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**BREAKING THE PICTURE BEHIND THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY: THE DOUBLE,
PROJECTIVE IDENTIFICATION AND THE SUPEREGO**

SAMRIDHI AGGARWAL

Independent Researcher, MA in Contemporary Literature Culture and Theory,
King's College London, United Kingdom

Samridhiaggarwal95@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This essay aims to read Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray* alongside psychoanalytic theory, particularly that of Sigmund Freud. By tracing the significance of the portrait in the narrative, I will read it alongside Freud's concepts of double, superego, and Kleinian concept of projective identification. Using the trial-and-error method of investigation, this essay will attempt to associate the portrait with Dorian Gray's superego. Subsequently, this association will show Gray's divorce from his own moral compass, a separation that projects itself onto his portrait which ages with his sins and inevitably leads him to the path of destruction. While psychoanalyzing Gray's narcissistic behavioral responses, Freud's theories will help shed light on his moral derangement by looking at his relationship with other characters and their boastful encouragement of his appearance. Rather than making this paper a commentary on the hedonistic tendencies conditioned as responses to the Fin-De-Siecle Victorian Society, I aim to make it an informed commentary of psychoanalysis on Dorian Gray's separation from self and his morality in the presence of his aging portrait.

Keywords: Superego; Narcissism; Psychoanalysis; Double; Projective Identification.

Introduction

The reader is appalled as Wilde cleverly takes him/her through the psychological journey of the character of Dorian Gray, his descent into madness and the inevitable fall. The book starts off with two people, Mr Basil Hallward and Lord Henry discussing Dorian Gray. In the first few pages itself, Wilde gives a strong foundation to Dorian Gray's character despite his absence. He talks about Dorian's irresistible beauty. In the subsequent chapters, the reader sees Dorian delving deeper and deeper into sin and his portrait bearing the mark of those sins. This portrait remains a symbol of mystery in the text. However, I will attempt to uncover the mystery behind this portrait in my essay.

Breaking the picture behind the painting of Dorian Gray: psychoanalytic criticism of the portrait

The portrait of Dorian Gray remains an interesting element of the uncanny present throughout the book. That it is indeed the element of the uncanny is not to be questioned as it can be easily traced throughout. As Freud suggests, the uncanny is 'something removed from the eyes of strangers, hidden, secret' (Freud 2003,

133). This is evident in the text as Dorian Gray keeps his portrait hidden in an old school room that remains locked and forbidden to everyone else but him. Freud goes on to describe the uncanny as something that is familiar but causes a feeling of uncertainty (Freud 2003, 134). Gray's portrait, familiar because it is his face that it shows, causes uncertainty because it changes while Dorian remains the same. Therefore, the portrait is undoubtedly an element of the uncanny. This proves to be an interesting twist in the plot of Wilde's text. However, it brings up questions surrounding Wilde's intentions. What is the portrait intended to be? What does this symbol of the uncanny do is the question that remains unanswered. This symbolization offers an interesting explorative journey into the psychoanalytic depths of the text. Is the portrait a part of Dorian or is it something else like an external element of supernatural or is it a higher moral authority? This phenomenon of the portrait and its depth and perception that shaped Dorian's attitude towards it is what I intend to explore in my essay.

