

The Decline of Dorian Gray

The Picture of Dorian Gray is one of the most controversial and studied works of literature of the 19th century (Drumova). This novel explores how the Aesthetic movement influenced the morals and behaviors of English citizens at the time of the book's publication. Oscar Wilde himself was a strong advocate for the movement, often expressing his extravagant, hedonistic ideas during his speeches (Hofer). In fact, he was invited to America before the creation of his novel to lecture colleges about this movement. Wilde's values were strongly paralleled in Dorian Gray, a fictional young man in his novel. Dorian becomes very attached to the thought of eternal youth, and thus allows himself other unrealistic pleasures. Lord Henry, an extremely influential individual, leads Dorian towards a life of pure hedonism and materialism, without considering the consequences of this. Dorian Gray's obsession with eternal youth and aestheticism causes a moral decline in his thoughts and actions that ultimately leads to his demise.

Dorian, a young and privileged individual, is innocent and blind to his own personal beauty and the unique advantages he receives as a result. Basil Hallward, a young artist obsessed with Dorian's beauty, paints his portrait to immortalize his perfection. Entranced by his painting, Dorian questions Basil, "How long will you like me? Till I have my first wrinkle, I suppose. I know, now, that when one loses one's good looks, whatever they may be, one loses everything. Your picture has taught me that" (Wilde 26). Dorian begins to fear the notion of growing old and hideous, and believes that it will cause him to become useless. The value of youth becomes such a priority in his life that he clings on to the painting as though it was the only solid proof of his

beauty. As a result of this mentality, he has effectively sold his soul to the portrait- he will remain youthful in appearance, but his withering soul will be reflected explicitly in the artwork. Dorian begins to embrace the thought of hedonism and becomes obsessed with a life dedicated to materialism and personal pleasures. These amoral principles existed in Victorian England at the same time in which Wilde wrote the novel, and thus influence the characters and their actions. This school of thought was popularized in the form of the Aesthetic movement.

The Aesthetic movement became widely spread during the late 19th century, but was most prevalent in the Victorian society of England (Terpening). This movement focused on intellectualism and art, and valued arts over morals. Through this ideology, the pursuit of pleasure was considered the most important part of life. Those who followed it believed in the idea of “art for art’s sake,” a belief that considered only the surface, and not the moral purpose, of art (Terpening). Wilde himself was immensely influenced by the movement, saying in his novel, “If one man were to live out his life fully and completely, were to give form to every feeling, expression to every thought, reality to every dream- I believe that the world would gain such a fresh impulse of joy that we would forget all the maladies of medievalism, and return to the Hellenic ideal” (Wilde 19). This vision of a perfect world provides insight as to why he decided to write his characters as hedonistic individuals. Wilde was a strong advocate for popularizing the movement, and often spoke of the benefits that it would have on society. Because of this, Wilde’s ideologies were massively reflected in the characters of his novel. For example, both Oscar Wilde and Dorian Gray grew to appreciate the values of pursuing a purely hedonistic lifestyle. Dorian makes an effort to have as many pleasurable experiences as possible, and justifies his actions by saying, “The only way to get rid of temptation is to yield to it: Resist

it, and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden to itself, with desire for what its monstrous laws have made monstrous and unlawful” (Wilde). This constant desire for amoral experiences and materialistic pleasures continues throughout the novel.

In order to satisfy his desire for objects of beauty, Dorian Gray collects jewels, tapestries, and valuable books. Surrounded by aesthetically pleasing trinkets, he begins to abandon his morals in favor of beauty. Dorian withdraws from his relationship with Basil, instead opting to go to the opera or theatre with Lord Henry. This transition into such an egoistic pursuit for pleasure has destructive consequences on both Dorian and his portrait. He notices that the painting is beginning to morph hideously. The visage reflects back a terrible, worrying sight, a corruption of his former self. Frightened by the true representation of his withering soul, Dorian rushes to hide the portrait, concealing it behind heavy drapes so he may no longer look upon it. With a strong desire to rid himself of the thought of the portrait, Dorian travels to the theatre to see a production of *Romeo and Juliet*. He becomes entranced by a young woman named Sibyl Vane, a talented actress.

