

OSCAR WILDE

LIFE (1854 - 1900)

Oscar Wilde was born in Dublin in 1854, the son of a Dublin surgeon and an Irish nationalist poetess. He studied at Oxford. When he left university in 1879 he headed for London in search of fame and wealth. He quickly made a name for himself as a society wit and London's leading aesthete. In 1881 Wilde was invited to make a lecture tour of the United States. He exploited this to increase his notoriety, addressing his American audiences in silk stockings, velvet breeches and satin jackets. On his return to London he embarked on similar tours in England. In 1885 he married Constance Lloyd, who bore him two children. In the next ten years Wilde rose to a position of fame and notoriety. The 90's, the decade of decadence, began with the publication of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), Wilde's best-known prose work. In 1895, at the peak of his career, he sued the Marquis of Queensberry, who had accused him of a homosexual relationship with his son, Lord Alfred Douglas. Unfortunately the accusations were proven and Wilde was arrested, tried and sentenced to two years hard labour. While in prison, he suffered every sort of humiliation. When finally released, he was a broken man, he adopted the name of Sebastian Melmoth. He spent some time in Naples and Switzerland, writing against the brutality of prison life. Then he settled in Paris where he died in 1900.

ACHIEVEMENT

The best of Wilde's work includes:

- short stories, among which the best-known are: *The Canterville Ghost, The Happy Prince and Other Tales*;
- the so-called social plays: *The Importance of Being Ernest, An Ideal Husband, A Woman of No Importance*;
- *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, published first in 1890 and, finally, in 1891 with the addition of six more chapters and its famous *Preface*, which eventually became the *Manifesto* of English Aestheticism;
- *The Ballad of Reading Goal*, a long poem about his prison experience;
- *De Profundis*, made up of portions from a letter he wrote to Lord Alfred Douglas while still in prison, and is tinged with autobiographical tones.

THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY

Oscar Wilde was one of the most provocative, entertaining, and notorious exponents of the "aestheticism". The aesthetic standpoint celebrated beauty and importance of subjective experience. British aestheticism was influenced by French 19th century writers and poets, especially Gautier, who claimed that art was divorced from utility. In fact his ideal was *art for art's sake*.

Lord Henry Wotton is the main spokesman for aesthetic attitudes in the novel. There're also suggestions of decadence in his behaviour. Gautier had outlined the basis of decadence. It was opposed to everything that was considered "natural" both biologically and morally. Gautier claimed that real beauty is unnatural and can only be produced by artifice. Unnaturalness and artifice are present in everything Wotton says and does.

Wotton's physical weakness is contrasted with his subtle and persuasive tongue. His experience is contrasted with Dorian's innocence and openness. His arguments sound like the voice of temptation. He has the sophistication, suavity and persuasiveness traditionally associated with the devil, which strengthens the impression that Wilde is creating a 19th century reworking of the Faust myth, where Wotton plays the part of the devil or devil's servant Mephistopheles, and Dorian plays the part of Faust.

PLOT. A beautiful youth, **Dorian Gray**, has his portrait painted by **Basil Hallward**, in whose studio he eventually meets the cynical **Lord Henry Watton** and becomes his close friend. Under his influence, Dorian rapidly deteriorates, driven by him towards a life of pleasure and sensation. For a while he falls in love with a Shakespearean actress, Sybil Vane, but he then cruelly accuses her of being no actress, and she commits suicide. Meanwhile the portrait, which is endowed with supernatural qualities, has become the mirror of Dorian's inner life, so whatever he feels or thinks or does is reflected in the portrait, while he retains his youth and beauty. The more he degenerates, the more hideous his portrait becomes. So he decided to lock it away in a room for which he only has the key.

Years pass and Dorian's life becomes more and more dissolute. On the eve of his thirty-eighth birthday he receives a visit from Hallward, who tries to persuade him to change his life. Dorian then shows him his horribly disfigured and aged portrait but, realizing that he has actually revealed his inner self, he stabs him with a knife. The portrait has now become unspeakably revolting, so Dorian decides to slash it with the same knife with which he has killed the painter. Inhabitants of the house hear a terrible cry and when they enter the room they find Dorian lying on the floor with a knife in his chest. Yet they can identify him only by his rings since he has become a ghastly, wrinkled wreck of a man, with all his sins on his face, while over him hangs the portrait of the youthful and beautiful Dorian restored to what it was in the beginning.