An Examination of Art and Evil in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Nikki Tosczak

This paper will discuss the relationship between art and evil, as well as subordination of ethics to aesthetics in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde. This will be discussed through an analysis of the illustrator Aubrey Beardsley and the Aesthetics Movement and Art Nouveau in England, and through the character of Dorian Gray, specifically, the influence of Henry Wotton. Aubrey Beardsley was heavily influenced by Japonisme and the French Rococo, both of which are present in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Beardsley's most well-known pieces are the illustrations done for Oscar Wilde's *Salome.* The French Rococo valued decadence and flirtation, which are also major themes of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and are most easily recognised in the character of Lord Henry Wotton. Rococo art also placed aesthetics over ethics and Dorian Gray is a person whose soul becomes corrupted through art and the subordination of ethics to aesthetics.

The last few decades of the nineteenth century were a time of cultural dichotomy. On one side were those who revelled in wealth, luxury, and technological progress (Davies, Penelope J.E, *Janson's History of Art: The Western Tradition*, Chapter 26). On the other side were people who perceived these qualities as signs of decadence, spiritual decline, and amorality (Davies, Chapter 26). The Decadent movement was a literary trend that started in France, focusing on self-indulgent characters, often holding anti-bourgeois ideals. The movement spread throughout most of Europe, and in England, was best represented by Oscar Wilde (Davies, Chapter 26).

One of the art styles that emerged during this time was Art Nouveau. The style was characterised by curvilinear lines, and artists drew heavily on the natural world for inspiration. The primary aim of Art Nouveau was to blur the lines between the fine and decorative arts. During this time, a huge emphasis was placed on craftsmen, and Art Nouveau could be seen as a response to William Morris's Arts and Crafts Movement (Davies, Chapter 26). The name for the movement came from a shop in Paris called La Maison de l'Art Nouveau, where the owner Siegfried Bing sold imported Japanese furniture (Davies, Chapter 26). This is likely the reason Japonisme is so common in the works of many artists who were active during this time period.

Japonisme emerged in the mid 1850s, after Japanese ports reopened to trade with the West. The style incorporated Japanese iconography or concepts into Western art (TheArtStory.org). The

integration was partially based on a European idea of Japan, and also included some authentic influence. Japonisme influenced many art styles, including Impressionist and Neo-Impressionist movements. It also had a strong influence on the Aesthetics Movement. Japanese art quickly became popular in Europe both through high end art pieces and relatively inexpensive prints that were often used as packing materials for luxury items. Japonisme drew heavily on the realistic images, simple palettes with relatively few colours, unusual viewpoints, and flattened space present in traditional Japanese art (TheArtStory.org). It also built upon Orientalist influences present in Neoclassical and Romantic art.

Another art movement happening in England in the 1800s was the Aesthetics Movement, which became a very popular approach to decoration. The movement aimed to do away with what it perceived to be the ugliness and materialism of the industrial era, and could be seen as the visual arts version of the Decadent movement. Artists focused on making art for art's sake, rather than art meant to convey some deeper meaning. Perhaps the most well-known artist from this time period is the illustrator Aubrey Beardsley.

Fig. 1 Beardsley, Aubrey. *The Black Cape.* 1894, Royal Academy of Art, London.

Japonisme is a very common theme in the work of Aubrey Beardsley. This is most obviously seen in his *Salome* illustrations. Many of these illustrations, such as *The Black Cape*, feature "patterns on costumes [moving] sinuously around planes of white and black" (Teukolsky, 645). *The Black Cape* features the figure of Salome drawn in black, floating on a white backdrop. This,

in combination with the flat picture plain, are significant hallmarks of Japanese art. Salome is shown in a Japanese style dress that mimics samurai armour, and a Victorian style hat sitting on traditional Japanese stylised hair.

Japonisme was also popular in literature of the time. Like in art, Japonisme in literature often drew on preconceived notions held by Europeans about Japan. For example, in *The Decay of the Dying* Wilde writes that "in fact the whole of Japan is a pure invention. There is no such country, there are no such people" (Wilde qtd. in Teukolsky 648). He also brings Japonisme into *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. For example, in the first chapter when Lord Henry Wotton is visiting Basil Hallward's studio: "Lord Henry Wotton could just catch… now and then the fantastic shadow of birds in flight [flitting] across… the curtains that were stretched in front of the huge window, producing a kind of momentary Japanese effect" (Wilde, 5).

