



**THE ENGLISH THEATRE
OF HAMBURG**

presents

THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY

by
Oscar Wilde
Adapted by **Merlin Holland**
and **John O'Connor**

STUDY GUIDE

Premiere on 4th September 2026

Preview performances at reduced prices on 31st August, 1st, 2nd, and 3rd September

Tuesday – Saturday 19:30

selected Sundays 14:30

Wednesday/Friday 11:30 (Matinee performances weekly alternating)

THE ENGLISH THEATRE OF HAMBURG

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TICKETS

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Dear English Teachers and Friends,

The English Theatre will premiere **THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY** by Oscar Wilde, adapted by Merlin Holland and John O’Conner, on 4 September 2026, with preview performances at reduced prices on 31 August and 1, 2, 3 September. Bookings of this classic English play have already started. See the cover of this publication for dates and times of performances. Teachers who wish to preview the play before bringing a group of students to the theatre should contact marketing@englishtheatre.de.

About Oscar Wilde

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 1890s. Wilde was known for his involvement in the rising philosophy of aestheticism and tried his hand at a variety of literary activities. He 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 EARNEST** 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. The imprisonment ruined his health. 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.

About the Novel and 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 from the original version of the novel have been reintroduced. This stage 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 whose portrait is 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 realizes 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 Adaptors of the Novel

Merlin Holland

Merlin Holland is a British and Irish biographer and editor. He is the only grandchild of Oscar Wilde whose life he has researched and written about extensively. Some of his books include **THE COMPLETE LETTERS OF OSCAR WILDE** which he co-authored with Rupert Hart-Davis; **OSCAR WILDE, A LIFE IN LETTERS**, an imagined conversation with Wilde; and **THE WILDE ALBUM** that includes hitherto unpublished photographs of Wilde. Holland's play **THE TRIALS OF OSCAR WILDE**, co-authored with John O'Connor, re-enacts the 1895 trials of Lord Queensberry for libel and Oscar Wilde for gross indecency. It toured the UK in 2014 as a production by the European Art Company before a run at St. James Theatre in London. The adaptation of **THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY** (written with John O'Connor) toured to 60 venues in the UK before a sell-out run in the West End in 2016. In 2025, Holland published **AFTER OSCAR: THE LEGACY OF SCANDAL**, which debunks the many biographical misunderstandings and family myths that have developed since Wilde's release from prison in 1897 and his death in 1900.

John O'Connor

John O'Connor is an actor, director, writer and producer. He studied Drama at the University of Manchester before living and working in Japan. In 2002, he founded the touring theatre group European Arts Company. Their first production was a British Council sponsored tour of Greece with Harold Pinter's **THE DUMB WAITER** and **THE LOVER**. Since then, the company has gone from strength to strength touring all over the UK, Ireland, Greece, Germany and Italy with 25 shows that have delighted audiences everywhere. In 2014, John co-wrote and produced **THE TRIALS OF OSCAR WILDE** which toured the UK before a run at St. James Theatre in London. Other Wilde productions include **THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST** and **LADY WINDERMERE'S FAN** which he directed for Il Palchetto Stage in Italy. The adaptation of **THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY** (written with Merlin Holland) toured to 60 venues in the UK before a sell-out run at Trafalgar Studios in the West End.



SUMMARY

Summary Of

Oscar Wilde's

THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY

Time: The Victorian Period

The artist Basil Hallward, infatuated with the youthful charm and physical beauty of Dorian Gray, has been painting a picture of the young man in his studio in London. When Basil's friend, Lord Henry Wotton, sees the portrait, he urges Basil to exhibit it. The artist, however, worries that the portrait reveals too clearly his secret feelings for Dorian to be displayed in public. Lord Henry wants to meet Dorian. But Basil fears that the aristocrat's cynicism, hedonism and lack of faith will spoil Dorian's innocence and tarnish their relationship. After Dorian arrives at the studio, he is fascinated by Lord Henry's brilliant and witty conversation. Lord Henry lectures the young man on the supreme value of youth and physical beauty, and warns him that these gifts will fade with time. Dorian is struck by how attractive he looks in the painting. He wishes he could remain so young and beautiful forever, and that the portrait would age and decay in his place. He impulsively asserts that he would sell his soul to have his wish granted. Is he making a pact with the devil?

