

Art Regression: On Unconsciousness Trend of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

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Abstract

As a most important representative of aestheticism, Oscar Wilde holds the view of “art for art sake”. His novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* opens the dialogue between art and psychology, which reveals the dual functions of art in shaping personality from the unconscious level. On the one hand, art can bring people aesthetic experience; on the other hand, misreading to art can bring serious damage to both individual and society. By means of psychoanalysis, interpretation to this novel shows that Dorian Gray’s personality split comes from his personal unconsciousness development; his life experience, art obsession and sex impulse directly refer to the three developing stages: inferiority complex, psychological defense mechanism and fear of intimacy. They jointly construct Dorian Gray’s dual personalities. His unconsciousness encourages his desire expansion.

Key words: Art; Personality; Psychology; Symptoms; Unconsciousness

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INTRODUCTION

Oscar Wilde’s aestheticism novel of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* tells us a story of a noble Adonis, Dorian Gray, who

lived in London and fell into the moral declination step by step, causing people deep to ponder. On account of finding his own striking beauty from his picture drawn by painter Basil Hallward, Dorian Gray was readily to sell his soul to get in return the picture assumed his sins including senility in order to keep his appearance unchanged. However, when he at last realized that his pursuit of artistic beauty overthrew the realistic aesthetics, he stabbed his picture and at the meantime ended his life of sin. As a most important representative of the aesthetic school, Oscar Wilde had warned people again that misunderstanding or misusing art immoderately and mistakenly might induce to the expansion of human desire, boost personal unconsciousness evolution as well, and finally result in schizobulia among id, ego and superego. “Art for art’s sake” is a sublime realm that is dominated by consciousness, it is totally repulsive with art coveting. Then, it was Dorian Gray’s ridicule and abuse to the sense of artistic beauty that incurred his out of control in personal unconsciousness. At last, with the unconsciousness developing to its peak, Dorian Gray not only injured the others, but also devastated himself.

1. FROM PSYCHIC TRAUMA TO SELF-ABASEMENT PROJECTION

Studies of psychoanalysis show that individual psychohistory comes from family life experience of childhood by which every person’s behavior patterns in adolescence and adulthood are influenced. Those who have psychic trauma are always sensitive to the outside world, they may hide their painful memories in a certain area of brain to seal them up for safekeeping, and be on guard against constantly the repetition of similar experience. Therefore, when they contact with others, these painful experience exteriorized by self-abasement plots, are embodied from discomfort in an unfamiliar environment, making them embarrassed in front of the

opposite sex. Thus we can find that Dorian Gray had been originally a good-natured person, but his grandfather's putting him into the dark sealing attic at childhood had left deep trauma in heart. As time went on, his trauma gradually developed into self-abasement plots, causing him subconsciously to think that he was inferior to the others, and unable to get other people's attention, win adoration or some other life payments. However, all his self-abasement plots now were suppressed by deliberately forgetting unpleasant mental events during his early growing process; he showed a calm appearance for the moment. Unfortunately

suppression is unable to eradicate his emotion of painful experience, instead it indulges the projection of his self-abasement plots, because suppression allows self-abasement plots to organize the instant experience: his self-abasement behavior permits him to drain the distressing experience and emotional feeling which are constrained in mind all the time. (Tyson, 2014, p.14)

Just as Carl G. Jung points out that

in order to assure trauma valid indeed, individuals have to band their former inherent intentions together. Of course, these former inherent intentions should be fairly doubtlessness and hence be understood as a sort of psychological development, which reach a climax and become visible during the trauma moment. (Rohn, 1989, p.226)

Therefore, we see when Dorian Gray inherited his grandfather's heritage and became a young nobility to come back to London, he seemed unaware of his change in status; instead, he showed his great uneasy in front of the public. What's more, as he entered the long parted old house, seeing the portrayal of his grandfather, his childhood memory was aroused again, and the pain in heart was hard to express though he tried his best to conceal such a discomfort feeling in front of the others. Then for the first time Basil Hallward and Lord Henry Wotton had introduced him to the social occasion, facing all sorts of upper-class figures, Dorian Gray showed immature and awkward with caution in speech and action. His behavior indicated that his early psychic trauma had a great effect on his mind. Generally, self-abasement plots evoked by psychic trauma are not easy to eliminate, so unless Dorian Gray could find an appropriate way to recognize and admit the true cause of his pent-up trauma, his conflation from pendent fear and evil thought, he would be tangled in self-abasement, distortion and self-destroying forever. In fact, Dorian Gray at the moment was active to seek his way of relieving or transferring his self-abasement, one of his choices was to project his emotion immediately to another object, the other to whom he could let his emotion off to blend in the present environment as well as new life. It was his picture that catered his mental appeal, at the moment he saw his picture, he completely had no recollection of all his surroundings,

