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# Oscar Wilde, Colonialism and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

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Sometimes there are moments when one's entire view about an author and their significance in contemporary life are subject to radical revaluation. Such was the case when I watched Andrew Graham-Dixon's *The Art of Gothic* – a three-part television documentary series broadcast on BBC Four in the United Kingdom in October and November 2014. The third episode, "Gothic Goes Global," shows how Gothic fantasy horror would be outstripped by the real horrors of the First World War. The language of the Gothic – giving vent to the imagination and the deliberate subversion of so-called "civilized" conventions – came to encapsulate the injustices of the twentieth century. A Gothic narrative seemed to make more sense in the modern world than any other literary form.

Graham-Dixon applied these insights to an analysis of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which he argued was a colonialist narrative in Gothic form. Written towards the end of the late nineteenth century, the novella's eponymous hero is someone ruthlessly exploited by

Basil Hallward and Lord Henry Wotton, whose only form of resistance can be expressed through establishing a close – almost sexual – relationship with his portrait. Dorian himself is the classic colonial subject – a young man sans personality who becomes the object of narratives of dominance constructed by Basil and Lord Henry. To Basil he is a sexual plaything to be vicariously ogled at while the artist paints his portrait. Lord Henry likes to play Pygmalion, transforming a naïve young man into a sophisticated denizen of London society. As an Irish citizen, and an outsider himself, Wilde uses the Gothic narrative to examine his own feelings of exclusion in a novella published four years before the author's arrest, after having lost the libel case against the Marquis of Queensberry. Perhaps Wilde had a premonition of what might happen to himself, should he lose the fragile social reputation as an aesthete and wit that ensured his – temporary – acceptance in London high society.

Graham-Dixon's argument made me rethink my entire approach to Wilde. Hitherto I had considered him a political writer, but one more preoccupied with skewering the foibles of the English upper classes. I had first encountered him while at school, when I watched a television production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* and enjoyed the ways in which the incessant use of epigrams exposed the basic ignorance of theatrical *grandes dames* such as Lady Bracknell. My all-time favorite film of a Wilde text is Albert Lewin's version of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a magnificently lush version of the tale best remembered for George Sanders's oleaginous performance as Lord Henry, his pointed nose turned upwards in a permanent sneer as he recounted what had happened to his one-time protégé. Until I watched the Graham-Dixon program, I had always considered the film to exemplify my view of Wilde as a social satirist rather than a critic of Victorian colonialism: Sanders's Lord Henry is so preoccupied with maintaining a civilized veneer that he remains oblivious to Dorian's suffering.

The experience of the program encouraged me to turn back to Wilde's text. Even in the first chapter there are indications of the discourses of domination that will dominate the narrative as Basil asks Lord Henry to refrain from jesting about Dorian: "Don't take away from me the one person who gives to my art whatever charm it possesses; my life as an artist depends on him" (6). Two chapters Lord Henry reflects on the young man's capacity to mimic other people's intellectual views "with all the added music of passion and youth [...] there was a real joy in that - perhaps the most satisfying joy left to us in an age so limited and vulgar as our own, an age

grossly carnal in its pleasures, and grossly common in its aims" (11). Lord Henry is so captivated that he resolves to "dominate him [Dorian] – had already, indeed, half done so. He would make that wonderful spirit his own. There was something fascinating in this spirit of love and death" (11).

Ostensibly these passages reveal Lord Henry's fondness for the aesthetic movement – that movement championing pure beauty and "art for art's sake," emphasizing the visual and sensual qualities of art and design over practical, moral and narrative considerations. The sight of Dorian provides a "satisfying joy" for anyone willing to turn away from the unpleasant realities of everyday life. Yet underneath this idealizing there lurks a controlling self-interest: Basil wants to "capture" Dorian on canvas so as to sustain the artist's self-belief, while Lord Henry believes in appropriating the young man's spirit through domination. For both men Dorian has no personality of his own, but functions as a piece of matter to be reshaped according to their particular preoccupations. They might believe themselves to be "artists" or "aesthetes," but their basic ideology is as self-interested as any Victorian explorer.

