THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY

THE PLOT

• Dorian Gray is a upper middle class young man of extraordinary beauty. He fascinates a painter, named Basil Hallward, who decides to portray him.

• While Dorian is sitting for his portrait, he receives the visit of a refined and cynical man, called Lord Henry Wotton. This man speaks to Dorian about his philosophy of life, which he called new Hedonism.

• The picture the painter makes is so beautiful that Dorian expresses the wish to be young forever while the picture should age. Dorian says he is ready to give everything, including his soul for this change of things.

• His wish is satisfied, time passes but Dorian remains beautiful and unspotted from his experiences in the world while the picture takes on the marks of Dorian’s degradation and vices.

• At a certain point Dorian is not able to stand the changes on the face in the picture, “the hideous face … grinning at him”.

• The image of his soul becomes so repulsive that Dorian, in a moment of repentance and disgust of himself, tries to destroy it, but in destroying it he destroy himself and so the picture will return to its original beauty while Dorian will die with a “withered, wrinkled and loathsome” face.

THE MYTH OF FAUST

Do an allegorical and it can be interpreted as a 19th century version of the myth of FAUST, the story of a man who sells his soul to devil so that all his desired can be satisfied.

The picture represents Dorian’s soul, which records the signs of experience, the corruption, the horror and the sins concealed under the mask of Dorian timeless beauty.

THE DOUBLE

The theme of the double is largely present in this story.

The picture is not an autonomous self: it stands for the dark side of Dorian’s personality, his double he tries to forget locking it in the attic.

The final stabbing of the picture can signify the triumph of art over life (it is not possible to live a life as a work of art): it is the picture that survives in the glory of beauty.

But it can also means that it is impossible to lead a life pursuing sensual and beautiful sensations without taking any moral responsibility.

Finally the horrible corrupting picture can be seen as a symbol of the immorality and bad conscience of the Victorian middle class, while Dorian and his pure, innocent appearance are symbols of bourgeois hypocrisy.

THE WILDEAN DANDY

Wilde totally adopted “the aesthetic ideal” as he affirmed that his life was a work of art.

He lived in the double role of the dandy and the rebel.

The Wildean dandy is an eccentric aristocrat whose elegance and refined manners is a symbol of the superiority of his spirit with respect to the vulgar and common morality of the bourgeois Victorian society.
The Wildean dandy used his wit to shock the vulgar materialistic middle class who devoted themselves to material progress.
The dandy, on the contrary, is not part of masses but he is an individualist who demands absolute freedom of leading a life of sensations because the more sensations the dandy could absorb, the more perfect his personality would be.
So life is identified with pleasure (the philosophy of a new Hedonism) and pleasure was an indulge in the beautiful.

WILDE'S AESTHETICISM

Wilde epitomised the ideals of the Aesthetic Movement of the last decades of the century: he challenged the conventions of his time by cultivating an extravagant style of living.
The search for Beauty in life was a constant in the Aesthetic movement that refused the didactic function of art, advocating the principle of “Art for art’s sake”
The contrast between art-life should be solved by making life as a work of art and by exalting the external form which can guarantee beauty. As Lord Henry states “only shallow people do not judge by appearances ...the true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible”.
Wilde's aestheticism was an attempt to cut free from the moral restraints and prejudices of Victorian society opposing “a new Hedonism”
Wilde refuses to subordinate ART to moral, didactic and religious ends, maintaining that ART has no other end but ITSELF: “Art’s for art’s sake”

PATER'S INFLUENCE

Walter Pater is regarded as the high priest of the Aesthetic Movement, the Movement of the last decades of the century, born in France with Théophile Gautier.
The conclusions of his Studies in the History of the Renaissance is that the secret of happiness is in the absorption of beauty and life should be treated “in the spirit of art”. It is Life that should copy art and not he opposite, as nature’s imperfect design is far inferior if compared to the perfection of Art.
The basic principles of his philosophy are his relativism and his individualism: the personal experience is the only criterion of judgement. Theories are useless, only impressions are real. But impressions are fleeting, personal, elusive. The true end of life is not the fruit of experience but experience itself, that is the capacity of experiencing the greatest number of impressions. The finest sensations are to be found in art which, on the other hand, must no have any moral or didactic aim.