Fig. 2 Aubrey Beardsley, *The Rape of the Lock,* 1897.

The other major influence on Aubrey Beardsley's art was the French Rococo. This period of art was characterised by decadence, flirtation, and drama. The French Rococo originated in the mid-18th century- roughly a century before Beardsley's illustrations. While the fashion depicted in the illustration does not represent how people would have dressed in the 19th century, it does stand in for the mindless consumption and opulence that was so common during this time period. This influence can most easily be seen in Beardsley's illustrations for *The Rape of the Lock* (1896). The illustration depicts figures dressed in a stereotypically French fashion, with wide, richly embroidered skirts, puffy sleeves, and huge, styled wigs. The scene seems to be a salon of some kind,

with people mingling through the room, and tables of food and drink just visible in the background. This piece showcases quintessential Rococo decadence.

Fig. 3 Jean-Honore Fragonard, *The Swing*, 1767

The Rococo themes in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are most clearly represented in the character of Henry Wotton. One of the first things Henry says to Dorian is that Dorian is "...too charming to go in for philanthropy" (Wilde, 17). This is the start of a common theme in both the text, and in Rococo art: the subordination of ethics to aesthetics. One very popular French Rococo painting is *The Swing* by Jean-Honore Fragonard. The patron commissioned Fragonard to paint a portrait of the woman he was courting. In the image, the woman on the swing is dressed in a way that shows her ankles- something that would have been considered scandalous for the time. We are to assume that the older man pushing the swing is her husband, and while he allows her some freedom, he is always able to pull her back. The man watching her on the swing is representative of the patron. Based on the angles of the swing and the man's head, we get the impression that he is seeing up her skirt. The painting delights in flirtation and voyeurism.

Dorian Gray is first introduced as the subject of Basil Hallward's finest work. He is described as being very charming and good-looking. Throughout the text, Dorian slowly becomes more and more corrupted. This is in large part due to the fact that the portrait Basil Hallward has painted of him seems to take on all of Dorian's sins. Rather than Dorian growing old, or bearing any mark of cruelty, it is the portrait that changes. Dorian's corruption is also due, at least in part, to the influence of Lord Henry Wotton.

When we first meet the character of Dorian Gray, he is sitting for a portrait. Basil Hallward used Dorian as a model for many other works "Adonis…". This, however, is the first time Basil is painting Dorian as himself. Based on the art of the time, the portrait was likely done in the style of

the Aesthetics Movements. Given the values of the movement, most of Basil's works were likely intended only to be, and not convey any deeper meaning. This could serve as one reason why Henry is so shocked when Basil reveals that he will not show this portrait because he has "put too much of [himself] in it" (Wilde, 6). If this sentiment was common in the art world of the time, this statement likely would not have gotten the reaction it did from Henry.

Upon the portrait's completion, Henry and Basil quickly come to the conclusion that this is Basil's finest work. Dorian, however, does not seem to feel as delighted as the others. When Dorian lays eyes on the portrait, he cries out "[h]ow sad it is! How sad it is! I shall grow old, and horrible, and dreadful. But this picture will remain always young…If it were only the other way" (Wilde, 25). This is the beginning of a common theme throughout the book: the subordination of ethics to aesthetics.

The first time Dorian notices that the portrait has changed is after his fight with Sybil where he called off their engagement. After getting home from the theatre, the portrait catches Dorian's eye, as the expression seems to have changed. Initially, Dorian is puzzled by it. He continues to go about his business, and then returns to look at the portrait in the light. When Dorian opens the curtains, he sees that the expression on the face of the portrait has become twisted into one of cruelty. This causes Dorian to wonder if he truly had been cruel to Sybil: "[c]ruelty! Had he been cruel? It was the girl's fault, not his" (Wilde, 78). The idea of his calling off the engagement being Sybil's fault is the start of a theme that will continue throughout the book, specifically in conversations about her death between Henry and Dorian.

