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as an Antagonist of Victorian Ethos

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The Picture of Dorian Gray as an Antagonist of Victorian Ethos

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Abstract

The Picture of Dorian Gray, the only novel of Oscar Wilde, was highly criticized as a scandalous and immoral novel by the society and critics. Wilde revised the novel by adding seven new chapters and a preface part. His aim was not to change his standpoint for his perception of art while adding the new chapters and preface, but to defend his perception of art against the public. This novel leads the way to the modern novel because the individual experience becomes prominent in it. As one of the well-known supporter of the aesthetic movement, Wilde defended his work, The Picture of Dorian Gray when it was criticized as being dirty and immoral. According to Wilde, the public is afraid of novelty, so they reject an artwork. Thus, we can say that The Picture of Dorian Gray is not an immoral book, but that it shows the shame of the world. In this paper, I will discuss Wilde's perception of art and how Wilde's attitude towards art and novel is different from the Victorian society. In my paper, I will try to analyse how the novel opposes the Victorian ethos and where Oscar Wilde stands as a novelist.

Keywords: Aestheticism, Anti-Victorian Novel, Oscar Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray

Introduction

The Picture of Dorian Gray, which was first published in 1890 and revised in 1891, is the only novel of Oscar Wilde. It was highly criticized as a scandalous and immoral novel by the society and critics. Wilde revised the novel by adding seven new chapters and a preface part. His aim was not to change his standpoint for his perception of art while adding the new chapters and preface, but he defended his perception of art against the public. To understand why The Picture of Dorian Gray was harshly criticized, we should know the attitude of the public towards the art and novel at that period. We should ask the question, “What was the function of the novel in the Victorian period?” Later on, I will discuss Oscar Wilde’s perception of art and how Wilde’s attitude towards art and novel is different from the Victorian society. Is there any function of art and novel according to Wilde? In my paper, I will try to answer these questions and analyse how the novel opposes the Victorian ethos and where Oscar Wilde stands as a novelist.

Background

Victorian Values and the English Novel in the Late 1800s

First of all, I will talk about the changes in the Victorian values towards 1890s. Manners, morality, social norms are the words that come to our minds when we say Victorian values. In that period, unity in nation was really important. The society’s perception of religion was also externalized and socialized instead of a spiritual and internal religion. John Wesley states that, “Christianity is essentially a social religion. To turn it into a solitary religion is indeed to destroy it.” (Himmelfarb, 1995:280). This social structure, which gives so much importance to social norms, approaches art as a way to give moral lessons to the public. Even the unbeliever writers of that period give moral lessons in their works. According to John Stuart Mills, “And it was this moral idea, that made the best of the unbelievers 'more genuinely religious, in the best sense of the word religion, than those who exclusively arrogate to themselves to title’” (Himmelfarb, 1995:303).

In the 1880s and 1890s, the growth of mass reading public and mass publication of books affected the novelists as these people demanded romances, sentimental books and melodrama, which resulted in cheap literature market (Himmelfarb, 1995:275). This cheap literature market caused a frustration among the modern writers who defended the need “for formalistic structure and technical innovation” (Himmelfarb, 1995:277) and they concerned to resist against the pressures of the mass bourgeois reading public. Thus, in 1890s the novelists, affected by the impressionist school of artists in Paris, saw the artist as “the teller of the truth about experience” (Himmelfarb, 1995:277). Thus, we can say that this period was painful for the modern novelists because they tried to change the perception of the English novel in

the late- Victorian Era. On the one hand, the defenders of Victorian values perceived the novel and art as a vehicle to teach morality and manners. On the other hand, we have the growing reading public who interfered in the art of the novelist and demanded romances and melodramas. Lastly, we have the modern novelists who tried to change these perceptions and give the novel a fresh definition as “a tightly organized work of art” (Himmelfarb, 1995:277). Henry James, the novelist who led the modern period, stated his resistance to the Victorian society, which interfered in the work of the author and said that the artist should be respected:

“We must grant the artist his subject, his idea, what the French call his *donnée*; our criticism is applied only to what he makes of it. [...] If we pretend to respect the artist at all we must allow him his freedom of choice, in the face, in particular cases, of innumerable presumptions that the choice will not fructify.” (James, 1924:7).

