



Transgressing Genre and Aesthetics: A Socio-historical Critique of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

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Abstract:

Known for his radical views on life and exploration of literary subcultures, Oscar Wilde was fascinated by the relationship between art and life, and the ways in which aesthetics can be used to enrich and improve ordinary human existence. Influenced by the philosophies of the movements such as Aestheticism and Decadence Wilde advocated for a life where pursuit of beauty, art and pleasure was at the centre of human life. Wilde used the form of the novel to explore philosophical and moral ideas about the nature of art, beauty and morality, rather than simply telling a straightforward narrative. His much-celebrated novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* blurs the line between fiction and philosophy. By juxtaposing the philosophical and moral themes with the fictional narrative, Wilde transcends the boundaries of traditional storytelling and delves into deeper intellectual and ethical territories. The present paper attempts to trace the cultural and spiritual journey of Wilde which has shaped his literary sensibility. With an in-depth textual analysis and a study of the socio-historical developments of the time the paper tries to engage with the ideas of hedonism and the other subcultural practices represented in the text.

Key words: Aestheticism, Decadence, Fiction, Genre, Catholicism.

The Picture of Dorian Gray is undoubtedly a convoluted work of fiction as it is not possible to confine the work in any conventional genre. It is a curious amalgamation of gothic fiction, myth, satire, psychological quest, religious allegory, criticism of the colonial project etc. Its highly experimental nature is not limited to the content but also reflected in the form. It's a subversion of the 19th century English obsession with bourgeois morality, and the rigidity of creative expression dictated by literary realism and naturalism. Wilde's literary oeuvre has critiqued the British Imperialistic tendencies, therefore, a Catholic-mythic reading of his novel in a way subverts the characteristic of the 19th century preoccupation with realist English fiction. Wilde's childhood was informed by an environment where opposition to British imperialism and a renewed eagerness to discover the Irish mythic past was afoot. His mother, Jane Francesca Elgee, was a prominent figure in 'The Young Ireland Movement' (1842-1846), which advocated for complete freedom from England. In the 19th century many catholic scholars were re-discovering a pre-Christian Irish mythic past to transcend the boundaries of a religiously divided National identity and Wilde's father, Sir William Wilde was one among those scholars. It is evident how from a very young age Wilde imbibed the values of Irish nationalism and its pre-Christian mythic past, later all of it would reflect in his writings.



Jarlath Killeen in the introduction of his book *The Faiths of Oscar Wilde: Catholicism, Folklore and Ireland* talks about Wilde's criticism of English cultural hegemony on Ireland, "Wilde's work exposes how historically contingent Irish and English identity are to the cultural, economic and political relations between the two islands" (10). In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* there are various references to Catholicism and the protagonist is reported to have interest in the same. Critics also attribute Wilde's 'marginalised' position for being a Protestant in a largely Catholic Ireland and as an Irish student then a writer in England, to his later interest in other marginal sub-cultures, significantly homosexual love. Killeen proposes an interesting argument about Wilde's initial interest of Irish folk Catholicism as reflected in his poem 'Requiescat' (1874). Wilde lost his sister Isola at a very young age and wrote this poem on her memory. The poem represents two opposing views on death and there is the dichotomy between folk-Catholic ritualistic celebrations of the dead to the protestant stoic acceptance of it. Killeen observes that the former belief aided in Wilde's coping with his sister's tragic death, "The Catholicism which emerges from this poem, then, is a strange conflation of folk and orthodox practice; it is seductive, paradoxical, coded, secret, masked, folkloric" (34). Catholicism provided Wilde with a world of ritual and faith as opposed to the Protestant preoccupation with reason and rationality.

The British imperial project was aided by its exaltation of middleclass morality and ethics along with Protestant religious values. Wilde's life-long fascination with Catholicism eventually found adequate expression through his works. Jarlath Killeen observes that Wilde might have based the character of Lord Henry, on Cardinal John Henry Newman, the spoke person for 'Oxford Movement'. Newman and Henry both advocated for the importance of beauty and youth. While Newman believed in regeneration of life (like the New English Catholic Church of 1850) through religious grace and miracle, Lord Henry believed in a complete Naturalistic approach where there is only the body and the soul is non-existent. At the beginning of the novel when Dorian transforms his soul to the painting, he begins to live two different lives— one of the bodies and another of the soul. According to Killeen, the actions of this body without the soul, is a criticism of the 'Darwinian body'. But Catholic theology believes in the coming together of body and soul for achieving Salvation; and the novel's ending confirms it when the portrait regains its lost beauty through the reconciliation of Dorian's body and soul.

