

Winter February 15, 2019

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Abstract:

This paper investigates aestheticism and authorship in the Oscar Wilde's only novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). Victorian literature is usually read against the relationship between art and reality. The literary merit of a book is determined by the degree of its conformity with the moral values of the time. This paper offers a detached reading of the novel where the value of the book is found in its ability to initiate the reader into an aesthetic world. The research argues that Wilde fragments the act of artistic creation among the artist (the painter Basil), the sitter (Dorian Gray) and the audience (Lord Henry Wotton). This fragmentation renders the novel aesthetically autonomous from its reality. Aesthetic autonomy contributes to the debate of morality in Victorian literature by placing the work of art in an alternative sphere where normative values cease to apply.

Key words: aesthetic autonomy, authorship, realism, subject positions, Victorian morality

Cites as: Ghazel, A. A. (2019). If Looks Could Kill: Looking through the Artist's Lenses in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). *Arab World English Journal for Translation & Literary Studies*, 3 (1) 136-144 . DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awejtls/vol3no1.11>

Introduction

Wilde's oeuvre and philosophical intellect stress the supremacy of art as an autonomous entity. His insistence on aesthetic autonomy places him ahead of his peers whose works sought to make the reader "recognize them as a continuation of their own lives or an extension of reality" (Peters, 1999). Instances of Wilde's aesthetic vision can be found everywhere in his oeuvre. In the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, he writes "No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style" (Wilde, 1994, p.5). In "The Decay of Lying", he asserts that life follows life and imitates it, and not the other way round. (Wilde, 1997). Aesthetic autonomy in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is formulated in Wilde's view of authorship. He displaces artistic creativity from the artist and divides it between the artist and the audience. Wilde achieves aesthetic autonomy by separating the artist from his art and art from reality.

Aesthetic Autonomy

The preface to the novel states that "there is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book" and that "no artist has ethical sympathies." (Wilde, 1994, p.5). This amoral pose of the novel is maintained through a reshuffling of the moral values and a reconsideration of sin and morality. Wilde endows sin with a new meaning that rescues it from its derogatory nature and presents it as a transformative agency. This agency is necessary not only to purify the soul, but also to attain individual growth. Establishing the aesthetic value of the novel is as important as finding its moral message, since in both cases the author's relation to his work is at play. It is necessary- therefore- to consider two inter-related areas in the novel: authorship, and aestheticism. The first area addresses the relationship between the author and the novel. Wilde insists on splitting the artist from his art. The second area overlaps with the first insofar as it separates the novel from its historical context. It gainsays the conception that art imitates life and supports the notion of aesthetic autonomy. It is in the relation between this area and the next one that amorality can be understood. That is to say, the aesthetic concern of the novel accounts for its theory of self-development.

The study of the above-mentioned areas cannot be done independently from character design. The novel introduces a set of characters, representing different and opposing moral directions. The first moral direction is expressed in the character of the painter, who believes in an ordered universe with a fair moral order where good is rewarded and evil is punished. He stands for the morality of his time that places considerable weight on subordinating the individual to social and moral standards. He represents those people, who are –in Henry Wotton's expression "afraid of themselves" (Wilde, 1994, p.45). Society channels human action towards social and collective goals, negating any effort of individual growth. In sharp contrast to this ordered view of society, stands Henry Wotton's frivolous attachment to life. This opposing moral stance is articulated in the relationship between Henry and Dorian. He believes in a world with neither faith nor purpose. For him, society represses the natural creative agency in the individual and mars human life. He believes that society creates a fear inside people to the point that they grow wary of themselves. Henry is to Dorian; what theory is to practice. He exerts a significant influence on

him. Dorian provides him with the possibility of testing the validity of his epigrams and quenching his scientific curiosity.

