

A question of morality according to the picture of dorian gray

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Morality in The Picture of Dorian Gray

Introduction

Morality and one's own moral scale plays a large role in The Picture of Dorian Gray. Morality can be described as one's own principles regarding the distinction between right and wrong. One's moral scale is constantly shifting due to factors in the world around them, which is usually the people one surrounds themselves with. In The Picture of Dorian Gray, Dorian finds himself committing wicked actions due to changes in his moral scale. In the novel, we see that Dorian is made aware of his youthful good looks and wishes to be young forever. He then uses this to his advantage as he is able to get away with committing horrific acts because of his good looks. Regardless of this, the shift in Dorian's moral scale and thus the wicked acts he commits are a result of Lord Henry's mentorship rather than his own pursuit of eternal youth.

Lord Henry's Morals in The Picture of Dorian Gray

Starting in the very beginning of the novel, it is made obvious that Lord Henry's morals do not align with what one would consider a highly moral person. We immediately see that Lord Henry is amoral. This lack of morality is portrayed when he is discussing his marriage with Basil as he says " You seem to forget that I am married, and the one charm of marriage is that it makes a life of deception absolutely necessary for both parties. I never know where my wife is, and my wife never knows what I am doing" (Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray, 3). Saying that deception is necessary in a marriage contradicts what a marriage should be about. Deception/lying is the last

thing that should be present in a good marriage. This idea gives initial insight into where Lord Henry's morals lie.

Later in the story, Lord Henry gives us another look into what his morals are. While he is having a conversation with Dorian and Basil, Lord Henry states "Discord is to be forced to be in harmony with others. One's own life - that is the important thing. As for the lives of one's neighbours, if one wishes to be a prig or a Puritan, one can flaunt one's moral views about them, but they are not one's concern. Besides, individualism has really the higher aim" (Wilde 57). Lord Henry is saying that one should not be concerned with other people as it is more important to be concerned with one's self. He stresses that individualism is way more important than being worried about other people. Lord Henry then goes on to state "Women, as some witty Frenchman once put it, inspire us with the desire to do masterpieces, and always prevent us from carrying them out" (Wilde 58). By saying this, Lord Henry is saying that women inspire men to be great but they hold them back from actually obtaining greatness. Through Lord Henry's statements regarding marriage, individualism, and women, we see that he is selfish and amoral. He is truly only concerned with himself and not those around him.

Dorian Gray in the beginning of The Picture of Dorian Gray

In the beginning of the novel, Dorian is portrayed as being young and handsome as well as pure. He is neither highly moral or amoral, he is immoral. This young innocence is best described by Lord Henry when he notes that "he was certainly wonderfully handsome, with his finely-curved scarlet lips, his frank blue eyes, his crisp gold hair. There was something in

his face that made one trust him at once. All the candour of youth was there, as well as all youth's passionate purity" (Wilde 11-12). Dorian is a handsome young man who has never done anything un-pure. His youth and innocence go hand and hand with each other and this makes it easy for anyone to trust him. Lord Henry immediately notices this which leads to him wanting to influence him.

Lord Henry's Influence Over Dorian

Shortly after Lord Henry meets Dorian and notices the distinct characteristics, he wastes no time before talking to him and influencing him with his ideals. When talking to Dorian, Lord Henry says " Don't squander the gold of your days, listening to the tedious, trying to improve the hopeless failure, or giving away your life to the ignorant, the common, or the vulgar. [...] Be always reaching for new sensations. Be afraid of nothing [...] The moment I met you I saw that you were quite unconscious of what you really are" (Wilde 16-17). Lord Henry immediately tries to instill his selfish values upon Dorian. He wants Dorian to enjoy his youth and not waste any of time helping others. He believes that Dorian should only be focused on himself and finding new pleasures in life. Soon after Lord Henry's initial introduction to Dorian, he is thinking to himself when he notes " he would try to be to Dorian Gray what without knowing it, the lad was to the painter [...] He would seek to dominate him - had already, indeed, half done so" (Wilde 27). Lord Henry wants to influence Dorian in the same way that Dorian influenced Basil. He wants to shape the way that Dorian sees the world. Lord Henry is aware that he has already made a strong impression on Dorian, but he knows that there is still more to be done if he wants to fully transform him.

Early on the novel we are told of Lord Henry's amoral views on marriage and women. He then tries to use these ideas to influence Dorian to feel a similar way. While having a conversation with Dorian, Lord Henry says "'Never marry at all, Dorian. Men marry because they are tired; women because they are curious: both are disappointed. [...] My dear boy, no woman is a genius. Women are a decorative sex. They never have anything to say'" (Wilde 34). Lord Henry takes his views on marriage and his personal experience to influence Dorian to not want to get married. He wants Dorian to enjoy his youth as marriage could get in the way of that. As soon as Dorian mentions him being in love with a genius actor, Lord Henry states that women can't be geniuses and refers to them as a "decorative sex". By telling this to Dorian, Lord Henry wants to influence him to adopt his immoral views of women since being in a marriage may ruin the person that Lord Henry wants Dorian to be.

