

# The English Theatre of Hamburg

*Established 1976*

Presents

# The Picture of Dorian Gray

by Oscar Wilde

adapted by Merlin Holland and John O'Connor

## Teaching Material

### Premiere

15 February 2018

Preview Performances at reduced prices:

12, 13, 14 February 2018

Weekly performances

Tuesday to Saturday at 19:30

Matinee Performances

Tuesdays and Fridays at 11:30

Dear Teachers and Friends,

The English Theatre will premiere Oscar Wilde's **THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY**, adapted by Merlin Holland and John O'Connor, on 15 February 2018. Bookings for the play have already started. The text of the play may be obtained at [www.samuelfrench.co.uk](http://www.samuelfrench.co.uk) or [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com). Teachers interested in being invited free of charge to a dress rehearsal of the play should contact us at [marketing@englishtheatre.de](mailto:marketing@englishtheatre.de)

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## About the Play

THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY is the only novel by Oscar Wilde. It was first published in 1890 in the Lippincott's Monthly Magazine as a thirteen chapter series. Fearing that the story was risqué, the magazine's editor, without Wilde's knowledge, deleted about five hundred words before publication. Despite the censorship, it shocked the social sensibilities of book critics. Some critics even demanded that Wilde be prosecuted for violating the laws guarding public morality. Our stage production is based on Merlin Holland (Wilde's only grandchild) and John O'Connor's adaptation for the stage. The deleted segments have been reintroduced. This version was first presented at the Queen's Hall Arts Centre, Hexham on 8 April 2015. Critics wrote that this was how Oscar Wilde had intended the novel to be. It tells the story of a young and handsome Dorian Gray who has his portrait painted by Basil Hallward, an artist who is captivated by Gray's beauty. Hallward introduces Dorian to Lord Henry Wotton, and the young man is soon enchanted by the aristocrat's worldview that beauty and sensual fulfillment are the only things worth pursuing in life. Lord Wotton realises that Gray, though handsome, is naïve. They discuss the cruelty of aging. Dorian curses his portrait, which he believes will one day remind him of the beauty he will have lost. He expresses a desire to sell his soul if only the portrait will show the burden of age and his offenses, permitting him to stay forever young. His wish is granted. Dorian then pursues a hedonistic life, remaining young and beautiful, but his portrait ages and records every sin in his depraved life.

## About the Author

The Irish poet and playwright Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde, known as Oscar Wilde, was born 16 October 1854. He became one of London's most famous playwrights in the early 1890's. He was known for his involvement in the rising philosophy of aestheticism and tried his hand at a variety of literary activities. Wilde published a book of poems and gave lectures on "English Renaissance Art" in Canada and the United States. Returning to London, he worked as a journalist. Renowned for his sharp wit, flamboyant dress sense, and glittering conversational skills, Wilde became one of the popular personalities of his day. He cultivated ideas about the supremacy of art and published a series of dialogues and essays. In his only novel, THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY, he incorporated themes of decadence, duplicity, and beauty. The opportunity to construct aesthetic details precisely and combine them with larger moral issues drew Wilde to write drama. At the height of his fame, while THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING ERNEST was running to sold-out houses in London, he had the Marquess of Queensbury, his lover's father, prosecuted for criminal libel. The libel suit would eventually result in Wilde's own arrest and trial for gross indecency with men. He was finally convicted and sentenced to two years' hard labour, the maximum penalty. After his release, he immediately left for France and never returned to Ireland or Britain again. He died 30 November 1900 penniless in Paris at age forty-six.

## Summary of The Picture of Dorian Gray

Lord Henry Wotton visits his friend Basil Hallward where he sees a painting Hallward is working on and is captivated by it. He urges him to exhibit the portrait, but Basil does not think it would be a good idea. Hallward is very protective of the subject in his painting and is afraid that it will reveal his strong feeling for the young man in it. Besides, the portrait belongs to the subject.

However, Lord Henry persists in his inquiry and Basil unwittingly reveals the name. He tells Wotton how he came to meet the young and very handsome Dorian Gray. Basil explains how he was drawn to Gray, which gave way to Dorian becoming his muse.

Basil: "As long as I live, the personality of Dorian Gray will dominate me. You can't feel what I feel."

Lord Henry: "Ah, my dear Basil, that is exactly why I can feel it. Those who are faithful only know the trivial side of love: it is the faithless who know love's tragedies."

