

# A Drama of "Soul": A Study of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

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## I

Now that the study of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* has been well in progress, probably I need hardly mention that the materialization of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was closely connected with the story of Goethe's *Faust*. It may also be redundant to say that the sale of one's soul, "devil's bargain," is always found in Faustian stories. Some works written with a plot similar to *Faust* are considered to be the sources for *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.<sup>1</sup>

"Devil's bargain" also reminds us of many other Gothic novels. It is often said that *Dorian Gray* has Gothic nature. However, Oscar Wilde did not intend to make *Dorian Gray* a common Gothic novel. He intended to make this story "a drama of soul." In this novel, he tries to search for mysteries lurking at the bottom of human minds. Indeed Gothic novel is also "a drama of soul" in a sense. But Wilde has turned his eyes more intensely to the nature of soul. And he invented a new way to express the state of soul. Wilde has linked a portrait and soul into closer relations with each other. Isobel Murray's opinion is similar to mine. She points out, as in the following:

A vast area of life is "missed out" of the novel [*Dorian Gray*], not because Wilde could not describe it, but because his aim is concentration on a specialized area of "soul."<sup>2</sup>

It is highly likely that Wilde was deeply concerned about the problem of soul at the time when he was writing *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. First because he states in *The Critic as Artist*, "It is to the soul that Art speaks."<sup>3</sup>

In that criticism, Wilde also observes that we should reject “the tedious realism of those who merely paint what they see,” and that we should also “try to see something worth seeing, and see it . . . with that noble vision of soul which is as far wider in spiritual scope as it is far more splendid in artistic purpose” (*Complete Works* 1051). Secondly because what he had wanted to publish in the *Lippincott's Magazine* at the beginning was not *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, but *The Fisherman and His Soul*.<sup>4</sup> As we can see from its title, Wilde focuses his attention on soul in the story more considerably than in *Dorian Gray*. Separation of soul and body is far more plainly depicted in *The Fisherman*. So the work resembles *Dorian Gray*. What is more, there are real witches and a real devil in *The Fisherman and His Soul*. In a word, “devil’s bargain” is expressed in the story far more clearly than in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

As we have seen, Oscar Wilde in those days had a deep interest in the problem of soul. He declared in the preface to *Dorian Gray*, “All art is at once surface and symbol” (*Dorian Gray* xxxiv). This affirmation seems to have been not only an explanation for an idea with which *Dorian Gray* had been composed, but also a proclamation that he stood for Symbolism. “All art is surface” is a very paradoxical phrase, indeed. But it is a manifestation that though the beauty of art appears only on its surface, yet the impenetrable mystery invisible to mortal eyes is kept in its inner part. This phrase is also an indication that whether to perceive such worth within Art existing in this world or not depends entirely upon the senses of people who see or hear the art (in this case, the senses of people who read *Dorian Gray*). Besides, that is a confirmation of ornamentalism in this novel. Aestheticism is joined with Symbolism here. On the other hand, “all art is symbol” means that such decorative art enraptures the senses of people who see it by means of its florid expression, and also means that the art hides, behind its decoration, the world of mystery which we can feel only by our soul.

According to Shûji Takashina, a famous Japanese critic of fine art, a high ambition of the Fin-de-Siècle artists in the 19th century was to pursue the wonder of human existence and the miracle of soul which were not directly expressible by means of ordinary words, shapes, colors, or lines.

And leaders of the Fin-de-Siècle art turned their sharp eyes inward.<sup>5</sup> Wilde exhibited this notion to us in an easy way by using a word “soul.” So Wilde poses the problem of soul to the reader from the first chapter of the novel.