Aestheticism

Oscar Wilde also shared the same idea with Henry James and believed in the idea of artist’s total freedom from the restrictions of the society. As one of the well-known supporters of the aesthetic movement, Wilde defended his work, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* when it was criticized as being dirty and immoral. He had no aim as an artist to be moral or immoral. Before analyzing the text, I will shortly define the aesthetic movement so that it can help us understand Oscar Wilde’s standpoint as an artist. Emerging in the 1880s, this movement took the motto, “art for art’s sake” from the Parisian Bohemia. The philosopher of the aestheticism, Walter Pater claimed the redemption of the individual through self-perception of art and beauty. (Himmelfarb, 1995:283) According to the supporters of this movement, the individual derives the knowledge of the world through art and through their own sensibility.

The Picture of Dorian Gray as an Anti-Victorian Novel

According to Oscar Wilde, the public is afraid of novelty, so they reject an artwork. They cannot understand the beauty in the novel and find it meaningless and immoral:

“A fresh mode of Beauty is absolutely distasteful to the public, and whenever it appears it gets so angry and bewildered that it always uses two stupid expressions—one is that the work of art is grossly unintelligible; the other, that the work of art is grossly immoral” (Wilde and Stuart, 1908:17).

When we look at the criticism for the *Picture of Dorian Gray*, we see that Oscar Wilde’s comments are totally right about the Victorian middle class public, who only look for morality in art. They criticized the novel of Wilde for

being contaminating, tedious, and effeminate because of the novel's homosexual undertones. In the preface part of the novel, Wilde states that, "Those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt without being charming" (Wilde, 2010:preface). For him, his novel is not immoral or corrupt because "there is no such a thing as a moral or immoral book" (Wilde, 2010:preface). However, the society itself is corrupt and this book like a mirror reflects its own immorality. The Picture of Dorian Gray disturbs the society because Wilde represents the evil of the society in the book. As he says in the preface, it is "the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in a glass" (Wilde, 2010:preface). Thus, we can say that Wilde does not taint the society, but it is already tainted.

Wilde does not have a purpose to impose morality, but he represents the superficial nature of the Victorian society through the characters in the novel. For example, people's responses to Dorian show the shallowness of Victorian London. Although everybody knows the evil of Dorian, he is not excluded from the high society life. "His great wealth was a certain element of security... It feels instinctively that manners are of more importance than morals..." (Wilde, 2010:138). We see that this upper class society only gives importance to the superficial things. As Lord Henry, who represents the superficiality of the society in the novel, remarks that "for the canons of good society are, or should be, the same as the canons of art. Form is absolutely essential to it" (Wilde, 2010:138).

Moreover, through the portrait of Dorian, Oscar Wilde represents evil in the society. Although the picture serves as the conscious of Dorian and carries the burden of his sin, the picture is also a metaphor for the evil in society. While Dorian remains young and beautiful all the time, the picture grows old and ugly. Dorian feels that "Eternal youth, infinite passion, pleasures subtle and secret, wild joys and wilder sins he was to have all these things. The portrait was to bear the burden of his shame: that was all" (Wilde, 2010:102). Thus, Dorian's beautiful appearance indicates that we are fooled by everything in the society.

Apart from the superficiality of society, Wilde remarks and supports the individual choices in his novel. This novel was harshly criticized because of the homosexual undertones because it was unacceptable for that society even to hint homosexuality. In the beginning of the novel, Lord Henry talks about Dorian as if he is an object: "He is some brainless, beautiful creature, who should be always here in winter when we have no flowers to look at, and always here in summer when we want something to chill our intelligence" (Wilde, 2010:3). However, it is not usual to objectify a man, so it is disturbing for the public. The words, "brainless" and "beautiful creature" were used to describe a woman while men were associated with power and reason. Thus, describing Dorian in this way is very subversive. Even though homosexuality is not openly mentioned in the novel, there are some hints about this issue, which again makes the public disturbed. Basil worships Dorian and idealizes him as if Dorian is his lover: "I worshipped you. I grew jealous of every one to whom you spoke. I wanted to have you all to myself. I was only happy when I was with you" (Wilde, 2010:110). Later on, Basil pays another visit to Dorian

and warns him about the gossip in the society about him. Everyone blames Dorian for affecting the people around him in a bad way. Dorian defends himself against those rumours saying that every one is responsible for his or her own deeds. Dorian states that the ones who criticize him are not clean themselves:

