

# The Inner Struggles of Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray

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Preddiplomski studij engleskog jezika i književnost i pedagogije

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**The Inner Struggles of Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray**

Završni rad

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**Abstract**

Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a controversial novel about a young and beautiful man who foolishly wishes to stay young, while his portrait gets the burden of his sins and age. Dorian curses himself to a life of body separated from soul, and lives a life of pleasures. Influenced by his friends and a society in which he lives, he goes through many inner struggles; regret, guilt, confusion and lies torture him constantly. Hidden behind an innocently beautiful face, he keeps destroying the lives of people around him. Since everyone judges him mostly by appearance, no one believes in his wickedness. Living a hedonistic life leaves him unsatisfied, his secret pleasures only make him yearn for more. Facing the corruption of his soul on the portrait, he goes insane and attacks it, thus destroying his life too. This paper analyzes changes in Dorian's life after his portrait was created. Moreover, it explains possible reasons for Dorian's behaviour, the effect he has on others, and his reactions to alterations that he sees in the picture of his soul.

**Key words:** Dorian Gray, beauty, portrait, hedonism, inner struggles, mask, secrets, soul

## Introduction

The character of Dorian Gray is put forward by the author as an unstable and immature young man, who is prone to fall under the influences of his elderly colleagues Lord Henry and Basil Hallward. From the very first page we can follow Dorian's change of personality and a rise of his ego which led him to his own death. This paper will discuss the changes in Dorian's life after Basil made a portrait of him, and after he realized that his beauty and youth will last for a long time. Furthermore, this paper will deal with all the inner struggles that occur in Dorian's mind and soul while he was living a hedonistic lifestyle; it will interpret his conscience, thoughts and feelings. Dorian's inner world is contrasted with his outside appearance, which represents the author's vision of the society in which he lives. Debra S. Grewar implies that "Victorian society was possibly able to portray itself as attractive because it kept its ugliness concealed from view in an attic" (27).

When Lord Henry proposes his philosophy of hedonism and egotism, it enters Dorian's mind pretty fast and he starts to act in a way that he never did before. As he notices that he can see his own soul in Basil's portrait, he suddenly feels ashamed and hides it so that no one would see it but he himself. His shame grows as he continues to live a life of a libertine, but he does nothing to change his ways. In these lines:

He would sit in front of the picture, sometimes loathing it and himself, but filled, at other times, with that pride of individualism that is half the fascination of sin, and smiling, with secret pleasure, at the misshapen shadow that had to bear the burden that should have been his own. (Wilde 162),

we can see how his inner self is not expressed through his behaviour; he thought about his works and felt guilty, but nonetheless continued with the same actions.

## 1. Selling His Soul: Dorian's Egotism

Being young and inexperienced, Dorian is amazed and enchanted when he is first introduced to the philosophy of Lord Henry. Since his influence is so strong, it can be considered as the one to blame for Dorian's irresponsible and hedonistic life. Lord Henry's words seem perfectly logical to Dorian as if they reflect some of his own inner thoughts. Further, Lord Henry's words and Basil's admiration for his beauty awaken Dorian's vanity for the first time, and it continues to grow ever since - "The sense of his own beauty came on him like a revelation. He had never felt it before" (Wilde 32). They aroused Dorian's sense of his own beauty for the first time and that revelation makes him look into all the undisclosed desires in his heart. He is eager to fulfil them all, to be fearless and shameless, just as Lord Henry asserts: "A new Hedonism – this is what our century wants. You might be its visible symbol" (Wilde 30). Indeed, Dorian continues to fulfil his own wishes, without any consideration for the people around him. His egotism is expressed through his deeds, his admiration for himself and his youth which never seems to fade. He is in love with himself and the pleasures which make him cruel and indifferent toward everyone but himself. Throughout his life, he is insensitive to the effect he has on others: he destroys marriages, seduces and tricks young women, kills his friend and destroys many lives.

