The personal journey of Oscar Wilde

Oscar Wilde is **famous as** a writer, an aesthete, a dandy

Typical commonplaces about him...

...he is considered eccentric, "strange", antinomian

and he is associated with

Aestheticism, pleasure, excess



IS THAT ALL?



In the novel

The Picture of Dorian Gray (1891)

Wilde creates the character of **Dorian**, a young man of extraordinary personal beauty

who immediately fascinates **Lord Henry** Wotton, an aesthete, who thinks that

there was something in his face that made one trust him at once.

All the candour of youth was there, as well as

all youth's passionate purity.

One felt that he had kept himself unspotted from the world.

You have the most marvellous youth, and youth is the one thing worth having.

Dorian feels a sudden attraction to Lord Henry's words

I believe that if one man were **to live out his life fully and completely**, were to give form to every feeling, expression to every thought, reality to every dream--I believe that the world would gain such a fresh impulse of joy that we would forget all the maladies of medievalism, and return to the Hellenic ideal.

The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it.

and something begins to change within him

For nearly ten minutes he stood there, motionless, with parted lips and eyes **strangely** bright.

He was dimly conscious that entirely **fresh influences were at work within** him.

Life **suddenly** became fiery-coloured to him. It seemed to him that he had been walking in fire.

.... 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 I would give everything!

The first change in Dorian's life is in his relationship with Sibyl Vane, the actress he loves.

He considers her as sacred:

When I am with her, I regret all that you have taught me. I become different from what you have known me to be. I am changed, and the mere touch of Sibyl Vane's hand makes me forget you and all your wrong, fascinating, poisonous, delightful theories.

But Lord Henry's conception of marriage will slowly transform the young man's heart and eventually he leaves her.

WHAT DID LORD



What is Lord Henry's conception of life?

Lord Henry is an egotist and considers the need for relationships as a weakness.

Life is a continuous search for new passions and **people** are only a temporary **source of pleasure**, which one should exploit for a while, till a new possibility arises.

Did Lord Henry's individualism make Dorian's life better?

Dorian's new life embodies a new Hedonism

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He isolates himself from his dearest relationships, experiences a variety of pleasures and even kills.

A conversation with the painter Basil makes him realize he **regrets** his past innocence. He feels he wants to re-conquer his own life.

I am not the same, he tells Lord Henry, and when the Aesthete replies You have never played so well as to-night. There was something in your touch that was wonderful. It had more expression than I had ever heard from it before,

Dorian explains: It is because I am going to be good, I am a little changed already.

At the end of the novel, Dorian stabs the picture, which was like **conscience** to him.

WHAT DOES WILDE TELL US THROUGH DORIAN'S EXPERIENCE?

- Oscar Wilde was a very eccentric, intelligent man, who became a follower of Walter Pater in Oxford.
- He was deeply attracted to his theory of "Art for Art's sake" and to the Aesthetic Movement.
- He wanted his life to be "a work of art".
- He lived as a dandy, whose refinement and sophistication were meant to be symbols of intellectual superiority.
- In 1883 he married **Constance Lloyd** and had **two children**.

 The Happy Prince and other Tales, A House of Pomegranates were written for them.
- He is also known all over the world for his wit and irony, seen in his plays.
- He was famous for being a brilliant talker.

In 1895 a crucial event took place in Wilde's life: he was arrested and sent to **prison** for homosexual offences. This sad dramatic moment was pivotal in his life, as Wilde himself declared in *De Profundis*:

The two great **turning-points** in my life were when my father sent me to Oxford, and when society sent me to prison.

WHY WAS PRISON SO IMPORTANT TO HIM?

Through the experience of sorrow, Wilde made an important discovery...

Sorrow is the most sensitive of all created things. Where there is sorrow there is holy ground.

He who can look at the loveliness of the world and share its sorrow, and realise something of the wonder of both, is in immediate contact with divine things, and has got as near to God's secret as any one can get.

In his letter he tells about a man who bowed at him the day he was moved to the Reading Gaol

When I was brought down from my prison to the Court of Bankruptcy, between two policemen, - waited in the long dreary corridor that, before the whole crowd, whom an action so sweet and simple hushed into silence, he might gravely raise his hat to me, as, handcuffed and with bowed head, I passed him by.

...Men have gone to heaven for smaller things than that...

I have never said one single word to him about what he did. I do not know to the present moment whether he is aware that I was even conscious of his action. ... I store it in the treasurehouse of my heart. I keep it there as a secret debt that I am glad to think I can never possibly repay. ... When wisdom has been profitless to me, philosophy barren, and the proverbs and phrases of those who have sought to give me consolation as dust and ashes in my mouth, the memory of that little, lovely, silent act of love has unsealed for me all the wells of pity: made the desert blossom like a rose, and brought me out of the bitterness of lonely exile into harmony with the wounded, broken, and great heart of the world.

...a new life, VITA NUOVA for me...

WHAT CHANGED IN WILDE'S LIFE?

