

# *The Picture of Dorian Gray* – An Aesthetic and Decadent Experiment

Rogério Yamada

December 2021

## 1 Introduction

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, authored by Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) during the Victorian Era (1837-1901), is a work of literature that brings much of Wilde's own life principles taken to overwhelming extremes, principles that challenged the established values of his time. The purpose of this essay is to explore a few aspects of Wilde's only novel in four parts.

The first part provides an introduction to two artistic movements that influenced Wilde and indicates a few passages where their principles are made apparent.

The second part analyses how the roles of three of the main characters of the novel are related to each other and how this relationship affects the story.

In the third part, evidence of the presence of a few Gothic motifs in the novel is provided.

The last part is dedicated to final considerations.

## 2 Aestheticism and Decadence

As once said by Wilde himself, "I am so glad you like that strange coloured book of mine – it contains much of me in it" (Hackett, 2014), his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* expressed much of his own beliefs and lifestyle. Two closely related movements that strongly influenced Wilde established principles that defied many of the Victorian traditional values and that, controversially, many of their supporters adopted as guiding principles for life (Burdett, 2014): Aestheticism and Decadence.

The traditional society of the Victorian Era strongly believed that literature and art were vehicles of ethical values and, therefore, were expected to inspire people with models of appropriate social behaviour. According to Burdett (2014), Aestheticism, whose motto was 'art for the sake of art', flourished in the 1860s/1870s and its supporters argued that art had nothing to do with morality and maintained that its purpose lay on the pure pursuit of beauty. Wilde regarded his own life as his work of art in justification for his flamboyant lifestyle – the famous statement "Life imitates Art far more than Life imitates Art" is attributed to him.

Decadence shares its origins with Aestheticism to some extent. According to Burdett (2014), in relation to art and literature, this movement included features such as "[...] the notion of intense refinement; the valuing of artificiality over nature; a position of *ennui* or boredom rather than of moral

earnestness or the valuing of hard work; an interest in perversity and paradox, and in transgressive modes of sexuality.” Burdett (2014) also explains that a decadent movement fiction, *À Rebours* (1884), by the French writer Joris-Karl Huysmans, is believed to be the notorious ‘yellow book’ that fascinates Dorian Gray in Oscar Wilde’s novel. This has been, nonetheless, denied by Wilde: “The book that poisoned, or made perfect, Dorian Gray, does not exist: it is a fancy of mine merely.” (Hackett, 2014).

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* reflects many of the qualities of these movements sometimes taken to their extremes. In the following passage, Dorian Gray comments about Lord Henry’s teachings:

I remembered what you had said to me on that wonderful evening when we first dined together, about the search for beauty being the real secret of life. (Wilde, 2017, p. 22)

The concept of art subverting life appears in this passage where Lord Henry states that Sibyl Vane’s art was greater than her as a human being and justifies Dorian Gray’s first sin.

She has played her last part. [...] The girl never really lived, and so she has never really died. [...] Mourn for Ophelia, if you like. Put ashes on your head because Cordelia was strangled. Cry out against Heaven because the daughter of Brabantio died. But don’t waste your tears over Sibyl Vane. She was less real than they are. (Wilde, 2017, p. 46)

### 3 The roles of Basil, Lord Henry and Dorian

In his works, including *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde often employed characters that were instances of himself representing different components of an argument (*The Picture of Dorian Gray Study Guide / Course Hero*, n.d.).

This was also admitted by Wilde in a letter he wrote: “I am so glad you like that strange coloured book of mine – it contains much of me in it – Basil Hallward is what I think I am; Lord Henry what the world thinks of me; Dorian what I would like to be – in other ages perhaps.” (Hackett, 2014).

Analysing from this point of view, these three characters maintain a fundamental relationship with each other around which the story is developed. They bear a certain degree of similarity, especially the fact that they keep bonds of sensual, egoistic love among them. Interestingly, they seem not to care about each other’s true well-being, instead, they feel attracted by the sense of pleasure one provokes on another – a sort of selfish, obsessive attachment. Although characterised as friends in the novel, they could rather be regarded as interdependent slaves of sensory pleasures.

Basil Hallward, “the creator of beautiful things” (Wilde, 2017, The Preface), is the artist who captures the unspoiled soul of young Dorian and expresses its pure beauty into the portrait in such a perfect manner that Dorian Gray, as expressed in the portrait, becomes the essence of his art and, therefore, of his life. As Wilde would be, Basil is aware that the homosexual nature of his passion for Dorian’s immaculate expression could harm his reputation if made public.

But I know that as I worked at it, every flake and film of colour seemed to me to reveal my secret. I grew afraid that others would know of my idolatry. I felt, Dorian, that I had told too much, that I had put too much of myself into it. (Wilde, 2017, p. 52)

Basil is enslaved by Dorian's original beauty – here, there is a trace of Aestheticism. As a consequence, he grows jealous of anyone who approaches Dorian and loses his mind when he learns about rumours of Dorian's horrible actions: "Deny them, Dorian, deny them! Can't you see what I am going through? My God! don't tell me that you are bad, and corrupt, and shameful." (Wilde, 2017, p. 69).

Lord Henry is a dandy who incorporates much of Wilde's behavioural traits. He is eloquent, charming and highly convincing, nevertheless, cynic and poisonous. Dorian, though, falls into his enchantment rather consciously – he is aware of Harry's intoxicating influence. While Basil was the creator of the forever pure Dorian, Lord Henry was the one who taught Dorian the ways of vice. As could be expected, Lord Henry's intentions towards Dorian have never been pure – Dorian was nothing more than an extraordinary living experiment for him.

