

Great Books Discussion of The Portrait of Dorian Gray

1. In the preface, Wilde writes that "there is no such thing as a moral or immoral book." In other words, art has no effect, other than aesthetic, on individuals or society. Do you agree with Wilde's premise? Does this novel adhere to his statement?

2. What is the relationship between Basil and Dorian...from beginning to end?

3. Talk about Lord Henry: what code or set of beliefs does he live by? How does he view conventional morality and in what ways does he challenge it? Why, for instance, does he believe it is futile and wrong for the individual to resist temptation?

4. In what way does Lord Henry affect Dorian's character? Why does Lord Henry choose Dorian as his disciple? And what impels Dorian to follow his guidance? What is it that Dorian fears?

Furthermore, is Dorian responsible for the ruined lives of his friends? Is Lord Henry responsible for the ruined life of Dorian? When is someone responsible? How does Dorian manipulate those around him?

5. Is Lord Henry's belief in the freedom of the individual truly evil? Or does Dorian misconstrue it? Does Lord Henry actually practice the ideas he espouses? Does he understand the real life consequences his ideas would have, or does he exhibit a sort of naivete?

6. Talk about the role of the yellow book. (Although Wilde never gives it a title, critics believe it is based on Joris-Karl Huysman's novel, *A Rebours*, meaning "Against the Grain" or "Against Nature.")

7. Why does Sibyl commit suicide and what impact does her death have on Dorian?

8. Discuss Dorian's portrait. What does it represent? What does it suggest about the effect of experience on the soul? Why does Dorian hide it in the attic? Discuss Dorian's various reactions to the portrait throughout his life. How does Lord Henry's commentary on Dorian's life situations affect Dorian's opinion of the painting?

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9. Dorian's scandalous behavior shocks his peers, yet he remains welcome in social circles? Why? What is Wilde suggesting about "polite" London society?

10. Dorian desires to reform his life after the death of James Vane. Why only after Vane's death and why doesn't he succeed?

11. Discuss the ending: what does it mean? After the events that end the novel, what will Lord Henry have to say at the next dinner party?

12. Do you find any of these characters believable? Why or why not? (If not, do you think Wilde might have purposely drawn them as such?)

13. If you know the story of Faust, what parallels do you find in Wilde's novel?

14. What is the importance of sin and redemption in the novel? Is there any redemption for Dorian?

Notes: