

# Life is beautiful: aestheticism and morals in the picture of dorian gray

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Throughout history, art has reflected the morals of society and, in turn, society has projected its morals into art. Art portrays our religion, our politics and patriotism, our flaws and convictions, our history and our goals.

Hieronymus Bosch illustrates the faults of man, Liberty leads the people to freedom, Jesus hangs upon the cross. There is always a moral to the story, an emotion to be felt. The power of art, we believe, is in its duende. When we look at art we may feel afraid, ashamed, joyful or distraught for art projects at us what we have filled it with: morals. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde seeks to abandon this presupposition. He instead portrays art as a purely aesthetic representation, and, rather than art reflecting life, life should reflect art.

By observing only the beauty of art and of life do we fulfill Nature's purpose: pleasure. It is only through the recognition of the uselessness of beautiful things that we remain uninfluenced and truly individual. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde uses Dorian's journey to illustrate the divide between an intrinsically moral society and Aestheticism and delineate the flaws in both philosophies when adhered to too strictly. Wilde makes his thesis quite clear in the preface, added after the novel had endured criticism for immorality a year after its publication: The artist is the creator of beautiful things . .

. Those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt without being charming . . . Those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are cultivated . .

. There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all . .

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. The nineteenth century dislike of realism is the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in the glass. The nineteenth century dislike for Romanticism is the rage of Caliban not seeing his own face in the glass . . . No artist has ethical sympathies .

. . Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril . . .

We can forgive a man for making a useful thing as long as he does not admire it. The only excuse for making a useless thing is that one admires it intensely. All art is quite useless (Wilde, 1). Beauty, therefore, is the only purpose of art. Lord Henry Wotton, or Harry, is the novel's resident aestheticist. It is he who proposes this search for and admiration of beauty and pleasure should extend into one's life and he is drawn to Dorian for this reason.

" Yes, he was certainly wonderfully handsome, with his finely curved scarlet lips, his frank blue eyes, his crisp gold hair . . . All the candor of youth was there, as well as youth's passionate purity. One felt he had kept himself unspotted from the world" (Wilde, 18) From their first meeting, Lord Henry influences Dorian (despite his misgivings about persuasion and influence) to fear the loss of his beauty and youth.

" Youth! Youth! There is absolutely nothing in the world but youth!" (Wilde, 25) But as Dorian progresses through life it is understood that the shame connected with morals and temptations will result in the loss of beauty. " You, Mr. Gray, you yourself, with your rose red youth and your Rose-white boyhood, you have had passions that have made you afraid, thoughts I have

filled you with care, daydreams and sleeping dreams is mere memory might stain your cheek with shame" (Wilde, 20). It is the catalyst that incites Dorian to wish to swap places with his portrait. " It will never be older than this particular day in June . .

. For that—for that—I would give everything! Yes, there is nothing in the whole world I would not give. I would give my soul for that!" (Wilde, 28) And he does. With those words, Dorian abandons the morals, worries and duties that once dictated him and lives a life for pleasure. The world that Lord Henry and this newly altered Dorian inhabit is unaccustomed to this pleasure-seeking approach to life. Their England, no doubt, is decadent, but it is also riddled with what Wilde would label as hypocrisy.

Dorian's society was one of morals, charity, self-righteousness and, Lord Henry would say, misguidedness. They are overly concerned with the plight of the poor, the sick and the needy; they trouble themselves with ugliness. The upper class may experience the beauty in life, they can afford fine meals, exquisite artifacts or a night at the opera, but they superimpose emotion, just as they do to their art. This portrait of culture is in direct accord with Wilde's preface. Those who see ugliness in beauty are corrupt.

They hate realism because it what they are and hate Romanticism because it is what they are not. At an extravagant dinner, Lord Henry responds to a group of upper-class philanthropists' discussion of the East End: " I can sympathize with everything, except suffering. I cannot sympathize with that.

It is too ugly, too horrible, too distressing. There is something terribly morbid in the modern sympathy with pain.

One should sympathize with the color, the beauty, and joy of life. The less said about life's sores the better" (Wilde, 43). Society, he believes, has become overly influenced by these preoccupations with pain and unpleasant emotions. Each person has lost their individuality because they are not living for their own conviction, but for those morals that are supposed to (by the culture's standard) direct their life. " The terror of society, which is the basis of morals; the terror of God, which is the secret of religion — these are the two things that govern us" (Wilde, 20). Lord Henry suggests that this life, manipulated by fear is a far cry from the intended experience.

