

The Conflict Between Reality and Imagination in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde

The Picture of Dorian Gray, the only novel written by Oscar Wilde, is considered to be one of the most well-known novels in world literature. From the very beginning, Wilde's work has generated many quarrels and discussions concerning the immorality and ugliness of the events and characters which take place in the novel. However, many academics consider this novel as a masterpiece due to the highlighted concepts and problems. Oscar Wilde is known as a master of paradoxes because his writing covers many controversial topics which can be interpreted in different ways. This fact was one of the reasons why the novel was perceived negatively by some critics. Their inability to interpret the author's idea correctly led to the negative responses towards Wilde's work. The author managed to create an utterly different world which seems to be real, but the role of imagination in it is significant. The novel covers the relationships which are often in conflict between such concepts as art and reality, the master and the masterpiece, reality and imagination, and many others. Many characters in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* live in a fictional and imagined world. Lord Henry, Dorian Gray, Sybil Vane, and Basil Hallward live among the concepts which do not coincide with the real things in life. Each of them in their own way has made the contribution to the distortion of such ethereal concepts as love, morality, beauty, and both the spiritual and physical. Their imagination made them unable to live in the real world and subordinate to the laws of life. The imagination of the main characters played the critical role in the perception of Dorian Gray and the surrounding world. Their misinterpretation of a vital element led to a fatal end for most of them. Thus, the

characters' perception of life has created the conflict between reality and imagination in the perception of each other and the vital values that contributed to the deterioration of the perception of the world and each character's fate.

The theme of the conflict and discrepancy between the external and internal essence of the person is not new in literature. For example, *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* by Victor Hugo depicted the outer ugliness of Quasimodo and his internal beauty. Oscar Wilde has chosen the reverse approach. He demonstrated the preservation of Dorian's physical beauty and the constant decadence of his soul. The German philosopher Gotthold Lessing, in his work *Laocoon*, once said that the beauty of the soul gives charm even to the frail body, but the ugliness of the soul puts its imprint even on the most perfect body¹. Thus, the reader sees how Dorian poisons his soul with his thoughts and deeds. The changes in his soul were depicted on the portrait of Dorian. In such a way, there is a mystical correlation between the soul of the protagonist and the canvas on which was the image of Dorian Gray.

One of the crucial concepts which determines the development of the plot is the concept of hedonism. This notion was introduced to Dorian Gray by Lord Henry Wotton. His view on the structure and the main principles of life influenced the life perception and behavior of Dorian. Moving on the path of hedonism, he forgot about the laws, morale, and the humane attitude to other people². The dangerous moment lied in the fact that the number of those who supported such views of life increased. All of these were confirmation of decadence in the society. All literary critics agree that Wilde's novel is a characteristic work of the era of decadence³. When to

¹ Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *LAOCOON: An Essay upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry, with Remarks Illustrative of Various... Points in the History of Ancient Art* (S.l.: FORGOTTEN BOOKS, 2015).

² Minodora Otilia Simion, "A New Hedonism in Oscar Wilde's Novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*," *Annals of the "Constantin Brâncuși" University of Târgu Jiu, Letter and Social Science Series 1* (2005): 56, "ACADEMICA BRÂNCUȘI" PUBLISHER.

³ Minodora Otilia Simion, "A New Hedonism in Oscar Wilde's Novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*," *Annals of the "Constantin Brâncuși" University of Târgu Jiu, Letter and Social Science Series 1* (2005): 55, "ACADEMICA BRÂNCUȘI" PUBLISHER.

compare this work with the classical novels of the 19th century (such as Stendhal, Balzac, Dickens, and some others), it is possible to notice that the creation of characters by Oscar Wilde is not subjected to the laws of realistic typification. The author created characters which are symbols. Each of the protagonists is a symbol of a certain type of people. Thus, Dorian Gray is an embodiment of eternal youth, and Basil is a symbol of service to art, Lord Henry is the spokesman for the ideas of hedonism, and the actress Sybil embodies the theatricality of life⁴. The author did not pay significant attention to the development of the full characters. He was somewhat interested in the intellectual play, in the development of paradoxes, and the play of words and phrases which can be perceived as idioms. Thus, the behavior of the protagonists is not determined by social or biological laws or impulses as it was seen in naturalistic or realistic works. Their behavior does not obey life logic⁵. The actions of the main characters are determined by the author's intention to develop the paradoxes he was fond of.

