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# A Mirror for Confinement :

The 1890 Edition of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Hikaru Sakamoto

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890 ; revised edition in 1891), the only novel by Oscar Wilde, has often been read as a Gothic story. Its doppelgänger motif is typically modern Gothic, reminding the reader somewhat of preceding novels such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886). In addition the preternatural agent which supports this motif in *Dorian Gray* is reinforcing the Gothic atmosphere of the work. However, this novel—especially the original edition published in 1890—shares many elements with some of the children's tales Wilde published in two collections *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888) and *A House of Pomegranates* (1891). While *Dorian Gray* makes use of literary devices of Gothic and modern Gothic novels, it also basically shares the same structure and motifs as some of Wilde's fairy tales. The portrait of Dorian Gray is a variation of the mirror motif in these fairy tales, and its function and malfunction as a mirror reveals the scheme of *Dorian Gray* as well as the proximity between the novel and the fairy tales.

The original edition of *Dorian Gray* was published in an American periodical *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* in July 1890, and it was also distributed in Britain. Although in the United States this novel met with a generally favourable reception as a moralistic account of a young debauchee, a considerable number of British critics did not appreciate it very well: according to them, the work was tedious, the

main characters were all puppies, and, moreover, it was immoral. An unsigned review in the *Scots Observer* reads: “it is false art—for its interest is medico-legal; it is false to human nature—for its hero is a devil; it is false to morality—for it is not made sufficiently clear that the writer does not prefer a course of unnatural iniquity to a life of cleanliness, health and sanity.”<sup>(1)</sup> Samuel Henry Jeyes, who wrote an unsigned review in the *St. James’s Gazette* and replied to Wilde’s letters to the editor, claimed that this novel was a matter for police, and in 1895 when Wilde was convicted he triumphantly wrote that he was right. Actually, in the court room this novel was used against Wilde as evidence that he had a corrupting influence on youth, and Lord Queensbury’s son in particular.

*Dorian Gray* could be censured for its corrupting influences in two aspects—or on two levels. Firstly, the protagonist Dorian Gray advocates a New Hedonism and leads a dissipated life to realize his ideal with the help of his seemingly inexhaustible inheritance and literally ageless beauty. Secondly, in the 1890 edition, Basil Hallward’s words to and about Dorian frequently insinuate homosexuality, although the author suppressed more overt expressions found in drafts.

As for the accusations concerning the quality of the novel and the prodigality described in it, Wilde set forth arguments against the scathing criticisms, and wrote in a letter to the editor of the *Scots Observer*: “An artist, sir, has no ethical sympathies at all. Virtue and wickedness are to him simply what the colours on his palette are to the painter.”<sup>(2)</sup> Wilde refuted criticisms, claiming that any work of art should not be stigmatized for its characters’ behaviour. Also in a letter to Arthur Conan Doyle, Wilde wrote, “I cannot understand how they can treat *Dorian Gray* as immoral. My difficulty was to keep the inherent moral subordinate to the artistic and dramatic effect, and it is

still seems to me that the moral is too obvious.”<sup>(3)</sup> According to Wilde’s second letter to the *St. James’s Gazette*, the moral is “All excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its own punishment.”<sup>(4)</sup>

In contrast to this eloquence, Wilde chose to silently suppress the homosexual element further when *Dorian Gray* was published in book form in 1891. However, this is not the only change found in the 1891 edition. He made more extensive revisions which changed the character of the novel drastically.

