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**“THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY” - Sex, youth and tragedy**

A 52' film by Jérôme Lambert and Philippe Picard

Produced by Hauteville productions in coproduction with ARTE FRANCE



## Synopsis

“The Picture of Dorian Gray” continues to find new readers and to inspire artists and creators the world over more than a century after its publication because Oscar Wilde gave his novel all the ingredients of a universal masterpiece. Driven by a rock ‘n’ roll soundtrack and a directorial approach blending archives, live-action footage and animation, this documentary allows the viewer to experience the dramatic power of this fantasy tale that probes the torments of narcissism, and explores the book’s premonitory dimension, which prefigures both the author’s tragic fate and contemporary society’s obsession with image.

## Director’s Note

*“Making the originality and modernity of the novel resonate”*

A timeless work, anchored in one period but which still resonates today. A text that is both singular yet universal, with which everyone can identify. That is the definition of a masterpiece.

This novel, which we loved so much as teenagers, has left its mark on generations of readers worldwide since its publication in 1891 because it echoes the most intimate aspirations of us all: Our relationship with time, with beauty, with ourselves, and with others. Both a eulogy to youth and that which corrupts it, a hedonist’s manifesto and moralist fable, Oscar Wilde’s fantastic tale is a gem of subtlety, which continually confounds expectations, just like its author – a man torn by contradictory urges, sensitive and generous, who played with his celebrity as much as he hid behind it.

Reading it today, one is struck by its modernity: The obsessions that Wilde dramatizes – the cult youth, the fantasy of eternal rejuvenation, and the quest for physical perfection – have never seemed as relevant today. 130 years after it was written, the novel holds up a mirror to our times, subjected to the diktats of appearance and youth, and the cult of image.



## A work that resembles its author

The novel's legacy owes a lot to that of its author. Oscar Wilde, a flamboyant and tragic figure, a rock star before the concept had been invented, was not afraid of provocation or transgression, even if it led to his downfall. "The Rise and Fall of Oscar Wilde", to paraphrase Bowie; or the greatness and decadence of an androgynous and provocative author who must have fascinated and repulsed the society of his age, well beyond literary circles. Rarely has a writer's life been quite so closely linked to his work. The pact which binds Dorian Gray to his portrait is at the heart of the book, and that which binds Wilde to his novel is the diabolical reflection of this: The same work which would consecrate him as the writer of eternity would lead to his downfall and death. For the novel turned out to be for prophetic its author. That is the main driver of our narrative: "The Picture of Dorian Gray" seems to encapsulate and foretell the tragic destiny of Oscar Wilde.



## Directorial approach

When you make a documentary about a literary work, you are soon faced with a challenge: How do you represent a book, without slipping into a too-literal illustration or into paraphrase – especially since the novel in questions focuses on image? We decided to trust our own experience as readers. The reader in each of us conjures their own mental images. We don't necessarily give precise contours to the scenes we find in books; our imagination incorporates fantasies, personal memories, pictorial or cinematographic references, and so on. These mental scenes blur time periods, and reconfigure places. In this film, we want to provide an echo of these composite constructions.

We have chosen to represent the reader's imagination "factory" in a metaphorical way. This world will reveal itself in a photographer's studio. In the half-light, white-gloved hands set up the elements of a miniature set on a table covered with black velvet. The photographer carefully places some cut-out silhouettes in the foreground of the set. They represent the main characters in the novel as they appear in Albert Lewin's film version of "The Picture of Dorian Gray", made in 1945.

Blending live-action footage, graphic animation, superimposed images, and archive footage, this approach aims to give a genuine esthetic coherence to the documentary. We will switch between

some very different material: Photograms taken from movie adaptations of “The Picture of Dorian Gray”, engravings from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, or photos from the Victorian era. In our miniature theater, we will also play out extracts from the films which, from the start of the last century until today, have continually reinterpreted Oscar Wilde’s masterpiece. The periods become intertwined, underling the longevity of the work since its creation.

## Synopsis

Rarely has a work foretold the fate of its author to such an extent. What Wilde describes in “The Picture of Dorian Gray” would come to pass symbolically and tragically in his own life. And during the high-profile trial which saw Wilde sentenced to forced labor for homosexuality, the book was even used as evidence against him. What was so scandalous and subversive in this novel? What had the author put in this book which could help convict him?

From the book’s first pages, the mechanism of a tragic pact is laid out. Having been made aware of his beauty and youth by Lord Henry, the innocent Dorian Gray makes a wish: By wishing that the painting ages in his place so he can eternally preserve his adolescent beauty, Dorian Gray seals his fate.

In the first chapter, the painter Basil Hallward presents his friend Lord Henry with the portrait of Dorian which he has just finished, and confesses: “I have put too much of myself into it. [...] The reason I will not exhibit this picture is that I am afraid that I have shown in it the secret of my own soul.” These words could apply to Wilde himself, a writer warning us that he is about to strip bare his soul in his novel. But should we see Wilde in the character of Basil Hallward, painter of the portrait? Or in Lord Henry, the cynical dandy with his provocative aphorisms? Or rather in the youthful Dorian? The author himself answered this question: “Basil Hallward is what I think I am; Lord Henry what the world thinks me; Dorian what I would like to be.”

