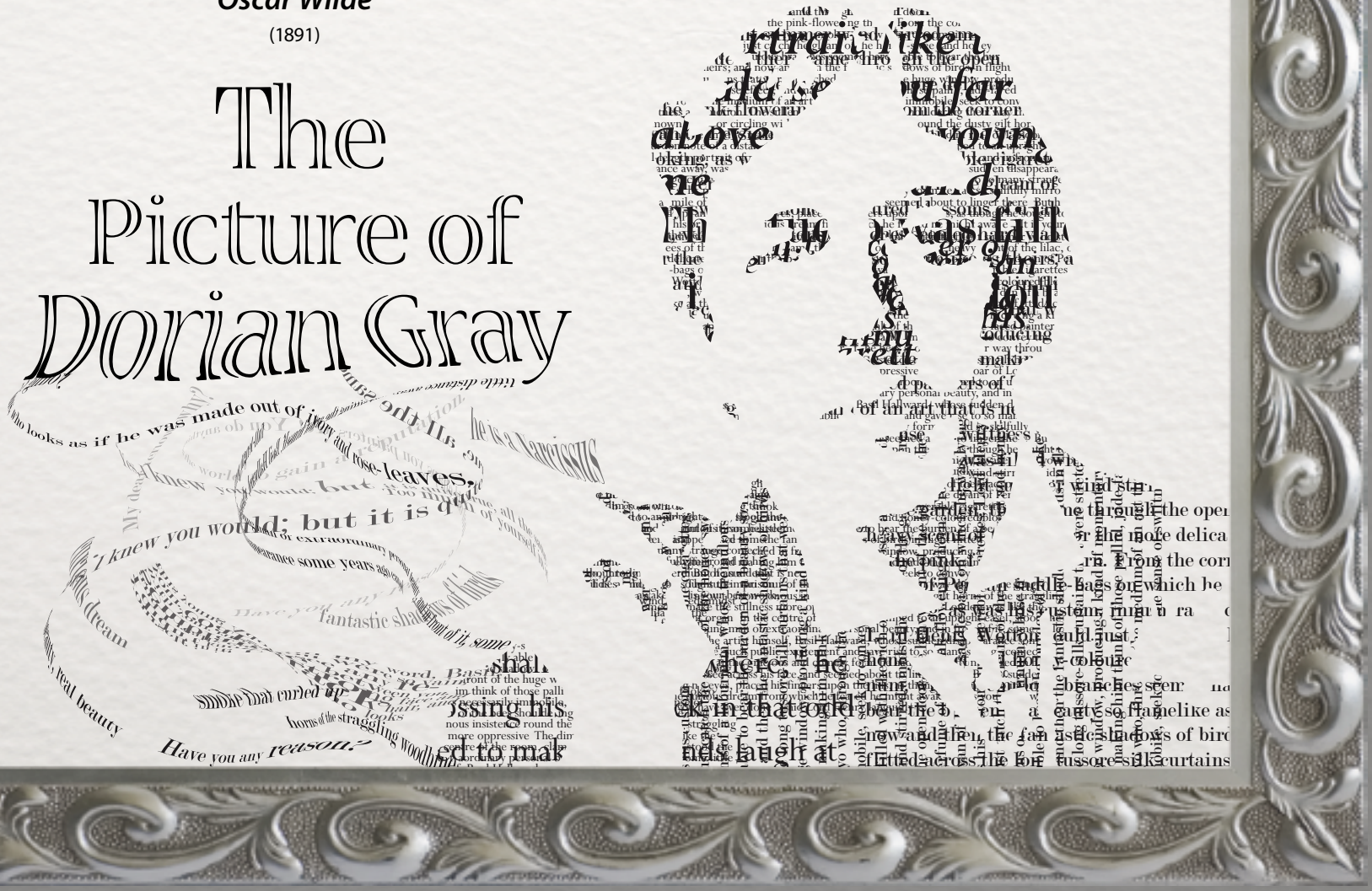
OCR
RECOGNISING ACHIEVEMENT

English Reading List

Oscar Wilde

(1891)

The Picture of Dorian Gray



Introductions and Suggested Reading

These Introductions and Annotated reading lists are intended for teachers preparing to teach this text for the first time for Unit F661 in the OCR GCE AS Level in English Literature, though some materials may be shared directly with students. Most of the concerns highlighted address literary, biographical, historical or other contextual concerns, as indicated in the margin (AO4). Others point to critical approaches that may be juxtaposed with the candidate's own (AO3). Very occasionally some help is given exploring the text (AO2) though it is assumed that this work will be carried on in centres.