While modulating or removing the vestiges of homosexuality, Wilde added six new chapters. In them he invented the gloomy secret of Dorian’s birth and introduced the revenge motif of James Vane. These additions made Dorian’s background and his consciousness more bizarre, and shifted the tone of the whole novel, reinforcing its Gothic character. The author’s intention can be seen in the “Preface” to *Dorian Gray* which appeared in *Fortnight Review* the next year and was later reprinted in the 1891 edition. The aphorisms in the “Preface” recapitulate Wilde’s eloquent vindication for his novel and show his literary creeds: “There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. . . . Vice and virtue are to the artist are materials for an art. . . . All art is quite useless.”<sup>(5)</sup> With the alterations and additions, Wilde succeeded in bringing *Dorian Gray* nearer to his credo, and this resulted in suppressing the moral of the story that was appreciated by readers who understood this novel allegorically. Wilde wrote to the editor of the *Daily Chronicle*, “I think the moral too apparent. When the book is published in a volume I hope to correct this defect.”<sup>(6)</sup> Then he fulfilled his words.

Without additional Gothic contrivances, the original 1890 edition shows the unique character of this novel more explicitly. Even the 1890 edition seems Gothic enough, making use of the doppelgänger motif as

a major contrivance of the story. However, in modern Gothic novels such as *Frankenstein*, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and *Dracula*, preternatural—or implausible—elements are usually accompanied with quasi-scientific explanations. These novels utilize Victorian science and positivism in order to support and even deepen the terror they try to create. Science and positivism were the mode of thinking in the nineteenth century, therefore they are the most natural and effective choice for exploring the world of terror.

In contrast, in *Dorian Gray* Wilde shows no endeavour to explain or substantiate the most implausible incident in the story : the image in the portrait corrupts hideously while its model remains young and beautiful. When Dorian notices this miracle for the first time and understands that his wish has been fulfilled, he gazes “at the portrait with a feeling of almost scientific interest.”<sup>(7)</sup> He is also a child of the age of science, but at this point he stops thinking about this preternatural occurrence and accepts it as it is. This is quite different from the way Dr Van Helsing accepts the existence of vampires because he comes to believe in it on the basis of his scientific research.

The protagonist of *Dorian Gray* is not a scientist but just a naïve lad, a hedonist whose life itself is hopefully his art, and no other main characters are of a scientific type. The only exception is rather a minor character, Alan Campbell, a chemist. He is blackmailed by Dorian and is forced to chemically dispose of Basil Hallward’s body. This episode introduces into the story a somewhat modern Gothic atmosphere by turning a human body into ashes with the help of technology instead of older methods—fire or time. On the other hand, in Chapter 10 the reader comes to know that Dorian loves to stroll in the picture-gallery in his manor house and look at the portraits of his ancestors.<sup>(8)</sup> Thus he contemplates what he has inherited in his blood from people in the past.

James Eli Adams, referring to Pater's criticism of *Dorian Gray*, remarks that here Wilde owes a debt to Herbert Spencer's evolution theory and it "offers, first of all, a quasi-scientific ground for locating all forms of 'otherness' within the self."<sup>(9)</sup> This is another example of the modern Gothic touch in this story. However, *Dorian Gray* as a whole does not comfortably fit into the framework of this category.

In *Dorian Gray* the preternatural element is introduced into the story just as a wonder. It begins and ends the story line and dominates the protagonist's behaviour and course of life, but it works only as a cue. It is integrated into the theme as will be discussed later, but it is not in the thematic centre of the story. While *Dorian Gray* as a whole looks Gothic, what makes it so is not the preternatural incident nor the portrait. It is the protagonist's Gothic consciousness.

Other literary devices employed by Wilde reinforces this scheme. *Dorian Gray* begins with a walled-garden—or the Garden of Eden—motif. The protagonist is an innocent young man whose beauty reflects his naiveté. Then, here appears Lord Henry Watton who is to be his mentor and seducer. Influenced by the skilful seducer, Dorian comes to appreciate his own youth and beauty, and he even begins to be afraid of losing them ; therefore he prays that the portrait which bears his beauty at its peak may age instead of him and that he may keep his youth and beauty eternally. This fairy-tale-like beginning is actually set in the contemporary world of the nineteenth century and is described in realistic detail. Then the miracle is introduced, and it sets the course and tone of the story: there is no modern Gothic device for verisimilitude. Wilde made this story of a "young man selling his soul in exchange for eternal youth"<sup>(10)</sup> a "wonder tale" rather than a modern Gothic story.