Sometimes, it is difficult to determine the style of Wilde's novel. There are features of realism, magical realism, naturalism, romanticism, and some other genres of literature. The author's invention here is not limited to the boundaries of credibility or reality. The reality often intertwined here with the fantastic⁶. The background of the plot corresponds to the realistic events which could take place in real life. Thus, the handsome boy Dorian Gray could be a model for the artist Basil in the creation of the masterpiece. Also, the boy could be under the influence of Lord Henry, who always underlined his adherence to the ideas of hedonism, demonstrated love to himself, and showed indifference to the moral law which existed in the

⁴ Viktoria Drumova, *The Picture of Dorian Gray: Eternal Themes of Morality, Beauty and False Values Through Centuries*, Master's thesis, NARVA COLLEGE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF TARTU DIVISION OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES, 2015 (Narva, 2015).

⁵ Rolf Breuer, "Paradox in Oscar Wilde." *Irish University Review* 23, no. 2 (1993): 224-26. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25484563>.

⁶ Jarlath Killeen, "Body and Soul: Nature, the Host and Folklore in The Picture of Dorian Gray," *The Faiths of Oscar Wilde*, 2005, 82-84, doi:10.1057/9780230503557_4.

society. As a result, Dorian has chosen the path of vice⁷. All these events could take place in reality. The fantastical moment in the novel relates to when Dorian and the portrait changed their roles. Thus, the appearance of Dorian did not change for almost twenty years. His portrait, in its turn, performed the function of becoming older. It was the portrait which displayed the influence of time, passions, and vices that took place in the life of Dorian.

Taking into account all the vices and passions which are present in the novel, many literary critics accused Oscar Wilde of having an absence of morality, that beauty here is portrayed as higher than morality. However, the plot of the novel denies this allegation. It is necessary to interpret the main idea in the right way. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* shows rather not how to act but what is better not to do. The novel demonstrates how we should not behave with the people who love us. For example, the first changes in the portrait occurred when Dorian affronted Sibyl. Dorian's behavior led to the girl's suicide. Dorian noticed that the face of the picture changed, and the expression became another, and something brutal appeared in the outline of his mouth⁸. From that moment, the portrait acquired all the burden of the passions and vices of Dorian. As a result, the portrait obtained human traits as its features as the artwork turned into descriptions of an aging man. When describing the picture, the author used a naturalistic and lower vocabulary, which continually removed the portrait from the realm of perfect beauty. The central tragedy of this fact was that the changes reflected the state of Dorian's soul. When Dorian realized the magic power of the portrait, he hid it away from the eyes of other people. He often stood in front of the portrait holding the mirror in his hands and looked at the malicious, ever-older face on the canvas, and then on the beautiful and still-young

⁷ Patrick Duggan, "The Conflict between Aestheticism and Morality in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*," *Boston Hospitality Review* RSS, 2009, , accessed June 28, 2018, <http://www.bu.edu/writingprogram/journal/past-issues/issue-1/duggan/>.

⁸ Oscar, Wilde and Michael Patrick Gillespie. *The picture of Dorian Gray. Authoritative texts, backgrounds, reviews and reactions, criticism*, 2007, Preface.

face that smiled to him from the mirror⁹. All the immoral actions which Dorian committed were reflected on the canvas. When Dorian killed Basil, he was frightened by his appearance on the canvas. A disgusting dampness appeared on the hand of the portrait, which was red and dirty; it seemed like the canvas was bleeding. This particular moment, which can be described as the result of imagination, is a metaphorical description of that which occurred in the soul of the protagonist. No one knew of the cruel murder Dorian committed. As such, in the imagination of the people who surrounded Dorian, he remained as a beautiful, smart, and even saintly young man. Such is the conflict between reality and imagination, which can be described here as a distorted perception of the surroundings.

