

## **THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY REVIEW**

The Picture of Dorian Gray is a film based on a novel by Oscar Wilde that tells about a man who sells his soul for eternal youth. After having his portrait done, Dorian Gray wishes for the picture to age instead of him so that he may be blessed with eternal youth. He was influenced by Lord Henry Wotton that was another aesthete character so his whole life was based on the pleasure.

After the death of his wife-to-be, Sybil Vain, Dorian Gray embarks on a life of pleasure and sins, which does not affect the man in the slightest, but leaves its mark on the portrait which descends into a horrid impression of the handsome young man it is portraying.

We can say that we were impressed by the fight between good and evil, evil and pleasure.

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**The Picture of Dorian Gray (1945)**

**THE SCREEN; 'The Picture of Dorian Gray,' Film Version of Wilde Novel, With Hatfield and Sanders, Opens at Capitol Theatre**

Aside from the fact completely that Oscar Wilde would probably have split his portly sides laughing at the mawkish pomposity of the film which has been made from his elegant little novel, "The Picture of Dorian Gray," there is good and sufficient reason for a modern to do the same thing. As a matter of fact, one might venture to slip it a ribald razz. For the elaborately mystical treatment which Metro has given the tale is matched in egregious absurdity by the visual affectations of the film. And the whole thing, now showing at the Capitol, makes little or no intelligible sense.

Granted that Mr. Wilde's story about the beautiful English lad who retained his youthful appearance while his portrait took on the signs of age was a thin piece of philosophic writing. Granted that Mr. Wilde's trick of having the portrait reveal the corruption of the sensualist's unregenerate soul was a literate bit of symbolism without too much profundity. Still those are not adequate reasons to excuse the artificial thinness of the film and the utterly artless distortion of some of the novel's more meaningful scenes.

As adapter and director of the picture, Albert Lewin was attempting, we presume, to suggest a diabolic enchantment by pacing it slowly and using light and shade, not to mention monotonous voice and music, to work a hypnotic spell. If so, his crafty endeavors were wasted on this reviewer, at least. We found his extravagant settings and postured actors pretentious in the extreme, and the weary words and reedy music just downright soporific. And his use of a nasty, colored grotesque as the portrait of Dorian Gray in the final stage of his corruption seemed a cheap and raw piece of staginess.

George Sanders in the role of Lord Henry, the cynic who corrupted Dorian's mind, gives the only commendable performance. He is brittle and dandified, at least, and drops the smooth and catty little bon-mots of Mr. Wilde with amusing aplomb. But Hurd Hatfield, yielding plainly to direction, is incredibly stiff as Dorian Gray, and walks through the film with a vapid and masklike expression on his face. (Apparently somebody figured that was the only way to show it doesn't change.) No, to use Mr. Wilde's purple phrasing, his chiseled lips don't even curl in exquisite disdain.

Angela Lansbury wears a quaint little costume as a music-hall-singing Sibyl Vane and wears an even more ridiculous pose of purity which provokes Dorian's bestiality. Donna Reed is presented in the flat role of Basil Hallward's invented niece, and Lowell Gilmore plays that very pompous artist with an excess of pomposity. Throughout, an unidentified narrator gives a play-by-play description of what transpires. It sounds like Sir Cedric Hardwicke sitting sternly in an invisible cloud.



**Dorian Gray (2009)**

**Director: Oliver Parker**

**Cast: Ben Barnes, Colin Firth, Caroline Goodall, Rebecca Hall, and Ben Chaplin**

**Runtime: 112 min.**

The most disturbing aspect about Oscar Wilde's singular work of 19th century horror literature, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, is that its best rendition into cinema is, by default, Oliver Parker's 2009 adaptation. Aside from an electronic score that emerges here and there, *Dorian Gray* is a gothic Victorian tale, a full costume period piece that thankfully wasn't reconfigured into a contemporary setting. For this we must be thankful. But despite its dedication to the era, Parker's film over-emphasizes the story, from the title character's behavior behind bedroom doors to the gory effects used to create his decaying portrait.

In 1945, director Albert Lewin created a dark vision that starred Hurd Hatfield and boasted Oscar-nominated makeup, though the outcome plays rather flatly today. Malcolm McDowell appeared in *Dorian*, a regrettable modernization from 2001. And Stuart Townsend made the role villainous in 2003's absurd literary mashup *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*. With the exception of Lewin's film for the quality of its production, these are all forgettable adaptations. And Parker's film might be forgettable too, if it weren't for one or two strong performances and some sleek looking photography by Terry Gilliam's frequent cinematographer Roger Pratt (*Brazil*, *12 Monkeys*).



Orphaned as a child and adopted by a wealthy man who beat him, Dorian Gray (Ben Barnes) arrives among London's elite to receive his vast inheritance. The first order of business is a portrait by enamored artist Basil Hallward (Ben Chaplin), who completes a prized work believed to have perfectly captured the much-discussed beauty of the young Dorian. Quickly the naïve innocent is corrupted by Lord Henry Wotton (Colin Firth), whose motto "There's no shame in pleasure" becomes Dorian's too, after Wotton convinces him that youth is everything. While admiring his portrait, Dorian whispers to himself that he would give his soul for eternal youth, and the devilish

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Versed in Wilde's work, Parker has given us likeable versions of *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (though Anthony Asquith's version could never be outdone). But another filmmaker might have chosen a better solution than to make Dorian's long life no more than a series of sexual encounters. In his search for pleasure and new experiences, Dorian passes from conquest to conquest in graphic R-rated detail, engaging countless women (and the occasional man, which seems an underexplored theme in the film, given the homoerotic symbolism of Wilde's book). However, Wilde only alluded to Dorian's activities, writing "What Dorian Gray's sins are no one knows." Parker removes that mystery by answering the question with lots of sex and drugs, which in turn removes Barnes from the responsibility of having to portray inner demons, resulting in his one-dimensional performance.

Meanwhile, Dorian's eternal soul grows more debauched and rotten as the film progresses, as shown with a maggoty painting enhanced (a term used sardonically) by computer effects and groaning sounds. As Wilde's novella was in many ways a condemnation of the conceit of decorative portraiture displayed in one's own home, Parker's distracting use of CGI to transform the portrait into a reactive, pulsating organism feels out of place. The film could have earned some subtlety points had the filmmakers simply used paintings that appear more and more grotesque, and then saved their fancy special effects for the moment when Dorian finally becomes as ugly as his picture.

There are performances to savor, such as the wonderfully devilish Colin Firth playing Dorian's depraved mentor. As time goes on and the character grows older, Firth's Wotton begins to regret his behavior and the actor shows more depth in his performance than Barnes does in the whole film. In a role written for the movie, Rebecca Hall (*Vicky Cristina Barcelona*) appears in the third act as Wotton's daughter, Emily, and with her open-minded allure brings about Dorian's questions of conscience. Hall has yet to break out and become a star, but she's charming and talented enough that with any luck it won't be long. Chaplin is also very good as the enamored painter.

Taking liberties with Wilde's source, Parker's adaptation accentuates far too much, insisting on special effects and even some contrived suspense in place of the author's dark drama. But horror movies today rarely offer a supernatural scenario without tossing in some blood splattering, plenty of breasts, and lousy CGI. *Dorian Gray* is certainly no exception. Though, audiences seeking Wilde's grim tale in movie form have little other choice, as another adaptation isn't bound to emerge for some time now. This might be one of the rare occasions where moviegoers have to break down and—gulp—read the book.