## II

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the aesthetic description of the opening scene is followed by Basil Hallward’s “confession of soul.” — Lord Henry Wotton sets his eyes on a “full-length portrait of a young man of extraordinary beauty” (*Dorian Gray* 1), which stands in the center of Basil’s studio. Lord Henry asks Basil to explain who the beautiful subject for the picture is. But Basil does not comply with his friend’s demands, and is even unwilling to disclose the young man’s identity. Basil Hallward says, “When I like people immensely, I never tell their names to anyone. It is like surrendering a part of them” (*Dorian Gray* 4). Moreover, he adds, “I can’t exhibit it. I have put too much of myself into it” (*Dorian Gray* 2). And at last Basil reveals the secret of his own soul like this:

“Every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion. It is not he who is revealed by the painter who, on the coloured canvas, reveals himself. The reason I [Basil] will not exhibit this picture is that I am afraid that I have shown in it the secret of my own soul . . . the world might guess it; and I will not bare my soul to their shallow, prying eyes. My heart shall never be put under their microscope. There is too much of myself in the thing [the portrait], Harry [Lord Henry] — too much of myself.” (*Dorian Gray* 5–11)

This feeling is generally observed among artists, more particularly among painters. The author of this novel has used the feeling as material for his “drama of soul.” And this is one of Wilde’s elaborate plans for the plot of this novel: a portrait will supernaturally be transfigured afterward. As we gather from Basil’s confession mentioned above, *Dorian Gray*’s portrait has included Basil’s soul from the beginning. This fact will play an important

role in the development of this story.

We can conjecture various things from Basil's confession mentioned above. I will examine the first steps of the argument of "problem of soul" in this novel. — First, Basil Hallward seems to bear a passionate feeling toward his young subject of the same sex. This feeling is not generally accepted as normal. As this work is constructed in a Symbolistic way, the relationship between the two men is not specified. But it is thought to be homosexual. Among Victorian people who considered the puritanical way of life as the most virtuous, homosexuality was taboo. The mere mention of homosexuality must have made common readers shudder in those days. Homosexuals are liable to be coldly looked on even in our time. Such a relationship must have been serious. So he had to draw a veil as "a secret of soul" in those sternly moral days. Basil's statement which follows backs up the conjecture that he falls in unnatural love with Dorian Gray:

"Harry [Lord Henry], you might see nothing in him [Dorian]. I [Basil] see everything in him . . . I have put into it [Dorian's portrait] some expression of all this curious idolatry."

(*Dorian Gray* 11)

On the whole, homosexuals like Oscar Wilde are thought to project their ideal image onto their younger lovers. Probably, Wilde cast a reflection of his own narcissism on Dorian Gray, just as he would see it in Alfred Douglas later.

Next, Basil's confession that there is too much of himself in the portrait requires comparative consideration with a phrase in the preface to *Dorian Gray*: "To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim" (*Dorian Gray* xxxiii). According to this theory, Basil's attitude toward his own work is contradictory to Wilde's one. But this painter has been aware that the portrait is a failure as art. Basil admits this fact, as follows:

"An artist should create beautiful things, but should put nothing of his own life into them. We live in an age when men treat art as if it were meant to be a form of autobiography. We have lost the

abstract sense of beauty. Some day I [Basil] will show the world what it is; and for that reason the world shall never see my portrait of Dorian Gray." (*Dorian Gray* 11)

This speech truly reflects the painter's sense of aversion to Realism, just like Wilde's one. The phrase, "the world shall never see my portrait of Dorian Gray" suggests that the picture has been painted in a realistic way, and so it is a failure.

Wilde must never permit realistic things, which are hostile to him. So, after this, Basil is killed by Dorian Gray, and the "realistic" portrait also becomes transfigured by Dorian's soul which has been put into it. Undeniably, the soul which exists in the depth of this portrait causes the shape of art to be changed, as if it were a manifestation of Symbolism.

In this novel, to give others one's own soul is defined as to influence them (*Dorian Gray* 17). Basil confesses his affection for Dorian to be the secret of his own soul, and he also implies that the soul of the beautiful sitter has exerted an influence over his whole sense of art:

"Harry [Lord Henry]! if you only knew what Dorian Gray is to me [Basil]! You remember that landscape of mine, for which Agnew [a friend of Basil's] offered me such a huge price, but which I would not part with? It is one of the best things I have ever done. And why is it so? Because, while I was painting it, Dorian Gray sat beside me. Some subtle influence passed from him to me, and for the first time in my life I saw in the plain woodland the wonder I had always looked for and always missed." (*Dorian Gray* 10)

