

# The Picture of Dorian Gray; The Return of the Real A Lacanian Perspective

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## ABSTRACT

I feel that my analysis, which endeavours to articulate the operational Lacanian concepts onto Wilde's fiction, will achieve a "liberating" of the meaning from the text, an enterprise which can be equated with a transvaluation of the textual psychological values. One of the points I argue in what follows is that the readers of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are encouraged by Wilde to transcend the limited perspective of the fictional selves (characters) in the story. To use Lacanian terms, consciousness equals a fictional construct that performs a masquerade of truth because it is attached to signifiers that reside beyond the subject in the Other (and in the unrepresented sphere of the Real). Approaching the text from a Lacanian perspective will make the reader aware of how one constructs an ideal image of one's 'self' and seduces others into recognizing it. The results that such an enterprise yields point to the fact that there is an *eccentric* relationship between what a person (Dorian Gray, in our case) *is* and what one *desires*, a lack-in-being that haunts the human subject. Even if the portrait fills his lack-in-being, by bestowing upon him everlasting beauty, there remains a gap within itself likewise. It lacks life. To conclude, the portrait becomes more Dorian-like in proportion as Dorian himself gets alienated from his self, so that eventually it *becomes* the real Dorian. When the latter fully realizes that, he tries to reconquer his life, even if the price is his death.

The subject goes a long way beyond what is experienced subjectively by the individual, exactly as far as the Truth is able to reach... This Truth of his story is not all of it contained in his script, and yet the place is marked there by painful shocks he feels from knowing only his own lines. (Lacan)

The portrait used to remind me of those lines in 'Hamlet': 'Like the painting of a sorrow, A face without a heart.' (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*)

## 1. Introduction

For several reasons a Lacanian approach to Oscar Wilde's fiction constitutes a particularly rewarding interplay of theory and fiction. First, and most generally, Wilde seems to be himself fascinated with the mystery of the unconscious. With *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, he

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makes the phenomenon of the unconscious uncomfortably problematical for his readers. By imposing a metanarrative on the stories, we can implicate that they illustrate a higher truth, and this truth, although sometimes beyond the understanding of the characters is nonetheless, perfectly apparent to a careful reader.

In a Lacanian plot of a story, a person experiences oneself only inasmuch as s/he constructs an ideal image of his/her 'self' and seduces others into recognizing it. (*Mirror*, 1977) In fact, the drive toward building explanatory paradigms may be said to arise from the subject's structural lack-in-being. The *moi's* insistence on verifiability and fixity is meant to obscure the fact that the subject's presumed autonomy depends upon the gaze and the desire of what Lacan calls the Other (the authenticator of one's unified, presocial self that one misrecognised during the mirror stage and has designated as true despite all evidence to the contrary). People try to interrogate and impress the Other in their relationships with others and, thus, celebrate the controllable unity of the "self" that they see reflected in the other's recognition of them.

It would mean that a person is in a continual chase for self-discovery, which is also, as I will argue, the case of Wilde's *Dorian Gray*. When he first appears in the studio of his friend, Basil Halward, for yet another session of modelling for the painter's portrayal of him, Basil describes him as having a "simple and beautiful nature."

The narcissistic investment in the 'self' would correspond to Lacan's view of the *moi*, or the 'ideal ego'. This *primary narcissism*, according to Lacan, is formed as a result of the mirror stage in which the subject mistakes his/her coherent image for a representation of a unified identity. Later, with a *secondary narcissism*, the subject forms "ego ideals". This complex psychic mechanism exposes the following truth: Basil isn't an ego ideal for Dorian, but rather an ideal ego, for, since there is no perceivable trace in the latter's speech of a proper 'moi' construct of his own that he tries to get authenticated, he is adrift to the others' untampered with views, in other words he seeks out others to validate this earlier (fictional) unity.