The evidence that the imagination is in conflict with the reality is the picture in which Dorian Gray is depicted. This portrait can be considered as one of the main characters, or even the main character. However, it is necessary to admit that the emphasis is not on the state of delight caused by the amazing colors and painting techniques, but on the beauty of the model and the changes in the animated portrait. The portrait also demonstrated the ability to watch. Thus, when Dorian abused Sibyl, he noticed the ugly modifications on it: “Yet it was watching him, with its beautiful marred face and its cruel smile. Its bright hair gleamed in the early sunlight. Its blue eyes met his own”¹⁰. In such a way, the portrait was like a mirror that showed not the appearance but the inner essence. The portrait became the plot engine in the novel. The author with methodological accuracy managed to depict the depersonalization of the main character, and the death of his soul due to the support of the cult of beauty and pleasure that inspired Dorian to act immorally¹¹. The novel is based on the contrast or conflict between the cult of

⁹ Paul Sheehan, “‘A Malady Of Dreaming’,” *Irish Studies Review* 13, no. 3 (2005), doi:10.1080/09670880500171942.

¹⁰ Oscar Wilde and Jill Nevile, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 79.

¹¹ Viktoria Drumova, *The Picture of Dorian Gray: Eternal Themes of Morality, Beauty and False Values Through Centuries*, Master’s thesis, NARVA COLLEGE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF TARTU DIVISION OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES, 2015 (Narva, 2015).

beauty and the baseness of the surrounding life. Dorian saw the meaning of his life in search of pleasures that could be guaranteed to him due to his beauty. The portrait and its magical properties assisted the protagonist in achieving all the pleasures of life. Dorian succeeded in this because he shifted the burden of the responsibility onto the picture. In Chapter 2, Dorian expressed thoughts that determined his further life: "If it were I who was to be always young and the picture that was 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!"¹². Dorian lived in the imaginary world, which was temporary and could not lead to a better life. He wanted to transform his imagination into a reality where he would not be to blame for anything ugly he was going to commit or committed. Thus, the portrait took upon itself the burden of that continuous evil, into which the life of a handsome young man subsequently turned as the result of his deeds. It was the terrible changes in the artistic masterpiece that reflected the stages of the moral self-destruction of the main character. In search of new feelings, he strived to be happy. But he succumbed to temptation, degraded morally, and ruined the lives of many other people. For the sake of pleasure, he managed to commit a crime and suffered from remorse as a result. Striving to destroy his conscience, he killed himself¹³. Such was the path of Dorian to the life he desired. However, he is the only person to blame. The external circumstances only helped to reveal his inner essence which became cruel and ugly.

The conflict between reality and imagination is always supported throughout the novel with the help of events and characters. The novel itself presents a subjective artistic picture based on the opposition to reality. This opposition acts like a counterargument which in the end proves

¹² Oscar Wilde and Jill Nevile, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 25.

¹³ Jarlath Killeen, "Body and Soul: Nature, the Host and Folklore in The Picture of Dorian Gray," *The Faiths of Oscar Wilde*, 2005, 90, doi:10.1057/9780230503557_4.

that there is nothing more valuable than reality¹⁴. Despite the constant stresses on the fact that art is higher than life, and the descriptions of the advantages of art over life, the author at the end of the novel concludes that the fate of each person is determined by real life. The portrait plays the vital role in the solving of the conflict between beauty and morality. Dorian has lost himself in search of beauty and pleasure. Dorian's "self-awareness is achieved only in front of his own image as revealed by art," and he was convinced that "only by means of art that the individual can achieve eternal youth"¹⁵. Dorian was even unable to experience the feelings of true love. He thought that he loved Sibyl, but that feeling was artificial. It is possible to say that Dorian was in love "with a Sybil Vane that is just a figment of his imagination, not with the real person but with the aesthetic worlds she gives life to through her performing on the stage, the embodiment of all 'heroines of romance'"¹⁶. That is why his love disappeared immediately when Sibyl demonstrated poor performance on the stage. Dorian could be silent, but he decided to express his negative thoughts to Sibyl. However, he realized that such comments could kill her because Sibyl loved him. Taking into account her imagination about Dorian's perfection, Sibyl decided that she did not deserve to love him or to be loved. In the end, that is why she committed suicide. In such a way, there is the conflict between the imagination of the character and the reality, which remained to be unknown to Sybil. The reader and the author are the only people who realized the essence of the main character and how things should be considered to be read and worthy of attention.