The portrait influences the reader from the start of the text; it becomes the lens for the reader to measure Dorian's sins. This can especially be seen when Dorian wonders 'if he had been looking into a mirror after he had done some dreadful thing?' (Wilde 73). But the portrait remains an enigma, a mystery, and an element of the uncanny. This air of subtlety that hides Wilde's intentions towards the portrait can be uncovered by understanding the relationship between the portrait and Dorian. The fog of mystery that veils this portrait can only be seen through if this relationship between the two is explored for the similarities and the differences that they share. In his essay, *The Uncanny*, Freud threw light on the idea of the 'double' or the 'doppelgänger'. According to Freud, the double can be categorized through the 'the appearance of persons who have to be regarded as identical because they look alike' (Freud 2003, 141). The portrait in this sense is identical to Dorian Gray; it looks alike. But is this criterion enough to label the portrait as the double? Thus it will give better insight if this labeling is traced further. Freud goes on to state 'this relationship is intensified by the spontaneous transmission of mental processes from one of these persons to the other' (Freud 2003, 142). This is evident later in the book when Dorian realizes that 'the face on the canvas bear the burdens of his passions and his sins' (Wilde 73). The link here becomes evident as Dorian Gray observes the change in the portrait bearing the mark of his evil deed. It shows the intimate relationship between Gray and his portrait and their influence over each other. Hence, it can be interpreted that Dorian has transferred his mental processes to the portrait. This opens up the question of whether or not the portrait is actually a double of Gray or not. Technically, in terms of the physical features, the portrait is the double but it also is not. Despite the connections that have been established here between the two ideas, there remains one essential difference. A difference that cannot be ignored. The double of someone changes like the person changes it remains exactly like him or her. It is supposed to be the exact mirror image of them. However, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, this is where the complication arises. The portrait changes while Dorian Gray remains the same. To be categorized as the double of an object both should remain the same or change to stay the same. Therefore, the portrait should adapt according to the changes taking place in Gray to ensure that the two still match. However, this does not happen. While the portrait changes due to Dorian's sins, 'his own beauty might be untarnished' (Wilde 73). Therefore, keeping this quintessential difference in mind, the idea of the portrait being the double can be refuted. This brings me back to the question of my essay to what does the portrait actually represent.

Clearly, the question of the portrait and its functionality is a lot more complicated than it appears to be at first glance. As the text delves deeper into the intimate relationship shared by the portrait and Dorian, it gives interesting insights into the portrait's being. The portrait is didactic; it exercises a sense of control over Dorian Gray. It reveals Gray's sins and misdemeanors and in this sense instils in him a sense of guilt. By making Gray face the corruption of his soul and the decay in his actions, it forces him to confront the monster he has become. Indeed, it can be interpreted as a kind of morality check for Dorian. It functions as a 'higher nature of man' that tries to guide Dorian out of his haze of hedonism (Freud 1962, 27). Wilde himself labels the portrait as the voice of conscience when he writes that the portrait 'would be to him the visible emblem of conscience' (Wilde 74). It can thus be said that the portrait functions as super-ego.

The portrait functions this way because, as Freud theorizes the super-ego makes one go through the process of 'self-judgment' and exercises a certain 'hold upon consciousness' (Freud 1962 27, 43). That the portrait does the exact same thing is evident when Wilde writes that 'his own soul was looking out at him from

the canvas and calling him to judgment.’ (Wilde 96) The function of the portrait exercising control over Dorian’s consciousness is not hard to see. In its presence, Dorian Gray experiences moments of regret and a sense of guilt and shame over his actions. Wilde makes this very clear by making Dorian think ‘would it teach him to loathe his own soul?’ (Wilde 74). The clear implication here is that the portrait was teaching him, and was making him question his actions and thoughts. Confronting Gray with his own faults consequently leads to a development of hatred towards his own soul, a hatred that can be traced in Gray’s characterization from hereon. This link between the portrait and Gray is made even stronger and more obvious as it only happens when he is in the presence of it. This is in sync with another function of the super-ego. Freud states in his text, *The Ego and the Id*, about ‘the general character of harshness and cruelty exhibited by the ideal’ (45). Therefore, it can be seen that the portrait is functioning as a kind of a super-ego that makes Dorian question his actions causing him to develop an attitude that could be seen as self-loathing.

Dorian’s characterization is interesting, especially if considered as a result of the portrait’s presence. The most important argument towards the portrait being Gray’s super-ego is perhaps his sense of guilt. According to Freud, ‘the superego manifests itself essentially as a sense of guilt’ (Freud 1962, 43). These moments when Dorian’s character becomes deep, profound and, laden with misery are rare, initially, however they keep increasing, as Dorian’s sins do, just like the marks and scars of shame on the portrait. His character reaches the peak of profound depth when Basil tries to advise him about redeeming himself. He comes as a shining beacon of hope for Dorian especially when he urges ‘Pray, Dorian, Pray’ and insists that the ‘prayer for repentance will be answered’. However, what follows next sets up a new tension within the text. ‘Dorian Gray turned slowly around, and looked at him with tear-dimmed eyes. “It is too late, Basil” he faltered.’ This is probably one of the most intense moments in the book. It paints a clear view of Dorian’s misery as he sees the clear-cut marks of shame painted on his portrait. The moment takes a darker turn when he is forced to confront the monster in him. This tension is well defined when Wilde writes that ‘the mad passions of a hunted animal stirred within him.’ (Wilde 125)

The loathing and aggression that he has repressed towards himself erupts like a volcano and he further projects this loathing towards Basil, most likely because he is the artist of the portrait, making it very easy for Gray to blame him for his descent into madness. An understanding of the Kleinian term ‘Projective Identification’ can help understand this. According to the *Comprehensive Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*, it can be defined as ‘repudiation of self-representation, its attribution to another individual who can emotionally experience such induction’ (Akhtar 224). Breaking this down into two parts can help further my argument in this essay. The repudiation of self-representation has been explained before in this essay as him confronting the loathing and aggression he feels towards himself and rejecting those feelings. He then attributes them to ‘another individual who can emotionally experience such induction’, who is Basil (Wilde 125). That Basil can experience them is evident when he partakes the blame of leading Dorian astray and is ready to bear the punishment. Things then take a violent turn when he stabs Basil, hence killing ‘the friend who had painted the fatal portrait to which all his misery had been due’ (Wilde 126).

Breaking the picture behind Henry’s characterization: tracing Gray’s downfall

Basil may have been the portrait maker, however, it was Henry who was the monster maker. From the start Henry had subjected Gray to the worst kind of objectification. He took away his innocence and led him astray. While it can be said that the portrait was the voice of the conscience, Henry’s character was probably the ultimate representative of the id. Freud labels the id as working according to the ‘pleasure principle’ (1962, 36). Similarly, Henry on various occasions talks on life being about pursuit of pleasure. According to Lord Henry, ‘sin is the only real color element in modern life’ (Wilde 26). He kept pulling Dorian deeper and deeper into sin. This is evident from the earliest point in the book especially when he says ‘when your youth goes, your beauty will go with it, and then you will suddenly discover that there are no more triumphs for you’ (Wilde 21). It can be said that if it weren’t for Henry then Dorian and the fable of this portrait would never have been made. The crux of the argument here is that Henry was the creator of what he called Dorian, ‘Narcissus’ (Wilde 6). He made Dorian narcissistic leading him astray. This caused Dorian to experience an anxiety over losing his youth and his

beauty, a truth, which for him was so unmanageable that it led to the eventual splitting off of his super-ego and its manifestation into the portrait.

The splitting off of super-ego brings into consideration another interesting element. The Super-ego is internalized, however, Dorian's super-ego is outside of him. Indeed, Oscar Wilde brings out this interesting sentiment perfectly when Dorian questions 'was the body really in the soul?' (Wilde 48). This externalization of super-ego makes the functionality of the portrait more central to Dorian's character. It makes it the essential truth of Dorian's existence. However, this divorcing of the super-ego brings into account another interesting possibility. Perhaps the superego, which is split off, is absent and is manifested in the presence of the portrait. Judging the portrait's effect on Dorian can help one see this. The effect of the portrait on Dorian can be seen when Dorian says at one of the most intense moments in the novel 'It has destroyed me'. As this statement reverberates its sentiments throughout the text after this point, one gets a glimpse of the control that the portrait exercises over Dorian. It also brings out an interesting observation. Before this instant, Dorian didn't express any sense of guilt or remorse. The times when he does express guilt or remorse are only when in the presence of the portrait. The first time this happens is when Dorian beholds the mark of his sin on the portrait. He felt a 'feeling of infinite regret' when he beheld the cruel line on his mouth. He even questioned 'why had such a soul been given to him?'. (Wilde 74)