*Dorian Gray* is a story of damnation as Wilde's words suggests,

but it is also a story of the growth of a very privileged young man : the story follows the process of his self-discovery and self-realization. This young man is lead first by Lord Henry and later by a book, and strives to make his life itself a piece of art. Throughout this course, the portrait works as a mirror, showing Dorian what he actually is. Thus the miracle and the portrait not only support the Gothic character of this novel, but also work as key devices in this bizarre variation of a bildungsroman—or, more precisely, *künstlerroman*.

Self-recognition and self-revision are the most common themes found in Wilde's fairy tales including "The Happy Prince," "The Young King," "The Birthday of the Infanta" and "The Star Child." *Dorian Gray* as a *künstlerroman* also follows this pattern as well as having several motifs found in these tales. Typically in these fairy tales, a rather naïve young man comes to see himself in a social context, and suffers terribly in the course of revising his self-image. This self-revision—and self-realization as its result—is sometimes literally fatal, but it takes him into a higher phase. What shows the protagonist his social image is a mirror as explained in Lacan's theory of children's development and self-objectification, although in "The Happy Prince" "looking" and "being looked at" create the same effect. When the protagonist accomplishes self-revision, his formerly hidden noble identity is discovered and fully authenticated.<sup>(11)</sup> In each of the four fairy tales, this story line is used with some alterations according as which of the major motifs—self-recognition and self-realization—is foregrounded. The structure of *Dorian Gray* is basically the same : it is an expanded version of this series of tales.

In *Dorian Gray*, the protagonist recognizes himself in a social context at the beginning of the story. This innocent young man finds his extraordinary beauty and youth in his portrait: he comes to know his

superiority and a social context that supports it, as the protagonist of “The Star Child” does at the opening. Of course, he needs guidance and Lord Henry, the mentor and seducer, prepares this as do the three dreams in “The Young King” and the beautiful rooms leading to the all-revealing mirror in “The Birthday of the Infanta.” Dorian’s self-recognition occurs in the first two chapters, and the rest of the story is used to describe his attempt at self-realization. In *Dorian Gray*, the process of the protagonist’s self-realization is foregrounded.

As already mentioned above, the portrait of the protagonist works as a mirror, but its function is a little different from Lacanian mirrors or its equivalent found in the four tales. With those mirrors, the protagonists objectify themselves through seeing their social images which is shared between themselves and the outside world. In contrast, what Dorian can see in the portrait is not such a social image of himself: it is nothing objective. He hides the portrait in the locked old schoolroom in his town house. Then, he is haunted by the picture because it shows him his own hidden hideousness: it shows to him any vice he performs and his ageing, which no one can discern in his eternally young and innocent face.

However, Dorian’s reaction seems disproportionately exaggerated if the portrait is simply reflecting the decline of appearance the model himself should have had. Dorian Gray is still only thirty-two years old at the end of the story.<sup>(12)</sup> This impression is partly due to the fact that Dorian’s vice remains vague throughout the story and nothing particular is attributed to it. Allan Sinfield remarks, “*The Picture of Dorian Gray* invokes the queer image, to some readers at least, *despite at no point representing it.*” (sic)<sup>(13)</sup> The change of the portrait can be associated with drug abuse, and Sinfield suggests another possibility, referring to its symptoms that were believed to be



common in the nineteenth century: "A vice that would very well fit what happens to Dorian's picture is masturbation."<sup>(14)</sup> Sinfield himself does not believe that this is the answer and urges that it is tricky to "get any fix on Dorian Gray's vices."<sup>(15)</sup> This vagueness itself illustrates what happens to Dorian and his portrait, and his words about Dorian's self-consumption are quite suggestive. D. A. Miller finds a hint on this in Basil Hallward's words: "The commonest thing is delightful if only one hides it."<sup>(16)</sup> According to Miller, this is the "misleading common sense that finds the necessity of secrets in the 'special' nature of the contents concealed,"<sup>(17)</sup> and this attempt internalizes the disciplinary order against which one strives to affirm his autonomy by means of secrecy.

Wilde already used this motif more explicitly in "The Sphinx without a Secret"<sup>(18)</sup> and in *Dorian Gray* he intertwined it with another motif of confinement. The portrait is not a mirror that takes Dorian out in front of society behind his own specular image; it is a mirror that reflects and visualizes his self-indictment. His original innocent state is fixed on his face as the index, and he has to be urged to recognize how far he has come. Of course the criterion of this self-indictment is an internalized copy of an external moral code that rules the world outside the locked schoolroom. Probably conscience is the right word for this criterion as epitomized in the author's words: Dorian Gray "is haunted all through his life by an exaggerated sense of conscience which mars his pleasures for him and warns him youth and enjoyment are not everything in the world."<sup>(19)</sup> Dorian is haunted by a social self-image that is actually separated and hidden from society. This structure naturally reminds the reader today of Oscar Wilde himself and his hidden or suppressed identity—his homosexuality and middle class Irish background. However it would be too simplistic to read *Dorian Gray*

as, for instance, a sort of gay novel. What happens in the story is a more common, but peculiar case of self-revision.

In the course of practising the “new Hedonism,” Dorian tries to revise his self-image two times : the first opportunity is when he regrets his cruelty to Sibyl Vane, and the second is when he determines to leave a country girl untouched. In both cases, he wants to regain the self-image of Prince Charming, as Sibyl Vane called him before the tragic break-up, and it is also the naïve and innocent state in the walled-garden scene. He is just trying to return to his lost original state whose relic is eternally fixed on his face as the beauty of an innocent youth.

Also in the four fairy tales mentioned above, beauty and self-revision are closely interweaved. In “The Happy Prince,” the protagonist—the statue of a late Prince—gives away his jewels and gold leaf to his poor people, and because of this self-sacrifice he and his helper, a swallow, are accepted to Heaven. In “The Young King,” the protagonist abandons the splendid attire for his coronation and is consequently crowned by God. In “The Star Child,” the protagonist has to overcome his arrogance and cruelty which are based on his beauty before he discovers his royal background and becomes a good King. On the other hand, the ugly dwarf in “The Birthday of the Infanta” is cornered when he comes to see his ugliness and perceives the ridicule of his audience : he dies from sorrow and despair. In each of these tales, the protagonist’s appearance is foregrounded as the point of contact between himself and society. This contact is nothing but the moment of self-recognition in a social context and it is mediated by a mirror or its equivalent. Thus, in order to survive the shock of the first contact and step into the next phase, the protagonist has to adopt and recreate his own social image: in the former three examples, the protagonists go

beyond their privileges symbolized in beauty, but in the case of the ugly dwarf there is no way out.

Dorian Gray is also an extremely privileged protagonist. He is handsome and rich ; he is very good at appreciating beauty and, with his fortune, he can obtain whatever he relishes for its beauty. However, he cannot go beyond that: he is confined in beauty as his self-image is trapped in his eternal youth. The hideously rotting image in the portrait and Dorian's eternal innocent beauty reflect and reinforce each other, as well as confine him. The protagonist of Huysmans' *A Rebours* renounces the world and secludes himself in a house with his favourite things. Dorian's edifice of beauty is open to the world, and his taste and himself are adored by many followers. However, the portrait will not work as a window to the outside world, and he is actually confined in and by his own beauty.