Wilde is well aware of their true natures; at one point he remarks sardonically that Lord Henry "paid some attention to the management of his collieries in the Midland counties, excusing himself for this taint of industry on the ground that one of advantage of having coal was that it enabled a gentleman to afford the decency of burning wood on his own hearth" (13). Any true aesthete would recoil at the idea of being associated with something as materialistic as industry, but perhaps it is excusable for anyone wanting to keep his fireside warm (to entertain Dorian, for instance). Wilde observes: "Only England could have produced him, and he always said that the country was going to the dogs" (12).

In this kind of society, where artistic "truth" becomes a form of discourse for domination, it is inevitable that the Gothic spirit will prevail. Wilde suggests this through the ways in which the picture changes – even as early as chapter 7, Dorian notices that "the face appeared to him a little changed. One would have said there was a touch of cruelty in the mouth. It was certainly strange" (38). Nothing seems to have happened yet, but the subsequent description suggests that something unearthly is about to take place; as Dorian draws up the blind, "The bright dawn flooded the room and swept the fantastic shadows into dusky corners, where they lay shuddering" (38). The shadows assume an anthropomorphic quality, as if beyond human control. Later on Dorian tries his best to conceal

the painting from anyone's sight, but finds himself unable to deal with an object "that had a corruption of its own, worse than the corruption of death itself – something that would breed horrors and yet would never die" (50). This is a fine piece of point of view writing, pointing out the effects of colonial domination on Dorian's psyche. In an attempt to mimic Lord Henry's aestheticism, he displaces his feelings of inadequacy on to the painting (it's not the human being who has been corrupted, but the object), but the superlative ("worse than the corruption of death itself") suggests an inability to cope. No one can offer him any counsel, or any alternative visions of living – as a result, his physical and moral degeneration seems inevitable.

As the novella unfolds, so the colonized subject acquires a form of self-determination quite at odds with what Lord Henry and Basil had envisaged. In the end Dorian takes "a monstrous and terrible delight" in comparing his unspoiled visage with "the hideous lines that seared the wrinkling forehead or crawled around the heavy sensual mouth" of the portrait: "He would place his white hands beside the coarse bloated hands of the picture, and smile. He mocked the misshapen body and the failing limbs." On occasions Dorian reflects "on the ruin he had brought upon his soul," but rarely: "That curiosity about life in which Lord Henry had first stirred in him, as they sat together in the garden of their friend [Basil] seemed to increase with gratification. The more he knew, the more he desired to know" (56).

The Christian overtones of this passage are deliberate: Dorian seeks to partake of the tree of aesthetic knowledge, without realizing that the search transforms him into a monster. The search captures the dilemma of any Romantic believing in the power of the imagination to rise above the humdrum realities of the quondam life and create new worlds of possibility. This is a laudable aim; but we have already learned that Dorian has simply mimicked what Lord Henry had told him, without developing a consciousness of his own. He might have a "curiosity about life," but we might question with justification precisely whose life the narrator is referring to. Dorian has not had a life of his own, not since he became part of London aestheticism.

The book's language acquires an overtly orientalist tinge, as the narrator describes Dorian's penchant for grotesque concerts where "grave, narrow-shawled Tunisians plucked at the strained strings of monstrous lutes, while grinning Negroes beat monotonously upon copper drums and, crouching upon scarlet mats, slim turbaned Indians blew through long pipes of reed or brass

and charmed – or feigned to charm – great hooded snakes and horrible horned adders" (57). The language in this passage, making use of repetition, alliteration and assonance, communicates the sensuousness of the experience, to be enjoyed at a nonverbal rather than a verbal level. There are overt references to the "Noble Savage," a favorite orientalist trope representing the non-white races as tribal and fond of strange, eerie-sounding music. The fact that Dorian prefers such entertainment to the more refined pleasures of western classical music emphasizes the extent of his transformation.

What makes the new Dorian so truly frightening is that the new world of the imagination he represents threatens the stability of the Victorian world that bred – and sustains – Lord Henry: "a world in which things would have fresh shapes and colours, and he [Dorian] changed, or have other secrets, a world in which the past would have little or no place, or survive, at any rate, in no conscious form of obligation or regret, the remembrance even of joy having its bitterness and the memories of pleasure their pain" (55). Lord Henry's aestheticism represents the outcome of a search for a better world, a scheme of values that he willingly imposes on others. Dorian's imaginative projection renders this aestheticism obsolete; a colorless set of empty ideas that pale into insignificance beside this new world. In the western scheme of things, past, present and future are clearly delineated; colonized subjects need to learn western history to become more civilized, and thereby fulfill their subordinate roles effectively. In Dorian's vision past, present and future merge into an immediate, visceral experience devoid of conscience or regret – an experience of the moment that should be savored on its own terms. Contemporary psychological theory values such moments as a means of cultivating mental wellbeing; by paying attention to one's thoughts and the world that shape them, we can learn how to feel good about ourselves, and thereby learn how to adapt to new challenges ("Mindfulness for Mental Wellbeing"). In the Victorian scheme of things such spontaneity challenged the very bases on which society had been established; it suggests that anyone, irrespective of class, race and gender, can experience powerful feelings, and thereby renders the work of the upper-class aesthete redundant. Dorian becomes a genuinely subversive figure, capable of communicating and savoring a depth of feeling far exceeding that of his erstwhile friends.

In the end such a libertine vision cannot be allowed to survive, and Dorian finds himself plagued by conscience: "What sort of life would be his if, day and night, shadows of his crime were to peer at him from silent corners, to mock him from secret places, to whisper in

his ear as he sat at the feast, to wake him with icy fingers as he lay asleep!" (47). Distinctions between past and present resurface, prompting him to destroy the painting (and thereby destroy himself): "It [the act of destruction] would kill the past, and when that was dead, he would be free. It would kill the monstrous soul-life, and without its hideous warnings, he would be at peace" (73). Superficially these passages might seem to represent Dorian's re-integration into mainstream Victorian life; his rediscovery of the consequences of what he has done, and how it has destroyed him. "Redemption" is possible, but only through further destruction. Yet I think we have to be careful while reading these passages; earlier on we have seen the narrator's fondness for point of view technique, where readers are lulled into taking statements at face value. In this case, we have to consider why Dorian should experience such guilty thoughts, especially when he had previously imagined himself a representative of a brave new world in which guilt no longer really exists. The tone here is highly ambiguous; while understanding the narrator's desire to bring the story to an appropriately moral close (and thereby reassert the colonizer's understanding of the difference between right and wrong), I am prepared to question whether the description actually communicates what Dorian actually thinks. Likewise the passage from chapter 20; if he had found a world in which western-inspired distinctions between past, present and future no longer held sway, why would he worry so much about wanting to kill the past? The Gothic monster that was once an attractive young man has become too powerful–even for the narrator.

The novella ends with a dénouement that was memorably filmed in Lewin's 1945 adaptation with the portrait restored to its pristine brilliant, and the corpse of Dorian in front of it, "withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage" (73). The colonized subject has been destroyed – or has it? The painting remains, a macabre reminder of how Basil (and Lord Henry) consciously imposed their wills on an impressionable young man and reconstructed him in their own image. The fact that it is still there for everyone to see might encourage other impressionable people to follow Dorian's example; to follow the leads of their Victorian upper-class masters and embrace the aesthetic life. This is perhaps the most unsettling aspect of Wilde's Gothic tale, and one that renders Graham-Dixon's description of it as a colonialist morality-play so chillingly apt. Times might have changed; the Victorian era might have been superseded by more egalitarian values; but idealized pictures of adolescents remain, not only in art galleries but in other forms of media as well as online. They offer seductive images of freedom and liberty, but such qualities are illusory, as youngsters willingly subject themselves to false values.

Audrey Jaffe suggests that the value of the novella, especially to contemporary readers, lies in its depiction of the consequences of self-picturing, suggesting "the formation of cultural identity as a moralization or rationalization of aesthetic choices whose meaning might be revealed in, or might just as well be hidden by, the face one chooses" (Jaffe). Her comments suggest an active choice; Dorian, a visible symbol of the age, is a representative of a culture in the form of a person. I would suggest that, through his subjection to the colonizer's will, he becomes a corrupt representative of a culture; and by doing so discovers the potential of a subversive culture in which concepts of moderation and restraint no longer exist. His experiences indicate the ways in which the colonized can reassert themselves in ways never envisaged by their former dominators. That is what makes the Gothic novel so enduringly powerful.

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