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Art Criticism Veiled in Fiction: Oscar Wilde's Views on Art and Literature in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

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“The artist is the creator of beautiful things” is the the first sentence of the preface Oscar Wilde wrote to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. This epigrammatic expression on beauty depicts Wilde’s advocacy to aestheticism, a late nineteenth-century movement, which rejects didacticism and opts for beauty and pleasure in art. One of the leading figures of this movement in England, who also became a mentor for Wilde was Walter Pater. In his seminal book *The Renaissance* he fuses the concept of beauty with art for art’s sake movement, saying the greatest wisdom is “the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for its own sake [...]. For art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments’ sake” (199). Another tenet of aestheticism is the autonomy of art through the denial of the well-grounded mimetic view that art mirrors nature. In his essays on art and literature written between 1889 and 1891

Wilde emphatically objects to the Victorian realist aesthetics and embraces art for art's sake with a particular focus on imagination, individuality and a challenge to morality. This chapter will examine Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as a literary elaboration on his views on art discussed in his "The Decay of Lying", "Pen, Pencil and Poison", "The Critic as Artist", "The Truth of Masks" and "The Soul of Man under Socialism" to portray Wilde's notion of an anti-realist aesthetics.

Oscar Wilde in "The Decay of Lying: An Observation" published in 1889 - one year before the publication of his novel - questions realism in art in the form of a Socratic dialogue between fictive characters Vivian and Cyril, who are named after Wilde's sons. Wilde's reversal of mimesis is evoked through his preference of veil to mirror as a metaphor for art when Vivian claims: "Art finds her own perfection within, and not outside of, herself. She is not to be judged by any external standard of resemblance. She is a veil, rather than a mirror" (*Complete Works* 982). Contrary to the mimetic notion that nature creates art, Vivian claims that art does not imitate the external world and that nature is a human construct: "Nature is no great mother who has borne us. She is our creation. It is in our brain that she quickens to life. Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us. [...] One does not see anything until one sees its beauty" (*Complete Works* 986). As is suggested in this quote artists attribute meaning to nature through their imaginative power, and force the audience to see nature as it is created in art.

Since Vivian in this essay objects to mimesis, he undermines realist novelists of the Victorian era, who imitate life, while he exalts those writers who prefer refashioning nature through imagination. The life-like characters in such fiction

seem to have suddenly lost all their vitality, all the few qualities they ever possessed. The only real people are the people who never existed, and if a novelist is base enough to go to life for his personages he should at least pretend that they are creations, and not boast of them as copies. The justification of a character in a novel is not that other persons are what they are, but that the author is what he is. Otherwise the novel is not a work of art. (*Complete Works* 975)

Imitating real people in fiction, according to Vivian, does not show the writer's talent, because "As a method, realism is a complete

failure" (*Complete Works* 979). Glorifying imagination over realism, Vivian declares "Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art" (*Complete Works* 992). Richard Ellmann in his biography on the writer also posits Wilde's favor of lies, saying "Wilde praised art's rejection of sincerity and accuracy in favor of lies and masks. [...] Lying is better because it is no outpouring of the self, but a conscious effort to mislead" (*Complete Works* 285). Such act of lying and deception is at the core of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

"Pen, Pencil and Poison" (1889), which focuses on the poet, painter and forger Thomas Griffiths Wainewright, deals with the artist's renunciation of imitation and realism in painting. Denouncing the 19th century realism in a similar fashion as in the previous essay, Wilde claims "In a very ugly and sensible age, the arts borrow, not from life, but from each other" (*Complete Works* 1001). What Wilde suggests about Wainewright's art, namely "compositon, beauty and dignity of line, richness of colour, and imaginative power" (*Complete Works* 997) applies to Basil Hallward's notion of art in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as well.

