

The Picture of Dorian Gray

Oscar Wilde

Chapter 1

1. What effect is created by the artistic setting of the opening scene?
2. What are some connotations, if any, of Basil Hallward's name? What is significant about Basil Hallward's past? His relationship to his own painting?
3. What are some aspects of Wilde's form of humor?
4. Which themes central to the book are introduced in the first chapter?
5. From what social class do the characters of this novel come? How does this affect our view of them and their problems?
6. What is notable about the account of Basil's first encounter with Dorian? How does Basil describe their relationship and Dorian's effect on his art? , represents "harmony of soul and body")
7. How is flower imagery used throughout the scene? (e. g., Lord Henry pulls "the daisy to bits with his long, nervous fingers") What symbolism is associated with a scene of temptation in a garden?
8. How is Lord Henry portrayed? What is his relationship to his family? What principles does he profess? What is indicated by his response to Lord Goodbody and his charities?
9. What does Lord Henry suggest may be the end of Basil and Dorian's relationship? Will his prophecy come true?

Chapter 2

10. What themes are suggested when Lord Henry meets Dorian Gray? (the serpent in the garden, tempter) How does the characterization of Lord Henry vary the familiar Victorian plot motif of mentor-tutee?
11. What do you think of the claim that Dorian is a naturally innocent, lovely person? What seem to be his initial impulses? Is he thoughtful?
12. What are some of the claims made by Lord Henry? --the aim of life self-development of the passions; need to resist social repression, to succumb to temptation.
13. What is the effect of his words? (suggestiveness of music and speech in revealing what had lain within, memories of things in his boyhood he had not previously understood)
14. What does Lord Henry believe is the relationship between the soul and the senses?
15. What do we know of Lord Henry's appearance? (olive-colored face, worn expression, low, languid voice) Could any of these descriptors be symbolic?
16. In what context does Lord Henry speak to Dorian of the decay of beauty and of his own decay? What does he advocate doing with the time one has? ("a new Hedonism--that is what our century wants")
17. How is the natural imagery of the garden used to reinforce the scene's meaning?
18. Does Dorian have a sense of foreboding in his new choices?
19. What do you make of the fact that Basil signs his name to the picture in vermillion?
20. What effect does the picture have on Dorian? (he is stirred by love of his own image, feels jealousy) What does he wish? Why do you think the wish is granted?
21. What is the symbolism of the departure of Dorian and Lord Henry to the theatre, leaving Basil behind? (seek performance, not reality)

Chapter 3

22. What does Lord Henry learn about Basil's background from his visit with his uncle? Does Lord Henry feel pleasure in the exercise of his influence?
23. What views are exchanged on Americans, Chicago, marriage to heiresses, etc., in his conversation with his uncle and later at lunch with his Aunt Agatha?
24. What is the tone of conversation at lunch? What remarks does Lord Henry make on philanthropy and pleasure?
25. What remarks are made on the state of recent English literature? ("Of all people in the world the English have the least sense of the beauty of literature,")

Chapter 4

26. What is indicated about Lord Henry's social position and tastes by the furniture of his house? What seems his relationship to his wife?
27. What are Lord Henry's views on marriage? On women? To what extent would his audience have accepted or resisted these views?
28. Are women generally presented in a favorable light in this novel? Since Wilde was the editor of *Women's World* and generally favorable to the emancipation of women, to what do you attribute his views?
29. Under what circumstances does Dorian encounter Sibyl Vane? What is the effect on the reader of the fact that he recounts his emotions to Lord Henry?
30. What is the nature of Dorian's attraction to her? (motif of life vs. work, premature adoration, sense of merging of body and spirit) What are connotations of her name?
31. What do you make of the emphasis on the fact that her manager is Jewish? Is Wilde exhibiting anti-semitism? Attempting to show the danger of her surroundings?
32. What metaphors are used to describe Lord Henry's interest in the mind and personality of Dorian? (scientific curiosity about the maladies of emotion)

