

# Workshop

## The Picture of Dorian Gray

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That's an excellent  
project, Kathrin!

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I hope you enjoyed  
reading the novel.

## TASK 1 Preface

They are the elect to whom beautiful things mean only Beauty.

I think with this statement Oscar Wilde wants to express his aesthetic view of art, saying that art does only have the purpose to offer beauty and nothing else. Only those who do not search for the meanings and purposes of art and beauty can fully enjoy them and I think Oscar Wilde also wants to warn of the influence art can have on people.

The nineteenth-century dislike of Realism is the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in a glass.

I guess by this Wilde intends to criticize Victorian society, which tries by all means to hide its weaknesses and defaults. Society is afraid to look at its own mistakes. This is why it rejects Realism and reality.

Those who read the symbol do so at their peril.

Oscar Wilde warns of the risk people might take if they see more than just beauty in art. He seems to condemn all influence art can have on people and warns of the dangers of searching for art's symbols and meanings.

The aesthetic views of Oscar Wilde's philosophy are clearly illustrated in the preface and serve to explain the novel. He thinks that art should only have the purpose to offer beauty and that searching for meanings and symbols can be dangerous as those might influence a person in a very negative way. Art doesn't have to educate or to enlighten people, it has to enchant them with its beauty.

## TASK 2

1.

Basil Hallward

He admires Dorian for his beauty and regards him almost as a piece of art. Basil is fascinated by Dorian's boyish appearance and youth and enchanted by his untouched charm. For him Dorian Gray represents the essential inspiration for his work and it is of extreme importance to Basil to conserve Dorian's youthful charm and unspoiled innocence, this is why he does not want his idol to get influenced and therefore spoiled by anyone. He fears that any influence might destroy the perfection of beauty Dorian represents for him. To Basil Dorian's character and personality are of less importance.

Lord Henry Wotton

He sees in Dorian an innocent and untouched character which he desires to form and change like a piece of clay. Like Basil Harry recognized Dorian's youthful, stunning appearance and his perfect beauty, but of greater interest to him is Dorian's malleable personality. Lord Henry enjoys having a great influence on Dorian and desires to project his own ideas and views onto Dorian, making him his own creation by profiting of the impact he has on him. Harry observes Dorian's development and change in personality with almost scientific interest.

2.

He sees marriage as a social obligation. In his opinion marriage makes a life of deception absolutely necessary, which means that he thinks that in order to lead a functioning life in marriage it is important to have secrets from one another and to stay independent from the partner. He expresses his contempt of interfering too much in the life or the partner. It also seems that Harry sometimes tries to say provocative things to his wife, just in order to get any

kind of passionate reaction. He intends to provoke some emotion, some sentiment because he fears finding himself trapped in everyday life, lost in routine.

“The masses feel that drunkenness, stupidity and immorality should be their own special property, and that if any one of us makes an ass of himself he is poaching on their preserves.”  
Page 10

Lord Henry has the impression that the masses and the English in particular are very proud of themselves and even of their weaknesses and defaults. He criticizes the Victorian society for its pride and is convinced that it will even defend all its negative aspects and characteristics because of this pride. If anyone risks to harm Victorian society's reputation by “making an ass” of himself, he is outlawed in order to reduce any harm that might be done to the reputation and pride of English society at that time, even if all the rest of society has the same weakness, commits the same crimes and makes the same mistakes. Reputation seems to be one of the most important things to Victorian society.

In my opinion he certainly makes some good points about these issues. I think it is quite important to have some secrets in a married life in order to be able to discover new things in the life of one's partner in order to fight against the monotony that will otherwise install itself in everyday married life. On the other hand I think it is of great importance to talk openly with one another in a marriage and to be honest enough to discuss important issues together. Without trusting the partner marriage can not work properly. I think Lord Henry's views about marriage are very exaggerated, but they reveal some realities.

His view about masses and the Victorian society appears to be justified. It is a society founded on the love of surfaces, placing their priorities on appearance and beauty rather than on morals. Even in our times societies seem to try to hide their weaknesses and to obtain a good reputation. The English and the French are both said to be very proud of themselves, accepting and hiding their weaknesses.