These rare and intense moments where the reader is given a glimpse of the Dorian with morality enrich the text with thoughtfulness and the incomplete life that Dorian has been leading. These moments stand in stark contrast to the otherwise detached hedonistic descriptions of Dorian's life. These brief interludes become darker and darker till Dorian decides that he 'would kill this monstrous soul-life and without its hideous warnings he would be at peace' (Wilde 177). This is an important piece to fit the puzzle that is the portrait. However, what is the true significance of this death can be analyzed in different parts, starting from the very terminology.

The various labels or names used to refer to the portrait represent the function and the centrality it holds in the plot. The label of 'visible emblem of conscience' shows a relationship between his conscience and the portrait. However, the term visible emblem makes the portrait a representative of the conscience and not the actual conscience. Therefore, it can be said that Gray's superego is manifested in the presence of the portrait. Furthermore the portrait has been labelled as the 'soul life' by Dorian, which can be said to mean that it is the lifeline of the soul. Loosely interpreted it can be said that it keeps the guilt and remorse in him alive. It makes him question and loathe himself and constantly remain in fear of people discovering his portrait. This marks another essential feature that is prominent in the superego.

Freud summarizes this essential feature as 'fear of castration, of conscience, of death' (Freud 1962, 49). Gray has shown all three of these fears on different occasions. He continually experiences the fear of castration after he hides away the portrait. He is scared someone will see the darkness inside of him and the ugliness of the portrait will be discovered. He keeps getting frightened whenever he beholds a policeman in sight or when he is not at home, he is afraid his butler is aware of the portrait's whereabouts and will showcase it to someone. This continuous fear of punishment is very similar to the fear of castration or punishment that the superego exercises. Freud makes this clear by stating that the guilt and the super-ego's harsh attitude towards the latter becomes the ultimate medium for punishment and the person 'refuses to give up the punishment' (Freud 1962, 39). Dorian in a way is externalizing his internal fears. The thing that he fears the most is the portrait being discovered and people getting to see what he really is inside. This can be interpreted as the portrait or the manifestation of the super-ego calling him to constantly punish himself with his sense of guilt. 'The dread of castration is probably the nucleus round which the subsequent fear of conscience has gathered' (Freud 1962, 47).

The fear of conscience is evident continually throughout the text. It constantly confronts Dorian and makes him want to change; however Henry pulls him back consistently. The reader can evidently deduce this when Dorian says that he knows the meaning of conscience and that 'it is the divinest thing in us'. The reader is then given a glimpse into Henry's attitude towards this statement when Dorian remarks 'don't sneer at it, Harry' (Wilde 79). This fear of his own conscience is what eventually leads to the portrait's or Gray's death. In order to

get rid of the constant warnings he then decides to kill the portrait. At what remains the darkest and yet the most anticipated moment in the story, Dorian picks up the knife to stab the portrait. But it is him who ends up dying as the portrait then clears up, relieving itself of Dorian's sins. This brings out an important aspect that Dorian said earlier, that the portrait is 'a part of himself' (Wilde 25). The return of the portrait to its original form and Dorian's change to the sins that the portrait bore is an interesting case to analyze. When Dorian tried to stab the portrait he ended up killing himself. This shows that Wilde is trying to comment that without the representation or symbol of the soul, a death filled with sins is what awaits one. The case of the portrait reversing to its original form can be interpreted as Dorian's sins dying with him.

