## Oscar Wilde (1854-1900)

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde was born on 16 October 1854 in Dublin, Ireland, the son of a wealthy famous doctor, Sir William Wilde. **Oscar was immediately recognised as a brilliant student** and after his school years in Enniskillen **he went on to study at Trinity College, Dublin,** Ireland's most prestigious university. In 1874 his excellent results won him a scholarship to continue his studies at Magdalen College, Oxford, where he studied Classics and again graduated brilliantly.

He left for London where he composed poetry, publishing his first collection in 1881. The following year he left for a lecture tour in America, where he met such important American writers as Longfellow and Walt Whitman. Another lecture tour, this time in England and Ireland, helped Oscar to create a name for himself as a **leading figure in the aesthetic movement**.

In 1884 he married a wealthy English woman, Constance Lloyd, who gave him two sons. He found employment as the editor of a women's magazine and entered a fruitful period of creativity. In **1888 he published *The Happy Prince and Other Tales***, a set of stories for children. Two years later he published his only novel, ***The Picture of Dorian Gray***. The novel was attacked as an immoral work, though Wilde defended himself in a preface to the work, stating that 'vice and virtue are to the artist materials for an art.'

**ZOOM IN**

**Oscar Wilde** was the embodiment of the **dandy**, a refined and elegant man who combined a strong taste for elegance and an attention to his appearance, clothes and style. The dandy often used his wit and spirit to shock other people and to unmask the absurdities of Victorian moralism. Dorian Gray, too, appeared as the perfect representation of the 'dandy', a man who sought pleasure and who believed that life should be lived as 'a work of art'.

Wilde's first play, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, was staged in February 1892. It was an immediate success with the public and critics alike and encouraged Wilde to devote himself to the theatre in the following years. His success was confirmed by a series of successful, satirical comedies, not without a vein of social criticism, including *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), *An Ideal Husband* (1895) and **his theatrical masterpiece, *The Importance of Being Earnest*** (1895).

Sadly, in the moment of his greatest success and popularity in London, Oscar **Wilde became involved in a legal case that would lead to his ruin**. Wilde had an affair with the young Lord Alfred Douglas, whose father Lord Queensberry **accused him of homosexuality**, which at the time was a criminal offence. Wilde decided, rather foolishly, to accuse Queensberry of libel and took him to court. Queensberry's lawyers defended their client by presenting evidence of Wilde's homosexuality, including passages from his works and his letters to Lord Alfred. The libel case against Queensberry was rejected, but now Wilde himself was **put on trial for 'gross indecency'**. Convicted in May of the same year, Wilde was sentenced to **two-year imprisonment and hard labour in Reading Gaol**.

When Wilde came out of prison in 1897, he was physically and psychologically a broken man, saddened further by the fact that he had been abandoned by many friends, including Lord Alfred himself. He lived in exile in France and wrote very little. His one significant production of this period was *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, which recounted his terrible prison experience. Wilde died on 30 November 1900, at just 46 years old.

After trying his hand at poetry, without any great success, Wilde began to write for the theatre publishing a series of successful plays. The plays owe their appeal, then as now, to Wilde's gift for brilliant, witty dialogue and social satire.

His only novel, ***The Picture of Dorian Gray***, first appeared in *Lippincott's Monthly*

*Magazine* in 1890. One year later Wilde published a revised edition, adding six chapters and a preface in which he attempted to deal with the criticism it had received. His preface outlines his philosophy of art, based on the principles of **Aestheticism**: **art is neither moral nor immoral**, it has no moral purpose, but **beauty in itself is a supreme value**.

# The Picture of Dorian Gray (1890)

## PLOT

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* tells the story of a rich, beautiful young man who has his portrait painted by Basil Hallward. The portrait is a masterpiece.
At Basil's studio Dorian meets Lord Henry Wotton. Lord Henry talks about the transience of youth and beauty. Dorian is struck by this thought and makes a pledge. He will sacrifice his soul if he can maintain his youth and beauty, while the portrait itself will bear all the signs of time.
Under Lord Henry's influence, Dorian leads a hedonistic life of pleasure, sin, crime and corruption. His scandalous lifestyle is hidden by the fact that he remains young and beautiful, while the image in the portrait, which is hidden away, becomes old and ugly, bearing all the signs of Dorian's sins.
At the end of the story, responsible for the death of an actress and the murder of Basil, killed in a fit of anger after the artist has seen the disfigured portrait and discovered Dorian's terrible secret, Dorian stabs the portrait. Dorian is found dead, now transformed into a horrible old man beside the portrait, which has returned to its original beauty.

## THE THEME OF THE DOUBLE

*'The books that the world calls immoral are books that show the world its own shame'.*

Henry Wotton, Chapter 19

When the novel was published in 1890, it came as a shock for most Victorian readers, who believed that the purpose of art was education and moral enlightenment, as illustrated in the works by Charles Dickens and other traditional Victorian novels. *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* overtly proclaimed beauty as the unique purpose of art and life, and **discarded bourgeois morality with contempt.** However, notwithstanding its aesthetic declarations, the novel does teach a moral lesson in the end, as Dorian's sins and his hedonistic life lead to his own destruction.
The point is that Dorian doesn't overtly defy bourgeois morality (as Wilde actually did), or make his life a manifesto of his ideas (as Wilde's life was). His appearance remains beautiful and innocent, but he is not innocent and beautiful inside, as the portrait (his double, the dark side of his personality) witnesses. Instead, Dorian's **double life** is only a sign of his hypocrisy; he uses his innocent appearance to be accepted in society and also to fulfil his basest desires without paying the consequences. As such, the novel ranks alongside Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) as a representation of how the literature of the period explored Victorian society and the forbidden desires behind acceptable public faces. In this sense, Wilde's is a highly, if misunderstood, **moral novel**.

## STYLE AND NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE

The novel combines the supernatural elements of the Gothic novel (Dorian's mysterious portrait) with French decadent fiction. It is told by an unobtrusive 3rd person narrator and, like in his plays, Wilde uses dialogue to reveal his characters' personalities. The settings are described in great detail, with words appealing to the senses. The main symbolic element is the portrait, which represents Dorian's conscience and his real self.

◀ A frame from Oliver Parker's film *Dorian Gray* (2009), starring Ben Barnes.

## AESTHETICISM AND THE CULT OF BEAUTY

**Aestheticism was an art movement** that developed in Europe in the late 19th century. It claimed that art exists for the sake of beauty and does not have to serve any moral, political or didactic purpose. It was a reaction to the utilitarian philosophy of the Industrial Revolution and to Victorian respectability and morals. In England, the artists of the Pre-Raphaelite Movement paved the way to Aestheticism with the works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones and Charles Algernon Swinburne. In Europe 'Decadence' (the term which has origins in common with Aestheticism) was used at first to describe mid-19th-century writers, such as Théophile Gautier, Charles Baudelaire, Stephane Mallarmé and J. K. Huysmans, whose *A Rebours* (Against Nature) is mentioned in Wilde's novel. It is the book Henry Wotton gives Dorian to convert him to Aestheticism.

▲ Edward Robert Hughes, *Night* (c.1880-85).

### CHECKPOINT

**1. Answer the questions.**

1 What works brought success to Oscar Wilde?

2 Which work was considered scandalous?

3 Why was Wilde's lifestyle considered scandalous in his time?

4 What consequences did this have for Wilde?

5 What philosophy of art emerged in Wilde's novel?

6 What is the moral lesson of the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*?