When faced with many opportunities and desires to live an "immoral" life, Dorian follows Henry's advice once again: "The only way to get rid of temptation is to

yield to it” (Wilde 26). As Irma Oemaya puts forward, there are external and internal factors that provoked the changes in Dorian’s character (6). Before he encountered Lord Henry, he was an innocent and beautiful young man. If Dorian had been raised in a normal family, maybe he would not be so easy to influence; his parents would probably have educated him and set some moral values in his heart. Instead, the reader finds out that Dorian is an orphan raised without proper care and love from his parents or relatives, and therefore it influenced his later behaviour, and certainly left a significant mark on his life: “The mother snatched away by death, the boy left to solitude and the tyranny of an old and loveless man” (Wilde 45). After their conversation, which took place in Basil’s studio, he is never the same innocent man; he turns into an incredibly selfish and narcissistic person. Henry’s words influence his soul, but the sight of his own portrait is a visible thing that influences him and he suddenly admires himself more than anything else (Oemaya 6). Lord Henry’s rhetoric strongly affects everything that Dorian does after their first meeting. Since he is still a young and immature man, he can be easily influenced, and his role model is the one who promotes shamelessness and immoderation. This example can teach one how people can exert either poisonous or positive influence on other in their surroundings, but it also depends on a person who accepts or refuses that kind of influence.



## 2. The Influence of a Hedonistic Life on Dorian's Soul and Conscience

As Patrick Duggan points out, Lord Henry proposes his philosophy of aestheticism with such courage and elegance that Dorian, and even the reader, are captivated with his thoughts. Lord Henry and Dorian share an opinion that “there is no distinction between moral and immoral acts, only between those that increase and decrease one’s happiness” (Duggan 62). But, at a closer look, purely aesthetic lifestyle eventually makes Dorian miserable and kills him. Trying to pursue pleasure by indulging in all kinds of impulses and desires, he ends up unhappier than ever, which goes against all that Lord Henry told him in the beginning of their friendship (Duggan 63). Wilde insists that Dorian’s acts should not be considered immoral, but it is still visible that Dorian experiences different inner struggles and feelings of guilt and shame throughout the novel. Dorian is an embodiment of an unbridled hedonist, and his ending demonstrates the fatal consequences of such a lifestyle. After all, the author himself claims that the story about Dorian Gray is a story with a moral; and the moral is that forethought and constraint are necessary when it comes to life’s pleasures, no matter how hard it was for a person to resist them (Duggan 63). This wider viewpoint clearly differs from Lord Henry’s words: “We are punished for our refusals. Every impulse that we strive to strangle broods in the mind, and poisons us. . . . Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden itself” (Wilde 25). Instead, it turns out that, even though it is often hard to resist temptation, it is

necessary to judge whether it is reasonable or not to do what one desires. When one becomes a slave to his desires, it will inevitably lead to his tragic ending, and not to his happiness.

Dorian is also a very impulsive person, which is especially visible from his relationship with Sybil Vane. Before he ever gets to know her, he falls in love with the illusion that he creates about her, enchanted with her acting and beauty while she is on stage. The only part that he loves about her is her talent, and nothing else. Donald Dickson asserts that Dorian sees her as “all the great heroines of the world in one”, and never as Sybil Vane (6). When she loses her talent, and becomes the real Sybil, he immediately leaves her, almost without regret. In her private life, Sybil still continues to dramatize and romanticize Dorian, her “Prince Charming,” whose name she does not know. The minute she kisses him and falls in love with, she loses her magical talent; as if her art ceases to exist when she starts to live her life. When she begins to understand all the love stories that she previously only acted upon, but never really experienced, she fails to depict them on stage. When he became to her “more than all art can ever be” (Wilde 101), she became worthless to him. Interestingly, both of them are in love with the illusion of another, and not with their real personality, and that is why their so called love is doomed to failure. The real Sybil is not good enough for him, since he wants to experience the life of senses, illusions and arts.

It is fascinating how fast he gets over the fact that he is the one to blame for her suicide: “It seems to me to be simply like a wonderful ending to a wonderful play. It has all the terrible beauty of a Greek tragedy, a tragedy in which I took a great part, but by which I have not been wounded” (Wilde 114). It is the beginning of Dorian’s selfishness – he is thinking only about himself and his interests, and the fact that he destroyed her life does not concern him at all. Perhaps his reaction would have been different if there had not been for Lord Henry’s presence and his whispers that he must think of her death “simply as a strange lurid fragment from some Jacobean tragedy. . . . The girl never really lived, and so she has never really died” (Wilde 103). Lord Henry fills him once again with the words that deaden his conscience, and so he continues to live according to his own impulses as if nothing important happened. Throughout the whole book, Dorian becomes so alike Lord Henry that his words resemble Henry’s philosophy, and his actions are a pure reflection of it.

