

Art, the Artist and Ethics in Wilde's Picture of Dorian Gray

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Abstract

This paper examines ideological and philosophical premises of aestheticism, presented in Wilde's critical essays (*The Critic as Artist* and *The Decay of Lying*), and epigrams in the preface to the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which both offer a philosophical context to the novel. Aestheticism emphasized that art can not be subordinated to moral, social, religious and didactic goals, because its ultimate goal is art itself, *l'art pour l'art* (art for art's sake). „Art never expresses anything but itself.“ „All bad art comes from returning to Life and Nature, and elevating them into ideals.“ „Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life.“ „Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art.“ (Wilde, 1891). The relations between art and reality (concealment of reality) and art and ethics (an ethical function of art) have been explored through the interaction of the characters of Basil Hallward and Sibyl Vane with Dorian Gray. The paper also examines the role of the artist, his morality in the process of creating and experiencing the work, and the influence of the work of art on the artist himself/herself.

Keywords: aestheticism, Dorian Gray, art, ethics, beauty, artist

1. Introduction

Oscar (Fingal O'Flahertie Wills) Wilde (1854-1900) is a prominent representative of aestheticism in English literature. Aestheticism¹ emphasized that art can not be subordinated to moral, social, religious and didactic goals, since its ultimate goal is art itself, *l'art pour l'art* (art for art's sake).

Wilde's aesthetics is best reflected in his critical essays *The Critic as Artist*, *The Decay of Lying*, *Pen, Pencil and Poison* and *The Truth of Masks*, published in the collection *Intentions* (1891), his epigrams in comedies and prefaces.

In his essay *The Decay of Lying* Wilde puts forward four principles which advocate larpurlartism and offer a philosophical context to his only novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) and other works: „Art never expresses anything but itself.“ „All bad art comes from returning to Life and Nature, and elevating them into ideals.“ „Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life.“ „Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art.“ (Wilde, 1891)².

Wilde's perception of the artist and the work of art itself have been best portrayed in the first sentence of the introduction to the novel: „The artist is the creator of beautiful things.“ (Dorian Gray: 3).

This approach fits in with the general philosophy of aestheticism according to which the work of art (Beautiful) arouses sensual delights in the audience, develops a cult of beauty and justifies its existence by expressing and embodying beauty.

2. Beauty and Ethics

G. E. Moore criticizes such a subjective approach and says that beauty can not be explained as something that exacerbates certain effects on our feelings since judgments of taste are subjective. Therefore he defines Beautiful: „...the beautiful should be *defined* as that of which the admiring contemplation is good in itself. That is to say: to assert that a thing is beautiful is to assert that the cognition of it is an essential element in one of the intrinsically valuable wholes we have been discussing; so that the question whether it is *truly* beautiful or not depends upon the *objective* question whether the whole

¹ Aestheticism opposed to Victorian Puritanism which advocated the idea that art should have utilitarian and social value.

² Wilde, O. (1891). *The Decay of Lying*. (www.online-literature.com/wilde/1307/). September 4th 2017.

in question is or is not truly good, and does not depend upon the question whether it would or would not excite particular feelings in particular persons. (...) In short, on this view, to say that the thing is beautiful is to say, not indeed that it is *itself* good, but that it is a necessary element in something which is: to prove that a thing is truly beautiful is to prove that a whole, to which it bears a particular relation as a part, is truly good.¹

In Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* Beauty takes over an ethical function. The narrator equalizes (Dorian's) Beauty with goodness but at the same time he conceals (Dorian's) ugly reality and immorality with (his) Beauty. „For the wonderful beauty... seemed never to leave him. Even those who had heard the most evil things against him (...) could not believe anything to his dishonour when they saw him. (...) They wondered how one so charming and graceful as he was could have escaped the stain of an age that was at once sordid and sensual.“ (Dorian Gray: 141-142). Lady Narborough tells Dorian: „...but you are made to be good – you look so good, ...“ (Dorian Gray: 197). Lord Henry Wotton doesn't trust Dorian when Dorian gives him a hint that maybe he (Dorian Gray) killed Basil Hallward, a painter. Lord Henry said: „It is not in you, Dorian, to commit a murder“ (Dorian Gray: 234), alluding to Dorian's beautiful appearance which doesn't allow him to contaminate himself with something so vulgar as a murder.

3. The artist and Ethics

The artist, Basil Hallward, plays an important role in concealing reality and in its embellishment. Basil is a painter who, in keeping with Wilde's views of art, represents the ideal of beauty and is clearly opposed to Victorian concept of art. However, Hallward is torn between the cult of beauty, which is imposed on him by his own artistic views, and moral principles of the time in which he lives.² He meets Dorian Gray, a young man of exceptional beauty who serves to him as a model in his paintings. He cherishes special feelings towards him because Dorian represents to him the pictorial ideal, an inspiration which enables him to realize himself fully in his works. Therefore, he keeps him away from the influence of others. But, on the occasion of completing the work on Dorian's portrait, Dorian meets Lord Henry Wotton, whose life philosophy is pervaded by "new hedonism." Basil was most afraid of Lord Henry's encounter with Dorian because he knew that the way of life represented by Lord Henry would intrigue Dorian and that he would remain without his ideal model.