Chapter 5

33. What is Sibyl's attitude toward her romance with Dorian? How does the mother interpret their relationship?
34. What do we learn further about the Vane family--patron, mother and Jim? What is the significance of their names?
35. What is ominous about the scenes which occur before Jim leaves for Australia? (foreshadowing in his threat)
36. Is his behavior melodramatic? How does it affect the novel that most of the Vane plot is presented in melodramatic terms?
37. What question does Jim ask their mother, and what is significant about her response? (she hadn't married their father, but she herself lacked the protection of a mother) Is James correct that she is not a fit guardian?
38. What seems the nature and basis of Sibyl's love? (idealizes without knowledge)
39. How does this family conflate art and life? (repeated motif of error of confounding art and life)

Chapter 6

40. How does Lord Henry react to Dorian's engagement? (notes that it was Sibyl who first mentioned marriage) What form does Dorian's romantic attraction to Sibyl take? (sees her as artist, out of Shakespeare)

41. What reason is given for the fact that Sibyl acts poorly after meeting Dorian? (has moved from art to life, has seen falsity of stage) What grounds do his friends offer for consolation?
42. What happens in the final scene between Dorian and Sibyl? What do we learn about his character? ("You have disappointed me," severs relationship and leaves the prostrate Sibyl)
43. How does this episode use/reflect on the conventions of melodrama? Does this alter our sympathies for the protagonists?
44. Within the assumptions of the novel, how does the author imply that Dorian should have behaved?
45. How is the portrait altered by this event? (a touch of cruelty in the mouth) What motivates Dorian's reaction to the changed portrait? (vows to reform and rejoin Sibyl) Is he sincere?

Chapter 8

46. What is the symbolism of Dorian's placing a screen in front of the picture? Of his writing to Sibyl? (literary gesture)
47. Is it appropriate that Dorian learn the news of Sibyl's death from Lord Henry? What is his first response? Why cannot he feel her death deeply?
48. On what grounds does Lord Henry console him? (life itself is vulgar, she had died for beauty of idea, the episode had been a marvellous experience of corruption!) Is the reader expected to be convinced? By the time he speaks to Basil, what attitude toward the event has Dorian taken?
49. How does Dorian respond to changes in his portrait? (feels fascination, is relieved that he himself is safe) What do these responses reveal about this character?
50. Does this book remind you of any of the themes, settings or episodes of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde? What are some differences?

Chapter 9

51. What function does Basil seem to serve in the novel? With whom is he repeatedly juxtaposed? Does this pairing remind you of any literary antecedents?
52. What is Basil's response to the thought of death? Over what issue do he and Dorian dispute? (Dorian wants the picture concealed; Basil wants to exhibit it) How have the respective positions of model and painter come to be reversed?
53. What is shown by the fact that Dorian falls into a rage of possessiveness and fear at the thought of anyone beside himself viewing the picture? Is this consistent with the narcissism he has heretofore shown?
54. What is less than reciprocal about the "confessions" made by the two men to each other? To what does Basil confess, and what does Dorian conceal? (Basil confesses his obsession with Dorian, unaware of the effect of his having painted his subject's actual soul; Dorian remarks that the portrait has a life of its own)

Chapter 10

55. What steps does Dorian take to distance himself from the portrait? What symbolism is associated with the cloth which covers it and with the cobwebbed attic? (cloth may have been used to cover caskets, room has been neglected since his lonely youth)
56. What is Dorian's reaction to the notion that he will become degenerate? Why doesn't he try to avert this fate? (feels future is inevitable) Within the framework of the book, to what extent is he culpable in not doing so?

1. Are there echoes of Pater's Renaissance in Dorian's recognition of Basil's love for him? (Winkelmann and Michael Angelo) To what extent would Pater have disapproved of these reflections?
2. What is revealed by Dorian's fear of his own servants? Who carries the picture upstairs for him? Why wasn't he willing to carry it himself? What seems odd about the picture? (unusually heavy)
3. What memories does Dorian have of his grandfather and the attic room? (grandfather had hated him) What symbolism might there be in this response?
4. What does Dorian fear in addition to sin? (aging, corruption of body) What is symbolized by the fact that he locks the attic door? What is significant about the fact that he reads a yellow-covered book?
5. What are Dorian's concerns when he reads of the inquest in Sibyl's death? (he is only concerned over whether he may be discovered)
6. Which suggestions of the yellow-covered book seem to echo ideas of Walter Pater, especially in *The Renaissance*? Is it significant that for the first time he fails to meet Lord Henry on time? (perhaps he has passed beyond his "mentor")

