



A new hedonism

In the following passage Lord Henry Wotton meets Dorian Gray and he finds him to be totally unselfconscious about his beauty. They are both enthralled by the beauty that the painter Basil has captured in the finished portrait of Dorian.

Oscar Wilde
The Picture of Dorian Gray
(1891)
Chapter 2

'Some day, when you are old and wrinkled¹ and ugly, when thought has seared² your forehead with its lines, and passion branded³ your lips with its hideous fires, you will feel it, you will feel it terribly. Now, wherever you go, you charm⁴ the world. Will it always be so?... You have a wonderfully beautiful face, Mr Gray. Don't frown⁴. You have. And beauty is a form of genius – is higher, indeed, than genius, as it needs no explanation. It is of the great facts of the world, like sunlight, or spring-time, or the reflection in dark waters of that silver shell we call the moon. It cannot be questioned. It has its divine right of sovereignty. It makes princes of those who have it. You smile? Ah! when you have lost it you won't smile... People say sometimes that beauty is only superficial. That may be so, but at least it is not so superficial as thought is. To me, beauty is the wonder of wonders. It is only shallow⁵ people who do not judge by appearances. The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible... Yes, Mr Gray, the gods have been good to you. But what the gods give they quickly take away. You have only a few years in which to live really, perfectly, and fully. When your youth goes, your beauty will go with it, and then you will suddenly discover that there are no triumphs left for you, or have to content yourself with those mean triumphs that the memory of your past will make more bitter than defeats. Every month as it wanes⁶ brings you nearer to something dreadful. Time is jealous of you, and wars against your lilies and your roses. You will become sallow, and hollow-cheeked, and dull-eyed⁷. You will suffer horribly... Ah! realize your youth while you have it. Don't squander⁸ the gold of your days, listening to the tedious, trying to improve the hopeless failure, or giving away your life to the ignorant, the common, and the vulgar. These are the sickly aims⁹, the false ideals, of our age. Live! Live the wonderful life that is in you! Let nothing be lost upon you. Be always searching for new sensations. Be afraid of nothing... A new Hedonism – that is what our century wants. You might be its visible symbol. With your personality there is nothing you could not do. The world belongs to you for a season... The moment I met you I saw that you were quite unconscious of what you really are, of what you really might be. There was so much in you that charmed¹⁰ me that I felt I must tell you something about yourself. I thought how tragic it would be if you were wasted¹¹. For there is such a little time that your youth will last – such a little time. The common hill-flowers wither¹², but they blossom¹³ again. The laburnum¹⁴ will be as yellow next June as it is now. In a month there will be purple stars on the clematis¹⁵, and year after year the green night of its leaves will hold its purple stars. But we never get back our youth. The pulse of joy that beats in us at twenty becomes sluggish¹⁶. Our limbs fail¹⁷, our senses rot¹⁸. We degenerate into hideous puppets¹⁹, haunted²⁰ by the memory of the passions of which we were too much afraid, and the exquisite temptations that we had not the courage to yield²¹ to. Youth! Youth! There is absolutely nothing in the world but youth!'

Dorian Gray listened, open-eyed and wondering. [...]

Dorian made no answer, but passed listlessly²² in front of his picture and turned towards it. When he saw it he drew back, and his cheeks flushed for a moment with pleasure. A look of joy came into his eyes, as if he had recognized himself for the first time. He stood there motionless and in wonder, dimly²³ conscious that Hallward was speaking to him, but not catching the meaning of his words. The sense of his own beauty came on him like a revelation. He had never felt it before. Basil Hallward's compliments had seemed to him to be merely the charming exaggeration of friendship. He had listened to them, laughed at them, forgotten them. They had not influenced

- 1 wrinkled. Rugoso.
- 2 has seared. Avrà solcato
- 3 branded. Marchiato.
- 4 Don't frown. Non aggrottate le sopracciglia.
- 5 shallow. Superficiali.
- 6 it wanes. Svanisce, passa.
- 7 sallow ... dull-eyed. Terreo, con le guance incavate e gli occhi smorti.
- 8 squander. Sprecare.
- 9 the sickly aims. Le aspirazioni morbose.
- 10 charmed. Ha affascinato.
- 11 you were wasted. Tu fossi sprecato.
- 12 hill-flowers wither. Fiori di campo appassiscono.
- 13 they blossom. Fioriscono.
- 14 laburnum. Citiso (piccolo arbusto con fiori gialli).
- 15 clematis. Clematide (pianta rampicante).
- 16 becomes sluggish. Si intorpidisce.
- 17 Our limbs fail. Le nostre membra diventano fiacche.
- 18 our senses rot. I nostri sensi si deteriorano.
- 19 hideous puppets. Orrendi fantocci.
- 20 haunted. Perseguitati.
- 21 yield. Cedere.
- 22 listlessly. Distrattamente.
- 23 dimly. Vagamente.