Having learned this fact, Lord Henry Wotton decides to exercise the same kind of influence over Dorian that Dorian did over Basil:

There was something terribly enthralling in the exercise of influence. No other activity was like it. To project one's soul into some gracious form, and let it tarry there for a moment; to hear one's own intellectual views echoed back to one with all the added music

of passion and youth; to convey one's temperament into another as though it were a subtle fluid or a strange perfume: there was a real joy in that . . . Yes; he [Lord Henry] would try to be to Dorian Gray what, without knowing it, the lad [Dorian] was to the painter [Basil] who had fashioned the wonderful portrait. He [Lord Henry] would seek to dominate him [Dorian] . . . He would make that wonderful spirit his own. (*Dorian Gray* 35–36)

This idea pertains to the words of Lord Henry's temptation. And Dorian will confine his soul in the portrait by uttering those fatal words. It leads to the creation of Dorian Gray as a completed person.

So, from this, we must note that Dorian's portrait is originally loaded with Basil's soul, and that Dorian's soul is also forced to be confined in the portrait by Lord Henry's temptation. Dorian's portrait painted by Basil holds two people's soul within itself.

Many critics point out that Basil (and Basil's soul) functions as a kind of "conscience" which tells Dorian what is morally right.<sup>6</sup> Since Basil's soul as a conscience has originally been confined in the portrait, it will be disfigured and will let Dorian know his injustice as "a mirror of conscience" to set him right. Even in this picture, Wilde has made arrangements for the plot of the novel to come. At any rate, in this work, souls are continually in full activity in a Symbolistic way.

### III

Until the seventh chapter of this novel, activities of soul are only invisibly alluded to. But, after that part, the author finally gives concrete expression of it. On the night when Dorian deserts Sibyl, he finds a mysterious change in the portrait. From this time on, the aspect of the novel will undergo a considerable change. However often the author mentioned "soul," this story has so far been only sentimental or metaphysical. And it also appeared as only a witty work filled with aphorisms and beautiful allusions. But, from this section as a boundary line, this novel suddenly

changes into a mysterious work. That is to say, from here on, symbol of the protagonist's "double life" will be presented in a visible way.

As soon as Dorian knows of the transfiguration of the picture, he judges it to be linked with the condition of his soul. This plot is often seen in works which have problems of "soul" or "Doppelgänger" as their own motif.<sup>7</sup> This picture will get out of shape in proportion to the degree of the protagonist's depravity. It will function as a mirror of soul or as a conscience which appeals to Dorian's interior.

However, Dorian gets Art in exchange for his own Soul. Namely, he makes himself into Art. Art never ages. Because Art is "at once surface and symbol," corruption of his soul is never revealed on the surface of Dorian in the flesh. On it, there is only a decorative beauty. We can say that the author presents here the world of reversed "Book Imagery."<sup>8</sup> While the portrait has taken the soul and the life from Dorian, a figure of Dorian's soul conversely appears on the surface of the portrait as an emblem. Thus, in the device of this portrait, a complicated artifice is used.

More complicated to say, the picture whose looks have turned into a sinister expression will be concealed by Dorian himself in a dark attic which nobody has used. The soul which has once appeared on the surface will be hidden in invisible depth again.<sup>9</sup> By doing so, Dorian temporarily feels eased. And Dorian, who has become Art, will live, as fancy takes him, to make his Life into Art. Thus, this novel is multiply devised with priority given to the problem of soul, and even the structure of its plot is complicated.

"The problem of soul" in this novel comes to its climax in the 12th and 13th chapters. — In this part, 18 years have already passed since that fateful day when Dorian first met Lord Henry. On the ominous foggy night, the hero, who still has his very youthful face, happens to meet Basil Hallward, the painter who made "the portrait of soul." Basil has waited, in the library of Dorian's house until late into the night, for Dorian to come home. But, as Dorian was late in coming, Basil resignedly left there. On his way from the house, Basil met Dorian. At this time, "a strange sense of fear, for which Dorian cannot account, comes over him" (*Dorian Gray* 147). This scene forms the foreground of the mysterious sight to come, being overlapped with

a gloomy and cold autumn night in England. Not only in this section, but also on other scenes of this novel where a spotlight is directed on “the problem of soul,” a mysterious mood continuously runs.

Dorian tries to pass by in disregard of Basil. But Dorian is recognized by the painter. Basil returns to Dorian’s residence again with him together. Soon after they arrive there, Dorian is given a scolding by Basil. He says that as a dark rumor about Dorian has lately been circulated, he wants to ascertain whether it is true or not. Because Basil knows Dorian’s past nature better than anyone else, he cannot possibly believe that rumor. And Basil presses Dorian for an answer more strictly. After that, this painter finally refers to “the problem of soul,” as follows:

“Dorian,” cried Hallward . . . “One has a right to judge of a man by the effect he has over his friends . . . You have a wonderful influence. Let it be for good, not for evil. They say that you corrupt every one with whom you become intimate, and that it is quite sufficient for you to enter a house for shame of some kind to follow after. I don’t know whether it is so or not. How should I know? . . . Lord Gloucester . . . showed me a letter . . . Your name was implicated in the most terrible confession I ever read. I told him that it was absurd — that I knew you thoroughly and that you were incapable of anything of the kind. Know you? I wonder do I know you? Before I could answer that, I should have to see your soul.” (*Dorian Gray* 151–52)

These influential words have touched the right chord in Dorian’s heart. Dorian is struck with terror. He mutters in a dismal tone, “To see my soul?” (*Dorian Gray* 152). Making up his mind, Dorian takes Basil into that attic where his “soul” has been stored. As the room was always kept shut, it is dark and the air is heavy with a damp odor of mildew. No other place is more suitable for a rotten soul than this room.

In the attic, at last Dorian reveals the secret of his own soul to the painter. Basil is the one man in the world who is entitled to read “the diary of life” (*Dorian Gray* 154) of this corrupt, beautiful young man. Dorian

somewhat harshly speaks to Basil, “You have had more to do with my life than you think” (*Dorian Gray* 155). Basil looks at that portrait. There once was nothing evil or shameful in it. But, now its face wears the expression of a satyr. An exclamation of horror has broken from the lips of its original creator. In response, Dorian explains, “It is the face of my soul . . . It has destroyed me . . . Each of us has Heaven and Hell in him, Basil” (*Dorian Gray* 157). Hesitatingly, Basil carefully examines it. But “the surface seems to be quite undisturbed, and as Basil left it. It is from within, apparently, that the foulness and horror has come” (*Dorian Gray* 157). After all, the picture’s looks prove to be transformed by the soul existing in its depth.

Although Basil trembles with fear, he murmurs to Dorian that he should repent of his sins. Thereupon, an uncontrollable feeling of hatred for the painter comes over the young man who was once the sitter for this picture. And Dorian kills Basil. But it seems that such a feeling of hatred has also been conducted by an inaudible cry from his vitiated soul. It is narrated in the text of this novel, as follows:

Dorian Gray glanced at the picture, and suddenly an uncontrollable feeling of hatred for Basil Hallward came over him, as though it had been suggested to him by the image on the canvas, whispered into his ear by those grinning lips. (*Dorian Gray* 158)

According to some critics, Lord Henry has been regarded as the only villain in this novel.<sup>10</sup> But, as we have seen, Basil is also to blame for Dorian’s metamorphosis. If Basil had not painted that portrait as he worshipped the sitter’s personal beauty..., if Basil had not taught the young man to be vain of his good looks . . . , if Basil had not been obliged to introduce Dorian Gray to Lord Henry . . . , and if Basil had not confined his own soul into the picture at the outset, Dorian must not have been annoyed with the corruption of his own soul. — Probably Dorian’s soul whispered such a feeling to his own mind. An opinion by Joyce Carol Oates is similar to mine, as follows:

The murder of Basil Hallward by Dorian Gray is usually seen as one of the more demonic of Dorian’s acts. Yet the murder is

symbolically appropriate . . . Basil functions as a “good” character . . . but his role in Dorian’s damnation is hardly an ambiguous one, and his sudden death answers to an internal logic.<sup>11</sup>