In "The Critic as Artist" (1890), where he dignifies the critic for his/her ability to recreate a text, Wilde deploys his views on aestheticism indicating that the critic "rejects these obvious modes of art that have but one message to deliver, and having delivered it become dumb and sterile, and seeks rather for such modes as suggest reverie and mood, and by their imaginative beauty make all interpretations true, and no interpretation final" (*Complete Works* 1031). Emphasis on creativity is intertwined with the lack of a direct message as suggested in this quote. Once the work is completed it becomes independent of its artist and "may deliver a message far other than that which was put into its lips to say" (*Complete Works* 1029). Wilde declares that art is not created by the dictates of others, but is instead "self-conscious and deliberate" (*Complete Works* 1020). In a letter to the editor of the *Scots Observer* dated July 9, 1890, Wilde further dwells on the artist's concentration on the work and not the public opinion. He writes: "I write because it gives me the greatest possible artistic pleasure to write. If my work pleases the few, I am gratified. If it does not, it causes me no pain. As for the mob, I have no desire to be a popular novelist" (*Selected Letters* 81). As this quote underlines, Wilde prefers the pleasure principle in art to teaching a moral lesson. This discussion on pleasure in art brings the topic to art being "immoral" (*Complete Works* 1039), which he will reiterate in the preface to the novel too. Similarly, in his essay "The Truth of Masks" (1891) he states that there cannot be universal truth in art: "A Truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true" (Wilde

Complete Works 1078). By rejecting truth and didacticism in art Wilde foregrounds individual taste and pleasure.

Like the other aesthetes of the time, such as Pater and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, in “The Critic as Artist,” Wilde draws attention to the paragone between verbal and visual arts. He says:

the domain of the painter is [...] widely different from that of the poet. To the latter belongs life in its full and absolute entirety; not merely the beauty that men look at, but the beauty that men listen to also; not merely the momentary grace of form or the transient gladness of colour, but the whole sphere of feeling, the perfect cycle of thought. The painter is so far limited that it is only through mask of the body that he can show us the mystery of the soul [...]. (*Complete Works* 1030)

He further values poetry over painting, because “while the poet can be pictorial or not, as he chooses, the painter must be pictorial always. For a painter is limited, not to what he sees in nature, but to what upon canvas may be seen” (*Complete Works* 1031). Thus, compared to painting, which is restricted with visuality, Wilde believes that literature is a higher form of art as it is characterized more with imagination.

Apart from “The Critic as Artist,” “The Soul of Man under Socialism” (1891) also emphasizes individualism in art, saying “A work of art is the unique result of a unique temperament” (*Complete Works* 1090). Indeed, as in the previously discussed essay, Wilde, in this one, objects to the type of the artist who takes the public view into consideration. He says:

In England, the arts that have escaped best are the arts in which the public take no interest. Poetry is an instance of what I mean. We have been able to have fine poetry in England because the public do not read it, and consequently do not influence it [...]. In the case of the novel and the drama, arts in which the public do take an interest, the result of the exercise of popular authority has been ridiculous. No country produces such badly written fiction, such tedious, common work in the novel form, such silly, vulgar plays as England. (*Complete Works* 1091)

When the public has difficulty accepting new aesthetic forms, they either claim that “the work of art is grossly unintelligible” or that it is “immoral” (*Complete Works* 1092). For Wilde, then, public taste is of two kinds: aesthetic or ethical, and he prefers the former.

Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is replete with the principles of art he puts forth in his essays. The book underlines beauty in art, Wilde’s anti-realist viewpoint and his emphasis on imaginative power in literature, as it belongs to a genre called the “magic-portrait story” that dates back to the late 18th century. As Diana Bellonby summarizes in her dissertation, in this genre

a male artist paints a masterful portrait of a beautiful young muse who inspires him. The process corrupts both the sitter and the artist, empowering only the spectators. At first, the sitter indulges in the seductions of beauty, sin, and artistic mastery. But by story’s end, the model commits suicide, having served only the hedonism of a master and the production of a masterpiece. (Bellonby 1)