When Dorian finds out that he has essentially murdered Sibyl Vane he is at first devastated as he exclaims "Oh Harry, how I loved her once! It seems years ago to me now. She was everything to me" (Wilde 72). Lord Henry proceeds to influence Dorian by saying "But you must think of that lonely death [...] as a strange lurid fragment from some Jacobean tragedy [...] The girl never really lived, and so she has never really died [...] The moment she touched actual life, she marred it, and it marred her, and so she passed away" (Wilde 75). Lord Henry was able to convince Dorian that Sibyl's death was less real than a death in a play. Since Sibyl was an actress, she never really lived and therefore she never really died. At this point, it is made clear

just how much of an influence Lord Henry has had on Dorian's morals as he is able to now look past the death of a woman he once loved.

Dorian's Moral Regression throughout the story

Dorian begins the shift to being amoral early on in the novel. Dorian is planning to go to the theatre with Lord Henry and Basil would rather he not go as he says "'Don't go to the theatre to-night, Dorian [...] Stop and dine with me'" (Wilde 22). But regardless of what Basil wants, Dorian responds by saying "'I can't, Basil [...] Because I have promised Lord Henry Wotton to go with him'" (Wilde 22). This scene represents Dorian's shift from the high moral ways of Basil to the amoral ways of Lord Henry. Dorian chooses to leave Basil to go to the theatre with Lord Henry just as he chooses to leave the pure and innocent life behind and choose a life of selfishness and lacking morals.

Following this incident, the next event that displays a major shift in Dorian's values is his relationship with Sibyl Vane. Though he had previously broken Sibyl's heart, he initially wanted to make amends and even not see Lord Henry anymore as he knew the influence that he was having on him. When referring to the incident and Dorian's thoughts, the narrator states " He would resist temptation. He would not see Lord Henry anymore [...] He would go back to Sibyl Vane, make her amends, marry her, try to love her again. Yes, it was his duty to do so" (Wilde 67). Dorian understands that he has done wrong and is not amoral at this point in the story. He knows that the right thing to do is to marry Sibyl Vane regardless of if he loves her or not. Once he learns of her suicide and meets with Lord Henry, he is then able to

shrug off her death and move on quickly. While later talking to Basil, Dorian refers to Sibyl's death as "one of the great romantic tragedies of the age" (80). This incident displays Dorian shifting further on the moral scale to being amoral.

The final incident that displays Dorian's complete lack of morals comes later on in the novel when he murders Basil. The narrator states "Dorian Gray glanced at the picture, and suddenly an uncontrollable feeling of hatred came over him [...] He rushed at him, and dug the knife into the great vein that is behind the ear, crushing the man's head down on the table" (Wilde 116). Basil had higher morals than anyone else in the novel. Dorian's murder of Basil represents his complete loss of morals as Basil cared for Dorian in a way that wasn't selfish. After the murder, it is clear that Dorian has been completely corrupted by Lord Henry and is now amoral.

Counterargument

One could argue that Dorian's moral scale shift and becoming amoral is a result of his youth/desire for eternal youth and the vainness that came along with it. He could have been doomed due to his amoral ways regardless if Lord Henry had been influencing him or not as Dorian was simply being his real self. The idea of Dorian's desire for eternal youth is brought up early in the novel when he exclaims "How sad is it! I shall grow old, and horrible, and dreadful. But this picture will remain always young [...] If it were only the other way!" (Wilde 19). Dorian continues to exclaim that "When I find that I am growing old, I shall kill myself" (Wilde 19). Through Dorian's desire to remain young forever, he becomes vain and selfish. When Basil is upset with

Lord Henry for negatively influencing Dorian, Lord Henry responds with “ It is the real Dorian Gray - that is all” (Wilde 20). Dorian was not an amoral person when the novel began. He neither had high morals or was amoral. He was simply an innocent young man. It was Lord Henry who instilled his wretched ideas into Dorian along the way until Dorian eventually became amoral. Had Lord Henry not been influencing Dorian, he would not have abandoned and killed Sibyl Vane and he thus would not have killed Basil. Lord Henry knowingly worked to corrupt Basil throughout the course of the novel.

Conclusion

By the end of The Picture of Dorian Gray, Dorian was amoral. He committed multiple wicked acts against innocent people. He began the novel as an innocent young man but as a result of Lord Henry’s mentorship rather than his own pursuit of eternal youth, he only cared about his looks and began to live a selfish life without regard for others.