One of the theories which Wilde aims to verify in this novel must be the phrase, “Give a person a mask, and he will tell you the truth” (*Complete Works* 1045), which is found in *The Critic as Artist*. By wearing the mask of this portrait, Dorian embodies his true nature as “a son of Love and Death” (*Dorian Gray* 36) into a visible form of the present life. And in the setting of this novel, both the painter who described the picture and the nobleman who tempted Dorian, assist the young man to find the real state of his own soul. Even at the scene of the murder of Basil, with a mask of the portrait, Dorian expresses his true emotion: he inwardly hates the painter.

Dorian ruins one character after another that are equivalent to his inner voices. They try to teach Dorian justice, and they constantly dog his footsteps. As these inner voices, we can count the following characters: (1) Sibyl Vane, (2) Basil Hallward, (3) James Vane, and (4) Dorian’s portrait. Every time Dorian wrecks them, his own catastrophe is expected. On all such occasions, Dorian’s mental conflict gets harder. And he moves his steps nearer to his own death as if he were swallowed up in them.

When there is only one inner voice (i.e. the portrait) left for Dorian, he ends up longing to dissolve his immoral life. It is a drastic conversion for him, who has held his ground only as an aesthete. And the portrait of his “soul” has subjected Dorian to be severely rebuked for his acts.

The masking in Dorian’s “double life” has so far been apparently perfect. — The real fact of his murder of Basil Hallward has never been disclosed; Alan Campbell, the only person who is supposed to have known the truth died an unexpected death; and even Lord Henry Wotton, the tempter, has never suspected the true nature of Dorian’s inner being. — In spite of this, Dorian declares, “Harry, I have done too many dreadful things in my life. I am not going to do any more” (*Dorian Gray* 209). Enlightened by consecutive transformations of the portrait, Dorian finally wished for his interior beauty, instead of his exterior beauty. This signifies his parting from

aestheticism.

Through the transfiguration of the picture, Dorian has also recognized how mystical a human soul is, and how mysteriously it rouses awe in us. He confesses concerning “the soul,” as follows:

“The soul is a terrible reality. It can be bought, and sold, and bartered away. It can be poisoned, made perfect. There is a soul in each one of us. I [Dorian Gray] know it.” (*Dorian Gray* 215)

At this time, Dorian has wished to keep completely away from Lord Henry’s Hedonism, as well. — When Dorian tells Harry that he has just separated from Hetty Merton, his new love, Harry insinuates to Dorian as usual that she must now be at the point of a tragical death. But, opposite to the time when Sibyl Vane died, Dorian complains to Lord Henry in an angry voice.<sup>12</sup> Dorian’s mental attitude has changed so much. If Lord Henry invites Dorian to a concert to dispel his “gloom,” he will not go. Dorian has felt a wild longing for unstained purity of his boyhood like a white rose. He has come to think it better for him that each sin of his life brings its sure, swift penalty along with it. For penalty has purification. Dorian has wanted to go to the length of being purified from his sins.

Dorian’s crimes are too grave to escape death as a punishment. He himself may dimly perceive it. But he does not care for it. And he conversely wants “a new life” (*Dorian Gray* 221). So we can say that there is an inconsistent feeling in his mind. Namely, Dorian is scared of death, but, nevertheless, he wants to be cleansed. Such an attitude should not be forgiven by “the soul.” After all, Dorian will be killed for a penalty. It is a miserable end for the beautiful young protagonist who has irrevocably been driven into a tight corner.

Thus, like other Faustian stories, also in this novel, themes of “crime and punishment” and “a drama of soul” are fully pursued. Moreover, since the portrait is very closely linked with Dorian’s conscience, and since the hero goes to ruin when he tries to destroy the picture, it is also connected with “morality.” Therefore we can even say that the pattern of this work’s plot is similar to that of many novels written in the Victorian England. For

the protagonist fails in his "double life," and he dies with its blame laid on himself. Nevertheless, this novel is handed down from generation to generation as one of the most important works of the Fin-de-Siècle literature in the 19th century, which is thought to be in a directly opposite position to the Victorianism. This fact may show the true value of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.<sup>13</sup>

But, at any rate, we should say that this novel aims to place the focus on and to inquiry into "soul" which is thought to exist within human beings. This novel can be called "a drama of soul."