Dorian made no answer, but passed listlessly in front of his picture and turned towards it. When he saw it he drew back,

and his cheeks flushed for a moment with pleasure. A look of joy came into his eyes, as if he had recognized himself for the first time. He stood there motionless and in wonders, dimly conscious that Hallward was speaking to him, but not catching the meaning of his words. The sense of his own beauty came on him like a revelation. He had never felt it before. (Wilde, 1988)

Now, Dorian Gray really found an emotional projection through his picture and was to share his unconscious plots with it suppressed many years in order to release his pressure. Although his meeting with the picture was just a sudden chance, he successfully realized his transfer of his self-abasement.

2. FROM DESIRE OF ART POSSESSION TO DEVELOPMENT OF PSYCHOLOGICAL DEFENSE MECHANISM

Though psychic trauma brought self-abasement plots to Dorian Gray, it didn't mean that his inward world was closed and scanty, instead, when he held up his painful memory of childhood and tried to send it into the unconsciousness, he didn't restrict at the same time his desire and fancy, he only threw them under his regulation and controlling, and had them supervised by superego so that they didn't perform incorrectly. Unless there was some induction factor forced him to make some changes. According to Jacques Lacan's image theory, during the period of several months the infants born, they are confused and unsystematic with experience not only themselves but the surrounding environment. However, when they enter the mirror image stage, whether the infants really see their figures in the mirror or just feel their images by reflecting from their mothers, their cognitions about themselves are the integral whole. As imaginative field is a world consisting of art, music, sexual freedom and romantic love, with regard to Dorian Gray, the picture that painter Basil drew for him was like a mirror through which Dorian Gray found his beauty and evoked his strong desire to possess the picture,

he then lamented himself lonely, sighed the appearance easy to escape, while the portrayal could keep young forever. He hoped that the ending could reverse into shifting his senility to the portrayal and kept his youth forever, so that he didn't spare to sell his soul out. (Ma, 2014, pp.136-141)

Now, great changes had happened in Dorian Gray's inner world, for the power burst out from his unconsciousness had twisted his ego, he in return set his life goal at contenting some specific lusts of id through a certain manner, whereas these special lusts were those that he had wanted to get but didn't win, he began to approach to the pursuit of morbid beauty of art, even to build up a set of his own psychological defense mechanism to keep this morbid beauty. On the one hand, he attempted to avoid his past distressing experience in order to keep away

from the encounter at his childhood that his grandfather closed him in the attic; on the other hand, he was seeking other substitution which could help him to undertake all his painful memories. He thought by doing that his loss and deficiency could be compensated. However, he would never give away his pursuit in any public occasions. As a result, for the first time he did evil and discovered the picture became ugly owing to assuming all his responsibility while he himself didn't lose any, he immersed in fancy and was unable to extricate himself from the abyss, he even turned a blind eye to the fact that his pleasure was built on the pain of the others', though he once felt that his deeds were discrepancy with social regulation and social expectation. Driven by the magic power of the picture and bewitched by Lord Henry, Dorian Gray could immediately dispel his scruple and restore his usual calmness.

Of course, being afraid of his secret discovered, Dorian Gray decided to remove the picture from the hall to his grandfather dark study, and covered it with a table cloth, till the painter Basil came to his house to reclaim the picture, only to find that the picture had been spoiled much. In order to keep his secret, Dorian Gray murdered Basil without mercy and threw the dead body into the Thames River. Again, Dorian committed a crime and covered it up. However, suffered by the worm of conscience, Dorian Gray couldn't help slipping into the dark study where the picture was kept after he did evil each time, opening the cloth to examine closely whether the picture had become ugly or aged. Full of contradiction, Dorian had wanted to stop doing evil, but now he was in the schizobulia stage of id, ego and superego, all his spiritual pillar was poured into the possession of the picture (art). Thus, under the control of id consciousness, Dorian Gray arranged his personal desire in a set of psychological defense mechanism elaborately designed, and allowed them to release or diffuse now and then; with the unconsciousness developing further, he had no hesitation to shift his crime to the others, and for a third time he executed his crime to murder Sibyl's brother, while he himself continued to be free from the punishment of the law. It was obvious that Dorian Gray had built up a set of relatively intact psychological defense mechanism based on the incorrect possession of the picture (art), and was crazy to do evils until such a set of defense mechanism collapsed. At last when he had no way to explain his behavior, he stabbed to the picture and ended his criminal life. Dorian Gray's story was a real art regression.