The storyline of this genre provides the quintessence of Wilde’s novel: the artist Basil Hallward’s magical portrait of his young and beautiful muse Dorian Gray brings both the tragic end of its artist as well as the sitter, while the portrait’s spectator/critic Lord Henry Wotton gains power through his manipulative words. Dorian’s desire to change places with his objectified beauty when he declares “For that – for that – I would give everything!” (*Dorian Gray* 25) turns out to be true; while the actual Dorian – or “Prince Charming” (*Dorian Gray* 53) as he is called by Lord Henry – remains unaffected by time, his image ages and becomes uglier because of his evil deeds in actual life. Indeed, with this Faustian bargain, life copies art’s stasis. This picture as “the most magical of mirrors” (*Dorian Gray* 106) becomes a sign of Dorian’s corrupting personality: the foulness reflected not on the surface but in the depths of the painting (*Dorian Gray* 157) turns it into a parody of the original as Basil thinks (*Dorian Gray* 156). In this sense Wilde takes the discussion in his “The Decay of Lying” that nature imitates art to an extreme case in which art and reality replace one another. Accordingly, Basil’s desire to exhibit his work in Paris leads Dorian to kill him due to his fear that the onlookers and especially Basil would recognize his evil deeds reflected in the painting.

Anti-realism is first voiced by Basil whose words evoke Walter Pater’s view of art and his emphasis on beauty rather than truth. To

Lord Henry, Basil says in his studio: “An artist should create beautiful things, but should put nothing of his own life into them. We live in an age when men treat art as if it were meant to be a form of autobiography. We have lost the abstract sense of beauty” (*Dorian Gray* 11). The artist refers to realism in art as well as the tendency to associate the artwork with its creator. His reluctance to exhibit Dorian’s portrait immediately after he completes it results from his belief that the viewers would understand Basil’s love to Dorian. However, after he loses his source of inspiration he recognizes that an artwork is independent of its artist and that “Art is always more abstract than we fancy. Form and colour tell us of form and colour – that is all. It often seems to me that art conceals the artist far more completely than it ever reveals him” (*Dorian Gray* 115). Basil finally comes to believe in an abstract notion of art, that art does not reflect the identity of its creator, and that the audience should not look for a message but just appreciate form and colour.

Secondly, Dorian’s affair with his fiancée Sybil Vane also illustrates the lack of a correlation between nature and art. Lying, the opposite of truth and reality as underlined in Wilde’s essay, is examined in this novel in the context of acting. Dorian falls in love with Sybil the actress who performs in various plays by Shakespeare but not the Sybil in actual life. Sybil, on the other hand, regards the characters she impersonates on stage as real, until she is promised a new life with Dorian. When her performance is considered a failure by Dorian, she defends herself against Dorian’s criticism of her performance, saying:

I was Rosalind one night, and Portia the other. The joy of Beatrice was my joy, and the sorrows of Cordelia were mine also. I believed in everything [...]. The painted scenes were my world. I knew nothing but shadows, and I thought them real. You came – oh my beautiful lover! – and you freed my soul from prison. You taught me what reality really is. To-night, for the first time in my life, I saw through the hollowness, the sham, the silliness of the empty pageant in which I have always played. (*Dorian Gray* 85-86)

“In this quote, Sybil, like Basil, emphasizes how art is misconceived as real. Referring to mimesis through the word shadow, Sybil puts forth the idea that art is a distortion of reality” (Uzundemir 263). Moreover, she underlines her preference of the real world to that of art, whereas for Dorian she exists only on stage: “Without your art you are nothing” (*Dorian Gray* 87) says Dorian. Seeing that her

performance has disappointed the spectator, Dorian decides to abandon her, which drives her to suicide. After her death, Lord Henry's consoling words to Dorian signify Dorian's affection for a false appearance not reality, saying:

The girl never really lived, and so she has never really died. To you [...] she was always a dream, a phantom that flitted through Shakespeare's plays and left them lovelier for its presence [...]. The moment she touched actual life, she marred it, and it marred her, and so she passed away. Mourn for Ophelia, if you like. [...] But don't waste your tears over Sibyl Vane. She was less real than they are. (*Dorian Gray* 103)

As underlined with Lord Henry's words, when Sybil passes from a fake identity on stage to the real one after falling in love with Dorian, she loses her attractiveness for Dorian.

