

Beauty is a form of genius

from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* Oscar Wilde, 1891

WARM UP

1 How important is beauty for you?

A Underline the expressions used to define beauty and the advantages given by beauty.

B "You have only a few years in which to live really, perfectly, and fully." Consider this sentence. What is beauty associated with?

C What remains when beauty has gone?

D Focus on the imperatives: what does Lord Henry encourage Dorian to do?

Dorian Gray is an aristocratic man of extraordinary beauty. In the passage you are going to read Dorian is in a painter's study, sitting for his portrait. Basil, the painter, receives the visit of Lord Henry, a refined man from London high society. The three men have a long conversation about youth and beauty.

You have a wonderfully beautiful face, Mr Gray. Don't frown. You have. And beauty is a form of genius - is higher, indeed, than genius, as it needs no explanation. It is of the great facts of the world, like sunlight, or spring-time, or the reflection in dark waters of that silver shell we call the moon. It cannot be questioned. It has its divine right of sovereignty. It makes princes of those who have it. You smile? Ah! when you have lost it you won't smile... 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... Yes, Mr Gray, the gods have been good to you. But what the gods give they quickly take away. You have only a few years in which to live really, perfectly, and fully.

When your youth goes, your beauty will go with it, and then you will suddenly discover that there are no triumphs left for you, or have to content yourself with those mean triumphs that the memory of your past will make more bitter than defeats. Every month as it wanes brings you nearer to something dreadful. Time is jealous of you, and wars against your lilies and your roses. You will become sallow, and hollow-cheeked, and dull-eyed. You will suffer horribly...

Ah! realise your youth while you have it. Don't squander the gold of your days, listening to the tedious, trying to improve the hopeless failure, or giving away your life to the ignorant, the common, and the vulgar. These are the sickly aims, the false ideals, of our age. Live! Live the wonderful life that is in you! Let nothing be lost upon you. Be always searching for new sensations. Be afraid of nothing...

(Chapter II)

Glossary

frown to make an angry, unhappy, or confused expression, moving your eyebrows together

sovereignty complete freedom and power to govern

shallow not interested in or not showing any understanding of important or serious matters

triumph an important victory or success

mean poor

defeat failure to win or succeed

wane to become gradually less strong or less important

dreadful extremely unpleasant

war to be in active or vigorous conflict

sallow slightly yellow and unhealthy

hollow (cheeks) cheeks where the skin sinks inside

dull not bright or shiny

squander to carelessly waste money, time, opportunities, etc.

sickly unpleasant

aim something you hope to achieve

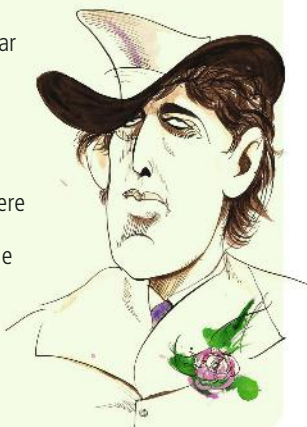


Let's meet the author

Oscar Wilde (1854-1900)

Oscar Wilde was born in Dublin in 1854. He was a brilliant student first at Trinity College in Dublin, then at Oxford University. In London high society he soon became famous for his witty conversation, especially his amusing sayings. Between 1892 and 1895 his plays, such as *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, and *An Ideal Husband* made him the most successful and popular writer in Britain.

When he was found guilty of having a sexual affair with a man, almost all his friends abandoned him, his plays and books were withdrawn and his possessions were sold to pay his creditors. He was imprisoned for two years. When he came out he was a broken man and spent the final years of his life in extreme poverty in France under a pseudonym. He died of meningitis in Paris in 1900.



WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, when Dorian looks at his own picture, he realises he is beautiful but also that his beauty will soon disappear. He wishes the portrait would grow old instead of him. His wish comes true. Dorian begins to live a sinful life. The portrait ages and becomes deformed, reflecting the effects of his sins on his soul. Dorian, however, remains youthful and beautiful.