It is the intention that most of this material will be found directly relevant to AS study, teachers are reminded that Assessment Objectives do not directly establish the quality of an answer, but only assist to place it accurately within an assessment band. It follows that no marks are given directly for demonstration of AOs and that unless properly assimilated into the candidate's discussion, undigested lumps of contextual material may often inhibit rather than enhance an answer.

The brief suggestions for further reading will need to be filtered by teachers before they are presented to students; I would, however, recommend a general textbook on the novel, regardless of your choice of text. This is Jeremy Hawthorn, *Studying the Novel* (Arnold), which first appeared in 1985, and has been frequently updated and reprinted. Hawthorn's sense of the history of the novel is astute, his use of examples informative and unthreatening. He is impatient of jargon, and his definition of key-terms ('realism', Modernism') is accessible. Here is a sample of his method. Here he tests the value of successful viewpoint choice:

I have tried to find good audio-book readings of all the novels, convinced that they aid student comprehension more than is generally realised. I also hope teachers will find my views of film versions helpful. No area of A-Level study has improved as much as performance-criticism, where film and television versions (in the case of novels) are viewed by candidates as critical readings of the base-text. Obviously this process will be short-circuited if candidates think of filmed novels merely as pale substitutes for reading, or, worse, as substitutes.

Please note that where editions of texts are suggested, these are only recommendations. OCR does not specify editions of texts to be used, and F661 is a closed text examination.

'You will, Oscar, you will!'

James Abbott Macneill Whistler famously joshed Wilde for stealing his thunder. In this novel, he probably did. In 1864 Whistler exhibited a painting called *Symphony in White No 2: The Little White Girl* (Tate Gallery). The girl before the mirror is fresh and unblemished; her reflection apparently older and careworn. The resemblance to Wilde's creaseless young man with his gnarled portrait in the attic is intriguing.

You can find the image online at: **http://tinyurl.com/5rjxzdc**

AO4
Possible source
AO2
Biographical context

The Texts of the Novel

The original text was published in the US in Lippincott's *Monthly Magazine* for July 1890. Though American reviewers noted few subversive features in the novel Wilde provided substantial additions and alterations for the British book version, published by Ward, Lock and Company. Almost all the changes may be traced to a desire to head off homoerotic construction of the text. It is evidence of how well Wilde succeeded that when Queensberry's defence counsel made use of the novel to discredit Wilde at the first trial (Hallward's obviously homosexual infatuation with Dorian) he reverted to the Lippincott text. Nevertheless despite the author's best endeavours critical voices were raised almost in unison against the softened British text: 'it constantly hints,' opined the St James's Gazette 'at disgusting sins and abominable crimes.'

AO2
Textual issues

Both texts are provided in full in the Norton Critical Edition of the novel (ed. Donald L Lawler, 1988) together with a wealth of early reviews, comments and recent academic criticism. The Penguin edition summarises the differences between the two texts, but does not reprint the Lippincott version.

N.B. OCR will never set questions that require the candidate to have read a particular text of Dorian Gray, or to have read both texts. All questions may be attempted with a knowledge of either the Lippincott or 1891 version, though AO2 performance may be enhanced if you acquaint yourself with the differences between the two.

Biography

AO4 Biographical context

For purposes of biographical information at AS you need only dip into Richard Ellmann's miraculously judicious and sympathetic *Oscar Wilde* (1987), especially chapter 12, '*The Age of Dorian*'. If you are interested in the climax (or nadir) of Wilde's story, The Stationery Office publishes *The Trials of Oscar Wilde 1895* in a convenient paperback edition. There are three competent films of Wilde's life, starring Robert Morley, Peter Finch (both 1960) and Stephen Fry (1995).

1891, the year of the book publication of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, was the single most productive of Wilde's literary career. In addition to the novel he published a collection of philosophic essays, Intentions, a book of fairy-tales, *House of Pomegranates*, and written his first major play, the society comedy *Lady Windermere's Fan*. For much of this 'miraculously' productive time Wilde was followed in public by an adoring group of young men. Chief of these was a Civil Servant, later a poet, still later a Roman Catholic priest called John Gray, upon whom Wilde conferred a supreme accolade by giving his name to the titular character of his only novel. Lord Alfred Douglas, who met Wilde after the publication of Dorian, envied John Gray this achievement. Wilde's male entourage soon began to be talked about, better than not being talked about, but given the state of criminal legislation against homosexuality in the early 1890s, decidedly dangerous. Even if the 1891 version of the novel tactfully avoided references to its characters' sexuality, certain portions of the literary establishment, and more especially the popular press, were quick to make obvious deductions. The green carnation, which Wilde had worn in his buttonhole as the perfect blend of nature and artifice, for them rapidly became an insulting badge of gay pride.