In "The Young King," the protagonist is depicted as "one who was seeking to find in beauty an anodyne from pain, a sort of restoration from sickness." Melissa Knox urges that Dorian also seeks a similar refuge, and she traces Dorian's vain attempt to "push disturbing thoughts out of his head with beautiful visions" after he murders Basil Hallward.<sup>(20)</sup> The long list of Dorian's huge collection of jewellery, tapestries, musical instruments and so on is a trace of his quest for an aesthetic life. However, so long as he is trapped in the cul-de-sac of beauty, this list only shows how much he has to overdose an anodyne. Pain-killer cannot be a remedy, and he just drives himself towards catastrophe. Dorian and the portrait make a labyrinth of two mirrors facing each other: he has to break one of them in order to escape it. Only when the portrait stops working as a mirror, is Dorian released from confinement.

In conclusion, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a novel which

makes use of Gothic and modern Gothic literary devices, and its Gothic aspect was reinforced with the additions in the 1891 edition. The preternatural occurrence that begins this story—the ageing portrait and the protagonist’s eternal youth—seem typically Gothic. However, as Claude Summers writes, “the name Dorian Gray conjures not an image of evil but of preternaturally extended youth and beauty bought at the trivial price of a disfigured portrait.”<sup>(21)</sup> This impression comes from the scheme of this novel. At least in the original 1890 edition, what is in the centre of this story is neither the horror of a bizarre rotting portrait nor the vices of a diabolic young man who sold his soul to restrain his youth and beauty. Instead, the story describes the whole process of a young man’s unavailing struggles and failures in revising his self-image. His attempt is destined to fail, because when he wished to keep his youth and this was fulfilled he confined himself in his fixed self-image. The ageing portrait and Dorian’s eternal youth are both contrivances for this confinement.

*Dorian Gray* shares many motifs and the basic story lines with some of Wilde’s fairy tales, and the theme of self-recognition and self-realization is also inherited from these tales. On the other hand, the Gothic contrivances of this novel are rather incidental. *Dorian Gray* is a variation of Wilde’s fairy tales which is expanded far beyond the ordinary scale of the genre. What is really Gothic in *Dorian Gray* is neither the portrait nor the retribution, but the confinement caused by the miracle and possibly the contortion given to the mirror motif which was also employed for the ordeal of growth in the fairy tales.

## NOTES

- (1) Unsigned review, 5 July 1890, reprinted in Karl Beckson ed. *Oscar Wilde : The Critical Heritage* (London : Routledge, 1970) 75.

- ( 2 ) Rupert Hart-Davis, ed., *The Letters of Oscar Wilde* (London : Hart-Davis, 1962) 266.
- ( 3 ) *Letters* 292.
- ( 4 ) *Letters* 259.
- ( 5 ) Donald L. Lawler, ed., *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (New York : Norton, 1988) 3-4.
- ( 6 ) *Letters* 263.
- ( 7 ) *Dorian Gray* 219.
- ( 8 ) All chapter numbers refer to the 1890 edition, unless otherwise mentioned.
- ( 9 ) James Eli Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints : Styles of Victorian Manhood* (Ithaca : Cornell UP, 1995) 220-21.
- (10) *Letters* 263.
- (11) See Hikaru Sakamoto, "Oscar Wilde's Fairy Tales : The Mirror and Self-Recognition" in *The Hiyoshi Review of English Studies* 31 (1997): 117-49.
- (12) In the 1891 edition Wilde changed Dorian's age from thirty-two to thirty-eight.
- (13) Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century : Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the Queer Moment* (London : Cassell, 1994) 103.
- (14) Sinfield 101.
- (15) Sinfield 102.
- (16) *Dorian Gray* 175.
- (17) Miller, D. A., *The novel and the Police* (Berkeley : U of California P, 1988) 175.
- (18) First published as "Lady Alroy" in *The World*, May 25, 1887.
- (19) *Letters* 263-4.
- (20) Melissa Knox, *Oscar Wilde : A Long and Lovely Suicide* (New Haven : Yale UP, 1994) 62.
- (21) Claude J. Summers, *Gay Fictions* (New York : Continuum, 1990) 44.