THE CONCEPT OF REALITY IN OSCAR WILDE'S *THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY*

Cristina NICOLAE, Teaching Assistant Ph.D.,
"Petru Maior" University of Tîrgu Mureş

Abstract: Oscar Wilde's novel is regarded as a sort of autobiography that brings (his) life and art together, a self-portrait offering the reader a glimpse at this Irish writer's inner reality, a mirror that reflects not only Wilde's image (a partial representation of his self), but also the Victorian society's in relation to the artist/individual (reality outside the self). Our analysis focuses on the elusive concept of reality, bringing into the equation two other issues: the act of creation and love, both rooted in the rapport between aesthetics and ethics.

Keywords: self, love, reality, illusion, duality, ethics, aesthetics

The Picture of Dorian Gray revolves around the myth of Narcissus ("the epitome of solipsism" [Ballesteros Gonzalez in Sandulescu, 1994: 1]), furthering, at a deeper level, the fear of old age and the longing for ever-lasting youth and beauty as the destabilizing human flaws that trigger the dissolution of the self (aesthetics prevailing over ethics). The individual's struggle with time becomes central, and non-acceptance of universal order results in duality – *the divided self*, moral and sexual decay, death. Following Ballesteros Gonzales' statement, the novel represents "one of the most climactic steps in the Victorian study of duality" while Narcissus is seen as symbolizing the search for identity, "the impossible wish to integrate oneself with his own reflection. The individual is no longer projecting his fears to the outside: the 'enemy' is in his own mind, perhaps in his own body" (in Sandulescu, 1994: 3).

In analyzing the Wildean approach to the concept of *reality* as depicted in the novel, we relate it to the act of creation and to love. In the former case, reality can be negotiated and reversed, it does not apply to the real body, but to the one represented on the canvas. Yet the exchange is not a simple one: the emphasis is not on the outward reality that Realism tried to represent, but on the rapport between inward and outward worlds; Dorian Gray's pact transfers inner reality (of the soul) on the portrait, while the natural order of the external reality (of the body) is negotiated and suspended, or better said, *postponed*; the change is observed from the outside, Dorian Gray following the alterations concretized in the portrait he contemplates.

The changes transposed on the portrait (a projection of the inner world on a concrete object belonging to the outer world) convey the idea that the individual's actions and thoughts are not only the outcome of the rapport inside-outside, but also a factor that generates changes itself, resulting in the transformation of the individual's understanding of reality in terms of aesthetics – the thought transposed into action results in a change of the self (in Dorian Gray's case, the gradual loss of youth and beauty as the outcome of the pursuit of pleasure taken to the extreme).

Reality is depicted in the form of the identity 'game' between truth and appearances, between hiding and revealing one's self/soul, which the two symbols of identity that apply to Wilde's novel (*the mask* and *the mirror*) presuppose. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* reflects then

BDD-A23422 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:40:55 UTC)

the *scission* of the individual: the soul (inner reality; subject to change) and the body (outer reality; change is suspended/postponed). The two realities cannot be separated, they are irrevocably connected and the change cannot be negated. The lack of change remains illusionary, and the attempt to deny it results in death, in the annihilation of the individual. Reality inside and outside, that is, *the self* and *the world* cannot exist in one-sided rapport, one through the denial of the other, a denial that leads to disequilibrium, decay and fall.

Nevertheless, according to Kohl (2011: 160), this division of the self could not be avoided and is reflected in what he calls "the dualism of portrait and portrayed", as well as in the multifaceted self/individual Wilde refers to in his novel (*TPDG* 113-114); thus the novel depicts "not the unity of the self with itself, but its decomposition" (Kohl, 2011:160).

In the preface to the Romanian translation, Dan Grigorescu interprets this 'game' of appearances somehow differently; the rapport between Dorian Gray and his portrait is one of appearances, says Grigorescu (in Wilde, 1995: 9) – the real man only *seems* not to be affected by the passage of time and the portrait *seems* to show the signs of aging, "confessing Dorian's hidden sins" (op.cit. 9, our translation).

Grigorescu (10-11) stresses that the individual's self-awareness is achieved only in front of his own image as revealed by art, and he adds that it is only by means of art that the individual can achieve eternal youth. As underlined by so many critics since its publication, the novel that depicts Dorian Gray's gradual decline and which has been considered by many an eulogy of vice, becomes itself a partial portrait of its author leading to Wilde's own fall that is circumscribed into another area of the manifestation of the self in which the ludic, dandyism, narcissism and audience are annihilated, and Wilde becomes an alienated individual that tries to find his equilibrium in the written wor(l)d of *De Profundis*. The novel is thus a portrait that reflects the changes the Victorian society superimposes on Wilde's life rooted in vice, immorality, coming out of the comfortable space of convention (as it was invoked in Wilde's sentencing to hard labour).

