Intentions in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: From the Perspective of Lord Henry

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The Picture of Dorian Gray has been analyzed from various aspects up to the present.[1] Each of those varied approaches to the novel reflects the period when it was taken; or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that "diversity of opinion about a work of art shows that the work is new, complex, and vital."[2] In spite of various insights offered by each approach, however, they often fail to present clear interpretative resolutions. Although to cultivate multiple perspectives is demanded of contemporary readers, it seems reasonable for us to return to the most fundamental, and perhaps the most important theme of Oscar Wilde and his works: art and life. This theme seems to be too banal to employ at this time of day; however, the relevance of the novel to his art criticism has not been sufficiently examined as yet. From that point of view, I would like to treat *Dorian Gray* as his another critical writing which shows us the essence of artist, just like "The Decay of Lying" and "The Critic as Artist."

When we read this novel as such, it is inevitable to focus our attention on Lord Henry who plays the part of an aesthetic critic in the story. Some scholars have referred to the critical nature of Henry[3]; but detailed analyses of Henry have not been attempted even in their studies, where more often than not a number of pages are devoted to considering the artistic defect and failure of Dorian. Perhaps the main reason for it is the difficulty in interpreting the cynical man who do nothing from beginning to end. His character is rather slippery, compared with other three characters. It is obvious that the deaths of Dorian, Basil, and Sibyl are catastrophes caused by their disobedience to their mission of living as artists. However, whether Henry is a failure as an artist or not is ambiguous. Although only

he outlives them, he loses both his wife and Dorian at the end of the story. His destiny seems to be tragic, notwithstanding his survival.

It remains difficult to understand Lord Henry, to the extent that we read only *Dorian Gray*. As I have mentioned before, it is necessary for us to reread Wilde's critical writings. In "The Critic as Artist," Gilbert, the author's spokesman, insists on a critic's superiority over artists in other genres: "The aesthetic critic, and the aesthetic critic alone, can appreciate all forms and modes. It is to him that Art makes her appeal" (*Works* 1054). This passage may make it possible to interpret Lord Henry as "a critic as artist" who surpasses other artists in the novel: the actress, the painter, and even the living work of art. In the following remarks, I would like to read *The Picture of Dorian Gray* from the viewpoint of Wilde's criticism, and to prove that Henry is the very ideal of an artist for him.

1

Wilde confesses as the following in a letter, shortly after he finished this story: "I am afraid it [*The Picture of Dorian Gray*] is rather like my own life — all conversation and no action. I can't describe action: my people sit in chairs and chatter" (Letters 255). In that sense, *Dorian Gray* is different from a novel in the usual sense of a series of incidents arranged so as to produce a single concentrated effect (San Juan 52). Particularly, one may say that a representative of "people who sit and chatter" is Lord Henry. We meet him on the opening scene, in Basil's studio. The portrayal of the studio is filled with colours and smells of abundant flowers. These flowers, however, are not symbols of natural beauty[4]; rather, loud colours and sharp smells of them creates an artificial air, which is hinted by "innumerable cigarettes" and "dim roar of London" (7). As Shewan supposes in his essay on"The Decay of Lying," the composition in town of a set of narrative myths pictures the irretrievable loss of man's original harmony with nature (Shewan 95). In such a situation which implies art's superiority over nature, the two men are engaged in a witty dialogue. Lord Henry takes a role like Vivian and Gilbert who are Wilde's spokesman. Concerning dialogue as a literary form, we can find lucid comments in "The Critic as

Artist" :

> Dialogue, certainly, that wonderful literary form which . . . the creative critics of the world have always employed, can never lose for the thinker its attraction as a mode of expression.By its means he can both reveal and conceal himself, and give form to every fancy, and reality to every mood. (*Works* 1046)

Most of the scenes on which Henry appears, including chapter 1, are given to the witty dialogues filled with Wildean epigrams. It follows from these settings that this novel has an element of aesthetic criticism.

