

The gothic elements in the picture of dorian gray



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The Picture of Dorian Gray, Oscar Wilde's only novel, tells us the tale of a person's journey towards doom through moral decadence. It can be observed that from the supernatural events to the delineation of murder, a great number of gothic elements can be found in this dark novel. Among these elements, three stand out as the most important ones, as their existence and development had been taking a large part of the novel. They are the magical portrait of Dorian Gray, the theme of decadence, and the presence of a gothic villain.

Not only do they make up the key plots of the novel, but also were they delineated with deliberation and detail in this novel. In order to find out the purposes of the gothic elements in The Picture of Dorian Gray, an investigation of the most prevailing three gothic elements is done in order to discover, in detail, their contribution to the novel. The Portrait It is not hard to observe that a lot of things in The Picture of Dorian Gray bore with them a lot more than their superficial significance.

For example, the long passages delineating fanciful ornamentations that Dorian possessed in his house were not mere decorations: their presence complemented the decadent atmosphere and showed us Dorian's personality by reflecting his taste. As well, Dorian's casual artistic creations also reflected his feeling of guilt and fear after he had murdered Basil Hallward, as it was observed that " As soon as he was alone, he lit a cigarette and began sketching upon pieces of paper, drawing first flowers, and bits of architecture, and then human faces.

Suddenly he remarked that every face that he drew seemed to have a fantastic likeness to Basil Hallward. “. The existence of reflective devices in this novel is supported by Elizabeth MacAndrew’s assertion in *The Gothic Tradition of Fiction*: “ Just as a Gothic tale is itself a dream and also a mirror showing the reader his mind, everything within these symbolic stories tends to be a reflecting surface . ” Among the many reflective symbols throughout the novel, one most important and long lasting one was Dorian Gray’s portrait, for it bore with Dorian the secret of his ever-lasting beauty.

It is a representation of Dorian’s true state of mind because it changed its appearance according to the immoral deeds Dorian had done. By doing so, it became the indicator of the decay of Dorian Gray. Dorian’s inner self, as it was remarked in *The Gothic Tradition in Fiction*: “ the reflections thrown back at the viewer from portraits reveal the inner self, as eyes in this literature reveal the soul. ”, was clearly reflected in his portrait. Under Lord Henry’s influence, Dorian’s change in his mental state and moral values was dramatic.

He learned to appreciate decadent art, to conform to the philosophy of “ to cure the soul by means of senses ” by going to opium dens and eventually to completely submit to sin by murdering Basil Hallward. Although Dorian’s decay was hard to observe because his beauty remained intact and thus created an innocent image of him, the portrait recorded his inner change by altering his appearances, as we observe for the first time in the novel “ the touch of cruelty round the warped lips ” in the painting after the death of Sybil Vane.

The painting provided Dorian a double life, as remarked in *Into the Demon Universe: A Literary Exploration of Oscar Wilde*: “ The picture of his soul was locked safely away in a dark room while the innocent face he presented to respectable society was only a mask. ” Indeed, the portrait became the spokesperson of Dorian’s true personality by altering his appearances according to his corruption of the mind. A more convincing evidence of the portrait being a reflection of Dorian’s moral decadence lies moments before the death of Dorian.

At the night of his death, Dorian attempted to convince himself that he had indeed changed and had started committing beneficial deeds for others. He beheld considerable hope in some positive changes in the painting, only to observe that “ in the eyes there was a look of cunning, and in the mouth the curved wrinkle of the hypocrite. The thing was still loathsome - more loathsome, if possible, than before - and the scarlet dew that spotted the hand seemed brighter, and more like blood newly split. ” Although Dorian believed that he might have started going towards the good way, his portrait showed his true identity in terms of immorality.

This suggests that Dorian’s portrait served solely as a measuring instrument for Dorian’s decadence while being completely detached from his own moral ambivalence and illusions of moral deeds. Therefore, the portrait truthfully reflected Dorian’s personality. As a split personality of Dorian Gray, the portrait also brought out the conflict and confusion between art and life. As a piece of art, the painting possessed reality, for it reflected the real personality of Dorian Gray. As a being in real life, Dorian Gray’s beautiful

appearance was solely a work of art, because it did not match with his inner immorality.