### TASK 3

1. Henry definitely has a lot of experience of life. It is easy for him to win over Dorian, because he can offer him a life full of experiences, dedicated to pleasure and fun. He impresses and fascinates Dorian with his interesting views and sometimes paradox epigrams. Lord Henry subtly offers Dorian to show him more about life, to guide him and to make him experience things he has never even dreamed of before. He makes the offer to let Dorian accompany him and to live out and satisfy all his desires, showing him how to enjoy life. Attracted and interested by Lord Henry's wisdom and experience Dorian is interested in doing so and wants to learn from Harry how to live his dreams.

“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 the maladies of medievalism, and return to the Hellenic ideal - ...” page 22

2. Dorian has chosen Lord Henry, who has successfully gained Dorian's affection by offering him a lifestyle full of joy and exciting experiences.

#### TASK 4

- page 1: "The studio was filled with the rich odor of roses, and when the light summer wind stirred amid the trees of the garden there came through the open door the heavy scent of the lilac, or the more delicate perfume of the pink-flowering thorn."
- page 24: "Lord Henry went out into the garden, and found Dorian Gray burying his face in the great cool lilac blossoms, feverishly drinking in their perfume as if it was wine."
- page 27: "In a month there will be purple stars on the clematis, and year after year the green wight of its leaves will hold up its purple stars."
- page 28: "A furry bee came and buzzed round it for a moment. Then it began to scramble all over the oval stellated globe of the tiny blossoms."
- page 28: "After a time the bee flew away. He saw it creep, into the stained trumpet of a Tyrian convolvulus. The flower seemed to quiver, and then swayed gently to and fro."
- page 28: "Two green-and-white butterflies fluttered past them, and in the pear-tree at the corner of the garden a thrush began to sing."
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## TASK 5

The only difference between a caprice and a life-long passion is that the caprice last a little longer." p. 29

Sin is the only real coloration left in modern life." p. 35

If a man is a gentleman, he knows quite enough, and if he is not a gentleman, whatever he knows is bad for him." p. 39

To get back one's youth one has merely to repeat one's follies." p. 49

I can believe anything, provided that it is incredible." p. 7

Conscience and cowardice are really the same things.

Conscience is the trade-name of the firm." p. 8

People say sometimes that Beauty is only superficial. That may be so. But at least it is not so superficial as Thought is. To me Beauty is the wonder of wonders. It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible." p. 26

Nowadays most people die of a sort of creeping common sense, and discover when it is too late that the only thing one never regrets are one's mistakes." p. 49

Men marry because they are tired; women because they are curious; both are disappointed." p. 56

Women represent the triumph of matter over mind, just as men represent the triumph of mind over morals." p. 56

Pleasure is Nature's test, her sign of approval. When we are happy we are always good, but when we are good we are not always happy." p. 93

Women treat us just as humanity treats its gods. They worship us, and are always bothering us to do something for them." p. 94

I love acting. It is so much more real than life." p. 96

- " There are always two kinds of people who are fascinating - people who know absolutely everything and people who know absolutely nothing. " p. 102
- " Good resolutions are useless attempts to interfere with scientific laws. Their origin is vanity. Their results are absolutely nil. " p. 120
- " One should absorb the color of life, but one should never remember its details. Details are always vulgar. " p. 123
- " Nothing makes one so vain as being told that one is a sinner. Conscience makes epists of us all. " p. 123
- " We live in an age that reads too much to be wise, and that thinks too much to be beautiful. " p. 125
- " Every effect that one produces gives one an enemy. To be popular one must be a mediocrity. " p. 238
- " Romance lives by repetition and repetition converts an appetite into an art. " p. 238
- " Each time that one loves is the only time one has ever loved. " p. 238
- " Destiny does not send us heralds. She is too wise or too cruel for that. " p. 246
- " If a man treats his life artistically, his brain is his art. " p.
- " The things one feels absolutely certain about are never true. " p. 261
- " The tragedy of old age is not that one is old, but that one is young. " p. 262
- " Is insincerity such a terrible thing? I think not. It is merely a method by which we can multiply our personalities. " p. 171
- " Women try their luck; men risk theirs. " p. 216