The fact that Dorian was bearing the marks of his shame after his death is an inevitable end. Wilde has tried to state that the superego, which in the case of Dorian is split off, is the ultimate guide to life; if it died then the person would die. He furthers this by the last thoughts that outline Dorian's final moments. In a way, they seem to derive their attitude from the death instinct of the super-ego and the third most important fear. The fear of death. Dorian Gray in a way goes against his death instinct by preserving his youth. According to Freud, the task of the death instinct 'is to lead organic life back to inanimate state'. However, by reversing the system of aging as his portrait grows older and he remains the same, he fails to fulfill the task of the death instinct. Dorian Gray's fear of death probably arises from this. The last few pages in the book shed an interesting light on this. Dorian Gray constantly hopes for a new life where he would maintain the purity of his soul and not corrupt it. The act of him stabbing the portrait was not just to give himself some peace of mind but also an act of hope that killing the portrait would destroy his sins and leave his life renewed. He expresses a fear of death in this way by repeatedly hoping for a new life to cherish. Indeed, his extended youth can itself be interpreted as an emblem of fear of death. By asking to stay young, he was asking to live longer, to cherish a life full of sins.

These three fears enwrap themselves around each other. The fear of castration leads to the fear of conscience, which in turn leads to the fear of death. Freud theorizes the fear of death as the ego giving itself up 'because it feels hated and persecuted by the super-ego' (Freud 1962, 48). This persecution is in turn from the fear of conscience as the superego is very harsh towards the ego, which in turn arises from the fear of castration as has been established before. These sentiments are summarized in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in the line 'it was the living death of his own soul' (Wilde 175). Dorian Gray kept blaming the portrait for disrupting his peace of mind while he was away because he was afraid someone would find it and uncover his sins, hence the fear of castration. He kept blaming Basil and the portrait for the destruction in his life and therefore kept rejecting the loathing he felt for himself, here comes in the fear of conscience. And finally, despite all the torment he was suffering, even labeling it as 'living death', he refused to kill himself and chose to kill the portrait itself. In this way he kept rejecting death and remained hopeful for a new life and here comes in our final fear, the fear of death. Therefore, the portrait represents to Dorian all three of these. 'Its mere memory had marred many moments of joy.' The portrait therefore, for Dorian was a constant reminder of his sins, his guilt, the destruction of his soul, his fears and his descent into darkness. It was therefore the manifestation of his super-ego, which was split-off. It can, however, also be said that super-ego was possibly absent and it manifested itself in the presence of the portrait. (Wilde 176)

Conclusion

Thus answering the question that I raised during the initial paragraphs of this essay, what is the portrait? I embarked on an investigative exploration into the psychological depths of the text. Starting from the question of the portrait being a double, which was refuted as the portrait changed and Dorian Gray remained the same. The complexity of the portrait was deeply explored till it was linked to the super-ego. Using Freudian theories it was established as the manifestation of the super-ego, which was split-off due to Gray's extreme narcissistic tendencies. This splitting-off was due to Henry persuading Dorian that after losing his youth, Dorian will have no more triumphs in life. Dorian found this anxiety so unmanageable that his super-ego split off and manifested itself in the presence of the portrait. It can be said that this process of breaking down the symbol of the portrait led to the discovery of new psychoanalytic depths in this masterpiece of literature.

The air of mystery that I have tried to look through in this essay has made me realize new aspects of Dorian's characterization. He is a broken and flawed character who is lost in the world of hedonism. The portrait may have been the marking of his demise but Dorian Gray paved the path for his own misery. It can be said that Dorian Gray aspired to be liberated by giving up his soul to the portrait but by doing so, he only managed to imprison himself. The beauty in his flawed character remains that his own beauty was his undoing. Unable to escape from the constant memory of the ugliness marring his portrait, his hands hoping for a renewed life led to his own death. Further, it can be said that the text gives interesting insights about one's psyche. Interestingly, this text brimming with the phenomenon of the psychoanalytic was written at a time when psychoanalysis hadn't even been conceived. The true enigma behind this story is Wilde sowing the seeds of manifold psychoanalytic depths in his text before the tree of psychoanalysis even grew a stem.

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