PLATO'S MYTH OF THE CAVE REFLECTED IN WILDE'S PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY

Ancuţa IONESCU *

Abstract*: Wilde's delight in provocation, and his exploration of alternative moral perspectives, mark his most important work of fiction,"The Picture of Dorian Gray". The novel's Preface presents a series of attitudinizing aphorisms about art and literature which end with the bald statement:"All art is quite useless." The narrative that follows is a melodramatic, Faustian demonstration of the notion that art and morality are quite divorced. It is, nevertheless, a text riven by internal contradictions and qualifications. Aestheticism is both damned and dangerously upheld: hedonism both indulged and disdained. Dorian Gray is a tragedy of sorts with the subtext of a morality play; it is self destructive, darkly sinning central character is at once a desperate suicide and a martyr.*

Keywords*: myth, picture, cave*

The novel "The Portrait of Dorian Gray" is Wilde's most important work as a prose writer; in spite of its international contradictions, the novel is a masterpiece of the time. **The Preface** is focused on the artist and the work of art, on reality seen through art, on the reality on the work of art. Each sentence is an essence and put together they are shocking like Wilde's later plays. "the artist is the creator of beautiful things" states Wilde and the reader should totally "beautiful things" from "useful things" since the only excuse for making a useless thing is that one admire sit intensely. All art is useless." Referring to the relation between morality and art he states that "there is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written."

Oscar Wilde's **The Picture of Dorian Gray** is set during the late nineteenth century England, a period marked with the exceeding importance of social stature and personal image. The protagonist, Dorian Gray, rises as the archetype of male pulchritude and youth. **The Picture of Dorian Gray** is a novel portraying evil. The theme is very much reflected by the book's setting, plot structure and characterization. It shows how individuals can slowly deteriorate because of the evil lying within themselves. The evil of this book is the evil created by one's self and trusted upon one's self. The power of greed and selfishness take over Dorian Gray and create an ugly evil side to him. The mid eighteenth century was a very influential era, especially in England. This period judged much upon appearance and status. Dorian was a very wealthy, intelligent man with a very high status. He knew the very influential and rich people in his town as well. His beauty charmed the world. Basil was inspired to draw his portrait in order to preserve his beauty and youth. Dorian recognized that as long as he remained young he would be handsome. He dreaded the day that he would age slightly and started to form wrinkles and such ugly (in Dorian's opinion) ugly things. He believed that that day would deprive him of triumphs that would result in him being miserable.

* University of Piteşti, ionescu9@gmail.com

BDD-A29803 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:55:36 UTC)

The degree of evil within Dorian increases as the plot develops. By trading his soul for his youth, Dorian rids of the good inside of himself. The plot proves to us that evil does actually lie within an individual. From the moment that he becomes forever young he begins to deteriorate. Even once he reached his epiphany and saw his evil through the portrait he simply denied seeing it and continued his malicious deeds. To him it was more than a painting, it was as if he created another life. He put himself into it. He did not know that he was creating his own murder when he made the painting. He wanted to be different, to be superior to others, to have something that the whole world would be envious of. He believed that to live a simple life was merely to live at all. His pride of individualism was half of his fascination of evil.

Morality is the very foundation of goodness and the pillar of righteousness. Immorality, however, is the threshold towards conspicuous malevolence. These two extremes are often but a step between which we are baffled and bemused. Morals undeniably establish the confinements of one's behaviour in any given society. Should these principles crumble, ethical boundaries would give way to anarchical freedom. He is conscious of his wrongdoing and feels profoundly culpable. However, Lord Henry encourages him to discard the incident and to revel in his present freedom. Dorian is torn apart as his egoism weighs heavily over his conscience. By overlooking the death he caused and indulging in pleasure, Dorian incarnates Lord Henry's philosophy. With the knowledge of his physical imperviousness to the aftermath of any consequence, he adopts hedonistic values. Dorian often gazes at the painting with horror, but is unable to divert from this lifestyle, aroused by its wickedness. He is undoubtedly aware of his ethical dissipation and, despite the beautiful items in which he surrounds himself, is appalled by the ugliness of his soul. When breaking apart from the moral confines that establish order, Dorian is thrust into a chaotic freedom. Without the ubiquitous prison that symbolises morality, anarchy and evilness reign, destroying the goodness in one's nature. When he strikes the diabolical picture, beleaguered by remorse and maddened by regret, he wishes to purge his soul and reacquire the proper values that once governed his life. Therefore, by destroying the wantonness that marred his spirit and the guilt that plagued his conscience, he kills himself.