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"A man can be happy with any woman as long as he does not love her." p. 217

"Moderation is a fatal thing. Enough is as bad as a meal. More than enough is as good as a feast." p. 217

"It is the feet of clay that make the gold of image precious." p. 218

"Scepticism is the beginning of Faith." p. 237

"Upliness is one of the seven deadly virtues." p. 236

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## TASK 6 Decadence

I think the book especially shows that living out one's desires and wishes completely, not considering its bitter negative consequences and not thinking about the repercussions one's actions and behaviour might have on others is an extremely decadent way of life. Many people even know about the wrongness of their actions, but they do not seem to care about the damage caused or other people who might be affected by their behaviour. The egocentric way of Dorian and Lord Henry is definitely very decadent and I don't agree with Lord Henry's opinion that if everybody lived out his needs and desires the world would get a fresh new impulse and people would enjoy life much more. I really think that if people did so the world would probably collapse in complete chaos. Our society relies on laws, rules and order and in addition there have always got to be people who care for others. If this weren't the case our society would not function anymore.

Also homosexual relationships were regarded as immoral and decadent by Victorian society. In the book this is shown very clearly when Dorian blackmails Alan Campbell to help him dispose of Basil's dead body. Alan Campbell seems to have a secret that only Dorian knows and the novel strongly suggests that this secret is of homosexual nature. Basil also alludes to the lives of several young men that Dorian seems to have ruined. The novel subtly suggests that Dorian had many different homosexual relationships with men. Society at that time despised such relationships and regarded them as an immoral and decadent lifestyle.

In my eyes the way people deal with death in the book also shows decadence very strongly. Suicide seems to be regarded as a sign of weakness and the inability to handle problems. Society shows very little sympathy with people who die and the death is looked upon as something to be ashamed of. It is a subject of gossip and society deals with death more with a scandal instead of showing some grief and sympathy for the family left behind. There is really no compassion to be found in the book when Sybil Vane died and except for a few newspaper articles and the gossip that is being spread, her death does not seem to touch people's hearts, to make them feel sorry for her. Society is very cold-hearted and in my opinion this is also a very decadent behaviour.

Also the extreme importance of beauty, youth and materialistic values shows great decadence. Beauty even seems to be more important than morals. Someone who is beautiful, young and wealthy will be accepted and liked by society. A beautiful person can therefore allow himself to behave wrongly because no matter what he does society will admire him for his charm and beauty and forget, overlook or ignore his sins and weaknesses.

Nowadays the attribute decadent is sometimes applied for describing the abominable way people deal with money. Very rich people often use their money in a completely senseless, useless way and I personally think that if people use their money for complete nonsense instead of helping others with it, that this is a decadent lifestyle.

In my opinion our society is turning more and more egocentric and most individuals seem to be unaware of the fact that their actions and their behaviour might have negative consequences and even worse some people know about the consequences of their behaviour, but do not care about them or the damage caused. Most people do not even see that there can be found many different forms of decadence in our society and I have the impression that today's society and especially the upper and middle class is quite unaware of the huge gap between extreme poverty and extreme wealth. There is a lack of respect for other people as most individuals are brought up to pursue their own way, instead of considering the effect we have on others and on our environment.

