

WILDE AND JOYCE

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw the rise of several important Irish writers.

Oscar Wilde and **James Joyce**, both born in Dublin, were fascinated by the aesthetic elements of language and the beauty of the written word as a form or art.

1 Read the short biography of Oscar Wilde and note down the significance of the following terms.

Aestheticism • Decadence • Morality • Satire

Oscar Wilde (1854-1900)

Oscar Wilde was born in Dublin where he studied at Trinity College, and then he went to Magdalen College, Oxford. He was a believer in aestheticism, that is art should exist for its own beauty and not for any moral or political purpose. When his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was published in 1890, it was considered to be immoral by Victorian society because of its depiction of decadence and the pursuit of pleasure at whatever cost. Wilde is also famous for his witty and satirical plays, particularly *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), and *An Ideal Husband* (1895), which have relatively simple plots but show his incredible ability at dialogue. Wilde was sentenced to two years in prison for homosexuality, illegal in Victorian Britain. After he was released in 1897, he went to live in France where he died three years later, converting to Catholicism on his deathbed.

The Picture of Dorian Gray

is about the life of a cultured, wealthy and beautiful young man who, after an artist friend paints his portrait, wishes that his likeness in the portrait could grow old in his place, leaving Dorian's own beauty and youth intact. Dorian continues his self-indulgent, hedonistic lifestyle but is forced to hide the portrait because, as time passes, he cannot bear what it represents about himself.

2 Read this extract from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and answer the questions below.

This extract is from Chapter Seven when Dorian notices for the first time that something about the painting has changed. Earlier that evening he had cruelly rejected Sybil, a young actress with whom he had said to be in love, telling her that he never wanted to see her again.

As he was turning the handle of the door, his eye fell upon the portrait Basil Hallward had painted of him. He started back as if in surprise. Then he went on into his own room, looking somewhat puzzled. After he had taken the button-hole out of his coat, he seemed to hesitate. Finally, he came back, went over to the picture, and examined it. In the dim arrested light that struggled through the cream-coloured silk blinds, the face appeared to him to be a little changed. The expression looked different. One would have said that there was a touch of cruelty in the mouth. It was certainly strange. He turned round and, walking to the window, drew up the blind. The bright dawn flooded the room and swept the fantastic shadows into dusky corners, where they lay shuddering. But the strange expression that he had noticed in the face of the portrait seemed to linger there, to be more intensified even. The quivering ardent sunlight showed him the lines of cruelty round the mouth as clearly as if he had been looking into a mirror after he had done some dreadful thing. He winced and, taking up from the table an oval glass framed in ivory Cupids, one of Lord Henry's many presents to him, glanced hurriedly into its polished depths. No line like that warped his red lips. What did it mean?

He rubbed his eyes, and came close to the picture, and examined it again. There were no signs of any change when he looked into the actual painting, and yet there was no doubt that the whole expression had altered. It was not a mere fancy of his own. The thing was horribly apparent.

He threw himself into a chair and began to think. Suddenly there flashed across his mind what he had said in Basil Hallward's studio the day the picture had been finished. Yes, he remembered it perfectly. He had uttered a mad wish that he himself might remain young, and the portrait grow old; that his own beauty might be untarnished, and the face on the canvas bear the burden of his passions and his sins; that the painted image might be seared with the lines of suffering and thought, and that he might keep all the delicate bloom and loveliness of his then just conscious boyhood. Surely his wish had not been fulfilled? Such things were impossible. It seemed monstrous even to think of them. And, yet, there was the picture before him, with the touch of cruelty in the mouth.

- 1 How has the portrait changed compared to Dorian?
- 2 Why do you think there are signs of cruelty in the portrait's expression?
- 3 How do you think Dorian feels about the transformation?
- 4 In what ways can the portrait be seen as Dorian's conscience?

3 Discuss these questions in pairs.

- 1 What other works of literature do you know with the theme of making a pact or selling one's soul?
- 2 Do you think in today's society we are obsessed with our outward appearance?
- 3 Are youth and beauty desirable at any cost? What could be the consequences of this?

