Essay B

The Picture of Dorian Gray

Your task in this paper is to answer the following question: what does the character of Sybil Vane teach us about the nature, status, and/or function of art in The Picture of Dorian Gray? Clearly, there is much that might be said in answer to this question; all you can do in 3 pages is offer a brief illumination of some one aspect of it. Don’t worry that you can’t offer a definitive or exhaustive answer--focus on crafting a viable thesis that attends to some of the details and nuances of Sybil’s character and her role in the novel. You could even do a close reading of a scene in which she appears. Below are some questions to get you thinking; you need not necessarily answer them in your essay.

In Chapter VII (p. 84), Sybil says “I have grown sick of shadows.” What is the significance of this reference to “The Lady of Shallot”? What are the implications of the reference for our understanding of the conception of art and the artist in the novel? Unlike the Lady, of course, Sybil is associated with drama rather than visual art; how are the two different for Wilde?

Does it matter that in this work the painter is a man and the actor is a woman? What does Sybil’s career suggest about the relation of feeling to art? Do Sybil’s virtues as an actor suggest any similarities between visual and dramatic art?

With what social class is Sybil associated? What are the implications of that fact?

Assume that your reader has read the novel, but only cursorily. You might begin the writing process by listing your local observations. Then determine how you can organize them into an argument and what you want your overarching thesis to be. Once you’ve written a draft, be sure to double-check your work for clarity and correctness (see “Paper Pointers” in the “Readings” section of the website).