(This is a modified version of a paper read at the 25th Autumn Conference of the Oscar Wilde Society of Japan, at Jissen Women's University, on November 25, 2000.)

#### Notes

- (1) Some examples of this are: *La Peau de Chagrin* by Honoré de Balzac, *William Wilson* by Edgar Allan Poe, *The Haunted Baronet* by Joseph Sheridan LeFanu, *Melmoth the Wanderer* by Charles Maturin and so on.
- (2) Isobel Murray, introduction, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, by Oscar Wilde, ed. Isobel Murray (London: Oxford UP, 1974) ix. All quotations of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* will be taken from this book, and hereafter they will be cited parenthetically in the text of this paper.
- (3) Oscar Wilde, "The Critic as Artist," *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. J. B. Foreman (1948; London: Collins, 1990) 1047. Quotations of Oscar Wilde's works other than *Dorian Gray* will be taken from this book, and hereafter they will also be cited parenthetically in the text of this paper.
- (4) As the quantity of *The Fisherman and His Soul* was small, and as it was only a fairy tale, the work was unfit for an adult magazine. So the editor of the *Lippincott's Magazine* refused to print the tale in his periodical. As a result, in place of *The Fisherman and His Soul*, Wilde published *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in that magazine.
- (5) Shûji Takashina, *Seikimatsu-Geijutsu [The Fin-de-Siècle Art]* (1981; Tokyo: Kinokuniya Shoten, 1990) 140–42.
- (6) See, for example, Christopher S. Nassaar, *Into the Demon Universe: A Literary Exploration of Oscar Wilde* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1974) 54.
- (7) Otto Rank, *The Double: Psychoanalytic Study*, trans. Harry Tucker Jr. (North Carolina: U of North Carolina P, 1971) 70–83.
- (8) The following ironic words uttered by Basil Hallward back up the existence of "the world of reversed Book Imagery" in this novel:  
 "Dorian...You don't want people to talk of you as something vile and degraded...I [Basil] don't believe these rumours at all. At least, I can't believe them when I see you. Sin is a thing that writes itself across a man's face. It cannot be concealed. People talk sometimes of secret vices. There are no such things. If a wretched man has a vice, it shows itself in the lines of his mouth, the droop of his eyelids, the moulding of his hands even...But you, Dorian, with your pure, bright, innocent face, and your marvellous untroubled youth — I can't believe anything against you." (*Dorian Gray* 149–50)  
 As for "Book Imagery," see, Ernest Robert Curtius, "The Book as Symbol," *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask (1963; New York: Princeton UP, 1973) 302–47.
- (9) Nobue Tsunoda also observes this concealing act by Dorian. See, Nobue Tsunoda, "Elusive Body: Textual [sic] / Sexual Politics in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*," *Studies in English Literature* 72.1 (1995): 47–48.
- (10) See, Joyce Carol Oates, "The Picture of Dorian Gray: Wilde's Parable of the Fall," *Contraries* (New York: Oxford UP, 1981) 3–16, rpt. in *The Picture of Dorian Gray: Authoritative Texts, Backgrounds, Reviews and Reactions, Criticism*, by Oscar Wilde et al, ed. Donald L. Lawler, Norton Critical Edition (New York: Norton, 1988) 422–31.
- (11) Joyce Carol Oates 424.
- (12) When Dorian was fascinated with Lord Henry's Hedonism, he even admired the beauty brewed by Sibyl's tragical death.
- (13) On this point, Yoshiichi Watarai has the same opinion as mine. See, Yoshiichi Watarai, *Seikimatsu no Chi no Fûkei — Darwin kara Lawrence madé [The Landscape of Wisdom in the Fin de Siècle — from Darwin to Lawrence]* (Tokyo: Nan'undo, 1992) 56–57.