The first area that should be covered in our analysis of aesthetic autonomy is authorship. The study of authorship in a work of literature is both tempting and difficult. The author is usually hidden behind the characters. In the case of Wilde's novel, hiding the author is intentional as the preface of the novel tells us "to reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim" (Wilde, 1994, p.5). According to the Victorian conventions, the meaning of a work of literature is contingent on the intentions of the writer. Any separation between the writer and his text would have deviated from the literary tradition of the time. The late 1960s marked a turning point in the history of authorship when Ronald Barthes published his seminal essay "The Death of the Author". His work redefined the relationship between author and text, maintaining that the meaning of the text is not dependent on the writer's life (Gabler, 2012). The role of the author in the text was at the centre of several literary theories in the second half of the 20th century, and opinions seemed to go in two directions. The first direction establishes a direct link between the author and his oeuvre, while the second direction presents the writer as a phantom whose relation to the work of art is not only ambiguous but also unnecessary (Gomel, 2003)

The problem of authorship has more to it than separating the text from its author. It has significant implications as the relationship between art and artist, textuality and subjectivity. Defining the exact nature of the relationship between author and text serves as defensive tactic in acquitting Wilde of immorality charges. This is more so when we take Wilde's assertion in the preface to the novel that "to reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim." (Wilde, 1994, p.5). This statement calls for a separation between the 'actual writer' and 'the textual author' of the text. It is, in fact, 'a split in subjectivity.' (Gomel, 2003, p76). The actual writer is the physical self that inhabits the mortal body, while the textual author is a subject that is constantly 'reproducible' and immortal.

Recognizing the split in subjectivity between author and writer helps to reconsider the novel's position in its historical context (McCormack, 2000). If Wilde, the physical subject who wrote the novel is different from the spirit or the talent that inspired it, then the novel is as separate from reality as the author from the writer (Taghizadeh & Jeihouni, 2014). In fact, separating the spirit of the writer from his physicality was a common literary practice at the time of Oscar Wilde. This can be seen in some writing conventions of the time like anonymous writing and the use of pen or pseudo names to publish. It is also reminiscent of the tendency to objectify the work of art that would later characterize modernism.

The second area that needs to be considered is aestheticism. As it has been argued earlier, this area overlaps with the first in that it resolves the debate on authorship. What aestheticism offers to the reader is the possibility of enjoying the artistic value of the work independently from both the author and the reality to which it responds (Rodrigues & Barbara, 2013). The relationship between authorship and aestheticism is formulated in the novel in the way the three male characters relate to the painting. The novel's main concern is not so much Dorian's growing interest in his

picture as it is the production, the reception and the interpretation of this picture. The picture offers Dorian, Basil and Lord Henry the opportunity to formulate their views of human life. It is in Dorian's reaction to his portrait that the novel's message is conveyed: "Oh, if it were only the other way! If the picture could change, and I could be always what I am now" (Wilde, 1994, p. 35).

Wilde fragments the artistic self among the three male characters of the novel. It is divided into three "subject positions" (Gomel, 2003, p79). These are: the artist (Basil Hallward), the sitter (Dorian Gray) and the audience (Lord Henry Wotton). The three subject positions collaborate in the production of the portrait. It is Basil Hallward who paints the picture, and it is Dorian Gray who sits for it and Lord Henry Wotton who watches it. His role as an audience should not be underestimated because the wish of Dorian to exchange places with his portrait is produced under the influence of his words. One could go even further to suggest that the last minutes in the painting are decisive in that Dorian's acquaintance with Henry and his discussion with him have improved his sitting and produced that magic look, without which Basil wouldn't have finished the portrait. Basil acknowledges Henry's when he says: "Quite finished," said the painter. "And you have sat splendidly to-day. I am awfully obliged to you?" (Wilde, 1994, p.32)

Once the wish is fulfilled, Dorian becomes an image pretending to be a real human being or to use Wilde's expression "a gracious shape of art." (Wilde, 1994, p.67). Wilde uses the painting in a metonymic way to expose the split between art and reality. Dorian Gray, the hero is a textual persona that comes to dominate and efface the identity of a human being. The transferability between the two identities (the textual and the real one) is the result of Dorian's wish to gain immortality while ascertaining the stability of the work of art. There is a parallel between the portrait and the act of novel writing because the novel reduces the differences between the novel and the portrait by highlighting the dichotomies of the corporeal and the ideal as well as the character and the audience (Gomel, 2003).

The exchange of roles between Dorian and his picture has significant implications for the duality of body and soul that the novel addresses. When he looks at his image in the painting, Henry realizes the disparity between the purity of his soul and the stifling effect of the body. The body confines the soul and hampers its flourishing; a deduction that echoes Lord Henry's theory of the innate creative faculty of the human mind that is repressed by society (Gandrabor, 2015). As he exchanges roles with the portrait, Dorian liberates his soul from the mortality of the 'corporeal'. He parts with his body for the most part of the novel only to reunite with it at the end when he destroys the portrait. The description of the dead Dorian stresses the deformation of the body: "He was withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage (Wilde, 1994, p.255).

The first subject position is the painter, Basil. He states that "there is too much of myself in the thing" (Wilde, 1994, p.9) and this has some implications for Dorian. This statement is further supported by a similar one that specifies that the sitter is merely an accident. He paints himself in another image and his work-as he later explains to Dorian- expresses the tenets of his artistic and aesthetic vision. Basil confesses to Dorian "you became to me that visible incarnation of that unseen ideal whose memory haunts us artists like an exquisite dream." (Wilde, 1994, p.34)

Dorian serves as Basil's muse and incarnates the artist's own dreams and desires. The reader gets a glimpse of Dorian the muse, in the way Basil speaks of him to Lord Henry stating that "he is never more present in my work than when no image of him is there" (Wilde, 1994, p.45).

By having himself projected in his portrait, Basil echoes Gilbert Statement in "The Critic as Artist" that "there is no fine art without self-consciousness." (Wilde, 1997, 975). Self-consciousness pushes Basil to project himself in the portrait. The moment of self-consciousness implies that the artist looks inwardly and discovers his inner impulses to create art. The visionary mission of art consists- according to Wilde- not in transcending the human existence but in discovering the hidden instincts of his being. Basil's hidden impulses are-as many critics have pointed out- homosexual, but that is irrelevant to his artistic voyeurism. What matters in artistic creation is not the outcome but the ability to distance oneself from society through his self-consciousness.

The role of art consists-therefore- in publicizing the inner self of the creator. The portrait is then the projection of this inner self into the external world. This might seem contradictory with Wilde's assertion that the aim of art is reveal art and conceal the artist. It is noteworthy, therefore, that this projection is not complete. The projection of the artist's soul in the work does not suffice for the completion of the creative process. The audience is equally important in this regard. In defence of his novel, Wilde writes "What Dorian's sins are no one knows. He who finds them has brought them" (Wilde, 2000, p.267) His defence of the novel accounts for public aversion to the artist. Society blames artists for undermining and subverting morality. This aversion is rooted in the danger that the artist presents to social institutions insofar as he reveals the hidden and subversive tendencies that exist in all men.

It is much easier to identify Basil's subject position than those of Dorian and Henry. Basil's connection to the portrait stops when he gives it up for Dorian. Unlike Dorian, Basil proves to be able to cut his relationship with the portrait and distance himself from it. He succeeds in dissociating himself from the picture through his adoration of the model more than the work. It is through this dissociation from the painting that he saves himself from it. He managed to develop immunity against it and restrains from a total immersion into the painting that proves lethal in the case of Dorian. Basil detaches himself from the portrait in accordance with his vision of both art and life. Too much involvement in evil is what Basil rejects.

The fragmentation of the artistic self in the novel is a defensive tactic whereby Wilde clears his novel of all charges of immorality. This is most seen in Basil's relation to his work and to Dorian. His subject position in relation to the portrait does not solve the issues of morality and authorship. Oates (1980) comments that the equivocation of the book leaves the reader with the feeling that the book is unfinished since what the reader can possibly get from the novel is "this sense of something riddling and incomplete" (p.420). This gainsays any accusation of immorality.

The second subject position is Lord Henry Wotton. His attachment to the picture is equally harmless in that he manages to keep his distance from the painting. Most of his reactions to it are

lived vicariously in his influence upon Dorian Gray. He is the observer whose remarks complete the painting and whose words to Dorian while sitting for Basil help finish the work. It is somehow difficult to see Henry as the creator of the work. This is mainly because his influence on Dorian is only temporary and soon disappears in the novel. He is merely an external spectator. Lord Henry is more interested in Dorian the man than the portrait. His connection to Dorian is established early in the novel. Lord Henry is highly cynical. His cynicism detaches him from the material world, but when he meets Dorian he finds in him a valuable occasion to invest his theory of a life devoted to the pursuit of pleasure and the repudiation of pain.