his nature. Then had come Lord Henry Wotton with his strange panegyric on youth²⁴, his terrible warning of its brevity. That had stirred²⁵ him at the time, and now, as he stood gazing at the shadow of his own loveliness, the full reality of the description flashed across him²⁶. Yes, there would be a day when his face would be wrinkled and wizen²⁷, his eyes dim and colourless, the grace of his figure broken and deformed. The scarlet would pass away from his lips and the gold steal from his hair²⁸. The life that was to make his soul would mar²⁹ his body. He would become **dreadful**, hideous, and uncouth³⁰.

As he thought of it, a sharp **pang** of pain struck through him like a knife and made each delicate fibre of his nature quiver³¹. His eyes deepened into amethyst, and across them came a mist of tears. He felt as if a hand of ice had been laid upon his heart.

'Don't you like it?' cried Hallward at last, stung³² a little by the lad³³'s silence, not understanding what it meant.

'Of course he likes it,' said Lord Henry. 'Who wouldn't like it? It is one of the greatest things in modern art. I will give you anything you like to ask for it. I must have it.'

'It is not my property, Harry.'

'Whose property is it?'

65 'Dorian's, of course,' answered the painter.

'He is a very lucky fellow.'

'How sad it is!' murmured Dorian Gray with his eyes still fixed upon his own portrait. 'How sad it is! I shall grow old, and horrible, and dreadful. But this picture will remain always young. It will never be older than this particular day of June... If it were only the other way! If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old! For that – for that – I would give everything! Yes, there is nothing in the whole world I would not give! I would give my soul for that!'

- 24 **panegyric on youth.** Panegirico (esaltazione) della giovinezza.
 25 **had stirred.** Aveva turbato.
 26 **the full ... him.** La piena realtà di quella descrizione balenò dinanzi a lui.
 27 **wizen.** Raggrinzito.
 28 **the gold ... hair.** L'oro sarebbe stato rubato dai suoi capelli.
 29 **would mar.** Avrebbe sfigurato.
 30 **uncouth.** Rozzo.
 31 **quiver.** Tremare.
 32 **stung.** Ferito.
 33 **lad.** Ragazzo.

LITERARY COMPETENCE

1 READ the text and match the highlighted words with their meaning.

- | | |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1 vibrates | 5 spasm |
| 2 moved backwards | 6 blushed |
| 3 appalling, fearful | 7 horrible, frightful |
| 4 enchant | 8 of special beauty |

COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT

2 READ the text from line 1 to 39 again and answer the following questions.

- What does Lord Henry tell Dorian about beauty?
- What is youth according to Lord Henry?
- What does he implore Dorian to do?
- What advice does he give Dorian?
- What does their age require?
- What could Dorian be the symbol of?

3 READ the rest of the passage again and say

- what Dorian realises looking at his portrait;
- what feelings the picture has created in his soul;
- what will happen to the portrait and to Dorian himself in the future;
- what Dorian wishes.



➤ **COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT**

4 IDENTIFY what kind of narrator tells this story, and if he openly intervenes in the narration. Whose point of view is adopted throughout?

5 FOCUS on the characters presented in this passage, Lord Henry, Basil Hallward, and Dorian Gray.

- 1 What social class do they belong to?
- 2 What kind of man is Lord Henry? He speaks through paradox, that is, a statement which seems at first untrue and contradictory, but which reveals a deeper truth; find some examples in the first part of the text.
- 3 Say how Lord Henry exerts his influence on Dorian Gray.
- 4 Lord Henry's speech contains words and phrases conveying the ideas of youth, beauty and old age. Underline them in the text and collect your data in a table.

Youth	Beauty	Old age

- 5 What image of youth, beauty and old age are depicted by Lord Henry?

6 IDENTIFY the theme of the text.

➤ **COMPETENCE: ESTABLISHING LINKS WITH THE CONTEXT OF THE AGE**

7 DISCUSS. Recognise the Victorian values emerging from this extract and Wilde's attitude to them.

➤ **COMPETENCE: LINKING LITERATURE TO PERSONAL EXPERIENCE**

8 DISCUSS with the rest of the class if we also value beauty and youth above talent, achievement or experience.

9 READ this statement uttered by Dorian Gray and discuss it with the rest of the class: 'For that – for that – I would give everything!'. Is there something for which you would give everything?