From its publication, “The Picture of Dorian Gray” was met with fierce criticism. There is no doubt that Lord Henry’s aphorisms skewered the decorum of the period, such as when he declares that “Sin is the only real color element left in modern life”. But above all, a scandalous reputation preceded its publication in England. It was said to be about a homosexual relationship between Dorian Gray and Basil Hallward.

The same year the book came out, Bosie, a young student admirer of “The Picture of Dorian Gray”, dreamt of meeting its author. Oscar Wilde and Bosie immediately fell for each other, and were soon inseparable. Just like in the first few pages of “Dorian Gray”. In a disturbing mirror play, the book and Wilde’s life began to resonate together.

The hedonism advocated by Lord Henry in the novel, and that which Wilde applied in his life, seem today like a prophetic vision. “Unbridled pleasure”, one of the slogans of May ‘68, was already there 80 years in advance. We would have to wait until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century before the cult of pleasure became a reality. Sex, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll, proclaimed the heirs to Oscar Wilde: Jim Morrison, David Bowie, and Pete Doherty.

Yet in the novel, Dorian Gray is only at the start of his apprenticeship. He would experience his first passion, which would turn out to be an illusion. This mirage is one of theater. The first time Dorian set eyes on “the adorable Sibyl Vane”, it is on stage; she is an actress.

And yet, when Lord Henry and Basil Hallward accompany Dorian to a performance, Sybil acts so badly that she attracts the mockery of his friends and shames Dorian. Without hesitation, he leaves her, breaking her heart. When he gets home, he notices an expression of cruelty on the portrait that he hadn't seen before. That's when he realizes that his foolish wish has been granted, the pact is working.

From then on, Dorian's life goes off the rails. He frequented the most notorious dives in London, in an increasingly decadent pursuit of pleasure. The picture, which he has hidden in a locked room, gradually grows uglier, bearing the signs of age and the stigmata of his moral undoing.

As he transgresses the moral rules of the day, Dorian Gray realizes the inevitable consequences of the pact. He regularly checks on the physical deterioration of the portrait, not without a certain delight. The years go by, but no sign of ageing can be seen on his face. In the only episode in the novel when his life is in danger, this miracle will even save him.

For the screenwriter John Logan, Dorian Gray remains a contemporary hero because Oscar Wilde modernized the Faustian myth by combining it with that of Narcissus. “Doesn't this narcissism associated with the cult of youth characterize our times? In Greek mythology, Narcissus fell so deeply in love with his reflection that it killed him. I sometimes think we're not far from that! Oscar Wilde couldn't know that wanting to look younger and the cult of self-image would become essential elements of contemporary life, but he nonetheless foreshadowed this.”

For Valérie Belin, “The Picture of Dorian Gray” is one of the literary works that has most inspired visual artists: “My work sets out to question our world in which the image reigns supreme, this society in which the cult of Me has become omnipresent. The world of the selfie, the ego-portrait, is proof that Dorian's narcissism has triumphed. ‘Love your image more than yourself’, that is the first commandment of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. An injunction which will soon be obsolete, because in the all-virtual era, that image has become ourselves.”

Dorian Gray ends up showing Basil Hallward the portrait. The artist is horrified to discover this disfigured portrait and the blackness of his friend's soul. In a fit of rage, Dorian Gray grabs a knife and stabs Basil.

Dorian has no fear of earthly justice. But what about Oscar Wilde? In 1895, the writer found himself facing an all-too-real trial. Bosie's father had publicly called Oscar Wilde a “sodomite”. At the time, this was a crime punishable by prison. But far from being concerned and against all good sense, Wilde filed suit for libel, and decided to appear in court to press his case. Brilliant, flippant, and provocative, the author of “The Picture of Dorian Gray” imagined he could do in real life what he had achieved in his novel, and put society's hypocrisy on trial.

In a dizzying *mise en abyme*, the prophetic dimension of the novel came to pass during Wilde's trial. The author and his work became one; Wilde's trial was also the trial of “The Picture of Dorian Gray”. On 25 May 1895, Wilde was sentenced to two years' hard labor for homosexuality. The British press

relished the author's fall from grace. The Times ran the headline: "Oscar Wilde is lost and doomed to damnation."



Dorian's death has stunned generations of readers: In the space of a few lines, the Faustian pact comes to a tragic end in a gloomy atmosphere. Beyond the esthetic moral that Wilde proclaimed – "In the end, it's art that wins" – how can one fail to see an ultimate echo of the author's life? Wilde left the stage, leaving us his masterpiece as his legacy, just as on the canvas, Dorian Gray's face has regained its youth and beauty.

Who recognized Oscar Wilde in Paris, where he sought exile after his release? His wife and most of his friends had abandoned him, he was ruined. On 30 November 1900, Oscar Wilde died in a hotel in the Rue des Beaux-Arts, a forgotten figure. In one of his final witticisms, he declared, after ordering a glass of the finest champagne: "I am dying as I have lived, beyond my means."



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[z-turpin@arteFrance.fr](mailto:z-turpin@arteFrance.fr)

**Florent Rocchi**  
Sales Assistant  
[f-rocchi@arteFrance.fr](mailto:f-rocchi@arteFrance.fr)