Another important element of Dorian’s life becomes the fact that he can see his own soul. His sins, his flaws and wrong actions are visible to him in his portrait; he cannot deceive himself that he is a good person, when he constantly sees the truth in the picture. After Sybil Vane’s death, the picture alters so much that he sees his soul getting ugly, but still continues to believe in Lord Henry’s philosophies, because it means that he does not have to change his ways. At moments, he wonders if he could alter the picture to look beautiful again, by becoming righteous and honest again, but

loses his determination quickly. The real fault of Dorian Gray, as Donald Dickson proposes, is “the failure of the will to assert itself in the formation of one’s character” (12). For a character to be shaped, one needs to intertwine his body and soul; Dorian lived a life of senses, and neglected the growth of his soul – which then turned into an abomination. Further, Dorian’s character was mainly shaped by Lord Henry’s philosophy; at times it even seems like he is marionette, and Lord Henry pulls all the strings with his words. Furthermore, he “had been poisoned by a book” (Wilde 168) which Lord Henry recommended him; the strange lives of its characters fascinated him so much. Still, Dorian had his free will and could choose not to listen to Lord Henry, but it is questionable whether the circumstances of his life and personality would allow him to do so.

### 3. The Influence of Dorian's Portrait on His Life

Dorian's outside image and the vision of his soul in his picture function as two major characters of this novel. It can be argued that Wilde wanted to express his opinion on the society in which he lived, and he did it by putting his character in a position in which Dorian Gray was judged by others solely in terms of his looks and not his soul. However, the truth is that body and soul cannot be separated from each other, and that is why Dorian's attempt to do so ends in death (Nicolae 700). His portrait, a "visible emblem of conscience," causes his frequent mood swings; one minute he wants to improve and live ethically, and another he smiles because no one can see his ugly soul but he himself (Nicolae 702-703). But, according to Irma Nicolae, "eventually, Dorian's self-love is truncated, he can no longer love his own beauty once he knows it is just a mask of ugliness. His self-denial is but a way of postponing the unveiling of this concealed identity/reality" that is presented in his portrait (703). "The sin which Dorian commits is not able to inscribe itself onto his body – it is etched into the picture" (Grewar 27). In reality, body and soul cannot be separated from each other, and this conception leads Dorian Gray into a tragic ending. Dorian wishes for his youth to be eternal, and even though he is not ready for the consequences, his wish is made true. With the body of a young man, without the visible lines of age and character on his face, he can never reach his maturity or learn from his mistakes; he remains immature and unchanged.

Another incident that overwhelms Dorian is the murder of Basil Hallward. In a surge of anger, he kills the only person who saw his soul, “the friend who had painted the fatal portrait to which all his misery had been due” (Wilde 183). After he commits that crime, he lives in a constant fear of getting caught; his insensitivity is shown through his concern for himself only, he is not thinking about the life that he ended or the life of a friend he blackmailed in order to destroy “the evidence.” Dorian’s state of mind keeps getting worse; he is incredibly selfish in order to preserve his freedom. Life and its sensations are no longer exciting to him, due to his fear of exposing the truth, and, once again, he desires to change his ways from evil to good. Ever since his portrait exists, he is neither peaceful nor happy; instead, he is in a terrible anxiety. Trying to avoid these negative feelings, he escapes into sensations: listening to music, collecting works of art, wearing the finest clothes, going to bars and seducing beautiful women with his beauty, and so on. These pursuits “were to be to him means of forgetfulness, modes by which he could escape, for a season, from the fear that seemed to him at times to be almost too great to be borne” (Wilde 161). This can be closely correlated with the author’s life; Wilde writes in his *De Profundis*:

I grew careless of the lives of others. I took pleasure where it pleased me, and passed on. I forgot that every little action of the common day makes or unmakes character, and that therefore what one has done in the secret chamber one has some day to cry aloud on the housetop. I ceased to be

lord over myself. I was no longer the captain of my soul, and did not know it. I allowed pleasure to dominate me. I ended in horrible disgrace (11).

The portrait of Dorian's soul makes him anxious each time he leaves England, and even his own house; he is in constant fear that someone will see it. It is a secret that haunts him, deprives him of freedom and peace, and eventually drives him insane. The bargain that he makes: selling his soul to gain youth cost him more than he could ever imagine, and when Lord Henry quotes Jesus: "What does it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?," (Wilde 246) it turns out right Perhaps Dorian did not gain the whole world, but every impulse that he satisfied, kept him unsatisfied and yearning for more, until he has fallen completely into ruin: emotionally and spiritually.