Ellmann sees *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as the "aesthetic novel *par excellence*, not in espousing the doctrine, but in exhibiting its dangers" (1988: 315), while Grigorescu (among others) claims that the novel best reflects its author in that it reveals Wilde's aestheticism in all its hypostases and it constitutes itself as the most accurate, detailed psychology study Wilde ever wrote, as reflected in Lord Henry and Dorian Gray. In what regards Wilde's aestheticism, Grigorescu further asserts, this is seen in the pursuit for sensations, in skepticism and disregard of anything that would oppose the quest for pleasure: "the search for strong, unusual sensations, total skepticism, disbelief in any kind of faith, of feelings that could endanger the joy to seize the day, the certitude of the real artist's superiority" (Wilde, 1995: 8).

In "Art vs. Life in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*", Amelia Chesley underlines the fact that "questioning the relationship between art and life involves questioning what is true and what isn't", and the relation between life, art and truth is viewed in terms of dualities: "appearance and substance, created and creator, surface and symbol, culture and nature, physicality and spirituality, body and soul, the representation and the thing represented". The elusive nature of truth is insisted on, Chesley relating this loss of clear distinctions with the individual's sense of self: "Is the painting or the living Dorian the truer individual? Which, the painting or the man, or neither, houses his true soul? And if the distinctions between

BDD-A23422 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:40:55 UTC)

Dorian as art and Dorian as real, between subject and object, creator and created, artificiality and actuality, are ultimately dissolved, what are the implications?"

"All art is at once surface and symbol" (*TPDG* 3), says Wilde in the *Preface* to his book (which summarizes Wilde's aesthetic ideas), revealing the double nature of art, of the character's portrait and of the novel seen as art; it is not only "surface" - appearances/form/outward reality, but it goes deeper than that, to its symbol – inner reality/meaning. But "those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril" (3) warns Wilde, and those "who read the symbol do so at their peril", for they might find beneath the surface and in their reading a mirror showing their own reflection, exerting an influence that might lead to terrible outcomes. Diving into the depth the symbol stands for implies setting out on a perilous quest for the meaning of life and the self. And art mirrors, just like Wilde emphasizes, not life but the spectator and their perception of reality, the individual and his inner life, hence human nature.

A different facet of reality is what Dorian Gray sees once Lord Henry has exposed his philosophy when they first meet. Dorian seems to have been awoken; the reality he wakes up to frightens him: "There was a look of fear in his eyes, such as people have when they are suddenly awakened" (20); the other is not perceived as an intruder who imposes his own boundaries, but as a *mirror* that reflects a hidden, unknown yet existent self - the latent, unexplored self ("Why had it been left for a stranger to reveal him to himself", Dorian asks himself [20]). He becomes aware of his beauty and its potential (in terms of influencing the others), but also of its frail condition, and is now pushed into a new hedonism rooted in the fear of the "jealous" time (21) and of becoming one of those "puppets" that are haunted by the passions and temptations they haven't had the courage to pursue: "We degenerate into hideous puppets, haunted by the memory of the passions of which we were too much afraid, and the exquisite temptations that we had not the courage to yield to" (22).

Facing his own portrait makes Dorian Gray aware of the reality of his body, the impact of the revealed beauty being increased by the fear of losing it, of becoming "dreadful, hideous, and uncouth" (24). Sadness overcomes him: it is the portrait that has been granted eternal youth and beauty, while his own beauty and youth are exposed to the passage of time. Awareness, sadness and fear result in a desire to oppose the natural order, to preserve youth and beauty forever, even if the price paid for such an exchange would be his own soul. Dorian perceives these aesthetic identity "accessories" as the only ones that define the individual, the ones that give him value and power, from now on the new Dorian pursuing the pleasure given by the senses granted by these two attributes. His inner torment is so intense that Basil wants to destroy his own creation, his masterpiece, in an attempt to protect Dorian (from himself); but it is too late, Dorian has already been seduced, he has fallen in love with this self of his on the canvas, as he says.