When the portrait is finished, it is sent to Dorian's house. Meanwhile, Dorian is strongly influenced by Lord Henry Wotton's philosophy of life, which maintains that one should be constantly in search of sensation and physical pleasure. That, according to Lord Henry, is the only way to heal the soul. Following Lord Henry's advice, Dorian begins to visit London's notorious opium dens where he indulges in all manner of illicit activities. He struggles, however, between his desire for pleasure and his feelings of guilt.

Dorian falls passionately in love with a beautiful young actress, Sibyl Vane, whose acting talent he worships, especially her portrayal of Shakespeare's heroines. Her brother, Jim Vane, distrusts Dorian's intentions with

his sister and threatens to murder him if he harms her. Sybil, though, remains deeply in love with Dorian and is determined to marry him. Jim urges their mother to protect Sybil while he is away at sea. Over time, Dorian notices that Sybil's acting has become artificial, cold and lifeless. When she explains that she can no longer imitate love on stage because she has fallen in love for real with him, he is heartbroken. He cruelly breaks up with her, declaring that he fell in love with her talent as an actress, and since she has lost that, she means nothing to him.

After brutally discarding Sybil, Dorian notices that the portrait of him has changed. He has a cruel expression on his face, and he has grown older and less attractive. Can it be that his wish is being fulfilled? He is panic-stricken and vows to make it right with Sybil. But before he can do so, he is told that she committed suicide. After at first feeling great remorse, Dorian, following the counsel of Lord Henry, seems to become indifferent to Sybil's tragic death. He is plagued by the portrait and hides it in the attic of his house. He continues to live according to Lord Henry's philosophy, pursuing only sensation and physical pleasure. As a result of his decadent behaviour, Dorian gains a bad reputation. He nevertheless remains welcome in the best circles of society because he is beautiful, charming and wealthy.

Basil is appalled by the horrible rumours circulating around Dorian. When he confronts Dorian about his disreputable behaviour, Dorian becomes so enraged that he stabs and kills him. Dorian then blackmails a man by the name of Alan Campbell to get rid of the corpse. Afterwards, hoping to forget about what he has done, Dorian immerses himself even more in London's infamous opium dens. There he is attacked by Jim Vane, who has returned home from the sea and is seeking to avenge his sister's death. Dorian survives the attack and flees to the countryside. While there, a man is killed by accident on a hunting trip who turns out to be Jim Vane. His death makes it unlikely that Dorian will ever be punished for his crimes.



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But the portrait in the attic continues to reflect the reality of Dorian's sinful life by becoming increasingly ugly and grotesque. Despite attempts to amend his ways, his image in the painting remains hideous, depicting the ugliness of his soul. In a fit of despair and rage, he

plunges a knife into his image on the canvas. A terrible cry is heard. His servants find Dorian lying dead on the floor, old and grotesque looking. The portrait, however, has changed back to its original form, showing Dorian as young and beautiful.

Study Questions

1. What drives Basil Hallward to paint a picture of Dorian Gray?
2. After Dorian sees the portrait, what does he wish?
3. How does Sir Henry Wotton influence Dorian?
4. Why does Dorian stop loving Sybil and abandon her?
5. Why does Jim Vane attack Dorian?
6. How does the painting change over time?
7. Where does Dorian hide the painting?
8. Why does Dorian murder Basil Hallward?
9. Why does Dorian decide to destroy the painting?
10. In what state do servants find Dorian and the painting at the end of the play?

For Discussion or Written Work

1. Dorian is fixated on preserving his youth and beauty. Do you regard this as a positive or negative value?
2. Sir Henry Wotton has a great influence on Dorian's life. Discuss how a single person can have a lasting effect on another's future, for either good or bad.
3. Do you think Dorian's love for Sybil was genuine? Why or why not?
4. Compare the character of Basil Hallward and Lord Henry Wotton.
5. Oscar Wilde's motto was "art for art's sake". He believed that art exists only for itself, that its only purpose is to be beautiful, and that it should not try to change the world or its morals. Do you agree with him?

Answer Key

1. His obsession with Dorian's youth and beauty.
2. That he could remain young and beautiful forever and that the painting would age in his place.
3. He persuades Dorian to live a life devoted to sensation and physical pleasure.
4. Because her acting on stage has become artificial and lifeless.
5. Because he holds Dorian responsible for his sister Sybil's death.
6. The image of Dorian in the painting becomes ugly and grotesque reflecting his life of immorality.
7. In the attic of his house.
8. Because Basil confronts Dorian regarding the terrible rumours surrounding him.
9. Because, despite trying to amend his ways, his image in the painting remains hideous.
10. They find him dead, looking old and grotesque, but in the painting, he is young and beautiful.