

## “DORIAN GRAY” (DVD/Blu-ray Review)

Written by Bekah McKendry

Wednesday, 01 September 2010 14:44

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Rarely does a film make me wish I had paid more attention in high school. I read Oscar Wilde’s *THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY* in 10th grade—well, kind of read it. As memory serves, I skimmed it and relied heavily on CliffsNotes for quizzes. However, upon first viewing this latest screen adaptation (on DVD and Blu-ray from E1 Entertainment), I was compelled to get a copy of the book and read it once again, this time paying attention. I then watched *DORIAN GRAY* (yeah, the filmmakers dropped “the picture”) a second time, feeling far more informed. But not only did the film influence me to revisit the source material, it stands up on its own as a fine movie.

*THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY*, which the notorious Wilde wrote in 1890, was often said to be a literary representation of Wilde’s own life—a struggle between beauty and reality, between influence and self-choice, between morals and sins. The book was repeatedly banned, chopped and otherwise censored because of its copious sex, drugs, debauchery and homoerotic overtones (it is Wilde, after all). Though other filmic versions of this book have been undertaken in past, this one is a solid translation with surprisingly few variations from the original story.



*DORIAN GRAY* was directed by Brit Oliver Parker, who is mainly known for other literary adaptations like *THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST*, but also appeared as in small parts in several Clive Barker flicks. Toby Finlay’s screenplay closely follows the book as the titular young protagonist arrives in London and is quickly thrust into a social scene of parties and aristocracy. Dorian (Ben Barnes) meets several older men who seem to live vicariously through him, convincing him that beauty and pleasure are all there is to live for. During this time, he gets his portrait painted, and professes that he would give his soul to stay as youthful as he looks in the picture. Done and done. Dorian begins to live a life of pure pleasure and sin, under the constant encouragement of his older male comrades. But, though he is living fast and hard, he stays young and beautiful while the picture ages for him.

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And in this film, the painting seriously ages—like, decaying with maggots. Realizing that he can do anything he likes and only the picture will suffer the consequences, Dorian embarks on a lifelong bender of orgies, drugs, alcohol, fight clubs and every sexual fetish the filmmakers could fit in. And all the while, the portrait takes the beating. Eventually, however, people find out about it, and Dorian must come to brutal and violent terms with the life he has lived.

The art direction of the film’s late-1800s English settings looks exquisite in the discs’ 1.85:1 transfers. I felt extremely classy watching all the fancy clothes and flowery talk, as though I could now drink tea and use doilies. But genre fans need not feel threatened by all the touches of class; DORIAN GRAY is first and foremost a dark, horrific journey into one man’s soul, and the hoity-toity trappings and language just make his downfall into hell all the more powerful, showing that beauty is fleeting and its upshot can be hideous.

DORIAN GRAY doesn’t completely follow the original text word for word, but still poses the same question Wilde asked: Just how far would a man go if there were no consequences for his actions? I asked myself what lengths I would explore after the movie ended, which is a sure sign of a good and effective film—though the best answer I could come up with was gorging myself on Cadbury Eggs and sliders (which do not make for as good a story as DORIAN). Parker and Finlay definitely take their own path in their treatment of certain plot elements, playing up the sins—after all, why just say Dorian’s going to an orgy when you can show it! With its classical literary background, DORIAN GRAY is a rarity among horror films; don’t expect an all-out gorefest, but it defiantly crosses the line into serious genre territory with its disturbing subject matter and thrills. Plus, the rotting picture is awesome.

The extras on the discs are equally good, led by an audio commentary by Parker and Finlay. It’s quite interesting to hear how they made their choices to follow the book or go in their own direction, and how they handled the historical element. For instance, as decades pass and Dorian continues his debauchery, he tries some newer inventions of the day like heroin (first developed in 1895), a detail that is beautifully woven in. There are some deleted scenes included, but none that really change the story, just embellish it. Also included are several behind-the-scenes featurettes, exploring the creation of the painting and other visual elements among their assorted subjects, a decent making-of documentary with cast and crew interviews and a pretty amusing blooper reel.

MOVIE: 

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