

ETERNAL YOUTH AND ITS CONSEQUENCES: HOW FILM ADAPTATIONS OF *THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY* (1891) PORTRAY MORAL DECLINE

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Abstract:

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), Oscar Wilde explores the dark consequences of vanity, beauty, and moral decay. Through the lens of a young man's obsession with eternal youth, Wilde reveals a chilling portrait of a society that values appearance above all else, and where the price of such obsession is a corrupted soul. The novel's haunting imagery of Dorian's portrait - a reflection of his hidden depravity - has captivated readers for over a century, resonating far beyond its original pages. This powerful symbolism has been vividly brought to life in several adaptations, including Albert Lewin's 1945 version and Oliver Parker's 2009 retelling. Both films intensify Wilde's themes and offer unique interpretations of Dorian's moral collapse. Together, they reimagine the novel's cautionary tale, reminding us that the pursuit of beauty, when divorced from morality, can lead to a fate far more monstrous than we could ever imagine.

Keywords:

Hedonism, Aestheticism, Immortality, Corruption, Portrait, Sin, Consequences, Beauty.

Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, published in 1891, is a key work in English literature that explores the intersections between beauty, morality, and self-destruction. The novel critiques society's elevation of beauty above all else, questioning whether outer beauty can endure in the face of inner moral decay. With its themes of homoerotic desire, vanity, and ethical corruption, *Dorian Gray* has inspired multiple film adaptations that reimagine Wilde's themes to suit evolving cultural landscapes. From Albert Lewin's 1945 adaptation to Oliver Parker's 2009 retelling, each

version reflects the concerns and values of its era while offering fresh interpretations of Dorian Gray's tragic journey. This article examines how *The Picture of Dorian Gray* bridges literary and visual art forms, and how its adaptations reinterpret the novel's core themes for the screen. By analysing how each adaptation visually reimagines Wilde's concepts, it explores how evolving cultural norms and cinematic techniques reshape Dorian Gray's warning against the dangers of vanity and moral decline.

This philosophical fiction is one of the best-known examples in English literature of ekphrasis¹, the literary description of a visual work of art. The brilliance of the ekphrasis that Wilde created in his story lies in the fact that neither Dorian's beauty nor the hideousness of his portrait are described in detail, leaving it to the imagination of the individual reader:

"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...The sense of his own beauty came on him like a revelation. He had never felt it before... and now, as he stood gazing at the shadow of his own loveliness, the full reality of the description flashed across him."².

The plot is therefore based on the relationship between language and image, for while Dorian's soul is revealed on the canvas and his nature on the page, the image means nothing without the story behind it. Ultimately, it is the whole book that is Dorian's true portrait, and it also becomes a medium through which the artist and the reader can see themselves – as Wilde wrote in response to criticism of the novel: "Each man sees his own sin in Dorian Gray. What Dorian Gray's sins are no one knows. He who finds them has brought them."³. Wilde's point is that everyone sees their own sins in Dorian Gray because he acts as a double for the reader, who is thus reminded of his own corruption.

Although Wilde's work is deeply rooted in the nineteenth-century aesthetic movement of 'art for art's sake'⁴ - which holds that beauty is the highest value, beyond social and ethical considerations - he complicates this idealism by questioning whether beauty can truly exist apart from morality. Wilde's assertion that "an artist should create beautiful things but should put nothing of his own life into them"⁵ is ironic, as he weaves his own beliefs and critiques into *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Through the portrait at the centre of the novel, Wilde merges visual and literary art, creating a powerful symbol of Dorian's beauty and, later, his corruption. The portrait captures the ideal of beauty, but becomes tainted as it reflects Dorian's sins, visually illustrating the consequences aestheticism when practiced without moral awareness. As a literary and visual symbol, the portrait serves as a cautionary reminder of the risks of separating beauty from ethical responsibility, showing that art can both elevate and entrap those who worship it without limits.