Having created this Victorian Narcissus, Dorian Gray, Wilde advances the idea of self-love in relation to aesthetics, yet his approach to the issue of love does not exclude the Other: Sybil Vane is the character Wilde makes use of in analyzing love as a two-sided relation, with a focus on the implications of the individual's failure to distinguish between reality and illusions. The image of the woman, as depicted by Lord Henry, is a somehow misogynistic, depreciatory one ("women are a decorative sex", representing "the triumph of matter over mind" [40]), and marriage is presented as the outcome of man's fatigue and of woman's

BDD-A23422 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:40:55 UTC)

curiosity, resulting in disappointment for both, while fidelity is but "the lethargy of custom or their lack of imagination", "a confession of failure" (41). Marriage is insisted on as an experience that might lead to two outcomes: on the one hand, it annihilates individuality, as it "makes one unselfish", "colourless", on the other hand, it makes others more complex by adding layer after layer of egos to the retained egoism, being "forced to have more than one life" (61).

Dorian's encounter with Sybil Vane appears as a consequence of his desire to explore, to 'taste' it all, to experiment and know life, a desire induced by Lord Henry, "a passion for sensations" (41) that overwhelms and terrifies Dorian.

Always shifting between the plays she acts in and the roles she interprets (*pseudo-realities*), therefore suggesting a chameleonic pose, proving a protean versatility, Sybil Vane arises his curiosity (as he is always in search of something new and intense) - sameness, boredom, monotony are, consequently, chased away; she is an actress that shows life in a multitude of hypostases, embodying "all the great heroines of the world in one. She is more than an individual" (45), but never Sybil Vane. "She plays Shakespearean heroines, so Dorian is able to aestheticize her" (Ellmann, 1988: 315). Dorian invests her with this *Role* that comprises all the others, a *mask/lie* he falls in love with and *a truth* (behind the mask; the real/true Sybil Vane) he refuses to know.

His love is, thus, an illusion, a chimera he is chasing. Imagination changes "the purely sensuous instinct of boyhood" (*TPDG* 49) into something that seems not to belong to senses, to be deeper and more noble than these, therefore perilous: "something that seemed to the lad himself to be remote from sense, and was for that reason all the more dangerous" (49).

Without being aware of it, Dorian Gray, now engaged to be married, is in love with a Sybil Vane that is just a figment of his imagination, not with the real person but with the aesthetic worlds she gives life to through her performing on the stage, the embodiment of all "heroines of romance" (83). "I have been right, Basil, haven't I, to take my love out of poetry, and to find my wife in Shakespeare's plays?" (62-63), asks Dorian. Yet, his strong belief in the idea of love, causes some inner change that opposes the ones induced by Lord Henry and his theories that bring aesthetics and ethics in opposition: "Her trust makes me faithful, her belief makes me good. When I am with her, I regret all that you have taught me. I become different from what you have known me to be. I am changed, and the mere touch of Sybil Vane's hand makes me forget you and all your wrong, fascinating, poisonous, delightful theories" (63).

Gray's fall from the heights of love is caused by Sybil's poor performance on the stage. If up to that day she could live the part of her heroines, infusing those roles with a life that was rooted in her own dreams of love, now that the Dream is felt as having come true, the heroines become *sterile*, untrue masks that do not say anything of her anymore, whose artificiality she has grown aware of. Playing "at being in love" would be a mere "profanation", as Sybil feels (70).

Although meant to express life/reality, art proves just a reflection, a humble copy of the true world she has wakened up to and where she needs to live in. "The reality of life changes to illusion" (Kohl, 1989: 151). The Prince Charming she has always dreamt of has chosen her to be his wife and 'live happily ever after' and there is nothing left to be transposed in her roles – she cannot act out love as love is not an illusion/a dream any more,

BDD-A23422 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:40:55 UTC)

but her *inner reality* she needs to share (yet one without an echo), the longed for one that replaces the 'imagined reality', a shared inner reality which will turn out to be a fabricated one as well:

> acting was the one reality of my life. It was only in the theatre that I lived. I thought that it was all true. […] You came – oh, my beautiful love! – and you freed my soul from prison. You taught me what reality really is. […] You had brought me something higher, something of which all art is but a reflection. You made me understand what love really is. My love! my love! Prince Charming! Prince of life! (*TPDG* 70)

Her poor performance in front of Dorian and his friends, Lord Henry and Basil Hallward, deprives Dorian of his own illusions of love. Juliet is not Juliet any more, nor is Rosalind Rosalind, or Portia or all her heroines, they are but Sybil Vane and that does not suffice; she is not his dream of love, she does not live up to his expectations of art (*love seen as art*). The real proves too colourless in the absence of illusions; this is a reality he rejects, as the world he desires is that of art:

> you have killed my love. You used to stir my imagination. Now you don't even stir my curiosity. You simply produce no effects. I loved you because you were marvelous, because you had genius and intellect, because you realized the dreams of great poets and gave shape and substance to the shadow of art. […] Without your art you are nothing. I would have made you famous, splendid, magnificent. […] What are you now? A third-rate actress with a pretty face. (*TPDG* 71)

It is the world of aesthetics that conditions Dorian Gray's understanding of love and the transition from imaginary to real has two outcomes. In Sybil's case ("serene and untouched by any knowledge of evil" [Nassaar in Bloom, 1985: 113]), reality proves the mirror of her dreams of love, yet for Dorian Gray reality results in a loss of dreams of love, turning into a mere illusion. The art he fell in love with is nothing but "bad art", and the artist (Sybil here) he fell in love with proves a "failure", "merely a commonplace, mediocre actress" (*TPDG* 68). What they both believed (and wanted) to be real proves nothing else but a *chimera*. Love loses, thus, its healing power.

Another fall follows: Dorian dives into the depths of the world Lord Henry's philosophy promulgates, down to its bottom; the portrait reveals itself as the *bearer* of his changes, of "the burden of his passions and his sins" (73), the mirror of his inner world that now shows "a strange expression", "a touch of cruelty in the mouth" (73). This "visible emblem of conscience" (74) will bear the mark of his future sins, a mirror that he needs to hide, a mask of his shame that needs to be concealed.

The visible change in the expression of the face causes "sickened horror" (78), regrets and wish to undo the harm, which is to be seen as a flimsy sign of his good nature, but also a manifestation of his narcissism (for this might reverse the process on the canvas). Now that he has discovered this trace of his goodness, conscience seems to him "the divinest thing in us"

BDD-A23422 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:40:55 UTC)

(79), yet on learning about her suicide, it all seems but "extraordinarily dramatic" (80), a "wonderful ending to a wonderful play" (81) that does not move him much; reality to him is blurred and he becomes a mere spectator that takes refuge in Lord Henry's picturing of human nature aimed at alleviating the feeling of guilt, being persuaded into perceiving the troublesome experiences of the real life as nothing more than acts of a play, while his mourning of the dead Sybil should be directed at some tragic heroines who, as Lord Henry puts it, are more real than Sybil was. Her death, however, turns her into a tragic heroine Dorian falls in love with, a representation of art that founds its completion in the death that he now cherishes.

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* the main character's life and death are to be perceived, in a way, as a matter of free will, of choices that one makes (influenced to a certain extent by external circumstances or by the Other); the *prayer* by means of which Dorian has tempted a "terrible" authority (*TPDG* 86) is granted the power to break the boundaries between the worlds (the real and the wanted-to-be-real one) and to bring about the reversal of the natural order. The prayer itself is in fact a *choice* he has made, now having to face the consequences of the granted wish. The changes that follow are again the outcome of his choices that have come to alter the beauty of the soul represented in the full-length portrayed body; they are changes of the self (body and soul together).

The portrait epitomizes the true, naked self ("without mist or veil" [92], yet an idealized one) – the one that Woolf refers to as "something central which permeated" (Mrs Dalloway), or "a wedge-shaped core of darkness" (To the Lighthouse), "a wandering flame" (Orlando); nevertheless, although the portrait is intended to be a representation of this self, it turns out to be also the bearer of its artist's self, and, in its initial stage (before Dorian falls prey to Lord Henry's influence), an idealization of the soul/self of the one represented conveying the representer's/artist's subjective vision. The act of creation as (partial) representation of its author's self.

"I was dominated, soul, brain, and power by you. You became to me the visible incarnation of that unseen ideal whose memory haunts us artists like an exquisite dream" (TPDG 92). Basil Hallward's secret that he strives not to reveal to the world is precisely this power of the other (Dorian, to him) that brought about a change in this perspective on art, a move from a detached, objective observer and faithful representer of outward reality to an artist that finds his vision in a subjective, self-revealing representation of inner and outer world together. It is a truth that Basil comes to deny for a while: "Even now I cannot help feeling that it is a mistake to think that the passion one feels in creation is ever really shown in the work one creates. Art is always more abstract than we fancy" (93).

