

# Dorian gray: wilde's ending and its moments of ambiguity



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

In Chapter 20 of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Dorian is presented to us as a figure torn between reforming and alleviating himself from the sin and corruption he has perpetuated on others, and pursuing his exclamatory yearning for his "unsullied splendour of eternal youth" to return. Above all, the death of Dorian can only be interpreted by asserting his relationship to his portrait; the "fatal picture", in which Wilde's diction suggests it serves as a brutal reminder for his deteriorating soul and his true self, or as simply a symbol of a greater societal force on Dorian. Hence, only with this can one judge whether Dorian truly died by murder, suicide or by accident.

At the beginning of the chapter, Wilde uses pathetic fallacy to convey the "lovely night" which could coincide with Dorian's inherent feeling of contentment and his ego-centricity and narcissism in regards to his relief that he is safe. This, is mirrored in previous parts of the novel, such as after James Vane's death, where Wilde bathetically recalls how Dorian's "eyes filled with tears, for he knew he was safe". The pleasing, opulent aristocratic setting of the "lovely night" echoes the synaesthesia previously used in Lord Henry's lavishing "apricot-coloured" habitat, does mirror Dorian's narcissism, but to a greater extent, the setting is oxymoronic against the sense of unease and underlying ennui in Dorian. As influenced by Lord Henry's Hedonistic aphorisms and the "poisonous" imagery epitomising the influence of the Yellow Book advocating a "complex, multiform creature", he seeks to "search for new sensations" (an allusion to Pater's *Renaissance*). However, Wilde's deliberate repetitious use of the past perfect tense and free indirect discourse in "He had often", "she had believed" suggests Dorian's remorse and apathy towards pursuing pleasure. This is seen in his

interaction with the girl whom he had "lured to love him" but told her he was "poor" and "wicked" implying how Dorian is on one hand atoning for perhaps a similar situation with Sybil by not corrupting the girl, as the imagery of the "thrush" echoes the "caged song-bird" that Dorian had been responsible for the suicide of. This perhaps underlies Dorian's guilt and longing to change, further seen in the alliterative aphorism "There was purification in punishment" suggesting how Dorian wishes that each of his sins would've resulted in punishment. On the other hand, one could argue that his declare to the girl represents his desperation to start "A new life!", thus implying Dorian is torn but is more inclined to ignore rather than face the consequences of his actions that will inevitably lead him to his death.

Furthermore, Dorian's relationship with the portrait is paramount in regards to whether his death is murder, suicide or accident. Jonah Siegel argues, "Dorian's death is less a sign of moral failure, than an indication of the failure of his historicism." Indeed, one can argue it is to a greater degree that Dorian's growing loathing for his portrait to crush it into "silver splinters" represents the failure of his historicism. This arguable externalisation of Dorian's conscience could mirror the Victorian society's crushing judgement on Wilde himself, for being a homosexual, and the hypocrisy prevalent in the 19th century that built itself on a façade of moral rectitude and piety with the "silver splinters" acting as the foundation of its vice, corruption and poverty. The sibilant image here could symbolise how Dorian fails to realise that he can never go back to how he was, and the "silver splinters" can never be rebuilt. However, I think Dorian's death is completely a sign of moral failure. His stabbing of the portrait was never meant to act as a divine

retribution for his crimes, as he never knows that in doing what he does, it will destroy him. Thus, Dorian's death is a sign of moral failure, as he dies through trying to save himself, implying his narcissism that essentially led to the forming of his Faustian pact with his portrait, led him to his inexorable death.

It can be argued that Dorian's death is caused by Dorian's disjunction between his inner and outer lives, and to what extent Dorian truly died or not. Andrew Smith exclaims, "Dorian's death represents the inability to be authentic...and the failure to be artificial". On one hand, Dorian fails to be "authentic" in the sense that, if the code of the vicarious flaneur like Lord Henry celebrates individualism (declaratively encapsulated in "the aim of life is self-development"), Dorian falters because he fails to establish and live by his own moral code. Furthermore, it can be seen that Dorian fails to be artificial, as he ceases to represent Art, remaining young and beautiful whilst his painting exhibits his corruption. However, I disagree to an extent with Smith's paradoxical criticism. In 'The Decay of Lying', Wilde stated, "Life imitates Art...life in fact tis the mirror, and Art the reality". Therefore, even though Dorian's sin accrued in the portrait is not displayed through his appearance, such as Basil's death and Sybil's suicide, it remains exhibited through the portrait as the reality, and Dorian's decisions and actions mirror this. This idea of Art acting as the reality mirroring life, was seen in Walter Sickert's paintings conveying the cruelty of life as beauty, seen in his portrait allegedly identifying Jack the Ripper.

Finally, it is disputable whether in Chapter 20, Dorian actually dies. It can be argued that when Dorian exclaims: "His beauty had been to him but a  
<https://assignbuster.com/dorian-gray-wildes-ending-and-its-moments-of-ambiguity/>

mask", the caveat "to him" suggesting an uncertainty, reiterating his torn nature at this portrait. It can be argued thereby the original Dorian without a mask was before he met Lord Henry and fell under his influence, encapsulated in the asyndetic "poisonous, fascinating, delightful theories" which is replete with oxymorons. Therefore in a sense Dorian's beauty could act as a mask for his already dying soul, therefore he was never really himself when he died, merely playing just an aping of Lord Henry's, "an echo of someone else's music". In contrast, Wilde himself stated, "Give a man a mask, and he'll tell the truth" implying Dorian's beauty was the truth and was reality, so it was his true self that died.