✦ For Joyce, an **epiphany** is a key symbolic moment, triggered by some banal event, object or gesture, when a character has a deep understanding of himself and his surroundings. **Interior monologue** is a literary device used to portray a character's thoughts and emotions.

James Joyce (1882-1941)

Born in Dublin in 1882 to a Catholic family, Joyce studied philosophy and languages at University College, Dublin. Soon after his graduation, he left Dublin and spent almost all the rest of his life abroad – in Italy, Switzerland and France. His works include *The Dubliners* (1914), *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) and *Ulysses* (1922). Ireland, in particular Dublin and its inhabitants, the political tensions with England, and Catholicism are recurrent themes in much of Joyce's work even if he hardly spent any of his adult life in Dublin and rejected the Catholic religion with which he had been brought up. Joyce is considered among the most influential writers of the twentieth century, with his innovative literary techniques such as **interior monologue**✦, use of **epiphanies**✦ and linguistic experimentation.

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, considered to contain many autobiographical elements, tells the story of a young Irish boy, Stephen Dedalus, from his childhood to his decision as a young adult to leave the restrictions of his home and Ireland for Paris. We follow Stephen's life through moments of confusion, crisis and uncertainty as he undergoes several transformations from child to sinner, from sinner to fervent Catholic and, finally, from Catholic to artist.

4 Read the short biography of Joyce and note down the significance of the following terms for his life and works.

Ireland • Dublin • Catholicism • Epiphany

5 Before reading, answer this question: in Greek mythology, who was Daedalus and what did he make for himself and Icarus?

6 Now read the extract and answer the questions below.

This extract is taken from the end of Chapter 4. Stephen has rejected Catholicism and as he watches some school friends playing in the water and making fun of his name, he understands his future is as an artist.

Their banter was not new to him and now it flattered his mild proud sovereignty. Now, as never before, his strange name seemed to him a prophecy. [...] Now, at the name of the fabulous artificer, he seemed to hear the noise of dim waves and to see a winged form flying above the waves and slowly climbing the air. What did it mean? Was it a quaint device opening a page of some medieval book of prophecies and symbols, a hawk-like man flying sunward above the sea, a prophecy of the end he had been born to serve and had been following through the mists of childhood and boyhood, a symbol of the artist forging anew in his workshop out of the sluggish matter of the earth a new soaring impalpable imperishable being? His heart trembled; his breath came faster and a wild spirit passed over his limbs as though he was soaring sunward. His heart trembled in an ecstasy of fear and his soul was in flight. His soul was soaring in an air beyond the world and the body he knew was purified in a breath and delivered of incertitude and made radiant and commingled with the element of the spirit. An ecstasy of flight made radiant his eyes and wild his breath and tremulous and wild and radiant his windswept limbs... His throat ached with a desire to cry aloud, the cry of a hawk or eagle on high, to cry piercingly of his deliverance to the winds. This was the call of life to his soul not the dull gross voice of the world of duties and despair, not the inhuman voice that had called him to the pale service of the altar. An instant of wild flight had delivered him and the cry of triumph which his lips withheld cleft his brain... His soul had arisen from the grave of boyhood, spurning her grave-clothes. Yes! Yes! Yes! He would create proudly out of the freedom and power of his soul, as the great artificer whose name he bore, a living thing, new and soaring and beautiful, impalpable, imperishable. He started up nervously from the stone-block for he could no longer quench the flame in his blood. He felt his cheeks aflame and his throat throbbing with song. There was a lust of wandering in his feet that burned to set out for the ends of the earth. On! On! His heart seemed to cry.

- 1 What references to birds and flying are there in the extract?
- 2 What do they represent for Stephen?
- 3 How does Joyce convey Stephen's feelings of ecstasy and excitement?

7 Discuss these questions in pairs.

- 1 Stephen realises he needs to leave behind his home and homeland in order to find his true identity. In what ways do you think a person's home and country can help or limit their choices?
- 2 Do you think the transition from child to adult is a series of separate transformations or a smooth evolution?