The third subject position is Dorian Gray's. His position is the most complex. When he exchanges places with his portrait he draws a boundary between Dorian the person and Dorian the 'model' of the portrait. The two Dorians are opposites. Basil himself is aware of the differences between the two. Jealous of the growing friendship between Dorian and Lord Henry, Basil resorts to the picture- which he still has at that point of the novel- for consolation. He reassures himself that he has not lost his best friend saying that he is staying with "the real Dorian" (Wilde, 1994, p.65). The expression 'real Dorian' implies both a disparity between the two and the fact that Dorian is changing under the influence of Henry. The same awareness appears again, twenty years later when Basil is shown his own portrait in its deformed aspect. At this point he sympathizes more with the man than the portrait and offers to destroy his creation.

Unlike Henry's and Basil's, Dorian's investment in the portrait is absolute. Gomel makes an interesting point about his investment in the portrait noting that it "Both Basil and Henry want to *have* the picture; Dorian wants to *be* the picture." (Gomel, 2003, p.82). By exchanging places with his picture, Dorian aspires to immutability and immortality. In contrast to Basil's original intention to make the portrait the expression of his aesthetic principle, Dorian sees in it the image of the man he wishes to be. His subject position betrays the one intended by Basil. He strives to be the man he sees in the portrait-both immortal and immutable- and he does not realize that he has parted with his humanity in the process. In so doing, Dorian fails to understand both life and art. His search for identity has led him to misperceive the real nature of art as a balance between the author and the subject. On the contrary it leads him to misperceive the real nature of individuality, which is based on the interaction between contradictory and contingent drives and desires.

Dorian's troublesome relation with his body is commonly understood as a giving away of his 'soul'. If the soul is understood in the traditional way as that spiritual substance that inhabits the body and is opposed to it, then this understanding is invalid. It is not the soul that he abandons in the novel, it is the body. What he transfers to the picture is not his soul but the burden of the corporeal. I think that those critics who argue that Dorian has given up his soul for the picture base their findings on some of Dorian's statements like when he invites Basil at the end of the novel-after twenty years of the painting- to look at his 'soul'. They read Wilde's use of the word soul in Cartesian terms. However, the word soul in the novel is used rather equivocally. It ceases to be the opposite of the body and comes to designate a whole set of subjectivity with the picture representing Dorian's body, self and mind together.

The interaction of these different elements in the makeup of Dorian's character is Wilde's settlement of the question of body and soul. Dorian's behaviour in the novel reflects the novel's concern with the dichotomy of the body and the soul, the psyche and the physical appearance. When Dorian makes his decisive wish "if the portrait could change, and I could always be what I am now" (Wilde, 1994, p.35), he is perfectly aware of the dangers of the interaction between the psyche and the physique. This awareness is indeed well grounded, as the reader will later learn in the incident when Dorian discovers the photos of his ancestors. The narrator maintains that the faces of his family members reflect the effects of both their passions and crimes. His wish to remain young while the picture grows old and ugly testifies to his insistence to escape the physical and psychological consequences of age, change and decay. This allows us to contradict the common conception that Oscar Wilde promotes immortality in the novel. What upsets Dorian is not morality, but mortality and decay. The wish spares Dorian the bad consequences of old age and experience.

The wish has a liberating effect for Dorian as it frees him from the manacles of the corporeal. He seeks to be able to enjoy the perfection of desire without the burden of the body swaying upon him. Getting rid of the corporeal allows him to devote his life to the pursuit of pleasure. As soon as he is free from the reality of the corporeal, Dorian engages in a series of crimes that will culminate in his suicide. The liberation of his soul has immunized Dorian against the devouring effect of time and loss. He leads an immaterial existence. Dorian has beaten time in the struggle to remain young. However, his new immaterial existence turns out to be boring and unfulfilling. That Dorian thinks of his identity in terms of immortality is seen in one passage in the novel that describes his sorrow for the decay of the baubles he collects. The narrator informs us that "no winter marred his face or stained his flower-like bloom. How different it was with material things" (Wilde, 1994, p.67).

