Oscar Wilde (1854 – 1900)

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

Later he went to live in London and began to live as an eccentric dandy. He was well-known in high society for his originality, his talks and his “aphorisms” (“I can resist anything, except temptations”).

He went on a lecture tour in America in 1882, and then he lived for some time in Paris.

He published poems, essays, short stories and one novel: The Picture of Dorian Gray.

However, he became famous especially for his witty comedies, in which he satirized against the mannerism of the Victorian upper classes.
• In 1895 his popularity declined because he was accused of having a homosexual affair with the young poet Lord Alfred Douglas. He was arrested and sentenced to two years’ hard labour. While he was in prison he wrote the poem *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* and the long letter *De Profundis*.

• He spent his last few years in Paris, in poverty and under an assumed name.

• He is the main representative of the **Aesthetic movement** in England. The Aesthetic movement was born in France with Teophile Gautier, who advocated the principle of “art for art’s sake”, according to which art shouldn’t have any moral purpose, but was an end in itself and aimed at the contemplation of beauty.

• The main theorist of the **English Aesthetic movement**, Walter Pater, believed that man’s primary aim is the experience of pleasure (“my life is like a work of art”).
• This was a subversive message, in contrast to the strict moral code of the Victorian middle-classes.

• Differently from the previous generation, the Aesthetes didn’t criticize contemporary society, but simply avoided it, by closing themselves in an ideal world of beauty and art. They didn’t want to mix with the masses and despised the ugliness of contemporary industrial society.

• They believed that art shouldn’t have any didactic or moral aim.

• **Decadent Art in Europe**: see handout (Huysmans’ *A Rebours*, Wilde, D’Annunzio).
The Picture of Dorian Gray (1891)

• For the plot see pages 267 – 268.

• **Main themes:**
  
  • 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.

    This is also a criticism to the bad consciousness of the Victorian middle-class, while Dorian represents their hypocrisy the Victorian compromise), with its pure, innocent appearance.
• It’s a 19° cent. version of the myth of Faust, a man who sells his soul to the devil so that all his desires might 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 his picture, he is punished for all his sins), but art survives people, it’s 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).
What kind of narrator is used? What point of view does he adopt? What’s the effect of this?

What is the “double” revelation that strikes Dorian? (First of his beauty, then that he will lose his beauty with age).

What qualities is Dorian afraid to lose when he becomes old (see lines 26-30)?

Which metaphors or similes does the narrator use to describe Dorian’s fear of becoming old? (See lines 31-34).

What does Dorian wish at the end of the passage?

Who are the other characters present in this passage? What’s their role in Dorian Gray’s life? (The painter Basil Hallward, and Lord Henry).