INDIVIDUALISM

Now I have realised that it is in me, I see quite clearly what I ought to do; in fact, must do. And when I use such a phrase as that, I need not say that I am not alluding to any external sanction or command. I admit none. I am far more of an individualist than I ever was. Nothing seems to me of the smallest value except what one gets out of oneself.

There is only one thing for me now, absolute humility.

In prison Wilde discovers the opposite of the egotism he exalted as a dandy.

While in prison he says:

Had I not a friend left in the world; were there not a single house open to me in pity: as long as I am **free from all resentment**,

hardness and scorn, I would be able to face the life with much more calm and confidence than I would were my body in purple and fine linen,

and the soul within me sick with hate.

My nature is seeking a fresh mode of self-realisation. And the first thing that I have got to do is to free myself from any possible bitterness of feeling against the world.

And, though I was a soul in pain, My pain I could not feel.

The simple action of the man who bowed to him, as if he wanted to share his sorrow, and even more, as if he were in front of something sacred.

This revealed to Wilde that not only are individuals deeply united to each other, but also that there is something we may adore in each of them:

Christ, through some divine instinct in him, seems to have always loved the sinner as being the nearest possible approach to the **perfection of man**. He regarded **sin and suffering** as being in themselves beautiful **holy things** and modes of perfection.

This new awareness changes Wilde and leads him to feel the pain of the whole world.

When Wilde wrote this poem, he was in trouble, but he felt one with all the men around him.

from The Ballad of the Reading Gaol

I never saw a man who looked
With such a wistful eye
Upon that little tent of blue
Which prisoners call the sky,
And at every drifting cloud that
went

With sails of silver by.

I walked, with other souls in pain, Within another ring,

And was wondering if the man had done

A great or little thing,
When a voice behind me whispered low,

'That fellow's got to swing'

Dear Christ! the very prison walls

Suddenly seemed to reel,

And the sky above my head became

Like a casque of scorching steel;

And, though I was a soul in pain,

My pain I could not feel.

This too I know - and wise it were
If each could know the same That every prison that men build
Is built with bricks of shame,
And bound with bars lest Christ
should see

How men their brothers maim.

WHAT DID THE EXPERIENCE OF PRISON INTRODUCE INTO HIS LIFE?



What a wonderful beginning!

In *De Profundis* Wilde says he does not regret spending longer in prison than expected, because it was a chance for him to understand more about himself and his **deep bond with the rest of the world.**

I have been placed in direct contact with a **new spirit** working in this prison through man and things, that **has helped me** beyond any possibility of expression in words: so that while for the first year of my imprisonment I did nothing else... but wring my hands in impotent despair, and say, 'What an ending, what an appalling ending!' now I try to say to myself, and sometimesdo really and sincerely say, 'What a beginning, what a wonderful beginning!'

Had I been released last May...I would have left this place loathing it and every official in it with a bitterness of hatred that would have poisoned my life. I have had a year longer of imprisonment, but humanity has been in the prison along with us all, and now ...I shall always remember great kindnesses that I have received here from almost everybody, and on the day of my release I shall give many thanks to many people, and ask to be remembered by them in turn.

WHY IS WILDE A "DEEPER" MAN?

- In prison he understands that nothing in the whole world is meaningless and that everything is united:
- Christ did not say to men, 'Live for others,' he pointed out that there was **no difference** at all between the lives of others and one's own
- life. Since his coming, the history of each separate individual is, or can be made. the history of the world.
- While to propose to be a better man is a piece of unscientific cant, to have become a **deeper man** is the privilege of those who have suffered. And such I think I have become.

People whose desire is solely for self-realisation never know where they are going

Wilde had stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of his age; famous for his extravagance and eccentricity.

All the sorrow he experiences in prison makes him realise that the truth of his search for pleasure and beauty is a long and mysterious path:

In one sense of the word it is of course necessary to know oneself: that is the first achievement of knowledge. But to recognise that the soul of a man is unknowable, is the ultimate achievement of wisdom. The final mystery is oneself. When one has weighed the sun in the balance, and measured the steps of the moon, and mapped out the seven heavens star by star, there still remains oneself.

Who can calculate the orbit of his own soul?

WHO IS OSCAR WILDE?

An intelligent writer and a brilliant talker.

a dandy and an aesthete;

He loved and suffered.

The end of De Profundis:

I am conscious now that behind all this beauty, satisfying though it may be, there is some spirit hidden of which the painted forms and shapes are but modes of manifestation,

and it is with this spirit that I desire to become in harmony.

I have grown tired of the articulate utterances of men and things.

The Mystical in Art, the Mystical in Life, the Mystical in Nature this is what I am looking for.

It is absolutely necessary for me to find it somewhere.

NOTES:

- The Picture of Dorian Gray.
- -SLIDE 10: Walter Pater's *Studies on the History of the Renaissance* was Wilde's favourite book for a long time.
- SLIDE 11: This man may be Wilde's young Catholic friend Robbie Ross.
- SLIDE 11: *De Profundis* is a long letter Wilde wrote while in prison, which was published posthumously in 1905. It is a reflection on his life.
- SLIDE 15: The Ballad of the Reading Gaol, a long poem written in 1898.
- http://www.catholiceducation.org/articles/arts/al0010.html