Therefore, the Dorian in real life and the Dorian in the painting were entwined, thus confusing art with real life. The philosophy of Basil Hallward well presents the conflict between art and reality as he told Dorian that “ Sin is a thing that writes itself across a man’s face. It cannot be concealed..... but you, Dorian, with your pure, bright, innocent face, and your marvelous untroubled youth - I can’t believe anything against you. ” Basil’s false perception of Dorian was because of his assumption that anything beautiful would decay under immorality.

The supernatural quality of the painting undermined such assumption and blurred the line between art and reality. By doing so, the painting also serves as an analogy for the whole novel. By being not merely a piece of art but also cruel reality, it sends us the message that the novel itself is a piece of art that contains cruel reality. As MacAndrew claimed in *The Gothic Tradition in Novels* that “ Without this device [the portrait as a split personality], his novel would be a lightly satirical story of the fin-de-siecle.

Indeed, the portrait was the key in presenting the moral problem of corruption in the novel, and by embedding reality inside the portrait, Oscar Wilde was, perhaps, hinting us how we should treat the novel as a whole: that it was not merely a work of art to entertain, but it contained important messages or depictions of the cruel reality. Therefore, the portrait as a reflective device not only served as a mirror of Dorian’s decay, but also an

analogy of the novel in terms of the conflict between art and reality.

Decadence

It is evident that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a cautious story regarding one's attitude towards aesthetics rather than a simple tale about immorality. Oscar Wilde had expressed his, or rather, the novel's view about aesthetics in the preface of this novel, where he stated that "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all." Such statement suggests that morality and art-since literature is a form of art- should be viewed separately. Indeed, Dorian Gray had followed such philosophy at the expense of his own doom.

This brings us to the gothic element of decadence, which is one of the most important themes in the novel. We should keep in mind that the theme of decadence throughout this novel is achieved by an appreciation and pursuit of art regardless of whether the art is moral or immoral, not through simple crimes. Dorian's decadence was gradually achieved through his appreciation of immoral arts, or finding artistic value in immoral affairs. Throughout Dorian's inner struggle between good and evil, his journey from innocence towards total decadence could be divided into three phases, marked by two deaths and the existence of one book.

Although unconsciously, the first decadent act that Dorian Gray had committed was falling in love with Sybil Vane, the opera girl. Dorian's love towards Sybil was that of pure sensations and pleasure. Such statement is supported by Dorian's conversations with Lord Henry in several occasions. While refusing to dine with Lord Henry, Dorian explained that: "Tonight she

is Imogen, and tomorrow night she will be Juliet. ” ‘ When is she Sibyl Vane? ’
‘ Never’ It seems evident that rather than being in love with Sibyl Vane
herself, Dorian was in love with Imogen, Juliet, and other heroines in different
plays.

Through his love for her, he expressed his love for opera, and the artistic
value of tragic heroines. Therefore, it was not surprising that when she
ceased to have the spirit of a tragic heroine, he claimed: ‘ Without art you
are nothing.... What are you now? A third-rate actress with a pretty face. ’
Through art Dorian loved Sybil, and through a lack of artistic values Dorian
abandoned Sybil, which eventually hurt Sybil’s innocent soul and caused her
death. However, it is after the death of Sybil that Dorian’s nature of love for
Sybil was completely revealed.

In an attempt to wash away the guilt he felt for indirectly killing Sybil, Dorian
accepted Lord Henry’s suggestion that Sybil died as a wonderful form of
tragic art by saying “ it has all the terrible beauty of a Greek tragedy, a
tragedy in which I took a great part it has been a marvelous
experience. ” In Sybil’s death, Dorian decays by letting go of his guilt of
committing something immoral by finding artistic value in it. Such decay first
brings out the issue of art and morality: should Dorian be condemned
because he sensed and appreciated art in an immoral deed?