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. […] a portrait (a preserver of memory [Kohl, 2011: 145]), a mirror (which amplifies a lie [Raagland-Sullivan 1986: 124]).

Killing Basil Hallward does not generate remorse but fear that overcomes Dorian; he is now haunted by the thought of death, "sick with a wild terror of dying, and yet indifferent to life itself. The consciousness of being hunted, snared, tracked down, had begun to dominate him" (*TPDG* 158). His pursuit of life has become a paranoid flight from terror. He desires to change, to exchange evil with good and comes to realize that he himself is the one responsible

BDD-A23422 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:40:55 UTC)

for his deeds, not the "superbly sterile" art (as Lord Henry calls it [172]) or any of the others. It is now that regrets and a feeling of helplessness overwhelm him, and, in an impulse, he breaks the mirror, being sickened by the reflection of beauty and youth, a desired reality whose poisonous shallowness he has gradually uncovered – Pandora's box.

The only way to quiet down this inner turmoil is, as Dorian sees it, to destroy the only proof of his crimes, the only witness (which Nassaar sees as "the ultimate evil act, the desire to rid himself of all moral sense" [in Bloom, 1985: 129]) – the portrait that once delighted him and now terrifies and sickens him. He needs to get rid of the past in order to cope with the present, unburdened by this present life of the soul ("this monstruous soul-life" [*TPDG* 177]).

The two mirrors showing the two realities (of the body and of the soul) have now been destroyed, an act of denying reality, in fact; the mirror he received from Lord Henry (a present, therefore a given identity) is one of aesthetics showing the reality of the body, whereas the other mirror, the portrait (again a present, this time Basil Hallward's; still a received identity) is one of ethics showing the reality of the soul. Antonio Ballesteros Gonzales sees in Dorian's crushing the mirror and stabbing the portrait an "attempt to get rid of all the evidences of his *dual nature* and *fragmented self*" (in Sandulescu, 1994: 10, emphasis added).

The portrait mediates the transition to an existence marked by *sin*, *fear* and his understanding of *love* ("or Passion with the Mask of Love" as Wilde wrote to Ross on referring to himself [qtd. in Ellmann, 1988: 557], and which is also true for his character). It is still the portrait the one that mediates the awareness of the self and of the changes it is subject to as a result of the contact with outward reality. Once the portrait is destroyed, what was hidden from the others becomes real, the concealed inner reality comes to be mirrored in the outward reality of the body. Dorian Gray returns to the human condition that reacts to the passage of time and acknowledges death, while the portrait returns to its status of a work of art.

On stabbing the portrait, his self (seen as body and soul in one) comes to the end of the quest and Dorian turns "withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage" (*TPDG* 177), an inner reality now revealed to the others as well, and a portrait of Lord Henry's influence and his own choices; the freedom he enjoyed turned into a metaphorical prison cell witnessing Dorian's decay and turmoil (his failure, in fact), and brought about his death, anticipatory of Wilde's own imprisoning outside and inside the self, as revealed in *De Profundis*.

Bibliography

Ballesteros Gonzales, Antonio. "The Mirror of Narcissus in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*" in Chesley, Amelia. "Art vs. Life in *The Picture of Dorian Gray"*
http://fatmanintweed.com/melia/wilde.htm
Bloom, Harold (ed), 1985. *Modern Critical Views: Oscar Wilde*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers
Ellmann, Richard, 1988. *Oscar Wilde*. New York: Vintage Books
Kohl, Norbert, 2011. *Oscar Wilde: The Works of a Conformist Rebel*. Translated by David Henry Wilson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

BDD-A23422 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:40:55 UTC)

Nassaar, Cristopher S. “The Darkening Lens” in Bloom, Harold (ed), 1985. *Modern Critical Views: Oscar Wilde*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers
Ragland-Sullivan, Ellie. “The Phenomenon of Aging in Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray:*A Lacanian View” in Woodward, Kathleen: Schwartz, Murray M., (eds.), 1986. *Memory and Desire, Aging – Literature – Psychoanalysis*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press
Sandulescu. C. George (ed.), 1994. *Rediscovering Oscar Wilde*. Gerrards Cross: Princess Grace Irish Library 8
Wilde, Oscar,1995. *Portretul lui Dorian Gray.* With a preface by Dan Grigorescu. Bucuresti: Editura Univers
Wilde, Oscar, 1992. *The Picture of Dorian Gray.* With an introduction by Dr. Joseph Bristow. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics

BDD-A23422 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior”
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:40:55 UTC)