

Dorian gray character analysis focusong essay



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Nevertheless, there are some cases when this line of thought may be justified: not in the way of mindlessly attributing every physical event of a book to the life of its author, but in the sense of parallels and the personal, social and ethical circumstances under which the literary work was created. Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* can indeed be seen as such a case. Although most of the novel's plot can hardly be construed as an autobiography, the situation in which it was composed all but predetermined its themes and overall message to have a significance above and beyond the realm of harmless fiction.

A basic overview of the book's characters is necessary as our starting point. Dorian Gray is a symbol of self-absorbed youth, initially innocent, loved yet unloving and possessing a beauty entirely at odds with his personality which becomes progressively more corrupt. He is faced with the decision between following the hedonistic Lord Henry who, incidentally, triggers the decay of Dorian's soul by passing the notion of eternal youth on to him, and the painter Basil Hallward who personifies unselfish love and devotion.

Dorian, of course, picks the former and completes this choice by eventually murdering Basil, thus losing all remaining links to Basil's principles before causing his own destruction by stabbing the hideously disfigured portrait of his own true self. The apparent moral of the story is uncontested: it is the state of the soul that really matters, not the temporary beauty of a young man afraid of age. On the whole, there is no direct conflict with the beliefs which the infamously rigid Victorian morality is known to have espoused.

However, countless smaller transgressions of the standards of the era litter the pages and can only be understood against the backdrop of Victorian England with its inflexible rules for practically every aspect of life, both public and private. Today's readers will arguably find nothing scandalous in the style of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, being used to much less restrained portrayals of sexuality in popular culture than Victorian homoerotic subtext.

The conventional nineteenth century reader, on the other hand, would either miss such references entirely or find them grossly inappropriate for well-known literature, although they are by no means emphasized in the text. An example of such subtle yet undesirable coding is the 'yellow book' Lord Henry uses to 'poison' Dorian:[2] although it cannot be asserted for certain, it has been argued that it represents J. K. Huysmans's *A Rebours*, a true Bible of decadence, which Wilde read shortly after getting married in Paris and which deepened his understanding of his sexuality.

3] Dorian is so moved by it that an entire section is devoted to his perusal of the book, itself referred to as telling 'the story of his own life, written before he had lived it. '[4] As this instance shows, Oscar Wilde the man and Oscar Wilde the author do frequently mingle. This is, of course, quite a bold statement, so it shall be examined further. Wilde's turbulent relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas, often known as simply 'Bosie', has been frequently addressed as one of the crucial points of Wilde's life, but as Bosie was not the primary impulse driving *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, his part in Wilde's life shall not be the focus here.

The inspiration for this book can indeed be traced to one of Wilde's acquaintances, but in this case it is his once lover John Gray who served as an unwitting model for Dorian's character; he is also said to have been exceptionally beautiful. The fact that Wilde did not even bother to change the surname speaks volumes about his unapologetic attitude.

He did change the first name to Dorian, but even this might have been for aesthetic reasons—' John' is, after all, quite commonplace—rather than for the purpose of disguising his source of inspiration.

Reading Wilde's descriptions of Dorian throughout the novel, one can indeed notice that their wording sounds remarkably affectionate for a depiction of a man who is well on his way to total corruption: The lad started and drew back. He was bareheaded, and the leaves had tossed his rebellious curls and tangled all their gilded threads. There was a look of fear in his eyes, such as people have when they are suddenly awakened. His finely chiselled nostrils quivered, and some hidden nerve shook the scarlet of his lips and left them trembling.

[5]

Another key point that may have been influenced by Wilde's own life, this time less favourably, is the treatment of Dorian's proposed marriage in the book when he allegedly falls in love with the actress, Sibyl Vane, whose specialty seem to be Shakespearean parts. Dorian announces his love for her to his friends who are intriguingly amused by the prospect, as if there were nothing substantial to Dorian's unexpected love affair. Lord Henry's reaction to Dorian's passionate avowals illustrates it best: ' I am not laughing, Dorian; <https://assignbuster.com/dorian-gray-character-analysis-focusong-essay/>

at least I am not laughing at you. But you should not say the greatest romance of your life.

You should say the first romance of your life.

You will always be loved, and you will always be in love with love. A grande passion is the privilege of people who have nothing to do. That is the one use of the idle classes of a country. Don't be afraid.

There are exquisite things in store for you. This is merely the beginning. '[6] Moreover, it is plain to see that Dorian himself can only love Sibyl as long as she remains perfect. The moment she is made weak by her infatuation and spoils her acting which first attracted Dorian to her, he changes his mind swiftly: