

The Picture of Dorian Gray and its Interpretations

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"Any of us might reject a novel because it seems to conflict with our moral belief....When we do so, we should be clear as to what we are doing. We have not read the book aesthetically, for we have interposed moral or other responses of our own which are alien to it....we cannot then say that the novel is aesthetically bad for we have not permitted ourselves to consider it aesthetically."

—Jerome Stolnitz from *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art Criticism*

When reading the Preface of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* on its own, this quote seems to describe Wilde's view of art and morality exactly. In the Preface, Wilde strongly opposes the use of morals when judging a piece of art and asserts that anyone who expresses a moral message in his work cannot be called an artist. The quote simply summarizes the stance that Wilde takes in his Preface. And in the book, the voice of Lord Henry often asserts this belief that art is above morals. But the book itself is a strongly moralistic tale. Dorian Gray, who dedicates his life to beauty and the pursuit of pleasure, does not meet a happy fate. His immoral acts are, in the end, rewarded only with anguish. Dorian follows the "Hellenistic ideal" zealously and it pulls him down a path of cruelty, sin and murder. It transforms his soul, represented on the canvas, into a repulsive monster while Dorian's supernatural trade-off preserves his face. By the end of the book, Dorian Gray is driven mad by his own ideal and the ugliness of the portrait and escapes only through his own death, at which time, the trade is reversed and the natural state of both the painting and Dorian are restored.

So, the Preface and the story itself seem to contradict one another. And because of that apparent contradiction, it is hard to tell if the given quote is consistent with Wilde's views on art and morality or not. Wilde, in the Preface to the book, writes "Vice and virtue are to the artist materials for an art," (Wilde, xvi) and this could connect the views expressed in the Preface with the supposedly moral story. This phrase would suggest that *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, while expressing moral themes, is not, in itself, morally biased and so can be called art, by Wilde's standards. Whatever moral conventions that are used in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are, according to Wilde, simply a means to express an aesthetic. In this respect, the novel can be compared to a still life painting: The subject matter of the work is not nearly as important as the way in which this subject is portrayed. Vincent Van Gogh's sunflowers, famous for their unusual and exquisite beauty, are only extraordinary in the way that Van Gogh painted them. Similarly, the simple story told in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, as well any moral material it may possess, is nothing more than the bowl of fruit in Wilde's still-life of words. The content of the novel, then, is unimportant and the book coincides with the view expressed in the Preface and both, through this interpretation, agree with the quote given. Art, though it can make use of morals, is above being judged by them.

But this interpretation, in drawing a connection between the given quote and Wilde's views, oversimplifies the book itself until it is no more than a surface story and Wilde's words. And Wilde's words, as beautifully written as they are, are not enough to lend the story artistic significance. While beautiful words are to the novel what brushstrokes are to the painting, books differ from the visual arts in one important way. No book of any significance can stand on words alone. Van Gogh's still life paintings have no meaning to them other than that they are beautiful. But, while visual arts can have many deep meanings, beauty itself can be enough meaning for a painting because of the brevity with which it is viewed. Walking through an entire museum of art takes only one afternoon, but the novel is a much more intimate art form. It takes days to read a single novel and most times, books are read in quiet places and by one person at a time, giving the audience much more time to think about the content of the book. No one would spend so much time with *The Picture of Dorian Gray* if it were nothing but exquisite words and a shallow story. So, there must be much more to the novel than that.

According to McGinn's piece "The Picture of Dorian Gray," the given quote is actually not consistent at all with Wilde's view of art and morality and that there is a morally significant meaning behind *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. McGinn explores the meanings hiding under the surface story, concentrating on the climactic, but ambiguous death of Dorian Gray. McGinn teases out his interpretation from small phrases and even single words that would go unnoticed by the casual reader. By deciphering Wilde's clever literary devices, McGinn suggests that, because of Dorian's pact with the devil, "Dorian becomes numerically identical to the picture of Dorian" (McGinn 128). Dorian does not simply gain the ageless characteristic of a work of art, he becomes his own painting. So, according to McGinn, when Dorian takes the knife that killed Basil and decides that he would "kill the painter's work and all that that meant" (Wilde 253), Dorian does not try to stab the canvas, only to have the knife turned on him by some supernatural force. He stabs himself, knowing full well that he himself is the painting.

From there, McGinn goes into an analysis of the purpose of the book. According to McGinn, the two seemingly conflicting values of beauty and morality are really a single value and that "the aesthetic and the moral...are ultimately inseparable" (McGinn 142). *The Picture of Dorian Gray* illustrates the dire consequences of trying to disassociate the two. Dorian often uses art to glorify his sins, such as in the suicide of his lover Sibyl Vane. The suicide was a direct result of his cruelty to her, spurning her love and adoration because she performed poorly in a play. She only performed poorly out of love for him, because in her mind, he was the reality of Love. At first, Dorian feels a terrible guilt for Sibyl's death, as any person might, but by elevating her death to the level of art, he makes Sibyl into nothing more than "a wonderful tragic figure" (Wilde 119). Dorian raises Sibyl and her suicide onto a pedestal, putting her among the tragic heroines she played, and saves himself from feeling guilt or remorse for her death because it has become beautiful and completely distant to him, a dramatic ending to a wonderful play. But by abandoning those human emotions, by essentially forsaking his conscience, Dorian makes himself into a repulsive, unfeeling creature. By attempting to make his life into art while denying virtue and embracing sin as a form of beauty, Dorian undermines his own pursuit and makes his soul into a "foul parody, some infamous, ignoble satire" (Wilde 176).

And so, McGinn translates Wilde's artistic ideal as a moral ideal as well. The quote by Stolnitz, then, would not reflect Wilde's view of art at all. In fact, the quote suggests that a critic practice the same separation of aesthetics and morals that brings about Dorian Gray's destruction. According to McGinn's interpretation, the two are naturally connected and it is both natural and correct to judge a piece of art as aesthetically good or bad based on the moral vision it represents. Because evil is inherently ugly, even the most skilled artist cannot make it beautiful.

The interpretation offered by McGinn is a thorough one and reveals a much deeper meaning in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* than that which a casual reader would find in it. His interpretation makes the ending of the book far more satisfying less ambiguous than the initial reading of the story. But is this interpretation really enough to reconcile the differences between Wilde's view in the Preface and the message of his story? McGinn addresses the differences between the Preface and the novel only briefly: "Did not Wilde scorn traditional virtue in favour of dandy-ism, sensation seeking, freedom of spirit? The aphorisms that preface the novel sound as if they are endorsing such a morally cleansed outlook. But his story points to a very different conclusion" (McGinn 140).

This does not do anything to connect the Preface and the novel, so there is still not a clear interpretation of what Wilde's views really are. The only way to understand Wilde's views is to get the seemingly opposite positions he holds in the Preface and the novel on the same page.

Wilde certainly does recognize that art cannot escape the influence of morality, the fate of Dorian Gray is enough to confirm that. Beauty and evil cannot possibly coexist because of the inherently ugly nature of evil, an ugliness that shows itself in the face of Dorian's soul, trapped on canvas. It may be in this acceptance of art's dependence on virtue that Wilde finds justification for his

arguments in the Preface. As Dorian Gray's inner ugliness mars his outer beauty, so too does evil disfigure art, twisting it into something so despicable that it can scarcely be called art at all. Wilde states that "the only excuse for making a useless thing is that one admires it intensely" (Wilde xvi). The artist who creates in his work the ugliness of immorality has no excuse for doing so because it is impossible to admire ugliness. This excludes immorality from being art. Therefore, an artist, who seeks only to create beautiful art, cannot be said to have "ethical sympathies" (Wilde xv) because he really only has two options when creating art: to portray either the morally beautiful or the morally neutral. The artist can express immorality if he so chooses, after all "the artist can express everything" (Wilde xvi), but morality must, by the nature of art, ultimately win over corruption.

Critics who find immorality in art, then, truly are "corrupt without being charming" (Wilde xv) because they have found evil in something that, by necessity, has no evil in it. The evil that they find can only come from themselves. Morals cannot be imposed on that which is already morally sound. Nor can they be imposed on the morally neutral. Even sensuous beauty cannot be criticized morally because if it were truly immoral it would cease to be beautiful. So, as Oscar Wilde suggests, it is not acceptable to criticize art by means of morality.

This interpretation of the Preface reconciles it with the novel itself. McGinn's interpretation of Wilde's beliefs is ultimately the most correct; he just did not extend that interpretation into the Preface. Wilde does not believe that there is a separation between beauty and morality, as the Stolnitz quote would suggest. In fact, it is that very separation that Wilde warns against in his book. And Wilde's views in the Preface, though they seem to agree with the given quote on the surface, actually coincide with those views expressed in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. McGinn's interpretation gives a satisfying explanation of the story, especially its ambiguous ending. But it also, more importantly, gives a satisfying and well-justified interpretation of Wilde's views on aesthetics. These two qualities together make McGinn's interpretation relevant to the views of Oscar Wilde and the content of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.