

Emilie Voeller

Dr. Milburn

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Aestheticism and Art: Analyzing the Incongruities in “The Critic as Artist” and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Oscar Wilde was a playwright, poet, author, and critic in the late 1800s. He is widely known for his brilliant wit, vibrant style, and well-remembered works such as *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Upon its publication, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was widely considered to be immoral and a promotion of a moral free, aesthetic life. To defend his work, Wilde wrote a preface to the novel where he concludes “All art is quite useless” (*Picture 4*). Wilde feeds into the Aesthetic Movement of the time and declares that all art should be beautiful, pleasurable, and separate from morality. With this view in mind, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* can seem like a promotion of this aesthetic ideal even in life itself. This interpretation, however, is much too shallow and can be further understood in light of Oscar Wilde’s other works. When reading two works by the same author, even if they are different mediums, the reader could assume that the two works would be promoting the same message. In Oscar Wilde’s “The Critic as Artist,” Wilde explains the role of the critic as well as expresses his ideas on art and criticism. It would be expected that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* would articulate the same ideals that Wilde discusses in his essay, this, however, is not entirely the case. While Wilde’s novel shares in some of the views of his essay, there are also instances where he seems to contradict himself, especially in the idea of the moral quality of art. It is through these contradictions that Wilde’s promotion of aestheticism in the novel comes into question.

In “Critic as Artist” Oscar Wilde demonstrates that writers often use “lies and masks” in their writing and employ these methods to “give shape to the era” (787). Through *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde is commenting on the aesthetic movement that is present during the time the novel is being written and first published. Wilde does not explicitly assert his aesthetic beliefs in the novel but instead he uses the “masks” of Lord Henry’s promotion of aestheticism and Dorian’s hedonistic life followed by his downfall to reveal Wilde’s true views. This idea is further promoted in the novel, in its only break into first-person narration, when the narrator questions, “Is insincerity such a terrible thing? I think not. It is merely a method by which we can multiply our personalities” (*Picture* 130). Through using the insincerity of lies and masks, the artist can take on many personalities and seem to promote different beliefs. It is through the reader’s act of determining the validity or insincerity of the promoted beliefs where the artist can shape the era.

Wilde’s critique of the culture in which he wrote his novel leads to a great work of art in response. This therefore makes Wilde, the critic of aestheticism, an artist in his response to this view. This follows Wilde’s own idea that “there has never been a creative age that has not been critical also” (“Critic” 796). Wilde himself is both a critic and an artist, using his art as a platform to voice his criticism, and by doing this, he is influencing the shape the following era will take. Wilde himself seemed to promote the aesthetic lifestyle, but as a result of the insincerities in his novel, he takes a stance that requires a more thoughtful aestheticism, which will impact future aesthetes.

In relation to the concept of writers using masks, Wilde also believes the purpose of criticism is to see the object as it is not, “It has been said... that the proper aim of Criticism is to see the object as in itself it really is. But this is a serious error” (“Critic” 800). Because in

Wilde's criticism he believes the critic takes on the role of an artist, as apparent in even the title of his essay, his ideas can be applied to art as well as criticism. Wilde elaborates upon this purpose in the novel. While Dorian himself remains untouched by time and sin, the painting of him done by Basil Hallward is the object that suffers the consequences

something that had a corruption of its own, worse than the corruption of death itself – something that would breed horrors and yet would never die. When the worm was to the corpse, his sins would be to the painted image on the canvas. They would mar its beauty and eat away its grace. They would defile it and make it shameful. And yet the thing would still live on. It would always be alive. (*Dorian Gray* 109)

Dorian's outward appearance presents the young and seemingly innocent man to whom the reader was first introduced. The painting, however, which goes unseen by all except Dorian himself, is the representation of Dorian's soul as it actually is: dreadful, evil, and ugly. Wilde believes that the purpose of criticism, and therefore art, is to present things as they are not, and the story's view on aestheticism follows this same idea, presenting it as it is not. What seems to be an affirmation of the life of total pleasure at the cost of morality, is, in reality, being represented as it is not, and is in fact, a warning against living a life of pure aestheticism and pleasure.

Wilde's novel also partakes in another idea presented in his essay, that of art being more real than life itself. Wilde states "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life" ("Oscar Wilde" 787). This is expressed in the novel through the characters' involvement in the theater. Dorian, Basil, and Lord Henry frequently attend theater and opera performances and Lord Henry proclaims his enjoyment of theater by stating, "I love acting. It is so much more real than life itself" (74). Lord Henry's proclamation seems oxymoronic but actually gets to Wilde's truth. In

life, people can be deceptive and fake whereas on the stage the actors have one clear intention and their performance is driven by this. Dorian is in love with Sibyl Vane, an actress, but as soon as she begins to lose talent in her acting, Dorian tells her he does not want to be with her anymore. Sibyl's response is that because Dorian truly taught her about love, she cannot fake love onstage anymore (80-82). Life aims to find ways of expression and art shows life how to do this. Therefore, life mimics what it learned in art, and in the novel, people mimic what they learned by watching theater, making the art of theater more real than life. Therefore, when Sibyl learns what it is really like to love, she does not need the false mimicry. This causes her acting to not come off as beautiful which is upsetting to Dorian as he is only interested in things which bring him pleasure in his aesthetic lifestyle.