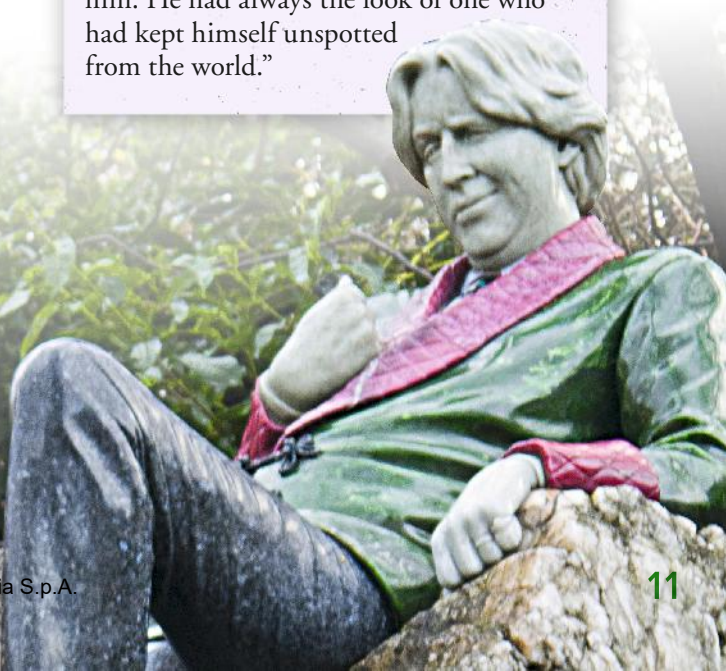
5 Read the quotes (1-3) from different parts of the book and match them to the main themes (a-c) of the novel listed below.

- a the mortality of youth and beauty
- b appearance
- c life as a work of art

1 "If it were only the other way! If it were I who was always young, and the picture that was to grow old!"

2 "The moral life of man forms part of the subject matter of the artist, but the morality of art consists in the perfect use of an imperfect medium."

3 "The wonderful beauty that had so fascinated Basil Hallward, and many others besides him, seemed never to leave him. Even those who had heard the most evil things against him could not believe anything to his dishonour when they saw him. He had always the look of one who had kept himself unspotted from the world."



DIGGING INTO THE TEXT

2 2.139 Read and listen to the text.
Answer the questions next to each paragraph.

3 Lord Henry's speech contains words and phrases which refer to youth, beauty and old age. What images do they express?

4 PERSONAL RESPONSE Lord Henry's ideas about beauty reflect certain aspects of our society:

- lots of people are still afraid of losing their youth and beauty;
- there are people who value beauty and youth above talent or achievement.

Look for news stories or images and messages in advertising which support this idea. What do you think about it?



Wilde's tomb

Oscar Wilde's tomb is at Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris where you can also find the tombs of Molière, Marcel Proust, Edith Piaf, Jim Morrison and many others. In the 1990s, graffiti began to appear on Wilde's tomb. Some fans then started a tradition of kissing his grave with red lipstick. In November 2011, Wilde's grave was cleaned and a glass barrier was built all around the tomb. However, that didn't completely stop Wilde's fans, who still leave kisses, messages, and flowers for him on the glass.

A fashionable dandy

Oscar Wilde was eccentric from an early age and soon became a fashionable "dandy". In the dictionary a dandy is defined as "a man who spends a lot of time and money on his clothes and appearance". At a time when men only wore black or grey he put on colourful clothes, grew his hair long and wore a flower in his buttonhole. Among his most famous aphorisms we can read: "Fashion is a form of ugliness so intolerable that we have to alter it every six months." Dandyism can still be found in today's fashion world.

- 6 On Wilde's tomb you can read his own words from the *Ballad of Reading Gaol*, a poem he wrote in 1898 after coming out of prison.