3. INTIMACY PHOBIA UNDER THE REPRESENTATION OF SEXUAL ABREACTION

Lacan once said, lust is always the other's lust, which indicates that the individual's desire object is none other

than the result of the others' instructing him or her to pursue. Just as kids obviously have a sense of security when staying with their parents, because parents can provide what they demand and vice versa they are what the parents expect. One's desire, belief, prejudice etc. attribute to his or her token world in which he or she once immersed, especially when this immersing process is executed by their parents and received by reflection from another token world. Oedipus plots is an inevitable stage of human's life, which is a natural and healthy component part of one's mature and identity, if he or she cannot safely lives through this conflict period, he or she may be in great danger of keeping steadfast shadow in his or her mind, they may finally form unconsciousness symptoms. According to Dorian Gray's life history, his parents died early, he was brought up by his grandfather, so from his childhood, he lacked his maternal love as well as paternal love. In addition, he was once confined in a dim horrid attic upstairs by his grandfather. All the early experience became Dorian's heart knots during his later growing progress, and obviously they were the real source of his intimacy phobia. On the one hand, he wanted extremely to get back the deficient maternal love; on the other hand, he would rather keep a distance to avoid a second hurt at the time he found that the love he had got back was not what he expected. With the increase of his age, the energy of libido stored in Dorian's body became more and more, he was strongly hankering for sex and was easy to keep a watchful eye on young pretty female. Therefore, when Lord Henry and Basil brought Dorian to the club of Hellfire, he came across the actress Sibyl Wayne and was struck by her beauty instantly, he peeked her for a moment with shyness. However, instigated by Henry and Basil, Dorian Gray subconsciously predicted that his heart knots were to be opened and ventured to indulge them. Eventually, one day Dorian got up his courage to watch Sibyl's performance alone and for the first time he felt the love charm of Romeo and Juliet on the stage. Full of confidence, he couldn't quiet down his desire fire and intruded roughly into Sibyl's dressing room. It was there that Dorian opened his Pandora's Box and he fell in love with Sibyl.

Unfortunately, what Dorian Gray pursued was a sort of emotion that he had lost, a kind of maternal love with the purpose of satisfying his mental lust as well as sense of safety, so he tended to regard Sibyl as his sexual companion, a substitution of libido discharge, so as to remit the Oedipus plots overstocked many years deep in his heart, that was a sort of abnormal unrequited love between son and mother. As an adult man, Dorian Gray, now, if he couldn't surpass this kind of knot, his Oedipus plots would impede him to establish a mature relationship with his female peer, and he might think the intimacy sense with them would destroy his Oedipus plots, then his love doomed to be a great failure. In fact, when examining Dorian Gray's performance, we are easy to find the love

that he pursued actually was an ambiguous representation of intimacy, but what was the connotation of this intimacy? Dorian himself had no idea. As a result, the more anxiously he wanted to get it, the more fearfully he perceived in his mind, for he knew maybe he could never obtain it. Hence, he just looked his love affair with Sibyl as a kind of spiritual bailment; he would not put all his vigor in maintaining the relationship with her. Actually, he became irritable after a short contact with Sibyl and when Sibyl displeased him with a little performance fault, Dorian Gray discarded heartlessly her who now had had his baby. Driven desperately, Sibyl then had no choice but to jump into a river to suicide. As Sibyl's brother came to blame Dorian Gray, he was indifferent and on the contrary reproached that Sibyl had gone off half-cocked. Of course Dorian began to have a sense of guilty, but when he found that the picture had undertaken all of his responsibility, he immediately forgot what he had done. So far, he had done many evils as if the devil had stolen his consciousness, and that he unscrupulously indulged his sexual desire showed he had suffered a symptom of intimacy phobia, it was really difficult for him to fall in love with a female unless his unconsciousness was satisfied.

CONCLUSION

The fiction *The Picture of Dorian Gray* truly reappears the current social situation of England in the 19th century. Although domestic economy had achieved a higher development degree, England had also become one of the powerful countries in the world, a lot of social problems still existed, and people witnessed the declination of

social morality, those who could treat art correctly were fewer and fewer, everything became merchandise, divorce was rather common. As a noble Adonis, Dorian Gray lacked care and love both from parents and from society, mental block gradually came about when he grew up. As a result, when he saw his picture, he showed a strong desire of possession and would not spare to sell his soul to agree a nasty deal with the picture, which was a real profanation to the picture (art). There's no doubt that Oscar Wilde wanted to warn us of the arrival of the art hardship time through showing us Dorian Gray's story. Because in England,

the changing of society and cultural environment had brought a sort of depression to the artists, the sense of alienation between art and society was intensified, and the artists commonly felt that they were not understood by the public. Therefore, they had only to walk on the lonely path because the public was so sensitive to their surroundings. (Wilde, 1988)

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