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AP Literature and Composition

3 January 2016

The Foil of *Dorian Gray*

Possibly one of the most familiar foils in the history-driven arsenal of literature, is that of the Prince of Denmark and Laertes. Similar backgrounds are flecked with discrepancies; akin destinies are intertwined as sure as opposites attract and likes repel. On a less earthly scale, demons and angels are popular poles in literature as well. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* takes advantage of the traditional battle of angels and demons, morals and passion, and the influences of all of the above through the life of the protagonist, Dorian Gray.

Lead into the world by the curiously terrible aphorisms and the passionately obsessive idolatry of his friends, Dorian sells his soul to a portrait of himself so that his real, physical form will never endure the atrocities of aging—the consequence of which is watching the painting morph grotesquely into a physical representation of his increasingly evil soul. The foil of Dorian’s influential friends craft his poor psychological development as he absorbs their lessons and eventually reeks of their bad influences, essentially embodying the worst of both worlds.

Lord Henry Wotton and Basil Hallward serve as the main foil in Oscar Wilde’s literary masterpiece. These two whisper their influences into Dorian Gray’s keen ears and fatally impressionable mind. Basil, the artist who paints the portrait, is an independent man of clean moral character with respectable views on society. In painting the picture, he shows Dorian how rare his untouched soul and his physical beauty is. The artist adored his favorite model, admitting, “As I said to (Lord Henry) once, you are made to be worshipped,” (Wilde 119). Despite his good intentions and his constant exclamations against Lord Henry, Basil became obsessed with Dorian during the time he sat for him. Basil unintentionally taught Dorian to be narcissistic of his beauty, and to believe his looks made it impossible for him to be a bad person no matter how he acted. His role as a character of foil was to impress upon Dorian the value and majesty of beauty, to disagree with Lord Henry, and to attempt to shield his friend from bad influences.

Upon Dorian Gray and Lord Henry’s first meeting, Basil warned, “Dorian, don’t…pay any attention to what Lord Henry says…He has a very bad influence over all of his friends…” (Wilde 9). This forward comment is an example of Wilde’s foreshadowing, due to the affirmation that Lord Henry, indeed, is a negative influence on Dorian Gray; he lent him a yellow book that Dorian accused of being psychologically poisonous, encouraged Dorian to confess a secret love and then convinced him his lover’s suicide (upon their broken engagement) was a selfish, shallow, womanish act that held no fault of his own, despite his cruelty and adamant lack of compassion. Wilde also includes this statement because, as Dorian spends more time with Lord Henry, he becomes a horrid influence on his own friends, leaving them to rot in opium dens after ruining their careers, public image, and relationships.

Lord Henry’s role is allusive to the snake—using an insidious, cunning tongue to craft forbidden suggestions in order to contort a pure soul into something as defying as itself to society or some other order. As the other half of the foil, Lord Henry attempts, and eventually succeeds, in corrupting Dorian. He does not speak of Dorian as a dear friend but rather as “…some brainless, beautiful creature,” as if he were the subject of some experiment (Wilde 5). Wilde includes Lord Henry’s apathy to emphasize the difference between Dorian’s two friends: one is devoted to him, worships him, and praises him, while the other toys with him and manipulates him for the sake of amusement.

As the foil characters observe their influences on their friend, Wilde includes more direct statements of foreshadowing. In doing so, the author allows the readers to glimpse, and predict, what may happen to Dorian as a product of both influences. For, as Dorian cries much later, “Each of us has Heaven and Hell in him,” (Wilde 161). When Dorian weeps in envy of the immortality of his own portrait, Lord Henry and Basil reveal much of the story in, “‘This is your doing, Harry’ said the painter bitterly. Lord Henry shrugged his shoulders. ‘It is the real Dorian Gray—that is all’” (Wilde 29). Basil distresses in Dorian’s unhappiness and Lord Henry remains indifferent, revealing to the readers that “the real Dorian Gray” is as dramatic, jealous, desperate, and childlike as his actions suggest.

In Dorian’s short monologue before murdering Basil near the end of the novel, he recognized the influences of his foil friends: how one “explained to me the wonder of youth” and the other “revealed to me the wonder of beauty” and “taught me to be vain of my good looks” (Wilde 160). Wilde had written Dorian Gray to have great physical beauty to represent the aesthetic movement he was such a part of, to have art for the sake of art and beauty for the sake of beauty. “Dorian Gray personifies the aesthetic lifestyle in action, pursuing personal gratification with abandon. Yet, while he enjoys these indulgences…” his recklessness and sin defile his external and internal self, and it “…ultimately kills him and others” (Duggan). Despite his life devoted to self-gratification, “he dies unhappier than ever” (Duggan).

Self-gratification and aesthetic appreciation frequently coincide with sin, immorality, and degradation, shown first through Lord Henry, who “trumpets the aesthetic philosophy” to Dorian through profound statements. Lord Henry is the friend who speaks of the aestheticism passionately and negatively, while Basil Hallward is the friend who devotes himself to beauty, content to make his life art instead of striving to experience all of it. Dorian, however, takes the fervor and passion of each into his own flower-white hands. He is the synthesis of Wilde’s foil with a visage of beauty and a soul of self-indulgence.

Works Cited

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