Before proceeding towards the discussion of Wilde's rejection of 19th century English obsession with realist fiction which was the inevitable consequence of scientific Naturalism (energised by Darwinian Philosophy), we must look at his involvement with Aestheticism and Decadent Movement of Art. Aestheticism was a literary movement in the late nineteenth-century France and Britain. It was a reaction to the notion that all art should have a utilitarian or social value. The Aesthetic Movement urges that art justifies its own existence by expressing and embodying beauty. In England, its chief theorist was Walter Pater (1839 - 1894), who was a professor of classics at Oxford University. In contrast to the usual Victorian emphasis on work and social



responsibility, Pater emphasized the fleeting nature of life and argued that the most important thing was to relish the exquisite sensations life brings, especially those stimulated by a work of art. Pater's influence on *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was profound. Aestheticism heralded the emergence of the later movement in England and France known as 'Decadence'. This movement flourished in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, a period also known as fin de siècle (or end of the century). Decadent writers believed that Western civilization was in a condition of decay, and they attacked the accepted moral and ethical standards of the day. The theory of Decadence was that all "natural" forms and behaviours were inherently flawed; therefore, highly artificial, "unnatural" forms and styles were to be cultivated, in life as well as art. Many Decadent writers therefore experimented with lifestyles that involved drugs and depravity (just as Dorian does in the novel).

One influential work of the Decadent movement was *A Rebours: Against the Grain*, a novel by French writer, J. K. Huysmans, published in 1884. The protagonist is estranged from Parisian society and continually seeks out strange and new experiences. It is generally accepted that *A Rebours* is the novel (the yellow book) that Lord Henry sends to Dorian Gray and which fascinates and grips Dorian for years. The narrative of *A Rebours* could be studied as a major influence on *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. *A Rebours*'s chronicles the life journey of its protagonist Des Esseintes through his encounter with faith and indulgence of bodily pleasures. Although he struggles with the temptations of indulgence and excess, the guilt and doubt associated with it draws him closer to his faith. Similar to Dorian, Des Esseintes too is fascinated by Catholicism in search of spiritual contentment. Wilde's friend and sexual partner John Gray who later converted to Catholicism and the ancient Greek tribe named Dorians who engaged in institutionalised homo-erotic activity; provides Wilde with his protagonist's name. Killeen observes,

Both Gray and Huysmans provided Wilde with a pattern whereby sexuality, sin and spirituality were linked in a movement towards the Catholic Church. Together, they suggested the possibility that the Bildungsroman, which was a largely secular genre, could be reconfigured and moulded into a spiritual parable. (87)

Jerusha McCormack in her essay "Wilde's Fiction(s)" writes about his 'queer' sense of National Identity and his peculiar use of English language to mock the hypocrisy of English aristocracy. The bohemian life style that Wilde pursued in England peculiarly called dandyism was, according to McCormack, a ploy to mock and subvert the customs of the very society he was seeking an entry into. Just like Lord Henry Wotton if one is allowed to make an observation, who ridicules the system from inside the system; follows most of the social codes while being in full knowledge of its sham. McCormack also talks about the mythic and folk-lore like narrative of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. She writes how the narrative of the novel brings together the myths of Greek and Jew by taking inspiration from the Irish legend of the bard Ossian. According to the legend the bard,



...wandering away on a white horse, entered the mythic country of the young, Tir-nan-Og, 'lived there three hundred years, and then returned in search of his comrades. The moment his foot touched the earth his three hundred years fell on him, and he was bowed double, and his beard swept the ground(130).

The Picture of Dorian Gray draws from various sources, significant among them being the myth of Faust (who barter his soul for worldly things), Dracula (who lives off the life of others), and “Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde” (dual personality and life, of the same person and the many perils of pressure of social convention).

John G. Peters in his article “Style and Art in Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: Form as Content” argues that Wilde deliberately uses some highly stylised passages to subvert the restrictions of Victorian obsession with realism. The beginning of the novel is a highly sensuous description of a garden, an imagery which is an exquisite testimony of artistic expression but at the same time representing a very colonial metaphor of the garden, where bounties of the empire are brought to a colonial centre to create an artificial sense of omnipotence of the Imperial power. Wilde never cared for realistic portrayal of life in Art, he believed in creating something non-existent instead of being a mere chronicler of events. John Peters writes,

Wilde found ‘the prison-house of realism’ to be restricting because it was limited to commonly held morality and representation of reality; it was also imperfect, because reality can never achieve the perfection of the ideal (which perfection was Wilde’s goal for art). As a result, art cannot imitate life if it is to be an invention of the ideal.