“The middle classes air their moral prejudices over their gross dinner tables, and whisper about what they call the profligacies of their betters in order to try and pretend that they are in a smart society, and on intimate terms with the people they slander... And what sort of lives do these people, who pose as being moral, lead themselves?” (Wilde, 2010:147)

Here Dorian criticizes the hypocrisy of the Victorian values. While Dorian is responsible for his own evil, the others are also responsible for their own sins. Also, nobody is totally evil or totally pure as Dorian tells Basil, “Each of us has Heaven and Hell in him” (Wilde, 2010:153).

As it is clear, Oscar Wilde supports the individual preferences and gives the novel a modern aspect. Thus, the individualism and characterization become important in the novel. We see that the relationship between the society and the individual become disintegrated. The society is defused, so it loses its influence on the individual. That is why Oscar Wilde reflects all aspects of the society through the individual, Dorian. He also questions all the evil of the society, the morals and manners of the Victorians and only gives importance the self-experience of the individual.

The Moral Aspect of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Although Oscar Wilde rejects the idea of giving morality through an art work and his only aim is to reveal beauty, he cannot escape the moral aspect of his own novel. In one of his letter to a journal, he says:

“... And the moral is this: All excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its own punishment. The painter, Basil Hallward, worshipping physical beauty far too much, as most painters do, dies by the hand of one in whose soul he has created a monstrous and absurd vanity. Dorian Gray, having led a life of mere sensation and pleasure, tries to kill conscience, and at that moment kills himself. Lord Henry Wotton seeks to be merely the spectator of life. He finds that those who reject the battle are more deeply wounded than those who take part in it” (Wilde and Stuart, 1908:39).

For Oscar Wilde, this morality is the only error in his book. Why cannot he escape the moral aspect of the novel? I think, as a part of that society, he cannot totally separate himself from it totally. Thus, even though he does not want, the novel has a moral aspect. The moral is that if the aesthetic life is uncontrolled, it can be dangerous for the individual.

Conclusion

As I stated in the beginning of my paper, Oscar Wilde revised *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in 1891 by adding a preface part and six new chapters. Wilde does not change his position as an artist while revising the novel. However, he diversified his arguments adding new aspects to the novel. In chapter five, one of the new chapters, Oscar Wilde shows the life of lower class people. While diversifying his arguments, Wilde makes society guiltier. In this chapter, Wilde shows how higher-class society exploits the people of lower class. We learn that Sibyl's mother has never married to the father of her children, who was a "gentleman". Sibyl's brother Jim is afraid that also Dorian, who is a "gentleman" will exploit his sister. He warns her that Dorian "wants to enslave her" (Wilde, 2010:65). In this chapter, Oscar Wilde reveals the evil of the higher-class society, which criticizes the homosexual undertones of Wilde. However, they cannot see their own evil. Thus, Wilde points at their own evil sides and their corrupt lives.

As an Anti-Victorian novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* has many aspects to criticize and subvert the corrupt social values of Victorian middle class. This novel leads the way to the modern novel because the individual experience becomes prominent in it. Through the end of the novel, Wilde reveals the purpose of his book. Henry states the purpose of the art as an aesthete, "Art has no influence upon action. It annihilates the desire to act. It is superbly sterile. The books that the world calls immoral are the books that show the world its own shame" (Wilde, 2010:217). Thus, we can say that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is not an immoral book, but it shows the shame of the world. A book cannot create the evil. The evil already exists in the society, but the society cannot stand reading its own shame. That is why the Victorian public criticizes this novel so cruelly.

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