And alien tears will fill for him
Pity's long-broken urn,
For his mourners will be outcast men,
And outcasts always mourn.

Look up the meaning of the words you don't know. Who do the words "alien" and "outcast" refer to? You can choose more than one option:

- a relatives
- b dear friends
- c people he didn't know
- d people who are not accepted by society

THE CHARACTERS' GALLERY

- 7 Complete the descriptions of the main characters with the words below.

corrupt • commits • friend • actress •
attractive • painter • eternal

Dorian Gray

An ¹..... but dissipated young man. His portrait ages and decays as its subject becomes increasingly ².....

Basil Hallward

A ³..... who creates the portrait of Dorian Gray; Dorian murders him after showing him the secret of the painting.

Lord Henry Wotton

A ⁴..... of Basil who is the first to see the portrait; he first puts into Dorian's mind the desire for ⁵..... youth, and is the major agent of corruption in his life.

Sybil Vane

A seventeen-year-old ⁶..... with whom Dorian falls in love, and she with him; Dorian rejects her when she loses her acting skill, and she ⁷..... suicide.



► THE BOOK AND ITS TIME

Oscar Wilde was one of the leading exponents of the 'aesthetic' movement which believed in 'art for art's sake' and rejected the strict morality of Victorian society.

Aestheticism argued that the sole purpose of art was beauty. Wilde thought that something beautiful didn't have to serve a larger purpose. It didn't have to be moral or educational or take a political stance.

► THE LANGUAGE OF BOOKS

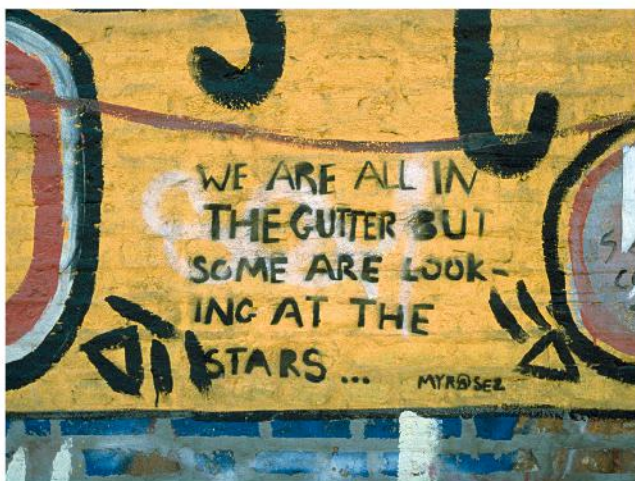
8 Wilde's elegant aphorisms * are still very popular. Match the first part of each aphorism (1-5) to its continuation (a-e).

- 1 "Examinations consist of the foolish...
- 2 "I can resist everything...
- 3 "It is better to be beautiful than to be good...
- 4 "Never trust a woman who tells you her real age; ...
- 5 "The only possible form of exercise...

- a ☐ is to talk, not to walk."
- b ☐ a woman who tells you that would tell you anything."
- c ☐ asking questions the wise cannot answer."
- d ☐ - it is better to be good than to be ugly."
- e ☐ except temptation."

* **Aphorism** A short phrase that contains a wise idea.

9 Use the aphorism that you like the best to make a poster that illustrates its meaning.



Filmophilia

Oscar Wilde is as significant a figure today as he ever was. His plays are being performed all over the world. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was adapted into five silent films. Between 1945 and 2009, there have been eight sound film adaptations.



Dorian Gray

UK 2009

Directed by Oliver Parker

The Picture of Dorian Gray was adapted into film for the 13th time in 2009. This version stars Ben Barnes as beautiful youth Dorian Gray and Colin Firth as aesthete Lord Henry Wotton.



10 Surf the Net for the trailer of the 2009 film *Dorian Gray* and complete the phrases below.

- His ¹ unforgettable
 His ² unthinkable
 His ³ unimaginable
 Forever ⁴
 Forever ⁵
 Forever ⁶