He portrays the solitary aesthete who keeps separated from the vulgarity of the outside society.
The reasons why the aesthetic trend spread so largely are not difficult to detect:
the craving for excess;
the fondness of irresponsibility;
the interest in exoticism, represented the reaction to the repression of the instincts imposed by the Victorian mentality. The principle that art has no moral implication was the revolt against the heavy moral standards which were only exterior observances.
The individual rebelled against the tyranny of the overpowering public opinion and demanded to assert himself unrestrainedly, indulging in any caprice of imagination.
OW was not the kind of man who would keep himself isolated from the vulgar society because he was eager for publicity, he looked at the world as a stage on which he intended to play a leading role: his eccentric behaviour, his refined and sophisticated manners, his brilliant and paradoxical conversation made him famous.
DORIAN GRAY

At the opening of the novel, Dorian Gray exists as something of an ideal: he is the archetype of male youth and beauty. At the beginning of the novel he captures the imagination of Basil Hallward, a painter, and Lord Henry Wotton, a nobleman who transforms the impressionable Dorian into a pleasure-seeker.

Dorian is exceptionally vain and becomes convinced, in the course of a brief conversation with Lord Henry, that his most salient characteristics—his youth and physical attractiveness—are fleeting. The thought of waking one day without these attributes makes Dorian make the wish to be as youthful and lovely as the his portrait Basil has painted of him, and he wishes that the portrait could age in his stead.

So Dorian adopts the tenets of “the new Hedonism” and resolves to live his life as a pleasure-seeker with no regard for conventional morality.

As Dorian’s sins grow worse over the years, his portrait grows more hideous. Dorian seems to lack a conscience, but the desire to repent that he eventually feels illustrates that he is indeed human.

Despite the beautiful things with which he surrounds himself, he is unable to distract himself from the dissipation of his soul.

His murder of Basil marks the beginning of his end as he cannot shake the thought that he has killed his friend.

Dorian’s guilt tortures him relentlessly until he is forced to do away with his portrait.

In the end, Dorian fails to live by his own moral code.

THE PURPOSE

of

ART

The purpose of art is to have no purpose.

In order to understand this claim fully, one needs to consider the moral climate of Wilde’s time and the Victorian sensibility regarding art and morality.

The Victorians believed that art could be used as a tool for social education and moral enlightenment, as illustrated in works by writers such as Charles Dickens. The aestheticism movement, of which Wilde was a major proponent, sought to free art from this responsibility. The aestheticists were motivated by a contempt for bourgeois morality—a sensibility embodied in Dorian Gray by Lord Henry, whose every word seems designed to shock the ethical certainties of the middle class—and by the belief that art need not possess any other purpose than being beautiful.

QUESTIONS

1. Illustrate the analogies between The strange case of Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde and The Picture of Dorian Gray in relation to the theme of the double and the myth of FAUST.
2. Can you define the Wildean dandy making references to the philosophy of the new Hedonism and Aesthetic creed?
3. Illustrate the theme of the double and the myth of Faust as represented in The Picture of Dorian Gray.
4. What is the connection between Wilde and Aesthetics? Give reasons.
5. “There was a cry... The cry was so horrible in its agony...a splendid portrait of their master...a dead man...with a knife in his heart. He was withered, wrinkled and loathsome of visage”. Explain why these words taken from the end of the book The picture of Dorian Gray convey the final meaning of the novel.
6. Bertha Mason in JANE EYRE, Mr. Hyde in THE STRANGE CASE OF DR. JEKYLL & MR. HYDE and the picture in THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY can be considered mirrors of the protagonists’ subconscious feelings. Illustrate the theme of the double making references to the three different novels.