He wishes that nineteenth century England would instate a new Hedonism. The good, he says, are the happy and they are happy because they have lived Nature's intention by finding pleasure in beauty. I believe that if man were to live out his life fully and completely, what you give form to every feeling, expressions every thought, reality to every dream — I believe the world would gain such a fresh impulse of joy that we would forget all the maladies of medievalism, and return to the Hellenic ideal—to something finer, richer than the Hellenic ideal, it may be. But the bravest man among us is afraid of himself. We are punished for refusals. Every impulse that we strive to strangle broods in the mind and poisons us (Wilde, 44).

Dorian takes Lord Henry's words to heart; his trade has allowed him to avoid the corruptness of moral influence while evading the physical deformities that follow moral degeneration. He views the events of his life as elements of

art, with no emotional attachment or significance. The first and most symbolic of his moral transgressions is concerning the young and poor actress, Sybil Vane. Dorian falls in love with her because he believes she is an artistic genius; she can abandon her own emotions and bring beauty to the stage. When he professes his love for her she is so overcome with joy that she acts terribly at her next performance. Dorian is disgusted.

She has become ugly to him as she let her emotions permeate her art. “ I loved you because you were marvelous, because you had genius and intellect, because you realized the dreams of great poets and gave substance to the shadows of art . . . How little you can know of love if you say it mars your art! Without your art you are nothing” (Wilde, 91). He abandons her, leaving her weeping for him.

The next day it is reported that Sybil Vane has committed suicide. It is quite obvious that Dorian is the cause of her demise and one would expect him to feel some sort of remorse or shame. Instead he views the event as a spectator would view a scene in a tragic play, not as a component, subject to the emotions inflicted, but as an emotionally unattached onlooker. “ And yet I must admit that this thing that has happened does not affect me as it should. It seems to me to be simply like a wonderful ending to a wonderful play it has all the terrible beauty of the Greek tragedy, a tragedy in which I took a great part, but by which I have not been wounded” (Wilde, 104).

The next day, Dorian is off courting women and enjoying himself. His friend, Basil Hallward, embodies moral society and points out that it is quite soon after the death of Sybil for Dorian to be so carefree. Dorian responds: “ What

has the lapse of time got to do with it? It is only shallow people who require years to get rid of an emotion. A man who is a master of himself can end a sorrow as easily as he can invent a pleasure. I don't want to be at the mercy of my emotions. I want to use them, to enjoy them, and to dominate them" (Wilde, 112).

It is at this point of the novel that Dorian has reached the apex of his aesthetic life; he has succeeded in allowing his life to reflect the moral uselessness of art. Dorian's life degenerates into something that cannot be described any other way but despicable. He is the cause of more suicides; he commits adultery and murder. He becomes a collector of beautiful things, jewels and tapestries and instruments, while he allow his soul to wither. The final stage of his moral deterioration is symbolized and influenced by a little yellow book gifted to him by Lord Henry.

The book describes the sins of a young French man. Dorian's favorite chapter is a running description of wicked things portrayed in beautiful ways. Over and over again Dorian used to read the fantastic chapter . . .

in which, as in some curious tapestries are cunningly wrought enamels, or picture the awful and beautiful forms of those whom vice and blood and weariness had made monstrous or mad: Filippo, Duke of Milan, who slew his wife, and painted her lips with a scarlet poison that her lover might suck deaths from the dead thing he fondled . . . Gian Maria Visconti, who used hounds to chase living men, and whose murdered body was covered with roses by a harlot who had love him (Wilde, 149). .

. . Ad infinitum, but the reader gets the point. Evil is ensconced in beauty, it becomes a pleasure, a temptation to be fulfilled. By the end of the story, Dorian's transgressions have caught up with him.

His hand in the deaths of his dear friends, the hatred of society towards him, have driven him to paranoia and opiates. He is faced with guilt, or at least a sense of 'wrongness' in what he has done. He finds himself where we knew it must end, in front of his portrait, the ghastly representation of his soul. He is in pain by the emotions the ugliness of his very being has flung upon him. He takes a knife to slash the effigy, and, through some psychological twist, lands the knife not in the canvas, but into his own heart. Wilde, though a proponent of the Aesthetic cause, clearly ends his novel with an illustration of Aestheticism's failure in Dorian life.

It could be that man cannot live completely without morals. It could be describing the dedication to beauty that one must have to succeed in life; Dorian doubted the premise for a minute and his life ended in tragedy. Either way, it is apparent that Dorian's brand of Aestheticism was incompatible with not only the society he lived within, but with the intrinsic qualities of human nature. Whether it is a philosophical flaw or not, we must, as human, project emotions into what we see, do or experience. It is what makes us sentient, emotional and moral beings. They may mar our outlook on a world of pleasure but, even in the face of utter beauty, morals are, apparently, inescapable.