Upon seeing Sibyl on stage for the first time, Dorian immediately falls in love with her, swooning over her beauty. He praises her talent for singing and acting, completely enamored by her performances. Despite his supposed love for the woman, Dorian can not think of Sibyl Vane as anything more than a brilliant actor- he considers her a work of art rather than a human being. This line of reasoning likely stems from the influence of the Aesthetic movement. Wilde regularly insists how important aesthetic beauty is to the world, and therefore, his characters begin to become influenced by his own opinions. When Sibyl performs poorly, Dorian is unpleasantly surprised that someone he thought to be perfect could change so drastically. Dorian

fills his life with perfect, never-changing pleasures. When these qualities are expressed in a woman, he cannot help but view them in the same, objective manner. This seems to be a direct result of Lord Henry's influence- Dorian becomes extremely detached and egotistical, only considering how Sibyl benefits his own life. Sibyl, to Dorian, is only a thing to admire from a distance and appreciate as a work of art.

Sibyl and Dorian meet behind the stage one night after a performance, and Dorian proposes to her. To his delight, Sibyl accepts, and Dorian rushes to tell Lord Henry of the good news. The two men visit the theatre that night, Dorian anxious to show off his new fiancée. To his dismay, Sibyl's performance is abysmal, and he is disgusted that she would perform so poorly. Sibyl tries to explain that she was distracted by love, yet he retorts "You are ill, I suppose. When you are ill you shouldn't act. You make yourself ridiculous. My friends were bored. I was bored" (Wilde 83). Dorian, exasperated that Sibyl is not reacting, continues "You have killed my love. You used to stir my imagination. Now you don't even stir my curiosity. You simply produce no effect. [...] Without your art, you are nothing" (Wilde 84). This mindset becomes worryingly recurring in the novel- Dorian simply does not empathize, or even consider, the effects of his actions on others. Dorian leaves the room, completely stoic, and leaves Sibyl to weep on her own. The next day, Lord Henry visits him in his parlor with the news that Sibyl has committed suicide. Before Dorian can react further, Lord Henry tells him that the situation is nothing more than a dramatic Greek tragedy. He opts to disconnect the events from reality, instead convincing Dorian that he has lived a brilliant work of fiction. This behavior serves as a turning point in the novel- it becomes clear that there is no way in which Dorian can redeem himself from his sins. Dorian is quick to accept Lord Henry's shallow explanation, as it allows

him to cease his mourning and continue to enjoy life's pleasures. Lord Henry's sentiments show how strongly he is able to influence Dorian with his own egotistical, amoral values.

Dorian's transition from an innocent young man to a sinful, detached shell of his former self can be strongly attributed to the manipulation of Lord Henry. Dorian's opinions rarely reflect his actual thoughts- rather, they are direct interpretations of Lord Henry's ideals. He becomes cynical and insensitive to those around him, which became obvious after Sibyl's demise. A result of his sins is the deterioration of his portrait. Basil comes to visit Dorian after hearing about his fiancée, and asks to see the artwork when he arrives. The young painter is upset with Dorian for hiding his portrait away in an attic, but Dorian resolves to show him why. "So you think that it is only God who sees the soul, Basil? Draw that curtain back, and you will see mine" (Wilde 148). Basil hesitantly moves the curtain, and immediately draws back in horror. He chastises Dorian for allowing his soul to grow so withered, and expresses that the painting only serves to punish himself. Dorian's hatred for Basil grows so strong that he lifts a knife from the table behind him and stabs Basil to death.

Rather than regret, he immediately thinks of ways to justify and conceal the death of his friend. Dorian calls upon Alan Campbell, an old friend of his who specializes in science. Alan arrives a few days later, and Dorian asks him to dissolve Basil's body with chemicals. Understandably, Alan is shocked, and outright refuses to meet his request. Dorian then threatens to blackmail Alan- the reader is not told what the letter contains- and Alan becomes ill at the thought. Some may speculate that the substance of this letter is intended to be unknown, as the rest of the novel leaves Dorian's sins up to conjecture. Alan refuses to allow Dorian to blackmail him in such a way that would ruin his life, so he yields and requests that a list of chemicals be

sent to Dorian's home. Dorian relaxes in the library while Campbell works on dissolving Basil's corpse. When he is finished, Dorian is delighted to find that there is no trace of Basil Hallward, save for a chemical odor. This blatant disregard for any sort of moral standards sets the theme for the rest of the novel. It is clear that Dorian has descended so far into a sinful, detached life that even his relationships with others cannot be saved.

