mechanical figures
gaunt – thin
haggard – worn, tired
infamy – a bad reputation; evil
interminable – endless
iteration – a statement; utterance
mackintosh – a raincoat
oblivion – insensibility; the state of being withdrawn
opium – an addictive, narcotic drug
quay – a harbor
theologians – people who study religion
vengeance – revenge
writhed – twisted

1. Interpret: “To cure the soul by means of the senses, and the senses by means of the soul.” (Pg. 155)

2. Find specific examples of description and certain words on page 155 and 156 that create an atmosphere of darkness and evil.