The preface is a collection of free-standing statements that form a manifesto about the purpose of art, the role of the artist, and the value of beauty. Signed by Oscar Wilde, the preface serves as a primer for how Wilde intends the novel to be read. He defines the artist as "the creator of beautiful things," and the critic as "he who can translate into another manner or new material his impression of beautiful things." He condemns anyone who finds ugliness where there is beauty as "corrupt." He states that a book can be neither moral nor immoral, and that morality itself serves only as "part of the subject matter" of art. Since art exists solely to communicate beauty, Wilde warns against reading too much into any work of art: "Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril." The preface ends with the whimsical statement that "All art is quite useless"; earlier, however, we are told that the "only excuse for making a useless thing is that one admires it intensely. In the garden, Henry tells the boy that "Nothing can cure the soul but the senses, just as nothing can cure the senses but the soul," and that he has "the most marvellous youth, and youth is the one thing worth having." (Wilde, Oscar. *The picture of Dorian Gray*, 1999, p.23) The conversation then turns towards beauty, and Henry asserts that it has "the divine right of

BDD-A29803 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:55:36 UTC)

sovereignty," that beauty gives power to those who have it, and that nothing in the world is greater. He warns Dorian that his beauty will someday fade, a prospect that horrifies the impressionable young man. In a fit of passion, he thinks, "If only it were the other way! If only it were I who was to be always young, and the picture was to grow old! For that...I would give my soul for that!"

The title of the book is ***The Picture of Dorian Gray,*** suggesting that the novel is about the image of the man, rather than about the man himself. In this manner, Wilde begins to blur the distinction between man and image (a practice that begins in earnest when the picture comes to reflect the true nature of Dorian's soul), raising questions as to the true location of one's identity, and the value of superficiality. Dorian himself makes his first appearance, describes the beginning of Dorian's corruption at the hands of Lord Henry. It also introduces Dorian's inadvertantly Faustian bargain, as the boy pleads for the picture to age in his place. Worth noting is the fact that Lord Henry invites Dorian into Basil's garden as he delivers his lecture on youth, beauty, and the value of immorality. This Eden-like setting emphasizes the fact that Dorian's response to Henry's words represents the boy's fall from grace; it is Dorian's original sin. Henry fancies himself an artist, a sculptor or painter of personalities; he uses his charm, wit, and scandalous views as his paintbrush or chisel. Nevertheless, as curious as he is to see Dorian's character evolve into its own fascinating shape, Henry's deepest motivation is unabashedly selfish and vain. He wants to "be to Dorian Gray what, without knowing it, the lad was to the painter." He wants to be adored, and to turn Dorian into a more physically attractive version of himself. This echoes the belief expressed in the preface that "the only excuse for making a useless thing is that one admires it intensely." However, although he certainly admires it, Henry's "art" is fundamentally flawed according to the first line of the preface: "To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim." Henry wants his "art" (Dorian) to reveal the "artist" (himself)(Wilde,op.cit.:28) This suggests another major theme that explores the value of superficiality and the discrepancy between one's interior self and how one is perceived by others. Henry is not jealous of Dorian's fascination with another person, but pays careful attention to Dorian's impression of his own emotional state. Recognizing his influence at work on the boy brings "a gleam of pleasure into his brown agate eyes"; he is like an artist proudly admiring his work. Henry's views are elucidated by the statement that "a complex personality…was indeed, in its way, a real work of art." Henry's beliefs are delivered in the voice of the narrator; this technique, called "free indirect discourse", is one that Wilde frequently used. His resulting cruelty towards her is the first undeniable mark of the corruption of Dorian's character, and therefore causes the first visible change in his portrait. He considers the aesthetic pain caused by her poor acting to be on par with Sybil's emotional devastation at his rejection.