Biography

Wilde's defence of masculine affection in the novel ('such love as Michal Angelo had known, and Montaigne, and Winckelmann, and Shakespeare himself ') is actually very like his speech on '*The Love that Dare not Speak its Name*' from the dock in his 1895 trial for homosexual practices. The latter runs:

> *"The love that dare not speak its name" in this century is such a great affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan, such as Plato made the very basis of his philosophy, and such as you find in the sonnets of Michelangelo and Shakespeare. It is that deep spiritual affection that is as pure as it is perfect. It dictates and pervades great works of art, like those of Shakespeare and Michelangelo, and those two letters of mine, such as they are. It is in this century misunderstood, so much misunderstood that it may be described as "the love that dare not speak its name," and on that account of it I am placed where I am now. It is beautiful, it is fine, it is the noblest form of affection. There is nothing unnatural about it. It is intellectual, and it repeatedly exists between an older and a younger man, when the older man has intellect, and the younger man has all the joy, hope and glamour of life before him. That it should be so, the world does not understand. The world mocks at it, and sometimes puts one in the pillory for it.*

Unfortunately, since writing Dorian Gray, Wilde had committed himself to an underworld of boy prostitutes who knew little or nothing of Shakespeare or Michaelangelo. It was chiefly for these liaisons that Wilde was sentenced to two years with hard labour in May 1895. Some scholars believe that Wilde may also have contributed at about this time to a novel of hardcore gay pornography called Teleny.

AO4 Biographical context

Dorian Gray and Gay Immortality

AO2
Close reading
AO4
Biographical and sociological context

One of John Sutherland's wonderful puzzles about Victorian Fiction (*Is Heathcliff a Murderer?* Oxford World's Classics, 1996), concerns Dorian Gray. In '*Why Does This Novel Disturb Us*?' Sutherland argues that the original reviewers who became outraged at the novel's 'insinuations' of homosexual lifestyle did so not on hard textual evidence but as a result of the subliminal impact of the novel's concerted attacks on sense and reason: the frequent collocation of powerful odours, especially the simultaneous 'nosegay' provided by flowers which ought to blow at different seasons, so that time itself becomes miraculously suspended, as in the homoerotic cult of the 'marvellous boy'. More significantly the time-scheme disturbingly never advances from the 1889-90 of the novel's composition. When Dorian sits for his portrait time itself is suspended: the novel basks perpetually in the gay sunshine of a June afternoon.

Suggestions for Further Reading

John Sloan, *Authors in Context: Oscar Wilde* (World's Classics, 2009)

Peter Raby, *Oscar Wilde* (1988)

----------, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde* (1997)

Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the Queer Moment* (1994)

The Yellow Book

Yellow-backed novels were risqué. Henry James's sensually starved hero in *The Ambassadors* (1900), Lewis Strether, gazes on them in a shop window 'fresh as lemon fruit on a tree.' The 'yellow book' that poisons Dorian is more than likely the book that poisoned Wilde, Joris Karl Huysmans's *À Rebours* (1884) [the title is variously translated 'Against Nature' or 'Against the Grain']. Twice he admitted to friends he had Huysmans's book in mind, and the lavish eleventh chapter of Dorian Gray seems to be modelled on its fastidiously glutinous delights, 'metaphors as monstrous as orchids.' Dorian's subversive passion for perfumes, ecclesiastical vestments, gifts given by noted homosexuals all resemble the appliances used by Huysmans's hero, Des Esseintes, in his disciplined hedonism. In *À Rebours* jewels are not merely collected and admired, as they are in Wilde, but fastened into the carapace of a giant tortoise, which dies of the excess. Unlike Dorian, Des Esseintes survives the novel, but only at the cost of entering a monastery (rather as Wilde, on his deathbed, was received into the Roman Catholic Church).

AO2 and AO4
Intertextual study

Wilde Anticipates Reader-Response Criticism?