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## TASK 7 Sybil Vane


Sybil closed the door behind her. The room seemed more deserted, the dresses more dirty and her life more desperate than ever. She sunk down on a small stool in front of the mirror and looked at her own reflection. Dark eyes stared back at her, expressing an infinite pain and desperation. Only some hours before she had sat on that same stool applying make-up and adjusting her dress. She had looked at the beautiful face of Juliet and had been hoping to find her real Romeo, her Prince Charming in one of the rows of the theatre. She had been so happy and had felt her heart pounding with joy. And even before Prince Charming had entered her life she had been satisfied with what she had had, but now there was nothing left to enjoy, nothing left that was worth staying in this world for. Her life had never been extraordinarily happy and luxury was a word of which Sybil had never had the possibility to experience its significance, but she had been glad to be able to earn a living in the theatre. Sybil had identified herself with all the characters she had played and shared their emotions. She had felt the strong passion of Juliet when her eyes met those of Romeo and shed her bitter tears. Now she lifted her head and saw that her cheeks were wet and her make-up spoiled completely as she looked into the mirror. Was that how she wanted to be? That was not her sitting in the dim changing room, but the empty husk of what had only a few hours ago been a joyful young girl. This afternoon she had been making plans about her future, their future and now it seemed impossible for her to lift herself up. She was tired. Her heavy eyelids closed and she put her face into both hands. Painful sobs made her body tremble and she knew that her life would never be the same as it had been before Prince Charming's arrival. Had her brother been right? Had she trusted Dorian too early? But he was the first one that had ever shown her that she was more than just an actress. He was the one who had made her realize that her life had been artificial and her emotions not her own, but those of the characters she had played. She had loved him, had adored him for showing her what life really was and trusted him entirely. Now that she knew what life could have been with Dorian she was aware of the fact that her existence up to the moment he had entered it, had been merely a delusion. It had been restricted to portraying the life of fictional characters. She had never wanted to be a hollow puppet and Dorian had shown her the true purpose of life and its essential meaning. A sharp pain struck her chest and as she started to sob again. Each breath she drew hurt and she felt as if her heart was going to tear, to break apart, leaving only broken pieces of her existence. Why could she have been so wrong? Why did Dorian change so completely? Had all his sentiments been an illusion? No. He was good, entirely good. It was her fault. Only she could have been the reason for the sudden change in his behaviour. She had chased away his goodness, had destroyed his love and spoiled the only thing that had ever really meant something to her. With this certainty she could not live. Her heart felt heavy like a piece of iron. Her glance fell on a small receptacle containing a substance to mix the make-up and temper the different colours. She reached out for it. Her long, delicate fingers were trembling as they closed around the cold glass. She stared at the poisonous substance and a vein in front of her eyes let everything appear so unreal as if she was dreaming. Dorian, she thought. Dorian, I'm so sorry! Her red lips touched the glass and she drank thirstily as if it were water. Then she sank down on her knees and a waterfall of tears rushed down her pale face. The teardrops made a dull sound as they tripped down and hit the wooden floorboards. She had never lead a real life, so she couldn't loose it now. It was the only right thing to do. She closed her eyes and whispered the name of her beloved Prince Charming. Dorian. Then she drew her last breath, imagining the curtains to close and hearing the applause, the clapping hands of the audience and the light went out.

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## **TASK 8 Dorian Gray**

Dorian does not care about the outcomes of his numerous experiences and whether or not his actions might do any harm. According to his philosophy and to the new hedonism he is living it is primarily the experience itself that matters. This new hedonism might be seen as a resistance against the conventional ideas and views of Victorian society. Lord Henry spends a lot of time criticizing the conventional morality of society and wins Dorian's interest by explaining to him his ideas which are quite opposing to the conventional ones of Victorian society. This is so fascinating for Dorian that he sets out first with Lord Henry and later alone, to live the new hedonism and to make lots of experiences without even thinking about their bitter consequences. He abandons his conscience and sets out with the single goal to achieve pleasure.


I think in our times there are a lot of adolescents who are living a similar hedonism as the one Dorian Gray is experiencing in the book. If I think of all the teenagers who spend their weekends with their friends, drinking alcohol, smoking and maybe even taking illegal substances, it appears to me that their only goal is having as much fun as possible and to enjoy life now, not caring about what the consequences of their sometimes really stupid actions might be. Of course not every adolescent in our times only thinks about achieving pleasure and enjoying life. There are many who live with the conscience that their actions have consequences and who care about their future, but in general I think that our society is often very ignorant of the consequences of its actions and also about people who can't afford to live this hedonism. Profit, money, pleasure and fun are the desires the fun generation sets out to satisfy and in my opinion what many people are doing today is not so much different of the sins Dorian Gray committed in the book.



## **TASK 9 Themes:**

In "The Picture of Dorian Gray" Dorian sells his soul in order to be able to maintain his beauty and youth. It is the picture which bears the burden of his sins, while he himself is spared. Another example in literature where the protagonist sells his soul is Goethe's Faust. Faust makes a pact with the devil and sells his soul in exchange for new knowledge and experiences. The wisdom he can achieve with science does not appear sufficient anymore and therefore his thirst for new, different knowledge drives him almost crazy, so that he finally sells his soul in exchange for the devil's help.