## 2. Discussion

In what follows, I argue that it is Lord Henry Wotton's interference in his life that brings about major changes. By his making a cynical apology of the relativity of all things, of their marred purity, he stealthily induces into Dorian's consciousness the full awareness of his own good looks which were the unmistakable sign of he who possesses the blessings of the one gift whose completeness couldn't be questioned: beauty. Lord Henry is the one who, by projecting his powerful gaze upon an empty consciousness, causes a response consisting of an instantaneous 'moi' formation, which would perform henceforth only for this kind of authenticating gaze: "He was dimly conscious that entirely fresh influences were at work within him. The very words that Basil's friend had said to him had touched some secret chord that had never been touched before, but that he felt was now vibrating and throbbing to curious pulses. Why had it been left for a stranger to reveal him to himself?" (Wilde, 1994, 78) Once the *moi* is projected outwards, it leaves the person in slavish dependence on the other to authenticate the myth of oneself. Wilde's probable design for this story shows that the exhilaration generated by recognition from the other also leads to a desperate sense of alienation that requires a constant resuming of this recognition. This alienation makes one "a somnambulist who walks through reality with obstinate conviction while ignorantly bruising oneself on the ineluctable real that consistently undermines the conscious fictions by which he lives." (Mieke, 2004, 32)

That Dorian rejects the possibility of his being other than he has come to think himself to be, and that he strives to consider his present state as one latently pertaining to him, is his

attempt, recorded in the verbal register, to minimize, nay to negate Lord Henry's influence, and thus to indulge himself into a non-acknowledgement of his *moi* suspension on Wotton's gaze: "Yet they seemed to him to have come really from himself". (Wilde, 1994, 81)

His dismay at engendering any kind of event that would jeopardize himself as an autonomous person and that would prove his *moi* but a fiction, becomes conspicuous when he first falls in love, with a beautiful actress named Sybil Vane. Dorian's "profound" attachment to Sybil is meant to confirm his newly acknowledged *moi*, for he only wants to see in her a counter-version of himself, complete and unaltered, a self-conscious, substantive beauty, which would not be a result of the inner changes he had undergone. Consequently, Dorian wants to misrecognize himself in what he deems to be a perfect person, wants to mistake himself for her and thus to have "a self-validation of his *moi*." (Bowie, 2010, 57).

Yet, the night Sybil performs her role so badly on the stage, in front of all his friends and when her justification for it proves to Dorian that, in fact, she was the one dependent upon his gaze (which, once having authenticated her as a consummate person, full of charm and grace, could be dispensed with and replaced for love, his love that would overlook her flaws as an actress) Dorian realizes that all he believed for true was in fact a mystification, only acknowledged as reality by him. A thing that would be subversive for his own allegiance to a self (= *moi*) only made real by Lord Henry's authenticating gaze. Thus, his parting with Sybil, in an attempt to counteract the paralytic effect of his discovery of her as jeopardizing his fictional *moi* betrays his unease that his subjectivity is structured so that it is both open to authentication and vulnerable to subversion by forces beyond the reality of his self-experiences. He had discovered Sybil to be vain (Vane), a thing which he tries to ignore, or rather to deny about himself.

Entranced as he is with the awareness of his own beauty, in its life-drained, therefore frozen projection on the equally lifeless canvas: "When he saw it, he drew back and his cheeks flushed for a moment with pleasure. A look of joy came into his eyes, as if he had recognized himself for the first time" (Wilde, 1994, 41) Dorian is painfully struck by his foreseeing of the imminent, gradual occurrence of the reversal of this present beauty: "How sad it is. I shall grow old and horrible [...] but this picture will remain always young." (ibidem) This latter remark implicitly bears Dorian's acknowledgement of the incompleteness of his being. This sense of incompleteness of one's self is defined by Lacan as "*a lack-in-being*". That's when one starts interrogating each object hoping it will provide one with a glimpse of truth by revealing itself as a signifier with a verifiable signified, that it will cater for the gap hollowing in himself. (Arrivé, 1998, 42-5)

And thus, it is increasingly obvious that the portrait becomes for Dorian the object of desire, for it attracts him by the way it appears to fill the gap in his being: "If it were only the other way! If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old!" (Wilde, 1994, 42) Now the difference between the live Dorian and the lifeless one is no longer only one translated in terms of divergent futures, but mainly one of dis-coincidental personalities. The split is produced in front of the picture, since both Basil and Henry begin talking about two different lads: the body-framed one and the canvas-framed one. But it is the former which Basil calls "the real Dorian".