> He threw himself into a chair, and began to think. Suddenly there flashed across his mind what he had said in Basil Hallward's studio the day the picture had been finished. Yes, he remembered it perfectly. He had uttered a mad wish that he himself might remain young, and the portrait grow old; that his own beauty might be untarnished, and the face on the canvas bear the burden of his passions and his sins; that the painted image might be seared with the lines of suffering and thought, and that he might keep all the delicate bloom and loveliness of his then just conscious boyhood. Surely his wish had not been fulfilled? Such things were impossible. It seemed monstrous to even think of them. And, yet, there was the picture before him, with the touch of cruelty in the mouth. (Wilde, 78)

The above passage comes from near the end of chapter eight of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In this section of the text, Dorian has just returned from wandering the streets of London following his argument with Sybil. After studying the changes in the portrait's expression, Dorian immediately flashes back to the day the portrait was finished. He remembers the prayer he made that " his own beauty may be untarnished, and the face on the canvas bear the burden of his passions and his sins" (78). This is the first hint of the influence Lord Henry Wotton had on the character of Dorian Gray. The completion of the portrait follows a conversation between Henry and Dorian, where Henry says "[y]es, Mr. Gray, the gods have been good to you. But what the gods give they quickly take away" (22). The article "Ethics and Aesthetics in the Picture of Dorian Gray" by Dominic Manganiello states that "Dorian is fascinated not only by Lord Henry's attempt to substitute an aesthetic for an ethical conscience, but also by the power of the language in which this substitution is couched" (Manganiello, 28). One of the biggest characteristics Henry has is being good with words: "words! Mere words! How terrible they were! How clear, how vivid, and cruel"(Wilde, 19). This conversation, Wilde would have us believe, is the first time Dorian truly realises what he has, and therefore, what he has to lose.

During all of this Dorian's feelings change rapidly. He eventually comes to the conclusion that he is not to be held responsible for the changing of the portrait. Even though the reason the portrait is changing is because of his prayer, Dorian thinks: "[b]esides, was it really under his control? Had it indeed been a prayer that had produced the substitution" (Wilde, 79). This prayer is the first time Dorian has chosen aesthetics over ethics, and is a theme that will continue throughout the rest of the book.

In the very next sentence, Dorian thinks of how interesting it will be to watch the portrait change and grow old, while he remains young and beautiful. He states that "there would be a real pleasure in watching it. He would be able to follow his mind into its secret places" (Wilde, 79). Dorian almost immediately goes from denying any responsibility for the changing of the portrait, to being fascinated by the idea of watching it change as his soul becomes more and more corrupted. This is yet another instance of Lord Henry's influence over Dorian. Henry has always been of the opinion that beautiful people should only devote themselves to being beautiful. He also believes that beautiful people can do anything they want.

Manganiello's article provides many helpful insights into the characters of Dorian Gray, and Henry Wotton. Manganiello explores contradictions in the way Dorian responds to Sybil Vane. He specifically describes the irony of Dorian's accusation that Sybil only sees him as someone in a play, even though that is exactly how he sees her: "he will always be in love with love itself, as Lord Henry says" (Manganiello, 29). This suggests that, regardless of who it is with, Dorian will always want to be in love, and that he is more in love with the idea of love than he could be with anyone else. Manganiello also discusses Henry's influence on Dorian, and he provides the example of Henry's attempts to use aesthetics in the place of a moral compass (29).

Dorian's arc as a character whose soul becomes corrupted through art reaches a peak when he stabs the portrait in the final chapter. After rushing home from Selby Royal following the death of James Vane, Dorian goes to see the portrait. Expecting the portrait to have changed for the better after leaving Hetty- the woman he had been courting- he is shocked to see that the portrait has changed- the mouth now has "the curved wrinkle of the hypocrite" (Wilde, 186). Upon seeing this change, Dorian becomes enraged. He ultimately finds the knife he used to kill Basil Hallward and slashes through the portrait in an attempt to kill it. However, this only ends up killing Dorian himself, while the portrait once again shows the twenty-year-old man who sat for it.

There are many different versions of Dorian Gray that are presented to different groups. The public holds one opinion of Dorian, his friends hold an opinion, and Dorian himself holds a completely different opinion. For example, public opinion regarding him was not very favourable. This is likely due to the influence Dorian had on several young men, including Sir Henry Ashton and Adrian Singleton. Young men who find themselves in Dorian's company are far more likely to eventually find themselves outcasts. Due to the influence of Henry Wotton, Dorian favours aesthetics over ethics- this is especially prevalent in the later portion of the text. Dorian's friends find him charming and conversational. He presents himself as reasonably intelligent and personable. The person who comes closest to fully knowing Dorian is Dorian himself. Even knowing all the things he has done, the only one who truly knows Dorian is the portrait. The best way to fully understand Dorian Gray is by analysing the text. As Manganiello puts it "the full portrait, however, is Wilde's book because it alone captures the chiaroscuro of Dorian's life" (32).

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