He was pleased by it. It made him a more interesting study. [...] There were poisons so subtle that to know their properties one had to sicken of them. There were maladies so strange that one had to pass through them if one sought to understand their nature. [...] To a large extent the lad was his own creation. He had made him premature. (Wilde, 2017, p. 25-26)

Seduced by Dorian's perfection, Lord Henry perhaps kept wondering what would become of the one who "have drunk deeply of everything" (Wilde, 2017, p. 98). While he kept his full attention on Dorian, given the latter's extraordinary potential, he lost his interest in Basil when he noticed a decline in his art. And then he coldly dismisses someone who was supposed to be his Oxford old friend. Here, Lord Henry again impersonates Wilde's beliefs that art was above life – in a rather extreme manner, though.

But let us pass from poor Basil. I wish I could believe that he had come to such a really romantic end as you suggest, but I can't. I dare say he fell into the Seine off an omnibus and that the conductor hushed up the scandal. Yes: I should fancy that was his end. I see him lying now on his back under those dull-green waters, with the heavy barges floating over him and long weeds catching in his hair. Do you know, I don't think he would have done much more good work. During the last ten years his painting had gone off very much. [...] "Yes," he continued, turning round and taking his handkerchief out of his pocket; "his painting had quite gone off. It seemed to me to have lost something. It had lost an ideal. When you and he ceased to be great friends, he ceased to be a great artist. What was it separated you? (Wilde, 2017, p. 96-97)

Dorian Gray, in turn, is the one who has been magically granted access to sensual pleasures to an extent never before imagined. If Dorian was someone Wilde would like to be, we could imagine Wilde considering: 'What if I could experience whatever kind of wild pleasures to the fullest extent free from any moral restraints? Where would I end up?'

Eternal youth, infinite passion, pleasures subtle and secret, wild joys and wilder sins – he was to have all these things. The portrait was to bear the burden of his shame: that was all. [...] This portrait would be to him the most magical of mirrors. As it had revealed to him his own body, so it would reveal to him his own soul. (Wilde, 2017, p. 47-48)

Not only did Wilde give Dorian a magical portrait but he also magically freed Dorian from any threat.

Made into the subject of a decadent experiment, Dorian paradoxically met self-destruction by avoiding destruction at all costs.

There was only one bit of evidence left against him. The picture itself – that was evidence. He would destroy it. (Wilde, 2017, p. 100)

It is arguable that Wilde's voice could be heard through his characters, especially Lord Henry. The following passages present statements followed by the sentence 'That is all', which is a construction Wilde uses in the preface of the novel.

Wilde: "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. **That is all.**" (Wilde, 2017, The Preface, emphasis added)

Lord Henry: "Conscience and cowardice are really the same things, Basil. Conscience is the trade-name of the firm. **That is all.**" (Wilde, 2017, p. 3, emphasis added)

Dorian: "I felt all that you have said, but somehow I was afraid of it, and I could not express it to myself. How well you know me! But we will not talk again of what has happened. It has been a marvellous experience. **That is all.**" (Wilde, 2017, p. 47, emphasis added)

Basil: "Art is always more abstract than we fancy. Form and colour tell us of form and colour – **that is all.**" (Wilde, 2017, p. 52, emphasis added)

Lord Henry: The books that the world calls immoral are books that show the world its own shame. **That is all.** (Wilde, 2017, p. 98, emphasis added)

## 4 Gothic elements

Considering the key Gothic motifs explored by Bowen (2014), it is possible to identify a few of them in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*:

- **Strange places:** The decaying schoolroom where Dorian concealed his portrait:

Hallward glanced round him with a puzzled expression. The room looked as if it had not been lived in for years. A faded Flemish tapestry, a curtained picture, an old Italian cassone, and an almost empty book-case – that was all that it seemed to contain, besides a chair and a table. As Dorian Gray was lighting a half-burned candle that was standing on the mantelshelf, he saw that the whole place was covered with dust and that the carpet was in holes. A mouse ran scuffling behind the wainscoting. There was a damp odour of mildew. (Wilde, 2017, p. 69)

- **Power and constraint:** Sibyl Vane – a woman in vulnerable position subjected to Dorian Gray's cruelty:

She crouched on the floor like a wounded thing, and Dorian Gray, with his beautiful eyes, looked down at her, and his chiselled lips curled in exquisite disdain. (Wilde, 2017, p. 40)

- **A world of doubt:** According to Bowen (2014), Gothic seeks to create in our minds the possibility that there may be things beyond human power, reason and knowledge. One piece of evidence of this can be seen at the moment Dorian's portrait mysteriously becomes a mirror of his soul:

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. (Wilde, 2017, p. 41)

## 5 Final considerations

Wilde was charged with 'gross indecency' and it is curious that he had provided evidence against himself at his trial through his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. But if insatiable satisfaction of sensual pleasures is the pathway to degeneration, what to say about the insatiable crave of today's business world for financial results? What is morality if not a social convention?

In his way, Wilde tried to say that art must not be an instrument to impose the identities and conventions of the mainstream of the society upon the rest of the society. Perhaps, through his unconventional lifestyle, he tried to demonstrate that our art is supposed to be our identity, as complex and varied as our life.

## References

- Bowen, J. (2014, May). *Gothic motifs* - *The British Library*. <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/gothic-motifs>.
- Burdett, C. (2014, March). *Aestheticism and decadence* - *The British Library*. <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/aestheticism-and-decadence>.
- Hackett, A. (2014, June). *Your handwriting fascinates me and your praise charms me*. <https://natlib.govt.nz/blog/posts/your-handwriting-fascinates-me-and-your-praise-charms-me>.
- The Picture of Dorian Gray Study Guide* | *Course Hero*. (n.d.). <https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Picture-of-Dorian-Gray/>.
- Wilde, O. (2017). *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Seattle: AmazonClassics.