

A picture's worth a thousand words: the role of art in the picture of dorian gray...



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Throughout history, art has played a major role in portraying the structure of society and the different roles people play in it. In Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, art seems to dictate the life of young Dorian Gray to the point of moral insanity, and eventually death. In the preface of the novel, though, Wilde states that "All art is quite useless." This statement is refuted as the novel progresses, as it becomes clear that art indeed does have the ability to control one's actions and define one's overall personal identity. Because of the effect the portrait of Dorian Gray has on its subject matter, it is revealed that art certainly plays an important role in the life of its spectators. There are several statements made by characters throughout the novel that seem to refute claims made in the preface of the novel. One such statement is made in chapter seven, as Dorian contemplates the relationship between his actual life and the life portrayed by the portrait: "But the picture? What was he to say of that? It held the secret of his life, and told his story. It had taught him to love his own beauty. Would it teach him to loathe his own soul? Would he ever look at it again?" (99). Through this psychological revelation, it becomes clear that Dorian is being strangely affected by Basil's painting. By asserting that the portrait "held the secret of his life," the reader is led to believe that the portrait, and not Dorian himself, is the one in control of his actions. Because the portrait does show the consequences of Dorian's everyday wrongdoings, one could assume that his soul is connected to the painting, as he wished when he stated in chapter two, "If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture were to grow old! For that—for that—I would give everything! Yes, there is nothing in the whole world I would not give! I would give my soul for that!" (30). With these vain words, Dorian becomes connected to the painting on a level that is

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irreversible and foolish. Why, if art is supposed to be useless, would a young man of such high stature feel the need to essentially bargain away his soul for the sake of remaining like the artistic portrayal of himself? The painting becomes a direct influence on Dorian's actions, and plays a major part in the outcome of his life. Another example that seems to refute this argument is the emphasis placed on several different art forms throughout the novel by Henry and others. Several mediums, from literature to theater, play a role in influencing Dorian. Dorian finds and begins reading the so-called "yellow book," which seems to influence him in a strange way: "After a few minutes he became absorbed. It was the strangest book that he had ever read" (134). We learn that the book has a profound effect on Dorian, as chapter eleven opens with the statement, "For years, Dorian Gray could not free himself from the influence of this book. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he never sought to free himself from it" (137). Whatever information this book contains affects Dorian in a way that he has never been affected before, and he seems to be intrigued on a level unnatural for something of this nature. Another influential artistic medium that affects Dorian is the theater. As he watches Sybil Vane perform in the role of Juliet, he is initially mesmerized by her. He falls in love with Sybil, not for the girl she really is, but because of the way she portrays her roles. In this respect, it is safe to say that Dorian loves art, rather than loving any other person. Love is a strong emotion; to say that one is not affected by love, even by the love of an art form, would be foolish. As it becomes easy to see in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, art can play a major role in how one lives out his daily life.

Whether it's directly through a self-portrait of an individual, the message one gets from a work of literature, or the feeling one gains from seeing a <https://assignbuster.com/a-pictures-worth-a-thousand-words-the-role-of-art-in-the-picture-of-dorian-gray/>

performance, art can make or break the sanity and emotional state of an individual. As the old saying goes, "A picture's worth a thousand words;" however, one's life is far more valuable. The decisions one makes should be based on his or her own feelings, not a work of art.