At the first glimpse of Dorian, Henry is attracted to the boy; but it is significantly different from Basil's blind worship of his idol. While the painter conceives his homoerotic love, Henry's feeling is just a calm curiosity. He regards Dorian as a candidate for the embodiment of his ideal. He decides to influence and dominate the boy. As Henry himself says, "to influence a person is to give him one's own soul" (19). In that sense, he tries to create another himself by inspiring his soul into the body of innocent Dorian. The word "soul," which is repeatedly used throughout the story, can be also found in "The Critic as Artist" : "That is what the highest criticism really is, the record of one's own soul" (*Works* 1027). It will be clear from the passage that Henry's deed of inspiring his soul is very similar to the essence of criticism which Wilde thinks. To put it another way, to create Dorian, or rather to create Henry himself through the medium of Dorian's body, is a kind of criticism as the creative art. Although the portrait painted by Basil teaches the boy his beauty for the first time in his life, Henry's influence is more powerful; his words serves as a guide in the whole of Dorian's life which should be uniquely artistic. Criticism, "a creation within a creation" (*Works* 1027), is superior to any form of art including painting.

Dorian's romance with Sibyl Vane is the decisive affair for his life as an aesthetic artist. He falls in love with her at first sight, and the actress is also fascinated with him. Although he is already under Henry's influence, his love seems to be dreamy and rather childish, which is also true to that of Sibyl's to him. Nassaar points out that Dorian, newly emerged from a state of innocence, is still at this time seeking pure sensations remote from

evil (Nassaar 44). When Lord Henry asks, ". . . what are your actual relations with Sibyl Vane?" Dorian answers with flushed cheeks and burning eyes, "Harry! Sibyl Vane is sacred!" (45). His reaction implies that their love is still platonic. Such naivety of him is far from evil and decadent. Thus, when he is taught by Henry that Sibyl committed suicide, he is stupified with horror and then gets upset. His pathetic cry, "Harry, Harry, it is terrible!" (78) shows that he has not been completely tainted with evil yet. Although Dorian abandons the actress who turned from acting, he is not firm in the view provided by Henry that art is much higher than the real life. He is disappointed childishly simply because his blind worship is dashed, just as Sibyl suffers grief at the cruel treatment by Prince Charming, who used to be quite gentle and tender.

Lord Henry, however, notices that this tragedy does not affect Dorian as it should. Feeling pleasant to see his "unconscious egotism," Henry says:

> "Sometimes, however, a tragedy that possesses artistic elements of beauty crosses our lives. If these elements of beauty are real, the whole thing simply appeals to our sense of dramatic effect. Suddenly we find that we are no longer the actors, but the spectators of the play. Or rather we are both." (80)

Artistic beauty is the very thing that is the most significant of all for him. From the practical viewpoint, it is unpardonable to take such an attitude as a spectator toward Sibyl's tragedy; but Henry finds something not lamentable but beautiful in her death. In his theory, the real world is always vulgarity itself. The elect with unique talent should overcome reality by pursuing the way of art. However, when the actress turns away from acting, she abandons the privileged talent as an artist, and becomes a mediocrity. He thinks the rest of such a degraded artist's life means nothing. The only way left for her to crown her artistic life is death, which has "all the pathetic uselessness of martyrdom, all its wasted beauty" (86).

Being persuaded by Henry that Sibyl's death is not to be grieved for, Dorian gets over his hesitation about living as an egotistic artist. At the same time, his awakening to artistic life has an important meaning also for Henry, who tries to sophisticate his individualism. Their mutual influence is a practice of the following theory which is represented in "The Critic as

Artist" :

> . . . it is only by intensifying his own personality that the critic can interpret the personality and work of others, and the more strongly this personality enters into the interpretation, the more real the interpretation becomes, the more satisfying, the more convincing, and the more true." (*Works* 1033)

A critic like Henry is creative; by interpreting the boy's personality, he realizes perfection of himself, as well as creates Dorian.

2

When Dorian's new life as an aesthete starts with the betrayal of Sibyl, he is still under Henry's predominating influence, as I have mentioned in the preceding chapter. However, he is inevitably to be independent of Henry, his creator; the reason is that "when the work is finished it has, as it were, an independent life of its own, and may deliver a message far other than that which was put into its lips to say" (*Works* 1029).

Dorian decides to hide his portrait in the upstairs nursery, without letting anybody know it. This is his first aggressive and voluntary action which is not taught by Henry to do so. The nursery has a special meaning for him; it links the portrait to Dorian's lost childhood, and his ancestory.[5] The room is the epitome of his lonely childhood. Lord Kelso, his grandfather, detested Dorian and gave him the room at the top of the house in order to keep him out of the way. The reason for Kelso's hatred for Dorian is that he resembles his disobedient daughter who had run off with a penniless young man. It is clear that the "son of Love and Death" (34) subconsciously held a grudge against his grandfather as the murderer of his mother. Moreover, for Dorian, Lord Kelso appears not only as the murderer of his parents, but also as a type of ugly old men. He cannot see the picture which is getting older, without recollecting his hateful grandfather: "There would be the wrinkled throat, the cold, blue-veined hands, the twisted body, that he remembered in the grandfather who had been so stern to him in his boyhood" (95). By concealing his portrait, he leaves his unblemished childhood behind him, and rebels against his

grandfather who is the incarnation of the ugliness of old age. Viewed in this light, the act of concealing the picture is not the manifestation of his passive attitude caused by fear; rather, it is a mark of his positive attitude to life of eternal youth and beauty.