Chapter 11

7. What is significant about the fact that Dorian imbibes evil from a book, even more than from a human being?
8. What change occurs in Dorian's lifestyle? What kinds of debaucheries and scandals seem to be hinted at? (99, 100, frequents docks) What do you make of the fact that he is given to mysterious absences?
9. What characterizes his behavior in polite society? What ideas does he allegedly wish to promote? (doctrine of spirituality of senses, a new hedonism, 101--this suggests Walter Pater's Marius the Epicurean)
10. What has changed in his relationship with the portrait? (gazes on it with a mirror, fascinated by his own corruption, 99)
11. What do we learn about the nature of Dorian's reveries? (102ff., tries on various modes of thought and experience, cmp. Pater's "Mona Lisa")
12. What tastes does he cultivate? (enjoys the primitive, 104, studies jewels, 105, collects textiles, 108, especially ecclesiastical vestments, 108, and objects connected with church services)
13. Are these distractions successful? What emotion haunts Dorian? (fear, 109)
14. What do we learn of his continuing relationship with Lord Henry? (shares a villa with him, 109, keeps a home in Algiers, 110) Why does he cease these travels? (wishes to remain near picture)
15. What gradually alters in Dorian's lifestyle and reputation? (begins to be distrusted, 110, former intimates shun him, 110-111)
16. What views does Dorian express about the nature of society? (requires a form of ceremony, analogous to that in art, 111) What is his view of human personality? (111) How may his views be affected by his desires?
17. With what aspects of the past does Dorian identify? (his mother, 113, his ancestors and figures of literature, 113; no mention or attempt to recover his father)
18. What is revealed by Dorian's relations with/attitude toward his servants and tradespeople?

19. What scene precipitates Dorian's murder of Basil Hallward? (121-23) How is this symbolic?
20. How is the murder described? What is especially culpable about Dorian's response? (124-25, no remorse or pity, only wants to protect self, entirely clinical response)
21. Who was Alan Campbell, and what has been their relationship? (129) What is noticeable in Dorian's attitude toward his commission of blackmail?
22. Are any assumptions about science latent in the representation of Alan Campbell's removal of the body? Can you think of other nineteenth-century texts with similar plots? (Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde; Frankenstein)
23. What is revealed about his life in the scene in which Dorian visits the opium den? What familiar persons does he meet there?
24. By what piece of information does James Vane come to recognize his desired victim? By what ironic sequence of events is he prevented from killing Dorian?
25. Why is another party scene introduced toward the end of the novel, and how does this one contrast with the earlier one? How have Dorian's own roles changed?
26. What is indicated by Dorian's fainting? What is the significance of Lord Henry's response to the discussion of the possible murder of Basil?
27. On what grounds does he assert his belief in Dorian's innocence? How have the two men changed roles?
28. What has happened recently in Lord Henry's private life? (his divorce)
29. What are Lord Henry's opinions on the topic of murder? Are these unprejudiced?
30. Can it be argued that he refuses knowledge or responsibility for the results of his own tutelage, or alternately, that Dorian has become far more evil than he?
31. What is added by the episode in which Dorian and his friends accidentally kill James Vane? What is revealing about Dorian's response to the killing? That of the other hunters?
32. How would the symbolism of the ending have been different had Vane been successful in killing Dorian?
33. What symbolism is embedded in the final scene? What are some of the ironies it captures?
34. Does it form an effective closure to the themes raised in the book?
35. What does the book seem to convey about the nature of personality? Of art and aesthetic value? Do you think the divide between dull morality and corrupting art has been removed?
36. What does The Picture of Dorian Gray seem to indicate about the relationship between morality and aesthetics? Between art and life?
37. To what extent do its homoerotic meanings alter/infect the significance of the novel? For example, is this a work which celebrates bisexuality? Warns against it? Laments its inevitability?
38. What do you think of the representation of women in the novel? If they are generally presented as unpleasant or marginal, to what do you ascribe this?