While it appears as though there are numerous ways in which Oscar Wilde's novel and critical essay agree with each other, the ways in which they disagree and contradict each other are crucial for explicating more thorough meanings from both texts as well as determining whether *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is truly encouraging aestheticism. Throughout *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Lord Henry Wotton mesmerizes the young, beautiful, and impressionable Dorian Gray with his aesthetic ideals. Lord Henry endorses the aesthetic lifestyle with such sophistication and audacity that Dorian, and the reader, cannot help but be enthralled in this aesthetic philosophy. Lord Henry is constantly speaking witty epigrams and critiquing the moral society as he is in pursuit of acts and things that increase his happiness, whether they are moral or not: "Pleasure is the only thing worth having a theory about... But I am afraid I cannot claim my theory as my own. It belongs to Nature, not to me. Pleasure is Nature's test, her sign of approval. When we are happy we are always good, but when we are good we are not always happy" (73). Lord Henry is trying to influence Dorian to be more like him and pursue the more

pleasurable aspects of life and he accomplishes this with his skilled rhetoric. With the ideals of this character, who is important throughout the book, as well as Oscar Wilde's own known involvement in the Aesthetic Movement in Victorian England, it would be extremely easy to read *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as a tale that advocates for this purely aesthetic lifestyle enjoyed by Wilde and Lord Henry. However, when Wilde's other writings are applied to this story, it is seen that this is not the case.

Wilde comments on beauty in both his criticism and his novel. According to Wilde, beauty "has as many meanings as man has moods" ("Critic" 802). Dorian finds beauty in the objects and experiences that bring him pleasure and he assigns meanings to these various actions, often disregarding the immoral meaning of the act in order to simply enjoy the pleasure. This lifestyle suits him for quite some time and the only negative that comes from it is that his portrait changes, but this seems to have no effect on Dorian himself. Dorian is allowing the art and beauty to give meaning to his life and he lets these things take over until he is completely destroyed.

While Wilde, through his essay, presents beauty as a positive idea to search for in life, through the novel, it is shown that this is not the case. Dorian's life was entirely devoid of meaning because he let beauty and pleasure, and nothing else, be the goal of his life, which soon was not enough for Dorian. Where he used to get pleasure from his terrible acts and watching the portrait change Dorian found that "Of late he had felt no such pleasure. It had kept him awake at night. When he had been away, he had been filled with terror lest other eyes should look upon it. It had brought melancholy across his passions. Its mere memory marred many moments of joy" (202). Wilde states that art and beauty can shape life, but Dorian's allowance of these things to shape his life is what ultimately lead to his demise. Up to the point of Dorian's final realization

of his faulty motivations, the aesthetic lifestyle was ceaselessly promoted and enjoyed throughout the novel. In his final moments, Dorian decides to rid himself of his conscience, all the terrible things he has done, and of the awful representation of his soul: “it would kill the painter’s work, and all that meant. It would kill the past, and when that was dead he would be free. It would kill this monstrous soul-life, and without its hideous warnings he would be at peace” (202). Dorian’s final realization that his beautiful, aesthetic, and hedonistic lifestyle was not satisfying or as enjoyable as he once thought it was expresses Wilde’s concluding commentary on this type of aestheticism as well, living in the style of Dorian and Lord Henry will lead to temporary satisfaction followed by despair and death.

The preface of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* first seems to further establish Wilde’s ideas from “The Critic as Artist.” Wilde’s preface was put into place to establish his views on art to his critics and future readers, as the novel had been under question for being immoral before the preface was published. In the preface, Wilde states, “No art desires to prove anything... No artist has ethical sympathies” (3). By stating that the goal of art is not to take a moral standpoint, Wilde is following an idea he presents in “The Critic as Artist,” criticism, and therefore art, “in its essence is purely subjective, and seeks to reveal its own secret and not the secret of another” (800). In this, Wilde does not believe that the art needs to promote a moral view, which would seem a fitting defense with the two works.

This idea, however, is contrasted in a letter Wilde wrote to the editor of the *St. James Gazette* where he was defending his novel. Wilde states

the moral is this: All excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its own punishment. The painter, Basil Hallward, worshiping physical beauty far too much, as most painters do, dies by the hand of one in whose souls he has created a monstrous and absurd vanity.

Dorian Gray, having led a life of mere sensation and pleasure, tries to kill conscience, and at that moment kills himself. Lord Henry Wotton seeks to be merely a spectator of life.

He finds that those who reject the battle are more deeply wounded than those who take part in it. Yes; there is a terrible moral in *Dorian Gray*.” (“Part Four” 259)

Wilde’s previous works state that he believes there does not need to be, nor should there be a moral message to art. In his letter, he directly challenges his own beliefs by explicitly stating that there is, in fact, a moral message and even goes as far as clarifying exactly what this moral is. While all contradictions Wilde makes against himself are important, this incongruity within Wilde’s works is imperative to finding the deeper meaning of the novel, past what was originally thought about it, as Wilde himself promotes the idea that his novel does have a moral and works towards the rejection of a totally aesthetic life.

When reading multiple works by the same author, it would seem to be a safe assumption that the author will have the same beliefs and views throughout his or her works. With Oscar Wilde, this is not the case. Wilde’s works do correlate with each other in many different aspects. It is where the texts conflict with each other where readers can find true meanings about the texts that would not be blatantly obvious. Upon first glance, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* can seem to be a novel that promotes a moral free, aesthetic lifestyle. This interpretation, however, only remains at the surface level of the text. When contrasting Wilde’s essay, “The Critic as Artist,” his personal letters, and his novel, Wilde’s seeming promotion of aestheticism comes into question. Where in his critical essay and in the preface of his novel Wilde concludes that art should not have a moral purpose, in his letters and novel, Wilde contradicts himself and goes on to promoting a moral in his art after all. Wilde encourages readers to understand that a total

aesthetic life is not for what people should strive, because those who live in excess will inevitably find punishment in their futures.



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