He illustrates in his article how after the occurrence of every significant crisis in the novel Wilde inserts a stylised passage. These passages are not the norm but exceptions in the novel to constantly shift the narrative from realistic to fantastic. He argues that the over stylised narrative is intentionally adopted by Wilde to draw the reader’s attention away from the plot. This reversal is very uncharacteristic of Victorian emphasis on realistic narrative progression and representation. Peters also talks about Wilde’s paradoxical use of sensuous language to tell what arguably is an inherently moralistic tale of sin and redemption. At the end of the day the aesthetic choices and style of the novel overshadows the moral trepidations of its characters, “...the style itself, not the moral overtones or gothic and melodramatic plot becomes the book’s most important aspect and becomes, in a sense, the novel’s content.”

To somewhat move away from the discussion so far, there is another fascinating perspective in reading the novel as a psychological drama, where art and life, imagination and reality overlaps. In her article “Art as Symptom: A Portrait of Child Abuse in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*” Esther Rashkin has attempted at a psychological criticism of the novel, tying Dorian’s degenerate life style to a possible childhood trauma. She picks up the generally overlooked sub-narrative of Dorian and his grandfather Lord Kelso. Kelso never liked his grandson born out of a relationship



which was between a socially unequal couple, which was frowned upon by society and was demeaning to Lord Kelso's higher status. Infact, his mysterious background increased Lord Henry's interest in him, "Behind every exquisite thing that existed, there was something tragic... He would seek to dominate him—had already, indeed, half done so. He would make that wonderful spirit his own. There was something fascinating in this son of love and death" (32-33). It's intriguing how Lord Henry time and again keeps conflating life and art, human emotions to objects of or inspiration for art. According to Rashkin Lord Henry was a mere catalyst, Dorian already had dormant in his psyche the capacity for leading an emotionally numb life due to his loveless and a possibly abusive childhood. Dorian's corrupt life was an outward projection of the malicious, vile image that his grandfather constructed of him and which he internalised. Oppression and contempt thus when finally come out it will affect life as well as art. Rashkin writes, "*The Picture of Dorian Gray* is thus a narrative that establishes a radical link between aesthetic creation and violence, between the production of an artistic work and the damage wrought by psychological abuse." This idea of internalised oppression could also be read in the context of the socio-political rejection of homosexual love which finds its echo in the novel. This refreshing reading of the novel somewhat veers the readers' attention away from the rather religiously fervent 'sin and redemption' reading. It also very minutely deals with the 'art as imitation of life' and 'life as imitation of art' dialectic, Wilde conflates life and art as his indignant mouthpiece Henry Wotton does. There are other instances where the themes about art and life are realized in part through the conflicts in the novel. The love affair is one of such conflicts between art and life. Dorian Gray falls in love with Sybil Vane, a young and beautiful actress who acts in the Shakespearean plays. Considering her as goddess of art, Dorian pursues her and claims to marry her in the future. But Sybil loses interest in portraying superficial love on stage after real love comes to her life. Dorian gets disillusioned with her and leaves her after she failed to enliven the stage with her Art, which drives Sybil to suicide. Dorian loves Sybil Vane in the art world rather than the girl in the real life, "She lived her finest tragedy...She passed again into the sphere of art. There is something of the martyr about her. Her death has all the pathetic uselessness of martyrdom, all its wasted beauty." (Wilde, *The Picture* 94)

The Picture of Dorian Gray so beautifully encapsulates the doubts and convictions of its author that one cannot help but marvel at the way it pricks the readers' curiosity as well as conscience. The novel is a myth, a religious journey, a juxtaposition of real and fantastic, natural and supernatural. Wilde tried to claim back the Irish mythic past rich with rituals and an organic faith rather than a mechanical comprehension of nature through this novel. Wilde was a rebel, a brilliant thinker who had to eventually give in to the prejudices of the authority for his beliefs and for his so called 'transgressions'. What can be more anti-mimetic than Wilde's own life! which did somehow imitate his fiction, after he quoted from it in the infamous 'gross indecency' trial which will herald the beginning of his misfortunes. But the questions he raised and the amusing way through which he raised them can never be overlooked. His criticism of the British



cultural hegemony on Ireland conveyed through his writings can be included, ironically enough, among some of the finest works of English literature.

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