All seems to be going well with Dorian who strives after perfection as an egotist. However, he is to be at the crossroads when he kills Basil Hallward. As a result, the murder alienates him from Lord Henry and his doctrine which he has followed till then. The affair with Sibyl, as we have seen, is the beginning of Dorian's way to an incomparable artist. In contrast, Basil's death means the beginning of his degradation.

It may safely be assumed that this catastrophe is due to Dorian's conscience, rather than to his sadism or evil aesthetics. What should be noticed here is the detailed descriptions which present Dorian's subtle mentality; it is clear that his mind is wavering in front of Basil, who is like conscience itself. His regretful and uneasy feeling can be found in the following citation. When the painter persuades him to pray together, Dorian unexpectedly betrays his weakness of mind:

> "Good God, Dorian, what a lesson! what an awful lesson!" There was no answer, but he could hear the young man sobbing at the window. . . .
>
> Dorian Gray turned slowly around, and looked at him with tear-dimmed eyes. "It is too late, Basil," he faltered. (122)

His "sobbing" and "tear-dimmed eyes" show that his heart aches with a sense of guilt. Basil's sincerity is enough to recall the conscience of the young man who has ignored it for years. The reappearance of the painter shakes his evilness to its foundation. However much Henry's influence is, it is certain that Basil is also one of the two artists that have made what Dorian Gray is now; or perhaps it would be better to say that his vice was created by Henry, and his virtue is due to Basil. Although only Henry's influence has been eminent since the affair with Sibyl, the aspect of goodness is still alive in Dorian.[6] Their reunion, as a result, awakes his conscience and a sense of goodness. Once he remembers what he used to have, the burden of all the sins he committed begins to weigh heavily on his mind. What he curses as the source of his evilness is neither Lord

Henry nor himself, but Basil who painted the fatal picture.

Basil is, as mentioned above, an incarnation of goodness. He is basically a spokesman of standard morality (San Juan 65). His sense of values is puritanical; he sees Dorian's beauty simply as a testament to his goodness and purity (Gillespie 46). Not believing in the numerous rumours of Dorian's evil doings, he says: " I knew you [Dorian] thoroughly, . . . Know you? I wonder do I know you? Before I could answer that, I should have to see your soul" (119). He seeks to know the truth of Dorian which is represented on the picture, but it results in his tragic death. It seems as if his tragedy hints Wilde's artistic creed that artists should not make much of pursuit of truth. For pursuers of beauty, what is most important is not truth, but lie. "Just as those who do not love Plato more than Truth cannot pass beyond the threshold of the Academe, so those who do not love Beauty more than Truth never know the inmost shrine of Art" (*Works* 990), says Vivian in "The Decay of Lying." Basil is too serious to put his heart into lying, "the telling of beautiful untrue things" (*Works* 992).

By contrast, Basil's counterpart, Lord Henry never wants to ascertain the truth which is concealed in the secret picture to the last. As Gillespie states, he continues to see Dorian as the precocious pupil whose sophistication and worldliness remain at the level of the tutelage he gave Dorian after the death of Sibyl (Gillespie 49). In the penultimate chapter of the novel, he says to Dorian: "At present you are a perfect type. Don't make yourself incomplete. You are quite flawless now" (165). What his words make obvious is that Henry forms a self-satisfied misjudgement of Dorian's character. It is not too much to say that the excessiveness of his misunderstanding seems to be rather absurd. Although Dorian has been already alienated from his creator, Henry little dreams of it. Basil's murder and the crimes following that were perpetrated not under the influence of Lord Henry, but were carried out of Dorian's own accord. His degradation is far beyond the elder man's understanding.