In Oscar Wilde's "The Picture of Dorian Gray" it is Lord Henry who seduces Dorian, offering him a lifestyle full of new experiences and pleasure and telling him that the most efficient tool for being successful in life is his beauty and boyish youth. His prayer makes the portrait bear all his sins and grow older while Dorian himself is relieved from his sins and stays beautiful and young.



## **TASK 10 The Supremacy of Youth and Beauty**

According to Oscar Wilde the only purpose of art should be to have no purpose. It should not have any deeper meanings or symbols and it is not supposed, like Victorian society believed, to be used as a tool for education or the spreading of morals. Wilde's idea was that art only had a single purpose, which was to show beauty. Although Dorian Gray uses art for his own purposes and gives it a meaning, there can be found many parallels between the life of Dorian

and Oscar Wilde. In the beginning Dorian is very naïve. He uses his beauty to achieve his goals and wants to experience and get to know the beauty of life. Only in the end he realizes that his way of life had been wrong and he is forced to accept that beauty had deceived him. He sees that his success was not real. Oscar Wilde was a strong proponent of the aesthetic movement. In his book he discusses his ideas about art and expresses his opinion that art should have no purpose. It is almost ironical that his work, which was meant to be part of his ideology, was later condemned, said to be immoral and used against him in court when he was tried for "gross indecency". Only a short time after the publication of "The Picture of Dorian Gray" Oscar Wilde had started a homosexual relationship with a certain Lord Alfred Douglas. This affair caused a big scandal. His own work, also a piece of art, finally served as evidence against Oscar Wilde in the trial, because it was regarded as autobiographical and contributed to his downfall.

### TASK 11 The Purpose of Art

In the book two different forms of art can be encountered – the picture of Dorian Basil paints at the very beginning of the novel and the mysterious yellow book Lord Henry gives to Dorian. Both have great influence on Dorian's life. The picture admits him to abandon his conscience and morals without censure as it carries the burdens of his sins, but at the same time it reflects all of his wrong actions making it visible to him what terrible sins he commits throughout his life. The yellow book seems to be a guideline or a map of his own life, which he follows and finally, in the end, Dorian realized that the influence both the book and the picture had had on his life was terrible and extremely dangerous. Both forms of art are shown to have great influence in the book and are therefore presented like Victorian society would have seen them. Aesthetic philosophy says that art is supposed to have no other purpose than to offer and show beauty. I think by illustrating the negative consequences of seeing more than just beauty in art, Oscar Wilde intends to warn of the Victorian way of dealing with art. They believed that art should be used to educate and to enlighten people. It is also suggested in the book that art can be used to escape the worries of life. When Dorian has to fight against his own conscience and distances himself from his terrible actions by showing great interest of beautiful things and arts like music and jewellery. In the end however Oscar Wilde sets out a warning, illustrating very clearly that the price one has to pay for giving art a purpose and also for beauty and youth, is far too high.

I personally think that if art would only show beauty it would be rather boring. I think it is the analysing and searching for symbols that makes art so interesting and fascinating. Of course it is a lot simpler look at a piece of art and to see nothing else than its beauty, but I guess the purpose of art is also the communication between the artist and society. For me art is a form of giving expression to one's thoughts and emotions. Basil Hallward refuses to exhibit the picture of Dorian Gray because he thinks to have put too much of his own personality and his own sentiments into his work. In my opinion it is exactly this identification of the artist with his work that makes art so interesting and fascinating. I can understand Oscar Wilde's criticism of Victorian society and the hedonism described in the book, but I don't really agree with the aesthetic sensibility to see art, because for me art has the primary purpose to tell a story and to evoke emotions. I don't think this can be done if we only see the beauty of art and do not go beyond, searching for its meanings. Of course I also consider the danger of sacrificing oneself to art and to let its influence take over completely, but if no symbols, no meanings and no influence at all are included in a piece of art I imagine it to be a really boring work that would not stir my interest.