When Dorian abandons Basil and accepts the life philosophy of Lord Henry, Basil anticipates that he will lose a special artistic flame which he possessed while creating his best works of art. Basil anticipates that he will lose the inherent power of artistic creation: „The painter was silent and preoccupied. There was a gloom over him. (...) A strange sense of loss came over him. He felt that Dorian Gray would never again be to him all that he had been in the past. Life had come between them... (...) When the cab drew up at the theatre, it seemed to him that he had grown years older.“ (Dorian Gray: 90). His premonition proved to be correct. While Basil had Dorian for his painting model, his works were the ultimate art achievements. „It is your best work, Basil, the best thing you have ever done“ (Dorian Gray: 6). Lord Henry commented on the Dorian's portrait. When the intense companionship between Basil and Dorian ceased, Lord Henry notes: „During the last ten years his painting had gone off very much. [...] Since then, his work was that curious mixture of bad painting and good intentions“ (Dorian Gray: 234-235). Even Basil himself admits to Dorian: „I can't get on without you.“ (Dorian Gray: 123). Basil is aware that without Dorian as his painting model, his artistic life is failing.

Basil's moral principles are just as well as his artistic ideal closely related to Dorian Gray. Although Carroll (2005: 298) calls Basil a moralist, alluding to his will to return Dorian to the „right path“, we believe that Basil's morality as well as his artistic creation can be divided into two periods: Basil's morality and artistic creation during and after hanging out with Dorian. In both cases his morality is very questionable.

As he meets with Dorian, he keeps him selfishly from the influence of others. But he does this not to protect Dorian from a bad society, but to protect his own artistic ideal. „I grew jealous of everyone to whom you spoke. I wanted to have you all to myself. I was only happy when I was with you. When you were away from me you were still present in my art...“ (Dorian Gray: 126).

But after Dorian had stopped hanging out with Basil, Basil repeatedly tried to direct Dorian onto the right path, concealing in his intentions a wish to have a Dorian as a painting model again. After the death of actress Sibyl Vane, with whom Dorian

¹ G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, taken from Patricia Waugh (ed.), 1997, *Revolutions of the word*, p. 225. Italics in the original.

² Basil is a moralist, not a wit, but he is also a true artist. For Wilde, the central enigma of personal identity is that the creative spirit, as it is embodied in Basil, is fundamentally divided against itself.“ (Carroll, 2005: 298).

was engaged, Basil comes to console him. But when he sees that Dorian doesn't want to talk about death, Basil uses the opportunity to hypocritically call him to become his model again. Accepting Dorian's request to draw Sibyl Vane, Basil, in turn, seeks a favor from Dorian, that is, he wants him to pose again. If Basil had been sincerely concerned about a young friend and had had true morality, his reaction to Dorian's behavior on the occasion of the death of Sibyl Vane would have been quite different. Carroll also notes (2005: 301-302): „Given Basil's temperament and values, one would anticipate that he would be profoundly shocked and alienated by this speech¹, but Dorian appeals to his friendship, and the painter felt strangely moved. (...) Basil's fascination with Dorian compromises his moral judgment.“

All Basil's attempts to moralize Dorian were in the function of rewinning his artistic ideal. Basil's morality is driven by a selfish impetus and the desire to relive his art again. But, failing to bring back Dorian, he is experiencing artistic death. His art is no longer supreme, and he becomes a mediocre artist, a mannerist, whom Lord Henry ironically calls *the representative English artist*.

4. The Aim of Art

By experiencing Dorian essentially as an object⁶ which enables him to achieve artistic pathos, Basil in the painting portrays only his superficial side i.e. Dorian's exceptional beauty. Basil skilfully conceals Dorian's personality underneath that beautiful mask, and he is almost not interested in it while making his art. However, in conversation with Lord Henry Basil gives a hint that under that mask of Greek beauty lies ruthlessness and vanity: „Now and then, however, he is horribly thoughtless, and seems to take a real delight in giving me pain. Then I feel, Harry, that I have given away my whole soul to someone who treats it as if it were a flower to put in his coat, a bit of decoration to charm his vanity, an ornament for a summer's day.“ (Dorian Gray: 16). Basil in his works offers a false image of Dorian Gray and in that way justifies Wilde's claim that the true goal of art is to produce lies: „Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art.“ (Wilde, 1891).

Basil is interested in what Dorian is really like only when he ends up losing his ideal and when he completely gives up on him and decides to go to Paris to find a new inspiration in his artistic life. Only in that moment, shocked with the rumors and stories circulating about Dorian, and not wanting to believe in what his ideal turned, Basil expresses the desire to truly see what lies underneath that beautiful mask: „I wonder do I know you? Before I could answer that, I should have to see your soul.“ (Dorian Gray: 168).