This belief is rooted in the sentiment expressed by Lord Henry before the trio leaves for the play, when he says "I love acting. It is so much more real than life." This statement is a clear indication of Henry's continuing influence on Dorian. He transforms from a devoted lover, to a bitter art critic, to a cruel betrayer, and seemingly back to a devoted lover. This final change is, however, superficial. He decides to do the honorable thing and marry Sybil, but only when faced with the possibility of watching the beautiful image in the portrait succumb to degradation. The corruption of Dorian's soul has begun in

BDD-A29803 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:55:36 UTC)

earnest, as reflected by the first visible change in the portrait. Dorian's comment that Sybil's death seems "to be like simply a wonderful ending to a wonderful play" continues the theme of life imitating art. It also recalls Dorian's obsession with the characters that Sybil portrayed. He became disappointed in her when she tried to be her own person, and rejected the falseness of playing a role. Now, her death has given Dorian the ability to once again view Sybil as a character in a play. When Lord Henry encourages this interpretation of the tragedy, he ensures that Dorian passes the point of no return on his descent into immorality. In Basil's confession to Dorian, he echoes several sentiments from the preface, saying that "what art should be [is] unconscious, ideal, and remote…Art is always more abstract than we fancy. Form and colour tell us of form and colour…art conceals the artist far more completely than it ever reveals him. (Burdescu, Felicia**.** *20th Century British Literature*, 2000, p.124) These sentiments, although they are presented by Wilde as truths in the preface, are disheartening revelations for the painter. The attic where Dorian hides the painting was "a playroom when he was a child" and "a study when he grew somewhat older." The room is already a vault hiding his past, and it will now hide the degradation of his conscience, as well. This room becomes a symbol of the purity of youth and concern for morality that Dorian consciously rejects. Instead of skeletons in his closet, Dorian has a painting in his attic. For Dorian, life and art are interchangeable. Like Lord Henry, he considers pleasure and aesthetic value more important than anything else. To him, any new and pleasurable experience is worth having, even if that experience is hurtful to others. The chapter closes with the statement that "There were moments when he looked on evil simply as a mode through which he could realize his conception of the beautiful." In those moments, Dorian was the most degraded, and his soul suffered the most disfiguration. The struggle to deny the nagging guilt he feels when faced with the portrait lies beneath all of Dorian's actions, which brings the nature of his fervent passion for his capricious endeavors into question.

"To cure the soul by means of the senses, and the senses by means of the soul." He feels as if his soul is quite sick, and takes comfort in the idea of curing it. He dismounts from the cab and walks several blocks, nervously checking behind him, until he finds a small, dilapidated house hidden in an alley between two factories. Like an addict, Dorian cannot refrain from seeking out and indulging himself in new guilty pleasures. And, like an addict, Dorian cannot help but return to the attic and bask in the horror of his disfigured soul. The emotional pain Dorian feels after learning that a man is dead is the consequence of his own self-pity: he considers the event a "bad omen," not a tragedy in its own right. Dorian displays his true insensitivity when his immediate reaction to the news is to reach for his checkbook. Henry's earlier comment that a man ought to "treat life artistically," one of the major themes of the book, is best considered in conjunction with the closing remark of the preface, that "All art is quite useless." Considering that this is the opinion of the author, it is clear that trying to make a work of art out of one's life will not be very rewarding in *Dorian Gray*. Dorian resolves to undo his past, to block it from his thoughts, and to focus on ensuring a positive future. He crushes the mirror given to him by Lord Henry, a symbolic rejection of his own vanity and the corrupting influence of Henry's friendship. He desperately clings to his treatment of Hetty as an indicator that it is possible to cleanse his soul, but it is too little, too late. Even this seemingly conscientious gesture was committed

BDD-A29803 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:55:36 UTC)

out of the hedonistic desire to experience an unfamiliar sensation, and the vain wish to improve the appearance of his soul, as depicted in the portrait. Vanity, not morality, drove his action, proving once again that Dorian is a condemned soul. When Dorian kills himself by trying to destroy the painting, the picture and the man once again trade appearances. The man in the portrait becomes young and beautiful, while the real Dorian becomes old and disfigured by guilt. Dorian has unwittingly realized the fear he had upon first seeing the painting: that he would wither and die, while the painting would remain young and beautiful forever. Furthermore, since the painting has been restored to its original appearance, the masterpiece of Basil Hallward is returned to the world. Dorian, seeing the knife, thinks that "As it had killed the painter, so it would kill the painter's work", but the work and the painter are instead granted the immortality of artistic greatness, while Dorian himself is destroyed.

