

Oscar wilde's dorian gray

Profession, Writer



Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray* received immediate criticism when it was published in 1890, being described as contaminated, unclean, and nauseous. The criticism stemmed from the challenges that were made by Oscar Wilde regarding Victorian morality. The novel was written in the aesthetic era, an era where authors attempted to reverse the role of art, to have no purpose besides being beautiful. Critics of the novel did not like this idea, fearing that it would corrupt readers, specifically their moral values.

English philosopher Alfred Whitehead gave this view on morality, "What is morality in any given time or place? It is what the majority then and there happen to like and immorality is what they dislike." Oscar Wilde added a preface to the novel a year later, in which he said, "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book, books are well written or badly written. That is all." Adding onto Whitehead's view, other morals exist outside of the majority, and people will develop their own morals based on how they interpret a situation. When Wilde reacts by saying that immoral and moral books don't exist, I agree.

The perspective that I developed in tying the 2 quotes together is that yes, a book is not written as moral or immoral, but it is viewed moral or immoral, depending on the reader's own beliefs. I will argue that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* suggests that art can have immoral effects, but the artist should not bear complete responsibility. The prime purpose of art in the Victorian Era to most viewers was to give concrete moral values. The concept of Hedonism in the *Picture of Dorian Gray* is evident throughout, and was the root for its criticism.

Lord Henry is responsible for placing these pleasure-seeking ideas in Dorian's mind, as Dorian became obsessed with Lord Henry. In Wilde's time period, as mentioned earlier, the artists were challenging accepted social norms. It is evident that Lord Henry is also challenging accepted morals when he says, " Modern morality consists in accepting the standard of one's age. I consider that for any man of culture to accept the standard of his age is a form of the grossest immorality. " Challenging social norms is one characteristic that Wilde and Lord Henry share.

Therefore, since this is a big part of the novel, I argue that Wilde wrote the novel as if he was Lord Henry. This is important because some view Lord Henry as the main reason for Dorian's downfall. To counter this, I want to point out that Dorian is the one who let Lord Henry influence him. Further, when Lord Henry gives Dorian the mysterious yellow book, it is Dorian's choice to base his life around this guide on how to live a pleasure-seeking life. The main argument I am making here is that Lord Henry cannot be fully blamed for Dorian's downfall.

As it related to Wilde, he does write immoral ideas for his time. For example, hedonism and homosexuality. The point is yes Wilde wrote about these topics, but he should not be held responsible and considered immoral as an artist because his time period rejected these views. A big part of the novel that needs to be looked at if Wilde wrote the book through Lord Henry's eyes is the fact that Dorian ended up dead at the end of the book and Lord Henry didn't face consequence. This is Wilde suggesting that Lord Henry's sayings, books, and thrill seeking lifestyle are all irrelevant to Dorian's morality.

Relating this to real life, Wilde is suggesting that a piece of art is not based on the moral value of the artist, but rather the way a viewer lets the work influence him or her. The slow deteriorating of Dorian's painting is a reflection of the sins he has committed. For example, when he embarrasses Sibyl and it leads to her suicide. Another example is Dorian's killing of Basil. Finally, when Dorian attempts to change his lifestyle and not screw over another girl, the painting worsens. The painting mirrors an image of sins that Dorian cannot erase or escape guilt.

Dorian stabbing the painting shows that he died from his own sin, not by any influence. The art is then returned to its original beauty. This shows that Wilde is suggesting that art should be kept separate from morals in society. Further, this is justified by art being viewed in this new movement as strictly beautiful; it bears no responsibility for a moral purpose. An artist's responsibility to morals is again minimized. Another point I would like to bring up is that if *The Picture of Dorian Gray* came out in a different time period, it would not have been so heavily criticized.

This is because people would have had different morals and immorals, as reflected in Whitehead's previous quote. If you agree with this, you have to agree with the argument that an artist is not fully responsible for any moral or immoral judgment of his or her art. The final perspective I would like to point out is for those who interpreted Wilde as writing the story through the eyes of Basil. At some points, I can agree with this, and it strengthens the argument that Wilde feared criticism by a good majority of people at his time. This is evident when Basil is afraid to show off his painting, in fear of what others will interpret it as.

This is similar to Wilde's work of Dorian Gray, in that Wilde wrote a story that challenged some moral beliefs, and was hesitant as to what people might think. When Basil finally does reveal his painting it is viewed as beautiful, but slowly deteriorates. I argue that this is how Wilde felt about his work, that it was the perfect novel, but it to was brought down by heavy criticism of another person. The point here is that Wilde did not intend everything in the story to be a moral message, he used his characters actions as puzzles pieces for each reader to put together their own beliefs.

Therefore, his critics should not hold him morally responsible. The belief of hedonism is demonstrated throughout the book, as mentioned earlier; in the way that Dorian lives his life. This is an example of Wilde reflecting his new movement's ideas, to live for beauty. In the article *The Conflict Between Aestheticism and Morality in Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray*, author Patrick Duggan makes the observation that hedonism is what Wilde was attempting to introduce through Dorian, but at the end of the novel Wilde puts restraint on this lifestyle.

When Dorian cannot reverse his sins, Wilde is suggesting that people still need to consider the consequences of their actions. Further, yes Wilde displays a thrill seeking lifestyle in the *Picture of Dorian Gray*, but he also suggests that the artistic movement he is involved in will only survive with SOME limitation. This view complies with my argument that art can have an immoral effect on people. Which is why an artist must have SOME consideration, but the artist will not bear complete responsibility because each viewer is going to look at artwork differently.