Dorian's disappointment with his giving away of his material substance is clear in his last meeting with Lord Henry when he affirms that "the soul is a terrible reality. It can be bought and sold and bartered away." (Wilde, 1994, p.222). Dorian's remark indicates that he has now realized that by exchanging places with his portrait, he has 'bartered away' not only his soul, but also his humanity. He is now what he has always wanted to be: young, unchanging, beautiful, but also soulless. He, now, despises the emptiness of his artistic soul and resents the presence of his decaying portrait. Both reflect a growing restlessness about the boredom of his life and will culminate in his murder of Basil Hallward.

Dorian's killing of Basil can, thus, have more than one implication. To start with, he kills him at a moment when he starts to experience the disappointment and the emptiness of his life. By having his wish granted, Dorian suffers the consequences of his identification with what he considers 'his ideal soul.' It makes sense, then, to argue that he puts all the blame on Basil for his disillusionment. It is Basil-after all- who has initially seduced him with the painting of his ideal self. Second, the killing of Basil partakes of Dorian's authorship concern. He hates Basil less for having seduced him with the painting than for competing with him over the creation of the

painting. It is only when the painter is killed that Dorian's full identification with, and creation of, the portrait can be established. He considers Basil his artistic rival.

The killing of Basil has some affinities with the suicide of Sybil Vane earlier in the novel. As it has been suggested by several critics, Basil's interest in Dorian is sexual. Therefore, Dorian is responsible for the killing of the two people who are indeed in love with him; Basil and Sybil Vane. Sedgwick comments on Dorian's killing of Basil saying that he kills the man "who dares to want him as a man rather than an image" (Sedgwick, 1990, p.67). The suicide of Sybil Vane is driven by the same interest to separate his ideal and immortal self from his decaying and mortal body. Basil is murdered when he expresses his adoration of his unchanging beauty (which is an expression of his desire) and Sybil is abandoned and driven to kill herself when she admits to Dorian that "she prefers the real Dorian to the fairy-tale Prince-Charming." (Wilde, 1994, p.58). By killing Basil and leaving Sybil, Dorian is being faithful to his initial attempt to constantly regard himself as the "gracious form" of Basil's own work. (Wilde, 1994, p.35)

The next step in effacing the physical reminders of his corporeal existence-after the murder of Basil and the suicide of Sybil Vane- consists in destroying the portrait. The portrait is the last object that reminds him of what he was, and possibly hampers his full appreciation of his immaterial self. This takes place in the murder scene at the end of the novel when he stabs the portrait with the same knife he used to kill Basil. The stabbing of the portrait reveals his insistence to extinguish any sign of his second self. The narrator describes his destruction of the portrait as an attempt to get rid of his past: "he looked round and saw the knife that had stabbed Basil Hallward. It would kill the past, and when that was dead he would be free" (Wilde, 1994p. 255)

Conclusion

The three subject positions discussed in relation to the portrait bear significant evidence to the dynamic forces underlying aesthetic autonomy. They illustrate the fragmentation of the artistic soul in the process. However, the discussion of authorship in the novel raises the same question in relation to Oscar Wilde. In other words, to what extent does Oscar Wilde identify with his own work? The tendency to draw a parallel between Dorian Gray and Oscar Wilde is not novel. A metonymic reading of the painting acknowledges the complexity of the correspondence between the writer and his characters. Wilde's recourse to multiple subject positions reveals the authorial project of contextualization. He is keen to find a theoretical context for the novel where any charges of immorality become irrelevant. By distorting the artistic subject between the painter, the sitter and the audience, Wilde divides the responsibility for the content of art between these three subjects. The meaning of the picture (and the novel at large) is determined by the audience. The interaction of multiple dynamic forces in the creation and the reception of the work of art not only divides the artistic responsibility, but also creates a virtual context for the novel.

Aesthetic autonomy implies that the artistic merit of the novel is not determined by its relation to reality, but by its aesthetic value. Accordingly, accusing the novel of undermining Victorian morality is indeed redundant. Even if the novel presents the reader with two opposing moral directions, it promotes none of them. Basil's righteous principles in both life and art cost

him his death, and Dorian Gray's indulgence in evil proves equally lethal. The three subject positions advocated in the novel foreground an amoral context for it and are at the heart of Wilde's aesthetic vision. Through this multiplicity of creators, Wilde positions his novel outside the sphere of morality.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Deanship of Scientific Research at Majmaah University for supporting this work under project number 40-1440.

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