In an attempt to rid himself from further sins and create a new life, Dorian enters the attic to see his loathsome portrait. As always, he is disgusted by it, but relaxes in the thought that he plans to destroy it. Dorian believes that after defacing the portrait, his life will somehow become more pure than before. He reasons that the portrait is the cause of his suffering, rather than the actual sins which he has committed. This thought is incredibly ironic- the hideous face in the artwork represents Dorian's terrible conscious. The fact that he feels like he has to destroy it highlights just how deeply he knows his actions have all been morally wrong. However, the ever-increasing pressures of Lord Henry Wotton and others around him show how easily he was influenced and led into a life of hedonism. Dorian picks up the knife that was used to murder Basil, and slashes a line straight down the surface of the canvas. Dorian cries out in agony as he dies- he has effectively destroyed his conscious- and all that remains is a withered corpse which reflects his portrait. As he has now destroyed his sins, the painting on the wall appears identical to the day it was painted- a youthful, innocent portrait of a man.

This shocking conclusion represents the fact that Dorian Gray was, in essence, simply a vessel for his sins. Throughout the novel, Dorian allows himself experiences which yield pleasure, and is quick to ignore the consequences. While other characters, namely Basil, fear what will come of Dorian's recklessness, Dorian himself is blind to this reality. For example, he

brushes off the death of Sibyl and the murder of Basil by justifying their deaths with his own selfish reasoning (Drumova). Wilde represents Dorian's steady decline in a way that highlights all the consequences of submitting blindly to amoral indulgences. Beauty and art were major components of the Aesthetic movement, and their portrayal in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* serves to show how these values can be detrimental if enjoyed without fear of consequence.

Annotated Bibliography

- Drumova, Viktoria. *The Picture of Dorian Gray: Eternal Themes of Morality, Beauty, and False Values through Centuries*. Thesis. University of Tartu, 2015. Narva: U of Tartu, 2015. 1-37. *DSpace at University of Tartu*. Web. 5 Oct. 2016. An extremely thorough Bachelor's thesis about the themes in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and how they relate to the Victorian movements at the time. Drumova goes into depth about Wilde's reasoning for writing each part of the book, and in some cases, how outside events influenced them. She also expands on the influence that this controversial novel had with conservative English citizens at the time. Her evaluations of Wilde's work provide explanations for all of the themes shown in the novel.
- Terpening, William. "Epicurus (342-270 B.C.E.) and Victorian Aesthetes." *The Victorian Web*. 6 Dec. 2004. Web. 06 Oct. 2016. An article describing the philosophy behind the Aestheticism movement, and how it caused the downfall of Dorian Gray in Wilde's novel. The author cites examples directly from the novel, and explains how these events are related to Dorian's hedonistic personality. Terpening also relates these fictional events to actual ideas during the time when the novel was written.
- Wilde, Oscar, Matthew Hofer, and Gary Scharnhorst. *Oscar Wilde in America: The Interviews*. Urbana: U of Illinois, 2010. Print. This book is a compilation of Oscar Wilde's interviews when he was invited to America to give lectures about the Aestheticism movement. Hofer

and Scharnhorst give their own analyses about his speeches. They compile news articles about his stay in the country, and give further insight as to how exactly he presented himself in the new country. Although it had not been written yet, Wilde's words provide insight as to why he wrote the characters of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* with their unique morals and opinions.

Wilde, Oscar. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Philadelphia: Lippincott's Monthly Magazine, 1890.

Print. This book is a philosophical novel which explains how Dorian Gray's values were poisoned by a life of beauty and amoral experiences. It was commonly considered to be controversial, as the values explored in the book were not morally sound. Despite this, it has been widely considered to be a very important work of fiction, as it explores the consequences of living a life of pure aestheticism. Wilde explores multiple themes such as morality and the values of youth and beauty.