Dorian Gray arrives and is introduced to Lord Henry. While Basil does the finishing touches on the painting, Lord Henry finds that Gray is not only handsome but also naïve. He speaks of the nature of beauty and hedonism, which beguiles Dorian and leaves much for him to ponder.

Lord Henry: "It should matter everything to you, Mr Gray, because you have the most marvellous youth, and youth is the one thing worth having."

Dorian: "But I don't feel that, Lord Henry."

Lord Henry: "No, you don't feel it now. Someday, when you are old and wrinkled and ugly, you will feel it, feel it terribly. You have a wonderfully beautiful face, Mr Gray. And beauty is a form of genius – is higher, indeed, than genius, as it needs no explanation. The gods have been good to you. But what the gods give they quickly take away."

He advises Gray to cherish his youth because he will never look so young and handsome again – but will eventually become old and wrinkled.

When Basil shows Dorian the painting, Gray makes a wish that he might stay young and handsome forever, if only his portrait would age and show the sins of his life.

Dorian: "How sad it is! I shall grow old, and horrible, and dreadful. But this picture will remain always young. It will never be older than this particular day of June. If it were only the other way. 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 everything. I would give my soul for that!"

Days later Dorian visits Lord Henry at his home. He tells him about the new love of his life – an actress called Sibyl Vane who performs at the Royal Theatre Holborn. By this time Dorian has fallen under Lord Wotton's influence and is now trying to experience life on his own.

Lord Henry doesn't approve of Sibyl, but he agrees to see her perform in *Romeo and Juliet* to appease his handsome friend. Gray also tells him that he and Sibyl have become engaged.

When Sibyl talks to her mother Mrs Vane and her brother James Vane about Dorian, she refers to him as Prince Charming. Mrs Vane is not happy about this new romance, but since Prince Charming has money she might reconsider. Brother James, who has decided to find his fortune in Australia, tells his sister that if Prince Charming does anything to cause her pain, he will kill him.

Dorian brings Basil and Lord Henry to see Sibyl perform *Juliet* at the theatre. She does a terrible job of it and embarrasses Gray. After the play is over, he meets her backstage to ask her what is wrong. She tells him confidently that she no longer wants to act, and explains that through Dorian's love she has come to realise that the lines in the scripts are suddenly shallow and without meaning.

Sibyl: "...but you came – oh my beautiful love – and you freed my soul from prison. You made me understand what love really is. My love! Prince Charming! You are more to me than all the art can ever be."

Gray does not accept this explanation for her terrible performance in the theatre. He rejects and scorns her, telling her he will never see her again.

Dorian: "You have killed my love. You used to stir my imagination. I loved you because you were marvellous, because you had genius and intellect, because you realised the dreams of great poets. Now you don't even stir my curiosity."

That same evening Dorian returns home to find that the portrait has been delivered. While examining it, he notices that the smile has become cruel-looking. The picture is taking on his sins. Gray decides that he has been too harsh with Sibyl and he wants to marry her after all.

But the next day Lord Henry informs him of Sibyl's suicide. Dorian is stunned, believing he somehow had a hand in her death. But he is not grief-stricken. He realises that the portrait is taking on the responsibility of his every action by becoming a little more marred, which frees him from sin. He no longer feels burdened by Sibyl's suicide.

Instead, he decides to embrace life to the fullest – eternal youth, infinite passion, and pleasures both subtle and secret.

Dorian: "I'll have them all! And the portrait shall bear the burden of shame."

## Interval

Twenty-odd years later Dorian Gray is much older in years, but he still looks very young and handsome. An elderly Basil admits to Gray that in the past he was in love with him, which had inspired him to paint the portrait.

Dorian immerses himself in sensual pleasures. But he fears that his portrait will be discovered, and his secret will be revealed. So he keeps the door to his old school room in the attic where the picture is stored under lock and key.

Lord Henry has sent Dorian a book that changes Dorian's life forever. It is a book about a young man who lives his life as young men lived in previous centuries. It is full of mythological beings, historical figures and symbolism that Gray recognises as his life, before he has actually lived it.

One evening Dorian chances upon Basil in the street. Basil tells him he is leaving for Paris where he will stay for six months, but he needs to talk to Dorian. Basil warns him of the vile scandals that are circulating around town of Gray's ill repute. Dorian brushes it off and decides to share his secret with Basil. He tells him that he wants to show him the 'diary' of his day-to-day life upstairs in order to put the rumours to rest. Basil is not happy to go up to the attic, but he does go.

Once inside the room, Dorian shows Basil the portrait. Basil is horrified by the evil he sees in the painting. Basil: "This is the face of the devil!" Dorian: "It is the face of my soul. Each of us has heaven and hell in him, Basil."

Horrified, Basil implores Gray to pray for forgiveness.

"It is too late Basil. Too late, far too late!"

Fearing that Basil will tell his secret to the world, Dorian kills him.

Gray then blackmails his former friend Alan Campbell, who has some knowledge of chemistry, into the disposing of Basil's body. Later that evening Dorian burns Basil's coat and satchel.

Dorian goes to an opium den. The opium seller uses the name Prince Charming to taunt Gray as an older James Vane, who is now a sailor, comes in. Sibyl's brother accuses Dorian of ruining his sister's life and he has

sworn to find and kill him. But Dorian talks his way out of James killing him by arguing and showing that he is too young to be the man Sibyl loved.

James Vane soon discovers, however, that Dorian really is Prince Charming and stalks him. While on the edge of the woods by Gray's country house, James is accidentally shot and killed during a hunting expedition by an older Lord Henry.

In the library of Lord Henry's house, he and Dorian discuss Gray's leaving his recent young lover Hetty, Basil's mysterious disappearance, and Alan Campbell's unexplained suicide.

Dorian: "Well, what would you say if I told you that I had murdered Basil?"

Lord Henry: "I would say, my dear fellow, that you were posing for a character that doesn't suit you. All crime is vulgar, just as all vulgarity is crime."

Dorian: "Do you think a man who has once committed a murder could do the same crime again?"

Lord Henry: "Oh anything becomes a pleasure if one does it too often. However, murder is always a mistake."

Later Lord Henry says to Dorian: "By the way, Dorian, 'What does it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose -', how does the quotation run? 'his own soul?'"

Dorian tries to live a better life and even tries to be good. But it does not change the portrait. In fact, the picture shows him as much older and wicked.

Dorian: "The beauty and youth that I prayed for have defiled me."

Filled with remorse and anger, he tries to destroy the portrait by stabbing a knife through it. Instead, the portrait, having taken on a life of its own by now, kills Dorian.

Lord Henry and a servant discover a hideous, mangled body. The servant does not recognise the old withered person, but Lord Henry does. He notices that the portrait has altered to its full glory.

Servant: "Who is it?"

Lord Henry: "Ah..."

Servant: "Sir?"

Lord Henry: "It's the real Dorian Gray. That's all."

### Multiple Choice Exercise

1. Who was Sybil Vane? (a. a singer, b. an actress, c. a peasant girl, d. a dancer).
2. The novel Dorian Gray caused an uproar because (a. of its heterosexual undertones, b. beauty had never been portrayed in this manner, c. of the flamboyancy of the portrait, d. of its obvious homoerotic content).
3. Why didn't Basil Hallward want to exhibit the portrait? (a. He was afraid people would see his true feeling for the subject in it., b. Because it belonged to Dorian., c. He was shy and not sure it was good enough., d. He was afraid the personality of Dorian would dominate him.)
4. The Picture of Dorian Gray is a (a. drama, b. romantic comedy, c. farce, d. dark thriller /tragedy).
5. The Picture of Dorian Gray is set in (a. middle 15<sup>th</sup> century, b. late 19<sup>th</sup> century, c. today, d. early 20<sup>th</sup> century).
6. Lord Henry was (a. the Marquess of Queensbury, b. the Duke of Monmouth, c. Baron van Helsing, d. a Nobleman).
7. James Vane dies of (a. a stab wound, b. strangulation, c. a gunshot, d. shock).

#### Answers Key

1. b, 2. d, 3. a, 4. d, 5. b, 6. d, 7. c

### Interpretative Exercise

1. What was it about Lord Henry that captivated Dorian Gray?
2. Why did Sibyl Vane feel she could not act anymore after falling in love with Dorian Gray?
3. The Picture of Dorian Gray was a shock to Victorian society upon its publication? Does it have the same impact today? If not, why?
4. If you had the same chance as Dorian to look young forever, would you take it?