Oscar Wilde

‘To live is the rarest thing in the world. Most people exist, that is all’
Oscar Wilde

1. Life

- He was born in Dublin in 1854. He graduated in classical studies at Trinity College, and then he won a scholarship and studied in Oxford. Here he got to know the works and ideas of Walter Pater, the founder of Aestheticism, and John Ruskin, a famous art critic.

- He became a fashionable dandy. He was well-known in high society for his originality, his talks and his “aphorisms”

- In 1881 he published Poems and went to the USA, where he held some lectures about the Pre-Raphaelites and the Aesthetes.

- In 1883 he got married and had two children.

- In the late 1880s he published some short stories and fairy tales (The Canterville Ghost, The Happy Prince and Other Tales)

- In 1891 he published his only novel The Picture of Dorian Gray.
1. Life

• In the 1990s he produced a series of very successful plays, which satirized against the mannerism of the Victorian upper classes: Lady Windermere’s Fan (1892), A Woman of no Importance (1893), The Importance of Being Earnest (1895), Salomé (1893).

• He became one of the most successful playwrights of late Victorian London and one of the greatest celebrities of his days.

• The Picture of Dorian Gray and Salomé, however, were considered immoral and obscene and damaged his reputation.

• He suffered a dramatic downfall and was imprisoned after being convicted of ‘gross indecency’ for homosexual acts (he had an affair with the young nobleman Lord Alfred Douglas). While in prison he wrote De Profundis, a long letter to Lord A. Douglas and the long poem The Ballad of Reading Gaol.

• He died in Paris, in poverty, in 1900.
Some famous quotations of Wilde’s:

• ‘I have nothing to declare except my genius.’

• ‘Experience is simply the name we give our mistakes.’

• ‘A man can be happy with any woman as long as he does not love her.’

• ‘I can resist anything except temptations’

• ‘Art is the most intense form of individualism that the world has known’.
Oscar Wilde adopted the **aesthetical ideal**: he affirmed ‘my life is like a work of art’. His **AESTHETICISM** clashed with the **didacticism** of Victorian novels. He thought that art shouldn’t have any **moral aim**, but should only celebrate **beauty**.

- **The artist** → the creator of **beautiful things**
- **Art** → used only to celebrate **beauty** and the **sensorial pleasures**
- **Virtue and vice** → employed by the artist as raw material in his art:

  ‘No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style’

  ‘The Preface’ to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*
4. The Picture of Dorian Gray

1890 ➔ first appeared in a magazine.

1891 ➔ revised and extended.

• It reflects Oscar Wilde’s personality.

• It was considered immoral by the Victorian public.
4. The Picture of Dorian Gray

Plot

- Set in London at the end of the 19th century.
- The painter Basil Hallward makes a portrait of a beautiful young man, Dorian Gray.
- Dorian’s desires of eternal youth are satisfied.
- The signs of age, experience and vices appear on the portrait.
4. The Picture of Dorian Gray

Plot

• Dorian lives only for pleasures.

• The painter discovers Dorian’s secret and he is killed by the young man. Other people will die for Dorian’s fault.

• Later Dorian wants to get free from the portrait; he stabs it but in so doing he kills himself.

• At the very moment of death the portrait returns to its original purity and Dorian turns into a withered, wrinkled and loathsome man.
5. Main themes of the novel

• Cult of **beauty** and art, and rejection of the utilitarian values of industrialised mass society.

• **Theme of the double**: the picture represents the dark side of Dorian, **his soul**, his bad consciousness.

• The horrible, corrupting picture could be also seen as a symbol of the immorality and bad consciousness of the Victorian middle class, while Dorian represents their hypocrisy, with its pure, innocent appearance.
6. The moral of the novel

It’s a 19th cent. version of the myth of Faust, a man who sells his soul to the devil so that all his desires can be satisfied.

Even if Oscar Wilde believed that art shouldn’t have any moral aim, there is a moral in this novel: every excess must be punished and reality cannot be escaped. When Dorian destroys the picture, he cannot avoid the punishment for all his sins → death.

The picture, restored to its original beauty, illustrates Wilde’s theories of art: art survives people, art is eternal.

**Narrative technique:**
Third person narrator, with an internal perspective (Dorian’s), so that it creates identification between reader and character. The setting is vividly described by many words appealing to the senses. Large use of dialogue (typical of drama).