However, it does not mean a defeat of Lord Henry's philosophy of life. Relevant to this point is the following remarks in "The Critic as Artist" : "a really great artist can never judge of other people's work at all, and can

hardly, in fact, judge of his own. The very concentration of vision that makes a man an artist, limits by its sheer intensity his faculty of fine appreciation" (*Works* 1053). Lord Henry is one of the two creators of Dorian (the other is Basil), as well as a critic. There is a suggestion here that even a narrow outlook can be a proof of greatness for him as an artist. He never knows the fact that his pupil has detached from him, and become vulgarity itself which is far from Henry's ideal. However, at least from the author's theory cited above, his ignorance does not lessen his artistic value. We may safely assume that it is not reasonable to underestimate Henry's aestheticism.

3

It was observed in the previous chapters that Henry is the embodiment of Wilde's ideal artist. To echo Erickson, "Dorian, Basil, and Sybil all fall from art to living and self-gratification. Wotton, the only one true to Wilde's critical tenets, remains unscathed" (Erickson 103-4). In this chapter, we should support this arguement, concentrating on the subject of the former three characters' deaths and Henry's survival.

It is after Basil's murder that Dorian begins to feel fear of death. When he thought of Sibyl's death being merely as "a wonderful ending to a wonderful play" (80), death was a kind of fancy for him; but the vivid spectacle of Basil's dying before his eyes made him realize it a hard reality. However, there is an obvious contradiction in his thought: Dorian, as a living work of art, should have no relation with death. Since he sold his soul on the day his portrait was completed, he has gained the ultimate privilege of perpetual beauty and youth. It is ordinary people who should fear death. In that sense, he gradually loses his uniqueness, and turns into a common human being. He is, to quote Danson, passing "from being a true aesthetic hero, the dandy who is his own best work of art, to being a sordid, unimaginative criminal" (Danson 94).

As fear of death increases, he loses the ardent desire for new sensations that he used to have. Although he indulges in opium, it is due to his weariness with an aesthetic life, not to the intense curiosity about

pleasure. On his way to the opium den, he meditates: "Ugliness that had once been hateful to him because it made things real, became dear to him now for that very reason. Ugliness was the one reality" (143). Wilde constantly sees reality as an ugly thing, in his other works like "The Decay of Lying." However, ugliness which is detestable for him never disappears from the world, just as death is inevitable for every human being. In that sense, death and fear of it are equivalent to vulgar reality. In the dialogue on Basil's disappearance, Lord Henry aptly says to Dorian:

> "If he is dead, I don't want to think about him. Death is the only thing that ever terrifies me. I hate it."
>
> "Why?" said the younger man, wearily.
>
> "Because," said Lord Henry, passing beneath his nostrils the gilt trellis of an open vinaigrette box, "one can survive everything nowadays except that. Death and vulgarity are the only two facts in the nineteenth century that one cannot explain away." (161)

We should not overlook that he identifies death with vulgarity. He always despises vulgarity which is opposed to art, or beauty. Therefore, the same is true of death; he hates death for it is unsuitable for the fictitious world of art.

When we discuss the novel, the problem of the relation between art and death deserves explicit emphasis. In order to consider the relation between art and death, Henry's comment on Sibyl's death must be recalled here:

> "Some one has killed herself for love of you. I wish that I had ever had such an experience. . . . The people who have adored me— there have not been very many, but there have been some — have always insisted on living on, long after I had ceased to care for them, or they to care for me. They have become stout and tedious, . . . " (80)

Although she was abandoned by Dorian for turning away from acting, Henry praises her death by reason that there is something beautiful about it. He says ordinary women with no sense of art would survive, always consoling themselves. Sibyl gave up her privileged talent as an actress, and fell into a common girl. If she had survived and spent the rest of her life

flatly as Dorian's wife, Henry would receive no interest in her. However, she passed from reality "again into the sphere of art" (86) through death. His logic implies that sometimes death for ordinary people can be a means to become unworldly, or to overcome reality. That is to say, people are capable of remoting from the real world, and attaining to supreme beauty when they die. Talented people, on the other hand, can accomplish what mediocrities can do only through death, by way of art. In other words, art is the way to make real life,"poor, probable, uninteresting human life"(*Works* 982), into a sublime drama. Art is to talented people what death is to ordinary people; it reminds us Wilde's remark in his letter, "Sometimes I think that the artistic life is a long and lovely suicide, and am not sorry that it is so" (*Letters* 185).