5. The Artist's Destiny

Sibyl Vane, an artist, experiences the same artistic destiny as Basil. Sibyl is a young, talented actress whom Dorian accidentally sees in a shabby, third-rate theater. Watching with admiration her performance of Juliet, and later of other Shakespeare's heroines, Dorian falls in love with *actress* Sibyl: „She is all the great heroines of the world in one. She is more than an individual. You laugh, but I tell you she has genius. I love her, and I must make her love me.“ (Dorian Gray: 62).

Sibyl is poor. Her life is far from luxury which Basil meets as he moves in the company of rich and eminent people. But as being a true artist, the poverty doesn't hinder her from giving brilliant performances on the stage. „She is simply a born artist.“ (Dorian Gray: 85). Dorian says when he describes her to Basil and Lord Henry. Sibyl, just like Basil, lives her art until it depicts her ideal. When the ideal disappears, her art also disappears.

Sibyl, like Basil, ends tragically, both in the sense of art and life. Her tragedy stems from the fact that she can not live her life ideal on the stage. She experiences love in real life. But her love for Dorian is sincere and pure, fuller and more meaningful than the one she presented on the stage. This makes her understand the fallacy of fictional love and the falsehood of emotions on the stage. All this leads to her loss of acting ability and kills her performing arts and she, as an actress, eventually dies. Her love towards Dorian is stronger than the love she lives and feels while playing the roles of Shakespeare's heroines. That love fills her up so much that nothing of her talent no longer lives in her performance.

¹ We think of Dorian's conversation with Basil when Basil comes to comfort him, and in which Dorian, quite contrary to Basil's expectations, doesn't show that he is in deep grief or that he is moved with the way Sibyl Vane ended her life. In that conversation Dorian expresses his disgust towards ugly and vulgar things such as death and dying. One shouldn't talk about them („What is past is past,“ Dorian Gray says) or one should look upon them, if it is possible, as upon works of art. (compare Dorian Gray: 120).

⁶ Basil says about the model: „every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion.“ (Dorian Gray: 9).

Elevation of life and natural things to the level of ideals, which true love certainly is, necessarily leads to bad art, as Wilde himself claims in his epigram. „...the staginess of her acting was unbearable, and grew worse as she went on. Her gestures became absurdly artificial. She over-emphasized everything that she had to say.“ (Dorian Gray: 93-94). Lane (1994: 941) says that Sibyl Vane with the bad performance „destroys the seamless illusion of her personality“ and that „Wilde does not indict Sibyl for being superficial or inauthentic; he argues that a wooden and inexpressive performance spoils her artistry.“ (ibid).

Her death by poisoning paradoxically reminds of deaths of many heroines she embodied during her artistic career and thus indirectly gives rise to Lord Henry to interpret her death as „her last role“ and to conclude that he is happy to live in „a century when such wonders happen. They make one believe in the reality of the things we all play with, such as romance, passion, and love.“ (Dorian Gray: 114). According to Lord Henry the death of Sibyl Vane represents a proof that she really lived while acting the life and death of literary heroines, and that, therefore, she was neither more nor less real than them.

6. Conclusion

Although Basil and Sibyl Vane are secondary characters in the novel, their relationship with the main character reveals much about the perception of the artist in Wilde's philosophy of aesthetics. Wilde perceives the artist as the creator of something beautiful which is deprived of any moral burden and which realizes itself in all its fullness while presenting us reality which we would like to see. In other words, the artist produces a lie in its works.

As long as the artist manages to live his/her art, as long as he/she is in his/her world of lies and concealment, he/she will be creating masterpieces. While Basil was inspired by Dorian Gray, he lived his most prolific artistic days. While she was living the lives of her characters and experiencing their feelings, Sibyl Vane achieved high-profile roles and performances. But when the artist, for the first time, has doubts about the truthfulness of his/her creation, his/her art acquires characteristics of mediocrity. Both Basil and Sibyl Vane, everyone in their own way, lose links with art which ultimately results in their artistic death. Basil has failed to retain his artistic ideal, and Sibyl Vane discovers love outside the theatre.

In order to revive his art at all costs, Basil, by moralizing, tries to return Dorian to the „right path“, and conceals his true intention: to bring him back. As a true artist, he is interested only in the outward appearance of his model. Only when he realizes that his ideal is lost forever and when he goes looking for a new one, he wants to look at what lies behind the mask.

Sibyl Vane fails to be happy when she discovers true love in real life. She raises it and surrenders completely to it. Such real life feelings destroy those which she lived in her acting, and she, just like Basil, can not achieve anything more than mediocrity in her performance. Both artists lose themselves in inability to live their art because they become victims of their own real life.

7. Literature

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