Lord Henry, who admits that "the only things that one can use in fiction are things that one has ceased to use in fact" (*Dorian Gray* 78) also abhors "vulgar realism in literature" (*Dorian Gray* 194). Contrary to puritan moral conduct, he believes that pleasure is the only principle in life to "hav[e] a theory about" (*Dorian Gray* 77). Thus, he preaches Dorian hedonism, to get utmost pleasure from life, a significant aspect of aestheticism. He suggests: "Live! Live the wonderful life that is in you! Let nothing be lost upon you. Be always searching for new sensations. [...] A new Hedonism – that is what our century wants. You might be its visible symbol" (*Dorian Gray* 22). Although this search for pleasure in life might lead to moral depravity, as depicted in Dorian's situation, Lord Henry believes that Dorian is too charming to commit vulgar crime (*Dorian Gray* 213).

Wilde's comparison of the sister arts, literature and painting, in "The Critic as Artist", is at the heart of this novel, as the book is an example to notional ekphrasis, "the verbal representation of a purely fictional work of art" (Hollander 4). In such manner, Wilde displays how one form of art borrows not from life but from another one. If Wilde is to make a choice between these two forms, he sides with literature as is shown through Lord Henry's influence. While Basil's portrait is the first cause of Dorian's corruption, as he tries to acquire the permanence of art, the second cause is Lord Henry's impressive words which emphatically underline Dorian's charming beauty by comparing him to Narcissus and provoking him to resist his physical change through time. Dorian reacts against him, saying: "Words! Mere words! How terrible they were! How clear, and vivid,

and cruel! One could not escape from them. And yet what a subtle magic there was in them!” (*Dorian Gray* 19). Not only the magical power of his words but the “poisonous book” (*Dorian Gray* 125) he gives to Dorian about a young Parisian’s sinful deeds also contributes to Dorian’s corruption. The yellow book’s power that “it presents a number of sinful acts that Dorian is impelled to imitate” (Sheehan 335) designates how literature shapes life. Basil’s murder by Dorian to get rid of the first cause of his corruption as opposed to the critic/spectator Lord Henry’s survival at the end of the novel could be interpreted as Wilde’s glorification of the power of literature over visual arts. One other reason might be related to the significance Wilde attributes to the critic or the spectator both in his essay as well as his preface to the novel.

Dorian’s destruction of the mirror that reflects his unchanged charmat the end of the novel could be interpreted as a criticism of mimesis. The next step of Dorian’s devastating act is to get rid of the portrait, because it no longer gives him pleasure (*Dorian Gray* 223) with all his crimes reflected on it. “The idea that art cannot substitute life in the case of Sybil is valid for Dorian too; the figure in the framed portrait cannot replace Dorian” (Uzundemir 264). He dies as soon as “he stabs the knife, with which he killed Basil, into the canvas. The figure in the artwork [...] transfers all the sins onto the dead man lying on the floor. Thus, before it is revived to its brilliant primordial state, the corrupt ideal should be demolished”(Uzundemir 264). In this way, the work of art gains an independent existence of its creator as well as its owner, who has kept it secret from the public, once they perish.

In conclusion, as Ellmann claims, Oscar Wilde’s “*Dorian Gray* is the aesthetic novel *par excellence*, not in espousing the doctrine, but in exhibiting its dangers” (Ellmann 297). Dorian’s sole center in life which is utmost pleasure based on sensation brings his destruction and he becomes in Ellmann’s words “aestheticism’s first martyr” (Ellmann 297). After the publication of the novel, Wilde is forced to defend his novel against criticisms of immorality by saying: “My story is an essay on decorative art. It reacts against the crude brutality of plain realism. It is poisonous if you like, but you cannot deny that it is also perfect, and perfection is what we artists aim at” (qtd. in Ellmann 303). The aim of this paper, which is to clarify Oscar Wilde’s maxims on art through his novel, is implied in this quote by calling the novel “an essay on decorative art”. Hence Wilde suggests his anti-realist stance and his belief in the power of imagination through the interaction of different forms of art, namely literature and painting.

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