However, there is a crucial difference between art and death. Art, which belongs to the fictional world, is death in only an imaginary meaning at the utmost. Certainly"Art does not hurt us"(*Works* 1038). As far as it is but a fiction, nobody dies a real death for the road of art. To put it to the other way round, it is indispensable for artists to be alive, in order to accomplish art. Perhaps this is why only Lord Henry survives among the main characters in this story. In spite of their natural gift of art, Sibyl, Basil, and Dorian died since they gave up to be artists, namely since they awoke to the sense of value in the real world. It is Henry Wotton alone who lives persistently in the fictional sphere of art. His life is the realization of the idea that full and complete human life is essential for every artist. This principle is condensed into the following words of him: "Live! Live the wonderful life that is in you!" (23). He is the only character that embodies Wilde's view of art.

In the final pages of his long chapter devoted to *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* Nassaar says that although Henry remains alive, his fate is the worst in the novel, and is foreshadowed when his wife deserts him(Nassaar 69). I believe that he goes too far in asserting that his fate is "the worst" compared with all of other characters; but it is interesting to parenthetically note the episode of Henry's divorce.

His wife is a sentimental woman with straw coloured hair. As her

name "Victoria" implies, she is a type of the contemporary moralist. She is, to echo Meyers, "a gauche and even ludicrous character, and an easy target for satire" (Meyers 24). It is likely that their married life sours. After her elopement with a young pianist, however, Henry says regretfully: "The house is rather lonely without her" (162). Although he has mocked Victorianism for its vulgarity, his divorce illustrates that he is retaliated by what he has always depreciated.

His aestheticism is an idealistic theory, being far from reality. From the practical point of view, such an unrealistic principle seems to be queer, and might be a laughingstock to the world. In other words, aesthetic artists cannot help playing the crown in front of the public. We may say that their aesthetics has the ambivalent aspects: while they thoroughly despises the realistic values of the world, it is inevitable for them to sneer themselves for being minority. As far as they are heretical to the society, they should commit themselves to the fateful resignation to being persecuted by orthodoxy. That is the reason why his posture is tinged with a kind of pathos.

Although the end of Henry's marriage is depicted somewhat pathetically, this does not affect the validity of the opinion that he is the personification of Wilde's artistic ideal. The reason is, as already stated in this essay, that he is the only survivor of the main characters in this story. His absolute conviction that beauty is superior to everything never wanes, while Dorian, Basil, and Sibyl cease to live as artists. I believe Wilde did not intend Lord Henry as a satiric sketch of a self-satisfied artist.[7] What the author wanted to urge through the descriptions of Henry is that artists should resist the vulgarity of reality, but at the same time they are ironically destined to be defeated by the worldly values. We can find the theme of artists' ironic fate also in "The Remarkable Rocket."Furthermore, Wilde himself unfortunately materialized it five years after the publication of *Dorian Gray,* when he was sent to the prison by the force of the public.

Notes

(1) For details about the transition of this novel's critical receptions, see Michael Patrick Gillespie, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: "*What the World Thinks Me*" (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995), 21-28.

(2) Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray.* Ed. Donald L. Lawler. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988), 4. All further references to this novel are inserted parenthetically into the text.

(3) See, for example, Donald R. Dickson's "'In a Mirror that mirrors the soul': Masks and Mirrors in *Dorian Gray*," ELT [English Literarure in Transition], 26 (1983), 5-15; Donald H. Erickson's *Oscar Wilde* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1977); Rodney Shewan's *Oscar Wilde: Art and Egotism* (London: Macmillan, 1977).

(4) For an argument on the smells in the opening scene, see John Sutherland's short essay on *Dorian Gray*, "Why Does This Novel Disturb Us?" which appears in *Is Heathcliff a Murderer?* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996), 196-201.

(5) This point is discussed by Donald L. Lawler, in "Keys to the Upstairs Room: A Centennial Essay on Allegorical Performance in *Dorian Gray.*" This essay appears in the Norton edition, 431-57.

(6) Concerning Dorian's conscience, Wilde says in his letter to the *Daily Chronicle*: "Dorian Gray has not got a cool, calculating, conscienceless character at all. On the contrary, he is extremely impulsive, absurdly romantic, and is haunted all through his life by an exaggerated sense of conscience which mars his pleasures for him and warns him that youth and enjoyment are not everything in the world." See *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (London,1962), 263-64.

(7) Walter Pater states that the writer [Wilde] may "have intended Lord Henry as a satiric sketch." His review of the revised version of *Dorian Gray* appeared in *The Bookman* (Oct. 1891); rpt. in Stuart Mason's *Oscar Wilde: Art and Morality* (1907; New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1971), 188-95.

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