Dorian does not care for the lives of others; his pleasure is the only thing that matters to him. However, his secrets are too big a burden to hold on for himself. Unable to live with this, he murders Basil and attacks his own picture – his own soul. He allows pleasure to dominate him to the extent that he can neither stop living a hedonistic life, nor continue living it; he grows restless and looks anxiously for a change that will stop this nightmare. Overwhelmed with fear, he keeps having visions of James Vane and Basil Hallward haunting him: "The consciousness of being hunted, snared, tracked down, had begun to dominate him" (Wilde 229). Death starts to terrify him, perhaps, because his life keeps destroying other lives: Sybil, Basil, James, Alan

Campbell, and many others have been brought death and destruction by selfish and inconsiderate works of Dorian Gray. Still, while reading the book, the author proposes that Dorian is also a victim of his own destiny; if there had not been for his portrait and the bad influence of society in which he lived, he might have had different personality. These changes begin when Dorian is still too young and not strong enough to defend himself or to reject them. When he confides in his best friend, Lord Henry, that he is about to change, all he gets is his laughter and a bunch of recycled life philosophies. Dorian has a determination to change, but his past life is too strong and keeps dragging him to come back; even Lord Henry says that it is impossible for him to change.

Wishing that he got punished for his sins immediately after he had committed them, and trembling at the thought of what awaits him after death, Dorian realizes that neither beauty nor youth are the most important in life. Even though he is free from punishment, since almost everyone who knew his crimes died, he loathes his life: “it was the living death of his own soul that troubled him” (Wilde 253). Hoping that his picture has altered at least a little bit for the good, he desperately looks for affirmation of that desire in the picture of his own soul. Seeing that his face looks hypocritical instead of good, he starts doubting his own wishes and even his success in his decision that he will change. The mere thought of confessing what he did to a living soul makes him attack his own picture. He wants to kill his conscience, to start again, to escape so



lightly from everything he did. As it goes in life, he cannot escape his own punishment, and his struggle ends in terrible disgrace and tragedy. Throughout the novel, the author depicts Dorian's inner state as chaotic, volatile, and troublesome, which is contrasted sharply with the feelings of pleasure that Dorian sought for. This dissenting sides of his inner and outer world slowly but surely leads to his own catastrophe.

## Conclusion

Dorian's sudden wish changed his life in a moment. It turned out to be his blessing and his curse: his sins hidden from the world, but not from himself. Dorian's beauty combined with the secrecy of his wickedness was what actually destroyed him, caused him various inner conflicts, and allowed him to do whatever he wanted. In a society in which the body image is valued more than the beauty of one's soul, he was an idol. Living a life of pleasures came with its price, and Dorian had to pay it someday. It gave him an artificial happiness, and often caused misery to many around him. What he thought he wanted the most, was what actually destroyed his life, made him different from others and prevented him from growing and becoming a good person. Each act of corruption that he noticed in the portrait made him feel bad, discouraged and helpless to change himself. Even when he determined to stop hurting others, it turned out to be only a hypocritical wish; at that point his inner conflicts reached their peak and he destroyed this sight of his own conscience. Consequently, he did not survive the union of his body and soul, and he finally received his delayed "punishment." Seeing that the corruption of his soul was leading him into despair, he blamed others for it - Lord Henry and his book, Basil who drew the portrait, etc. In the end, the only one who took the blame was he himself. No matter how hard Dorian was influenced by others, in the end he was left alone with his conscience, and there was not anyone who could help him or advise him what was the best to do. In the company

of others he could hide behind his beautiful face, but when he was faced with the ugliness and horror of his corrupted and damaged soul, he just could not bear it; it destroyed him inside. One can follow his inner conflicts and struggles, which only get worse page by page, and realize that secrets and masks can ruin one's life. The truth and confession are the only things that could set Dorian free, and he was too ashamed and angry to do it. As Wilde wrote: "Sin is a thing that writes itself across a man's face. It cannot be concealed" (172). Dorian maybe had the "advantage" that others could not see his wickedness, but his actions and all the wrong he has done eventually came after him. He is an example how our desires have the power to ruin us, if we are not careful enough to control ourselves.

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