A03
Opinions of different readers

Oscar Wilde's *The Perfect Critic* was published in his collection Intentions in 1891 (the same year as Dorian Gray). The essay provides an extended gloss on the most important epigram in the Preface to Dorian Gray: 'It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors.' Wilde believed that works of art revealed more about their consumers than they ever disclosed the 'Intentions' of the artist, neatly anticipating what 60s literary critics called the 'Intentional Fallacy' (that critics could discern a writer's aims and therefore the meaning and purpose of his or her book), and pre-empting the theories that drive Reader-Response criticism. Wilde turned his belief that audience is more significant than author into a wonderful compliment to the first night audience of his play *Lady Windermere's Fan*. Speaking after the final curtain, he congratulated them on the excellence of their performance, suggesting they thought almost as highly of the play as he did himself.

Students intrigued by the possibilities of Reader-Response criticism may wish to consult:

Wolfgang Iser, *The Art of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (1978).

Stanley Fish, *Is there a Text in this Class?* (1980).

Wilde's Other Fables

1): *'The Fisherman and his Soul'*

This story, the most complex of Wilde's fables, appeared in the collection *House of Pomegranates* (1891). It is often compared with Dorian Gray, written at about the same time, commentators noting that both stories are versions of the Faust-bargain in which the hero cuts himself off from the normal relationship between soul and body for a temporary but much-desired span of moral freedom. But whereas the disembodied soul of Dorian sits quietly in his attic, the fisherman's soul goes on a rampage through the gaudy and stylised landscape of the Near East, tempting the fisherman with wisdom, riches and sex. It is the latter which proves efficacious, contrasting Dorian's fate, who is undone by the conventional hypocritical simper of the portrait when he spares a girl. Dorian's hedonism claims many victims, but the soul's only one, the little mermaid with whom the fisherman hoped to live out all his years in the bliss of solitude. OCR examiners have noted that F661 answers are often improved by intertextual engagement with short stories written by the author of the assigned text.

AO2 and AO3 Intertextual study

Wilde's Other Fables

2): 'The Disciple'

A02 and A03 Intertextual study

Wilde, himself a great Narcissist, wrote in Dorian Gray a great reinterpretation of the Narcissus legend: Dorian can buffet about the world self-satisfied in his ageless body, living a life of new and perfect hedonism. Wilde saw all three characters, not just Dorian, as made in his own image. He explained to a correspondent, "Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry what the world thinks me: Dorian is what I would like to be in other ages, perhaps"'. Three years after his novel, Wilde wrote an even sharper homage to Narcissus. It is a brief 'poem in prose' called '*The Disciple*':

> *When Narcissus died the pool of his pleasure changed from a cup of sweet waters into a cup of salt tears, and the Oreads came weeping through the woodland that they might sing to the pool and give it comfort.*
>
> *And when they saw that the pool had changed from a cup of sweet waters into a cup of salt tears, they loosened the green tresses of their hair and cried to the pool and said, 'We do not wonder that you should mourn in this manner for Narcissus, so beautiful was he.'*
>
> *'But was Narcissus beautiful?' said the pool.*
>
> *'Who should know that better than you?' answered the Oreads. 'Us did he ever pass by, but you he sought for, and would lie on your banks and look down at you, and in the mirror of your waters he would mirror his own beauty.'*
>
> *And the pool answered, 'But I loved Narcissus because, as he lay on my banks and looked down at me, in the mirror of his eyes I saw ever my own beauty mirrored.*

Film and Audio Versions

AO3
Other versions and interpretations

Including updatings, these are numerous, but three are significant. Best is Albert Lewin's luminous 1945 version, with a deserved Oscar for cinematography, where cavernous London interiors are shot in black-and-white, but the eponymous picture glows incongruously in a few Technicolor frames, as Wilde's fable mockingly celebrates the distance between art and life. Hurd Hatfield as Dorian has a brittle necrophilic beauty, helped out (anachronistically) in his efforts to seduce Sybil by Wilde's poem '*The Sphinx*'. The 1977 BBC television film, currently available as part of the Oscar Wilde Collection, has a stellar cast, none more notable than John Gielgud as an ageing, and ultimately aged, Lord Henry, complete with increasingly desperate hair-dye. Colin Firth in the same role ages more gracefully in the most recent cinema version (2008), where Dorian's immortality propels him into the twentieth century, picking up a second-generation girlfriend in the person of Wootton's daughter. Wilde's novel, like its hero, never ages, of course: remaining anchored in the fin-de-siècle, among cigarettes and carnations.

The Picture of Dorian Gray is freely available as an audiobook download, and unabridged on CD from Cover to Cover (2010), read by Edward Petherbridge and from Naxos Audiobooks, read by Greg Wise; *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* (2000) is a brilliant dramatisation of the three Wilde trials, in which all parts except a hotel maid are played by Martin Jarvis. It is on cassette or CD.