According to Sanders "the narrative that follows the novel is a melodramatic, Faustian demonstration of the notion that art and morality are quite divorced". Seeing the picture, Dorian Gray said: "How sad it is! I shall grow old, and horrible, and dreadful. But this picture will remain always young. It will never be older than this particular day of June. If it were only the other way! If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old! For that – for that- I would give everything! Yes, there is nothing in the whole world I would not give! I would give my soul for that!" With Sanders ''Dorian Gray is a tragedy of sorts with the subtext of a morality play: its self-destructive, darkly sinning central character is at once a desperate suicide and a martyr (Sanders, Andrew. *The Short Oxford History of English Literature***,** 1994, p.1980)

Oscar Wilde was a one man band, his art a public show in which he played all the instruments and more often than not was one of the spectators, too. His versality depended in part upon shameless plagiarism; but we should view him now as we do a period anthology, remembering that its form and content have been shaped as much by the preferences of the compiler as by the age that it tries to represent. "I've put my genius into my life; I've put my talent into my works", runs Wilde's famous remark to Andre Gide. Even today opinion polls frequently make him the guest that most people would like to encounter at a dinner party. (Winwar, Frances. *Oscar Wilde and the Yellow 'Nineties*. 1940, p.78)

In *The Republic* by Plato, we find the Allegory of the Cave, a symbolic story, told by Socrates, which asserts that all humanity starts out in ignorance and is eventually pushed to seek further knowledge. Socrates believed that those who through their inclination to learn the truth leave the Cave, are dutifully to return and help others find the world that existed on the surface. In the allegory, Socrates describes a dark cave deep in the Earth. In the back of the cave there is a fire, the only light and the only way to see in the cave. In front of the fire is a roadway with people walking across with objects to cast shadows with the fire. These objects are cutouts, consisting of the shapes of animals and plants. Plato is describing the Cave as the world as we are taught children. The cutouts represent our religious morals and the morals taught by our parents. (Allen, R.E. *The Dialogues of Plato*, Volume II, 1991, p.94)

The Cave Allegory, written by Plato, is an interpretation of a conversation between Socrates, Plato's mentor and Glaucon, one of Plato's fellow students. Philosophy, in any

BDD-A29803 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:55:36 UTC)

aspect, can be interpreted in so many ways. This particular story is well known for it is thought provoking content and various explanations. The argument made by this philosopher has been interpreted thousands of times across the world. My own interpretation of this allegory is simple enough as Plato expresses his thoughts as separate stages. The stages, very much like life, are represented by growing realizations and newfound "pains." Therefore, each stage in "The Allegory of the Cave" reveals the relation between the growth of the mind and age. The first stage of the excerpt, which is characterized by chained and confined people, is a metaphor representing the infant and child ages of humans. Like the confined people, children are not allowed to wander freely outside of their home and must stay close to their parent's watchful eye. Those living in the underground den have their heads positioned in a way that they cannot view a fire blazing behind them. The heads of the people only see the shadows cast by the fire and objects passing by behind them.

Bibliography

Allen, R.E. *The Dialogues of Plato*, Volume II.,Yale University Press Publisher, London, 1991
Belford, Barbara. *Oscar Wilde: A Certain Genius.* Random, New York, 2000
Bennett, Arnold. *Arnold Bennett on Wilde as an Outmoded Writer*. 1927. Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritaje Ed. Karl Beckson, Barnes & Noble, New York, 1970
Bristow, Joseph. *A complex multiform creature: Wilde's Sexual Identities*. The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde. Ed. Peter Raby. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997
Burdescu, Felicia. *20th Century British Literature*, Reprografia Universitatii din Craiova, 2000
Carnes, Patrick. *Out of the Shadows: Understanding Sexual Addiction.* 3rd ed. Center City, Minnesota: Hazelden, 2001
Dollimore, Jonathan. *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault.* Oxford: Clarendon, 1991
Dolan, John P. *The Essentials Erasmus*, The new American Library Publisher, New York,1964 Hare, R.M. *Plato.* Oxford University Press, London,1892
Sanders, Andrew. *The Short Oxford History of English Literature*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1994
Winwar, Frances. *Oscar Wilde and the Yellow 'Nineties*. Garden City, NY: Blue Ribbon, 1940 Wilde, Oscar. *The picture of Dorian Gray*, Penguin Books, 1999

BDD-A29803 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:55:36 UTC)