¹⁴ Cristina Nicolae, "The Concept of Reality in Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray," 2013, 698, https://www.upm.ro/facultati_departamente/stiinte_litere/conferinte/situl_integrare_europeana/Lucrari5/IETM5_Part84.pdf.

¹⁵ Cristina Nicolae, "The Concept of Reality in Oscar Wilde's The Picture Of Dorian Gray," 2013, 699, https://www.upm.ro/facultati_departamente/stiinte_litere/conferinte/situl_integrare_europeana/Lucrari5/IETM5_Part84.pdf.

¹⁶ Cristina Nicolae, "The Concept of Reality in Oscar Wilde's The Picture Of Dorian Gray," 2013, 701, https://www.upm.ro/facultati_departamente/stiinte_litere/conferinte/situl_integrare_europeana/Lucrari5/IETM5_Part84.pdf.

Basil's imagination also played an essential role in the formation of Dorian's views about himself. The admiration of Basil by the beauty of Dorian strengthened Dorian's self-perception and that ideal to which he should strive according to Lord Henry. The symbolism of the work is rather complicated. On the one hand, reproducing the truth in the portrait, the writer shows that art is higher than life, and on the other, Wilde shows that changes in the portrait occurred due to the fact that the character neglected his moral principles and norms¹⁷. He always wanted to be handsome and for no one to notice his soul's ugliness. For this, Dorian tried to destroy the portrait that portrayed his immorality and cruelty. By trying to kill the image on the portrait, Dorian killed himself. After that, the portrait started to radiate the same beauty when Basil had just created it. The face on Dorian's body instead began to display devastation and immorality. Thus, the fantasy of the majority of people disappeared when they saw the corpse of Dorian on the floor. The reality, in any case, will be seen no matter how someone tries to hide it. Dorian was not a prince (as Sibyl Vane described him) who had to rescue his princess from the routine of the theater¹⁸. Instead, he created the even deeper hole in which he pushed Sibyl, Basil, and other people who believed that Dorian was a saint. By the death of Dorian, the author shows the readers the erroneousness of Lord Henry's convictions and inspires them to look through the life of beliefs and truths.

In such a way, the main problem of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is the relationships and conflicts between reality and imagination (which can be interpreted as art and fantastic elements). This problem runs through the entire novel and is supported by the traces of character of the protagonists and the central actions that take place in the plot. It is observed in the relations between the artist and his creation and the aesthetic attitude to art and beauty. The novel

¹⁷ Natasja Groenewold, *Wilde's Aestheticism, The Picture of Dorian Gray and Salome*, Master's thesis, 2015 (2015), 16-17.

¹⁸ Oscar Wilde and Jill Nevile, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 54.

is full of paradoxes the author loved to create. Dorian struggled with the fantastic beauty and the morals that were imposed on him by the real world. From the very beginning, Dorian had a chance to choose between two sides of reality and life. Unfortunately, he had accepted the immoral side of existence where the concepts of beauty would be higher than the moral and eternal principles of the society. Dorian struck a bargain with the fantastic object which in its turn has lead to his own degradation. Such a fantastic method allowed the author to condemn the negative aspects of hedonism because its principles do not coincide with the reality and moral principles of human life. Thus, reality cannot be replaced by any imagined things, because in any case, the real state of affairs will be revealed. The described conflict between reality and imagination teaches us to be careful with our desires and always live according to the principles of morality.

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