

Example of reality and its metaphors in against nature and the picture of dorian ...

[Art & Culture](#), [Symbolism](#)



Symbolist literature often discusses the abstract - the essence of symbolism is to discuss the truth through indirect means. Symbolism is full of metaphors, often discussing the nature of reality. It can be argued that it is difficult or not as interesting to get across the author's ideas about life and reality in a realist or naturalist way; simply stating the obvious message of the book through realistic actions that the characters or the plot takes is but one way to get across a message. Symbolism seeks to hide those messages in metaphors and objects that are different from the explicit message the author wishes to convey. Two prominent examples of the ways Symbolist authors deal with the subject of reality are Huysman's *A Rebours* (Against Nature) and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In both of these works, the protagonists enter an artificial world that represents their own inner worlds, specifically in regards to their desire to be artistically and socially respected.

In *Against Nature*, Juan Des Essientes, a remarkable nobleman, decides to retreat into his own world, where his own aesthetics are rewarded and he is given everything he wants. Tired of the decadent lifestyle he lived in Paris, he is sick of the rest of humankind, and decides to retreat to his home in the country, filling it with varied pieces of art- " It became perfectly clear to him that he could entertain no hope of finding in someone else the same aspirations and antipathies; no hope of linking up with a mind which, like his own, took pleasure in a life of studious decrepitude; no hope of associating an intelligence as sharp and wayward as his own with any author or scholar" (Huysman. P. 6). To that end, he sits in retreat, discussing various artists and writers of the time, thinking about his past in Paris while studying paintings

and creating his own unique world around him. Des Esseintes ends up creating his own little realm that is catered to him and him alone, cutting out all things that upset him or cause him distress - i. e. the decadent lifestyles of Europe.

Des Esseintes' aesthetic world that he creates for himself is the reflection of the inner world of the character. The man is fed up with other people, so his new reality is one that is uninhabited. Instead of communicating with the real world, he merely imagines his own, one that he can control. Meanwhile, all of the things inside his artificial reality are representative of his personality; he is able to renounce the Romantic writers but reward other Symbolist writers, talk down on the Golden Age Latin writers but celebrate Silver Age ones - "Goya's savage verve, his harsh, brutal genius, captivated Des Esseintes. On the other hand, the universal admiration his works had won rather put him off, and for years he had refrained from framing them, for fear that if he hung them up, the first idiot who saw them would might feel obliged to dishonour them with a few inanities and go into stereotyped ecstasies over them" (Huysman, p. 108). All of these opinions are strongly held, and he seems to be wholly satisfied that he does not have to quantify them or have them questioned by other people. He is perfectly happy in this artificial world of his own making, since it is a circular, narcissistic view of himself.

The physical environment of this artificial world is also symbolic of his personality. His dining room looks much like the cabin of a ship. All of these things are used to further fill in the details of his ideal world; everything is artificial, but he does not care, since it is what he wants. He feels the

romanticism of a life at sea, and he imagines himself to be an adventurous person, so he must have that component of adventure to his life; " He imagined himself on a brig, between decks, and curiously he contemplated the marvelous, mechanical fish, wound like clocks, which passed before the porthole or clung to the artificial sea-weed. While he inhaled the odor of tar, introduced into the room shortly before his arrival, he examined colored engravings, hung on the walls, which represented, just as at Lloyd's office and the steamship agencies, steamers bound for Valparaiso and La Platte, and looked at framed pictures on which were inscribed the itineraries of the Royal Mail Steam Packet, the Lopez and the Valery Companies, the freight and port calls of the Atlantic mail boats" (p. 15). By imagining this, it allows him to feel more vividly than he would actually experience in a real cabin; he creates an idealized version of the " life at sea." This makes his imagination more real than reality for him. This seems like an example of taking a positive benefit from his experiment in the artificial reality, like Dorian's painting.

Rejecting nature, he creates his own artificial nature that lies within what he thinks nature should be - a garden of poisonous flowers. He first only collects rare exotic blooms which are able to live by artful devices for a proper temperature. The artificial flowers are more real to him than the real flowers, following along with the need for false idealism in his world. Going one step beyond he finally creates a garden of poisonous flowers, and picks real flowers that 'look' artificial, which have monstrous and weird looking; they have the appearance of artificial skin ridged with false veins, look as though consumed by syphilis and leprosy, appear embossed with wounds and have

stems seamed with gashes like lambs flecked with black. (p. 54-56). Even animals are not spared his tweaking to make them that much more decadent; he embeds gems in the shell of a tortoise. The purpose is only to satisfy his desire for decorating his artificial world- for the color of an Oriental rug to be harmonized by the contrast of the striking color of the tortoise (p. 28). However, that tortoise finally dies; this is a symbolic indicator of the poisonous nature of his attempts to shape the world around him to suit his needs. It suggests that although Des Esseintes tries to be against nature, if living thing is transformed against nature, it is actually unable to live longer. This is the reality of life. In fact, he can make his world look artificial, but it is impossible to make nature artificial and sustainable. The death of the tortoise is one of the first cracks in the foundation of his artificial life.

In Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Grey*, Dorian is a self-centered young man who is entering the intellectual and social elite of England. Making a Faustian bargain, he makes a deal to stay young forever; meanwhile, a portrait of him ages in real time. While this happens, however, Dorian gets to disappear into a world of hedonism, where he indulges in sex, money, drugs, and even murder. Dorian Grey is the very definition of uncanny; he is a figure of exceptional beauty, the subject of endless infatuation and aestheticism by those around him. As nothing he might do will change his age, he is freed from the responsibility of caring for himself or others. This is his own artificial world that Dorian has created for himself - much like Des Esseintes, the world of the immortal Dorian Grey is a symbol for the way he always wanted

to live his life in the first place: always having youth, vigor and superiority over others.

Beauty reigns in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*; the appearance of a person rules over all, and beastly personalities can hide behind a pretty face and get away with it. Of course, in order to accomplish this, Dorian has to give up his soul. By doing so, he projects his own sins onto the painting, creating the disquiet of an aging painting contrasting with the eternally youthful human being. That same contrast is what brings about the disturbing nature of *Dorian Gray*, and the pretty face belying such an old, evil personality, a thought he considers when seeing it - "Perhaps if his life became pure, he would be able to expel every sign of evil passion from his face" (p. 261). The beauty of Dorian's face and the ugliness of the painting, which gets uglier as each sin is perpetrated, is symbolic for the ugliness of man that one always tries to keep under the surface. In Dorian's ideal artificial world, he never has to deal with the consequences of what he has done; even after murdering Basil, Dorian gets away with it due to his charm and his youth, not to mention his cunning (through blackmailing Alan Campbell into destroying the body) (p. 200). Dorian never looks at the painting if he does not have to; he just wants to keep doing what he is doing without consequence - "Experience is merely the name men gave to their mistakes" (Wilde, p. 69).

The essence of *The Picture of Dorian Grey* lies in the portrait that was taken of him; much like with *Des Essientes*, Dorian's secret lies within art.

However, Dorian's own imaginary, artificial world happens because of art, not in service of it - while *Des Essientes* wishes to make a fantasy world to

admire art on his own terms, Dorian uses art to immortalize himself, since he simply wants to live forever and do what he wants. Wilde uses art to examine people from within, to show the intransient nature of art as part of our own wish for immortality - "The reason I will not exhibit this picture is that I am afraid that I have shown in it the secret of my own soul" (Wilde, p. 15). In this way, art in both works is symbolic for one's inner world; the art that Des Essientes admires in his own imaginary world shows just how obsessed he is with it in his heart, while for Dorian art is the means to an end - a way to showcase his own upper-class status, his invincible wealth and youth. This imaginary world gives Dorian everything he could want, but takes away what he really needs: his humanity - "What does it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" (Wilde, p. 449). Dorian's inner world is ugly and spiteful; the painting increasingly reflects that. The painting itself becomes symbolic of Dorian, showing the dark side of the ideal, hedonistic artificial life he has set up for himself.

In conclusion, both *Against Nature* and *The Picture of Dorian Grey* present idealized, artificial versions of the world both main characters would like to live in. Des Essientes, through his largesse, creates a world that has everything he ever wanted; all of his favorite authors, no one to disagree with him, and the ability to choose the most beautiful, yet artificial things. Dorian Grey, because only his painting ages, gets to live consequence-free and live up to every vice he could have ever dreamed of. The painting is symbolic of his guilt, which has no place in his ideal world; therefore, he

hides it. The ugliness of the painting symbolizes him ignoring or pushing aside all of the consequences of his actions, as he attempts to live without the need for guilt or selflessness. These ideas of decadent men creating their own perfect worlds for themselves is symbolic of our need for self-validation; we always have to believe our opinions are correct, that we can get away with anything, and that nothing bad will ever happen to us. These men get to live that dream, but their eventual fates teach us that this kind of dream is impossible to truly attain.