The Picture Of Dorian Gray: Themes Of A Novel

Literary texts that have been attacked and criticised for being ‘immoral’ are books that show the world its own shame. The Picture of Dorian Gray, Irish poet Oscar Wilde’s only book published in the year 1890. The Picture of Dorian Gray narrates a story of a young innocent man Dorian Gray, whose physical beauty and appearance is unparallel, and his transition from a ‘blank page’ into a life of limitless pleasure at the cost of his innocence and morality, whose painting reflects on his very soul bearing his sins. This has caused a great uproar in Wilde’s time and society, as the novel’s themes and morals of aestheticism, “art for art’s sake”, were challenging the themes and morals that society has for the definition of humanity. Humanity has been portrayed through the characterisation of Basil Hallward, a talented middle-class painter, Lord Henry Wotton, a man possessed of “wrong, fascinating, poisonous, delightful theories”, and of course, the pure, innocent, and vulnerable Dorian Gray. The Picture of Dorian Gray presents the conflict between good and evil sides of humanity, where individuals are highly influenced and weak against the temptations of youth, love, pleasure, and secrecy.

Appearance in The Picture of Dorian Gray plays as an important and vital aspect in how people see and define each other as people. When first observing Dorian for the first time, Henry Wotton says “Yes, he was certainly wonderfully handsome, with his finely curved scarlet lips, his frank blue eyes, his crisp gold hair. There was something in his face that made one trust him at once. All the candour of youth was there, as well as all youth's passionate purity”. Henry’s description of Dorian’s physical beauty as part of Dorian’s personalities, innocent and pure, his youth being part of how Dorian is seen as a person, and clearly something that should be idolised. 'Life has everything in store for you, Dorian. There is nothing that you, with your extraordinary good looks, will not be able to do.' Henry portrays a side of humanity that judges a person purely based on their physical appearance and their youth, as seen by his speech when observing Dorian’s ‘beauty’. Lord Henry’s philosophical theories and ideas have had a huge impact in Dorian’s pure life, where the concept of humanity being weak under the temptations of youth is portrayed; “Youth is the only thing worth having. When I find that I am growing old, I shall kill myself. The transition of Dorian Gray, turning away from morality is reflected upon by his portrait,” Its red and white roses would die. For every sin that he committed, a stain would fleck and wreck its fairness”, symbolising the loss of innocence that is starting to be discovered of Dorian Gray; every time Dorian performs an action of corruption, another blemish appears on the painting.

There are many forms love and definitions in The Picture of Dorian Gray, where the story views love from a variety of perspectives, but always resists a single, unifying definition of what love is or what love might mean. Love, portrayed in the novel, was meant to be innocent and pure, and the concept of ‘love’ is portrayed through the transitioning romance between Dorian and Sibyl Vane. Sibyl, when explained by Dorian to Lord Henry, “Oh, she was so shy, and so gentle. There is something of a child about her. Her eyes wide in exquisite wonder when I told her what I thought of her performance, and she seemed quite unconscious of her power”. His description of Sibyl echoes Basil’s initial description of Dorian as being innocent and unaware of his beauty, meaning that the Victorian perspective about what love should be is to be beautiful, innocent and pure. Sibyl, being only a seventeen year old girl who was the only one calling Dorian “Prince Charming”, was the only one ever to love Dorian with pure innocence, and what

“Love himself should be like”. This perspective about love was soon challenged by Wilde later on, where the expense of finding love is to lose the power to feign feelings for her plays; “Yet she was curiously listless. She showed no sign of joy when her eyes rested on Romeo. The few words she had to speak… with brief dialogue that follows, were spoken in a thoroughly artificial manner”. When Dorian brings Basil and Lord Henry to see Sibyl act for the first time, they observed how much worse she performed than she has ever before. Although her physical and inner beauty has not changed and she has the right techniques, her performance shows what happens if an artist does not put their whole being into their art, further implying that love is also a portrayal of art, and the artist can have many kinds of art; 'An artist should create beautiful things, but should put nothing of his own life into them. We live in an age when men treat art as if it were meant to be a form of autobiography. We have lost the abstract sense of beauty.'

Secrecy is a big deal within a society, where everybody has their secrets. In The Picture of Dorian Gray, secrecy is shown to be something that is hidden away due to its evil nature; for example, Dorian hiding his painting after he has noticed a change on the expression. Henry, is characterised as an upper class of society, and clearly quite open about his philosophical views and ideas; 'Yes, we are overcharged for everything nowadays. I should fancy that the real tragedy of the poor is that they can afford nothing but self-denial. Beautiful sins, like beautiful things, are the privilege of the rich”. Dorian, also being one of the upper class of society, isn’t so out about his ‘secrets’, as repeatedly reinforced by the altering of his portrait and hiding it away from anybody, not even his first and closest friend Basil Hallward, could ever catch a glimpse. If Lord Henry is the Devil’s advocate, then Basil Hallward is God’s advocate, being an external idealistic who truly believes in the innate goodness of mankind, where Lord Henry refuses to believe. What Basil doesn’t realise is that he is a good man living in a bad world; “Dorian, this is horrible! Something has changed you completely” is Basil’s closest description of Dorian after the influence of Lord Henry. Basil playing the role of the biggest satire in the story, being the closest friend of Dorian at the beginning, but he had to witness the corruption of his ‘perfect angle’. What makes the story more satiric, is the murder by his beloved Dorian after seeing the horror of Dorian’s ‘secret’; the very painting Basil painted for Dorian.

The Picture of Dorian Gray portrays the conflict between good and evil, Basil and Lord Henry, where individuals such as Dorian are vulnerable to the temptations of youth, love, and secrecy. The story portrays how youth is a vital and important aspect in which people see each other, along with the destruction of ‘true love’ and the introduction of affairs, and the importance of secrecy in the corrupt upper class of society. Secrecy, being the biggest and most hidden away, where the secrets of humanity aren’t ‘good’ secrets, but evil and corrupt where it is a matter of life and death if one is to find out. Wilde’s novel, The Picture of Dorian Gray, provides the Victorian era with ‘immorality’, reflecting and challenging the world by showing their own shame; their evil and corrupt human nature.

Bibliography:

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