

The picture of dorian gray: an exemplary piece of literature to emulate

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‘ Characters in the novel have few redeeming qualities, making the novel more of a cautionary tale than a model for emulation’. How far do you agree?

As a primarily phallogentric novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* features characters who harbour few redeeming qualities, and this can be argued in light of Basil’s fierce dedication to Art itself, and the arguably temporary effect it has on Dorian, whom he sincerely declares “ a motive in Art”.

However, it can be argued characters such as Lord Henry, vicarious ambivalent lifestyle ultimately embody none, and instead serve as a catalyst to unravel the corruption of Dorian. Thus the novel cautions against the dangers of societal forces on one’s self and being true to one’s self, and reveals the question of whether it can be a model for emulation in light of corruption, influence and aesthetic ideals.

Lord Henry arguably has few redeeming qualities, as his paradoxical nature means he is never true to himself. His aphoristic declaratives, “ All influence is immoral...from the scientific point of view” highlights how he embodies the hypocrisy of the Victorian society at the time when the novel was written, where even though there were extortionate levels of poverty, crime and children living in squalor, the fin-de-siècle “ Terror of society” and “ God” remained prevalent. Furthermore, Wilde alludes to the idea of temptation in regards to the prelapsarian state, when he exclaims, “ The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it”, suggesting his hypocrisy as he never yields to any of his temptations himself as a flaneur, which means he doesn’t possess many redeeming qualities. Moreover, his hedonistic influence on

Dorian, to “ give form to every feeling, expression to every thought, reality to every dream”, and Wilde’s clever use of parallelism indicates how on one hand, Lord Henry perhaps bears some redeeming qualities in the sense that he acts a patrician lens for Dorian’s to see how his youth’s “ passionate purity” will privilege him. However, as Wilde alliteratively elucidates, Lord Henry is the flaneur that remains unchanged in his “ curious crucible of pain and pleasure”. Therefore, Lord Henry has few to arguably no redeeming qualities as a result of the fact he never does act upon his emotions, but sees other characters like Dorian self-destruct when they abide to them.

In regards to Lord Henry, the novel can be seen as a cautionary tale for the societal forces on one’s self and less of a model for emulation, because upon being a model, it would suggest a certain moral high-ground, which Wilde disagreed upon his prefatory epigram, “ There is no such thing as a moral or immoral book”. Wilde’s symbol of the “ common laburnum” for Lord Henry could represent how some higher societal circles, due to his poisonous tongue and ideas, forsake him. The idea of the societal forces forsaking him could act as the aesthetic ethos “ Art for Art’s sake” forsaking his own distorted view of Art as “ procuring extraordinary sensations”. Wagatsuma argues: “ Lord Henry Wotton’s aestheticism echoes to a certain extent the Rousseauian idea that civilisation mars the individual’s innate good”. This is indeed true as one can argue the effect that civilisation and Lord Henry has marred Dorian, whose inherent wealth and dualistic nature being the “ son of Love and Death” and Faustian pact formed to preserve his eternal youth and beauty corrupts him and others. On the other hand, I disagree in the sense

that Lord Henry's sensual primacy to Aesthetics doesn't echo the Rousseauian idea, but instead echoes the Calvinistic idea that evil, just like our sensual impulses, is an inborn feature of human nature since the fall of man, as Dorian argues: "There is a Heaven and a Hell in all of us". Therefore, in light of this depolarisation of good and evil, Dorian embodies the caution of societal forces such as Lord Henry's distorted view of aestheticism corrupting himself and others, making the novel a cautionary tale and so less of a model but an indication of where emulation can lead one to.

I agree to an extent that Basil bears few redeeming qualities, but it is simply the way the context in which they were presented in that could suggest otherwise. He is the only character that is close to prefiguring the characters' fates (apart from Lord Henry's) when he cries "my brains, such as they are – my Art, whatever it may be worth; Dorian Gray's good looks – we shall all suffer for what the Gods have given us, suffer terribly". The use of caveats here indicates Basil's appreciation for what he has, and where it will inevitably lead him. He can be seen as a pioneer of Aestheticism, but on the other hand, a failure. For example, on one hand he clearly abides to the preface statement "To reveal Art and conceal the Artist" by stressing that his suggestively homoerotic "fascination" for Dorian has driven him to exclaim the truth of Dorian's beauty. However, he could be seen as a failure as the outdated, anachronistic version of Aestheticism; Victorian society at the time would've been replete with corruption, as shown in Walter Sickert's Art. Therefore, in a way, Basil embodies the how the novel is a caution

against dedication to Art, seeing as his infatuation with Dorian ultimately leads him to be murdered. However, in light of Basil, the novel can be seen as a model for emulating the wrong Aesthetic ideals, as his somewhat mother-like figure as the holder of Dorian's youth as the painter, in the Freudian sense, soon results in Dorian "loathing" his own portrait. Therefore although Basil bears few redeeming qualities in his dedication to his Art, the way Wilde himself responded that, "Good people exasperate one's reason; bad people stir one's imagination", suggests that Wilde's constructed the novel as a caution against excessive dedication to Art.

It can be argued that Dorian either holds redeeming qualities in regards to his innocent, youthful veneer he once harboured before meeting Lord Henry, or does not at all in the sense that whether he seeks to redeem himself throughout the novel. It can be argued that it was not his fault that he came under the influence of Lord Henry and pursued a life of sin, due to his dualistic nature. In fact, his surname 'Gray' clearly stands as a homophone for the colour, connoting an undefined, ambiguous demeanour which suggests that despite the dichotomy between his aristocratic mother and "penniless subaltern" father, it is unfair to argue that he holds no redeeming qualities, to say the least; and perhaps Wilde supports this through his indulgence in using colourful alliteration, "passionate purity" to convey Dorian's beauty. However, Wilde's exclamatory syntax: "I would give my soul for that!" ultimately makes the reader instantly observe Dorian as a naive character as he forms a Faustian Pact, which unlike Faustus did to gain perpetual knowledge of the universe from Mephistopheles, Dorian perhaps

forms to take advantage of others and follow as an aping of Lord Henry's. I can see that the novel could act as a model for emulation in the sense that Dorian arguably, since he was under the influence of Lord Henry, wears Lord Henry's influence as his mask to shield himself from atoning for his sins. However, it is to a greater extent that the novel is a cautionary tale against not being true to one's own self, as in doing so, Dorian is not pursuing the individualistic view of life that ultimately condemns him.

To conclude, The Picture of Dorian Gray is to a greater extent a cautionary tale than it is a model for emulation. Even though Wilde wanted to ensure that the novel emulated the harsh truth of Victorian corruption and was condemned at his libel trial in 1895 for 'gross indecency', the novel acts not only as a cautionary tale in regards to being true to one's self under the pressure of societal forces, but a caution against not being able to control Art itself: this resulting in the deaths of Dorian and Basil.