

Dorian Gray: A Narcissist with Intrapsychic Conflict

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Abstract

The Picture of Dorian Gray is the only novel written by Oscar Wilde, a prominent representative of aestheticism in the late 19th century. The novel tells the story of a young handsome and innocent man Dorian Gray, who constantly degenerates after discovering his amazing beauty and finally stabs the ugly portrait then dies mysteriously. As the plot continues to develop, the character of Dorian Gray is changing. This paper aims to probe into the character image and identity of Dorian Gray through the analysis of the plot in the novel.

Keywords

The Picture of Dorian Gray; Oscar Wilde; Narcissism; Archetypal analysis.

1. Introduction

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the beautiful young Gray is a thoroughly virtuous citizen with a moral conscience before meeting Lord Henry Wotton, who regards hedonism as the true meaning of life. Henry is a cynic, using his tricky words to urge people not to restrain themselves, not to be bound by so-called moral principles, but to indulge themselves in sensual pleasures. His attitude towards life gradually influences Dorian, activating the inner self of Dorian which has been suppressed in his personality to pursue pleasure. Therefore, driven by Henry's hedonistic thoughts, he seems to feel that his beauty and youth should not be wasted on a canvas. Instead, he begins to squander his youth. He makes a wish with the portrait that he would sacrifice his soul if he could stay young forever and all the vicissitudes and sins are borne by the portrait. Miraculously, his wish comes true. The picture grows uglier and grimmer with every misdeed Dorian has done, but Dorian's appearance remains the same. For decades he leads a contradictory life under the cover of that portrait——innocent and beautiful in appearance but guilty in soul due to countless despicable and depraved deeds.

2. Dorian Gray's Anima: a Narcissist①

Dorian Gray is an individualist, and the best expression of his individualistic tendency is narcissism. At first, he has no idea about his amazing and attractive beauty that everyone would fall for. It is the painter's portrait that makes him realize it. Then after discovering the magic of the portrait, his attention to beauty gradually turns to the extreme. Finally, he tries to destroy the painting——the only thing that prevents him from loving himself completely. This narcissism eventually leads to his tragedy.

2.1. Dorian's Searching for Identity

Dorian's search for his identity is full of confusion. His searching process has three stages. At first, Dorian is innocent when he first encounters the complex society. From the moment the painter Basil Hallward first meets Dorian, he realizes that this man will have extraordinary impact on him. For Basil, Dorian is the tangible embodiment of the invisible ideal. He is struck by Dorian's beauty and fall in love with him. Then Dorian begins to notice and appreciate himself. As he consciously searches for his identity, the magic portrait gives him the chance of eternal youth but deprives him of the ability to obtain the social identity. In the second stage,

Lord Henry persuades Dorian that “People die of common sense, Dorian, one lost moment at a time. Life is a moment. There is no hereafter. So make it burn always with the hardest flame”. Under the influence of Henry’s plausible words, he starts to obey his inducement to imitate Lord Henry. This is also an attempt in the process of searching self-identity. In the third stage, he starts his own independent and tentative attempt. It is mentioned in the novel that Lord Henry gives Dorian a book in which many chaotic, luxurious, crazy and decadent behaviors are depicted. This plot indicates that Dorian is likely to copy some behaviors in that book.

In the second half of the novel, his personal characteristics are completely consistent with a narcissist, which is also the reason that leads to his tragic ending. Under the control of narcissism, he puts his feelings above everything and abandons Sibyl who loves him deeply, causing her to commit suicide; he cannot bear the increasingly ugly portrait so he attributes his fault to the painter Basil and murders him. Finally, in the grip of his narcissism, he stabs the portrait and kills himself. As Dorian strays further along the path of searching his identity, his attempts to deny his true self lead to his own destruction.

2.2. Dorian’s Mythological Prototype as a Narcissist

In Greek mythology, Narcissus falls in love with his own reflection in the water. Infatuated with his own reflection day after day and afraid of losing it, he jumps into a lake and drowns himself. Similarly, Dorian’s death is related to his beauty. Neither of them is aware of their attractive appearance at first. After being inspired by others, they are obsessed with their beauty. The picture of Dorian is like the reflection of Narcissus in the lake. Dorian, aware of his own beauty from the portrait, is misled by Lord Henry’s belief. The beautiful picture is no longer beautiful, recording the crimes committed by Dorian. In the end, beauty is no longer a source of pride for Dorian but a heavy psychological burden for him. Therefore, Dorian wields the dagger trying to destroy his portrait but only killing himself, just as Narcissus throws himself into the lake, ending his perverted quest with death.

3. Dorian Gray’s Nature: The Combination of Contradictions

Dorian Gray has the extreme thinking of narcissistic personality, and he is faced with the identity split between good and evil in his identity construction at the same time. As a combination of contradictions, he bears the great psychological pressure brought by the inner split.

3.1. Dorian’s Extreme Thinking

Gray’s way of thinking is typical extreme thinking with narcissistic personality. In his mind there is only pure good or pure bad, hot as fire or cold as ice, without any intermediate states.

The most obvious example is his love for Sibyl, which is dramatic and extreme and can't withstand any disturbance. The love seems romantic and passionate but it can instantly cool down as if it never exists. A performance could be a chance that Sibyl, a naive and kind girl, could get out of dramatic life to experience and grow in real life, but she is frustrated by Dorian’s inexplicable detestation because of the failure and commits suicide under the extreme despair. After Sibyl's death, Dorian is unlike normal people who may feel a deep sense of guilt for a long time, and carry a heavy burden to torment their conscience. With Henry's perverse words, he quickly makes excuses for his actions and is free from guilt. For the rest of his life, Dorian doesn't think about Sibyl, even when he is chased after by Sibyl's brother. It shows the ruthlessness of Dorian's extreme thinking: a passionate lover can turn into a ruthless killer instantly.

3.2. Dorian's Intrapyschic Conflict

At the beginning of the novel, Dorian is still in the stage of constructing self-identity. At this time, he is shy, pure, innocent and curious about everything around him. Basil represents the original purity of human nature. He is kind-hearted and has a strong sense of conscience and morality. When creating the portrait for Dorian Gray, he adds his own emotions and moral values to construct a perfect work of art according to his own ideas. In the portrait, Dorian Gray not only has the most attractive beauty of the world, but also has a sense of incomparable spiritual temperament brought by the sublime morality. Dorian Gray in this portrait is undoubtedly the ideal image of Dorian himself. This is why he is deeply attracted to this picture when he first sees it.

Although Dorian indulges his desires and does many absurd and cruel things, he has not have antisocial personality. He clearly knows that his behavior is against common customs and morality so he has to keep his dark side of human nature as a secret. When he does something wrong, he will hate himself from the bottom of his heart. Therefore, he always struggles with contradictions, surviving under enormous psychological pressure. In addition, the life-size portrait as a mirror of his soul keeps reminding him the ugliness of his soul and the cruelty of his actions. Moreover, as a person who refuses to accept the fact that human beings will eventually age, he strives in vain for perfection and immortality. Under the contradictions, Dorian's fragile and unbalanced inner world is increasingly splintered, tearing apart his remaining sanity. In order to relieve his overwhelming intrapsychic conflict, he has to continue to degenerate to numb himself. In this way, Dorian goes astray step by step.

4. Conclusion

As it is analyzed above, Dorian Gray is a narcissist who is extremely obsessed with his beauty. He is misguided in his search for self-identity and finally loses himself. Meanwhile, he is also a combination of contradictions. While being content with material comforts, he is subject to the trial of the portrait for his sins and bears tremendous psychological pressure. At the end, while Dorian is trying to get rid of his ugly soul and start a new life, he is accidentally killed by himself. His death is no doubt a reckoning with past sins. Through the analysis of Dorian Gray, it can be seen that this work not only expresses the author's views on aestheticism, but also pioneers the plurality of human nature. Oscar Wilde embodies his thinking about issues like social identity and sexual orientation through the character of Dorian Gray, which is the uniqueness of his work.

5. Notes

Narcissist refers to someone in love with themselves. This word comes from the name of Narcissus, a beautiful boy in the ancient Greek mythology. One day Narcissus found his own shadow in the water without knowing it was himself. Then he was obsessed with his own beauty and finally drowned himself into river to hug the shadow.

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