Lacan states: "Is the place I occupy as the subject of a signifier (that we take, for argumentation's sake, to be the portrait) concentric or eccentric in relation to the place I occupy as subject of the signified? (The equivalent of which, given the previous reason, is the person it represents)? – that is the question. It is not a question of knowing whether/ I speak of myself in a way that conforms to what I am/, but rather of knowing whether / I am the same as that of which I speak". (*Écrits*, 1982, 219) An interpretation of this statement would

allow us to catch a glimpse of the relation that mediates henceforth between Dorian and his portrait.

To all intents and purposes, the first delimitation deals with identification, while the second one deals with identity. You *identify with* a person, that is you do things that you think are concurrent with the person's observably habitual way of behaving, but you *are* a person when you don't behave by guessing and in virtue of empathy, but when what you do is what you feel in your nature like doing. Hence, the *eccentric* relationship, between what Dorian *is* and what he *desires* to be, makes the reader aware of the lack-in-being that haunts the human subject. When he first realizes that, for every sin he committed, a stain would tarnish the fairness of the face on the canvas, he considers it, on the spur of the moment, to be the visible emblem of his conscience, that would keep a close vigil upon his deeds and permanently determine them. Then it dawns on him that the portrait isn't only the emblem of his consciousness, but, given its ec-centric position, his consciousness itself, which could bear a burden he would know nothing about: "he was to have all things", (Wilde, 1994, 82) as he thinks, grinning, upon it.

Yet he gradually realizes that the "pact" he had concluded with what he intended to be his *alter-ego*, the worse one, turns against him. For, while he performs for a gaze that, after having induced in him destructive upsurges, turns blind, Dorian estranges himself from the inherent self-alienations the *moi* introduces into its subjectivity in order to control a steady *moi* projection. As an illustration, Lord Henry never seems to wonder about the reason why Dorian looks so young, but only contents himself with what he sees. Hence, all those alienations within himself that he tries to deny, and that are passed upon the portrait, his outer consciousness, lead to "an extensive and ever-expanding hole within himself, namely to alienation of his self." (Ogilvie, 2000, 61). The lack-in-being that had been filled with his desire of remaining "forever young", is balanced by a continual voiding of whatever emerged in himself as a potential peril to his artificially preserved physical purity. Thus, he comes to painfully acknowledge that all he's left with is his own Apollinic flesh, while his spirit had migrated towards the canvas.

It is a strange feeling, that of losing yourself to yourself. He powerlessly witnesses the life – perverted and depraved as it is – draining from him, he is bereft of his present, which he crosses through, and watches it turn into past on the portrait, without being able to tamper with his future.

### 3. Conclusions

Even if the portrait had filled his lack-in-being, by bestowing upon him everlasting beauty, it experiences a gap within itself likewise. It lacks life, if we were to apply to it what Lacan asserted about words: "as symbols for something that is absent, the words are a presence that, however concretely presented, implies a residue of unnameable absence beyond what can be consciously known". (*Les quatres*, 1978, 189) Yet it becomes more Dorian-like in proportion as Dorian himself gets alienated from his self, so that eventually it *becomes* the real Dorian.

When the latter fully realizes that the hole, he had cut himself in the real is dangerously aggrandised, and that his reality recedes with the advancing gained by the portrait, he tries to reconquer his life, even if the price is his death. Thus, he cannot fully live while both he and his alter-ego – the bearer of his alienations – co-exist. The outcome is that he rips off his outer conscience and internalizes it: "Like the painting of a sorrow, a face without a heart." (Wilde, 1994, 221)

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