

Oscar Wilde

# Oscar Wilde's life

Oscar was born in Dublin in 1854 and attended the Trinity College and then in Oxford.

During this period he was influenced by John Ruskin – who was lecturing in art – and Walter Pater and his ideas of Aestheticism and he began to write.

He became the spokesman for the school of 'Art for Art's sake'. He was an eccentric dandy and was famous for his wit and aphorisms.

In 1882 he gave lectures in America and when he arrived in New York he said "I have nothing to declare but my genius". In Paris he met Zola, Hugo, Balzac, Mallarmé...

In 1882 he married Constance Lloyd and had 2 children and his popularity increased and culminated in 1895, when he published the play *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

However, that year, he was accused of homosexual offence and was arrested and kept for two years at the Reading Jail.

When he was released, he was a broken man. He spent the rest of his life in Italy and France and died in poverty in Paris in 1900.

# Literary production

- 1881 – His first volume of poems
- 1891 – Essays and other stories and his most famous novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*
- 1892-5 – His greatest success was achieved through his comedies, like *Salomé*, *An Ideal Husband* and *The importance of being Earnest*.
- In prison, he wrote *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* and his prose confession *De Profundis*, a letter to his lover Alfred Douglas, that he called Bosie.

# Wilde and Aestheticism

- Wilde believed in Walter Pater's theory of Aestheticism. This theory stated that the meaning of life was in beauty and art.
- Their motto was Art for Art's sake. This meant that a work of art is important for humankind *per se*, exactly because it has no other purpose than its own beauty and perfection; it didn't have to teach or denounce anything or have other social functions.
- It was in contrast with the ideas that dominated the Victorian age, dominated by rational and scientific thought and utilitarianism.

# His life as a dandy

- Oscar Wilde took the principles of Aestheticism and brought them to the extremes, playing the role of a dandy. He became famous for his way of dressing, his witty conversation and his life of vice and pleasure, which made him very popular.

# *The Picture of Dorian Gray: the plot*

- **Lord Henry Wotton** becomes the mentor for a young and beautiful boy, **Dorian Gray**.



He teaches him how to behave in the rich London and encourages him to fall in love with his own beauty.

- His friend Basil Hallward paints Dorian's portrait and he becomes conscious of his beauty that will fade, while the painting will always be beautiful. He expresses the wish to stay beautiful forever.

- Later, he realises that the portrait begins to absorb the consequences of his terrible actions, while his own real beauty remains untouched.
- Dorian begins to frequent the theatre and meets an actress, called **Sybil Vane**, who falls in love with him. When she stops acting to be with him, he cruelly refuses her.
- When he looks at his portrait, he notices that his face an expression of cruelty. He goes back to Sybil and finds out that she had killed herself.

- Henry Wotton pushes him to enjoy the different aspects of a life of vice and sensual gratification. Years later, Dorian is completely corrupted and evil, but still looks like when he was young.
- He shows the older Basil the changes in the portrait and Basil warns him that he will have to pay for his moral decline. To keep the secret of the portrait, Dorian kills Basil.
- Dorian also has to kill other people to keep the secret.
- The portrait becomes more and more ugly and Dorian decides to start a new life and destroys the portrait. But in doing so, he kills himself. The portrait goes back to its original aspect, while Dorian becomes an old disgusting man.

# Aestheticism in *The Preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray*

- The Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is considered the manifesto of the Aesthetic movement and expresses Wilde's idea of art.
- It contains many reflections on art, such as:
  - 1) The artist is creator of beautiful things.
  - 2) There is no moral or immoral book. Books can only be well written or badly written.
  - 3) Artist has no ethical sympathies.
  - 4) An artist can express everything
  - 5) Vice of virtue are material for art
  - 6) Diversity of opinion about a work of art demonstrates that it is new, complex and vital.

# Aestheticism in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

- The importance of art and beauty is central in the novel because Dorian is an example of **hedonism** (→ pleasure is the most important thing in life) because he devotes his life to the pleasure of the senses, without morality.
- Dorian is similar to **Faust**, because he sells his soul to maintain his youth and beauty. The split between appearance and reality becomes the centre of the novel.
- The novel is a metaphor of the consequence of narcissism and the fact that we are all responsible for our actions.
- It shows that art can make our life better, but not substitute it.

- Many dialogues in the novel express some ideas of Aestheticism, for example:
  - 1) Basil and Wotton start the novel with a debate about beauty and appearance, which have become the ultimate values.
  - 2) To seduce Dorian into his world, lord Henry gives him a yellow book, probably a copy of Huysmans's "À rebours", a central text for Aestheticism in which the protagonist surrounds himself of precious objects, sounds and perfumes.
  - 3) Henry says that "beauty cannot be questioned [...], it is one of the great facts of the world and [...] has the right of sovereignty.
- Dorian considers his fascination for evil as a part of his life of pleasure. He rejects the utilitarian values of industrialised society through the cult of art and in this, he represents Wilde's thought.