Under Lord Henry’s influence, Dorian never stops pursuing for sensual
pleasures and decadent arts. Such influence is, perhaps, best represented
the yellow book Lord Henry once sent him. It was a novel with a young
Parisian as the only character in whom the “ The various moods through

which the world-spirit had ever passed, loving for their mere artificiality whose renunciations that men have unwisely called virtue, as much as those natural rebellions that wise men still call sin.

It was delineated that Dorian was greatly fascinated by this book and “ never sought to free himself from it. ” Although the title of the yellow book was never disclosed in the novel, many sources suggest that Oscar Wilde based the yellow book on a combination of two major works of the English decadent movement: *A Rebours* by Joris-Karl Huysman and *Renaissance* by Walter Pater. Thus, it is clear that the philosophy of the book, which was to find wisdom in sin, attracted Dorian.

It is reasonable to suggest that although it seems that Dorian's future sin was the product of the influence of this novel, but we should also keep in mind that it was Dorian's desire to escape from moral constraints and find art in immoral things that brought him to be attracted by this novel in the first place. Therefore, the yellow book both reflected and enhanced Dorian's philosophy of decadent art. Gradually, Dorian was to become more and more comfortable with his own corruption and eventually “ he grew more and more enamored of his own beauty, more and more interested in the corruption of his own soul.

Thus, the yellow book could be seen as a second milestone in Dorian's journey of decadence. The delineation of Dorian's decadence was condemned by many critics following the publication of this novel. Most people deemed such a novel “ immoral”. It is in the reaction of Oscar Wilde towards these criticisms that we see the value and importance of Dorian's

decadence. In a letter to the editor of the Scots Observer , Oscar Wilde wrote, in opposition to a critic who deemed his novel “ false art, false morality’ , that “ it was necessary for the dramatic development of this story to surround Dorian Gray with an atmosphere of moral corruption.

Otherwise the story would have had no meaning and the plot no issue. To keep this atmosphere vague and indeterminate and wonderful was the aim of the artist who wrote the story. ” In such response, his message in the purpose of the theme of decadence in the novel was clear: he portrayed decadence in order better reflect a man’s soul under temptation of immoral art. Dorian’s final step towards total decadence came when he killed Basil Hallward, the artist who created the very painting that Dorian both dreaded and relied on.

At first glance of the murder scene, it was, perhaps, hard to determine the reason for which Dorian murdered Basil. It seemed that he killed Basil purely out of a surge of anger. However, a closer look suggests that the murder was due to Dorian’s passion for sin. Before he was killed, Basil said: “ It is never too late, Dorian. Let us kneel down and try if we cannot remember a prayer. Isn’t there a verse somewhere, ‘ Though your sins be as scarlet, yet I will make them as white as snow. ”

Such word, apparently, greatly irritated Dorian, for he replied: “ Those words mean nothing to me now ” After Basil told him to “ don’t say that” and that “ accursed things were leering at them,” “ Suddenly an uncontrollable feeling of hatred for Basil Hallward came over him, as though it had been suggested to him by the image on the canvas, whispered into his ear by those grinning

lips. " Basil was an artist conformed to social codes and moral restrains, for he was desirous of praying for Dorian and washing away his sins.

However, having ignored the roles of morality, moral issues did not matter to Dorian, and it was his pursuit for sin that killed Basil. By killing Basil, he had completely yielded towards his passion for sin and decadent arts. His sinful painting dominated him, and he never sought to escape its domination by turning to morality, as described in *Into the Demonic Universe* that " the murder is an attempt on Dorian's part to stifle the voice of goodness forever. " The commitment of this murder which symbolized Dorian's total decadence is significant to the reader because it completely portrays the moral corruption a man can retain through art.

As Wilde quoted in his letter to the Scots Observer that " Keats remarked that he had as much pleasure in conceiving the evil as he had in conceiving the good ", the conception of evil in this novel was necessary for the readers because it helps to create and develop Dorian's personality. His decadence, which was reflected in his passion towards sin, could only be presented by confronting the symbol of morality and social code, which, in this case, was Basil Hallward. Therefore, the theme of decadence largely developed Dorian's personality and enhanced our understanding towards his end.