The story of *Dorian Gray* is, on a higher level, a story of morality and temptation, but it is also a story of gothic horror. Wilde's use of gothic elements serves to emphasise the novel's exploration of decadence and moral corruption. Dorian's descent into self-indulgence is reflected in the gradual deterioration of the portrait, which reflects the consequences of his actions and stands in stark contrast to his unchanging, youthful appearance. This contrast between beauty and moral

decay is heightened by the gothic setting, with the portrait hidden in a 'cobwebbed' room - reminiscent of the haunted attic in classic Gothic literature. The painting becomes a powerful visual symbol of Dorian's decaying soul, a constant reminder of his sinful lifestyle and the price he pays for his vanity. Wilde's use of gothic horror, including themes of murder, suicide, and doom, creates a dark, sombre atmosphere that heightens the tension of the novel and highlights the dangers of a life of unrestrained self-indulgence. The gothic elements in the story create a dark and unsettling atmosphere, enhancing the sense of dread and inevitability surrounding Dorian's actions and fate.

The first full-length film adaptation of Wilde's work was released in June 1945. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was directed by Albert Lewin and starred Hurd Hatfield as Dorian, George Sanders as Lord Henry Wotton, and Lowell Gilmore as Basil Hallward. It is often said that Lewin's film is one of the best *Dorian Gray* adaptations to date, not only because of the performances of its leads, but also because of Lewin's commitment to the visual and thematic complexity of the book. Lewin remains faithful to Wilde's narrative structure, retaining key plot points and much of Wilde's original dialogue. He also uses a voiceover narrator to guide the viewer into the inner lives of the characters, enhancing the audience's connection to Dorian's complex moral journey.

The 1945 movie is especially remarkable for its adaptations of Wilde's colour symbolism and gothic themes into powerful visual metaphors, translating Wilde's literary devices into elements of film noir. Lewin contrasts light and shadow to depict both Dorian's descent into darkness and the duality within Victorian London - between the decadent upper class and the sinister underworld. This duality, so central to Wilde's critique of aestheticism and moral decay, is heightened by the stark visuals, such as the dimly lit bars of London and Dorian's own shadowy transformation. The contrast between light and dark is heightened in critical scenes, such as Dorian's murder of Basil and his own demise, where Lewin uses a swinging lamp to cast sharp shadows, emphasising the moral consequences of Dorian's choices. In these moments, the use of lighting becomes a gothic device, in keeping with Wilde's original use of gothic tropes to heighten the story's atmosphere of horror.

Lewin also incorporates Wilde's symbolic use of colour to represent Dorian's inner transformation. Early in the film, Dorian is seen with a pink rose, both on his clothes and in Basil's painting, representing his initial innocence and purity. This rose disappears after the tragic suicide of his lover, Sybil Vane, marking a visual shift that reflects Dorian's loss of innocence and growing corruption. In addition, Lewin dresses female characters such as Sybil and Gladys in vibrant, pure colours, enhancing their purity through specific lighting techniques that give their faces a soft, glowing quality.

This choice seems to create a stark contrast to the increasing darkness surrounding Dorian. Through these colour choices, Lewin's film subtly echoes the thematic colour symbolism of the novel, combining the visual language of cinema with Wilde's literary artistry.

Although Lewin's adaptation may soften Wilde's original critique of aestheticism, his careful integration of visual storytelling respects the spirit and literary ambition of the novel. By translating Wilde's aesthetic themes into carefully constructed visual symbols and lighting techniques, Lewin preserves the cautionary essence of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* while adapting it to the social norms of his time. The 1945 adaptation is a fascinating bridge between literature and film, demonstrating how cinematic techniques can bring Wilde's gothic, morally complex world to life in a way that both respects and reinterprets the visual and thematic artistry of the novel.

One of the most recent adaptations, 2009's *Dorian Gray*, directed by Oliver Parker and starring Ben Barnes, Colin Firth, and Ben Chaplin, reimagines Wilde's novel with a darker, more intense visual style, emphasising Dorian's psychological decay through powerful gothic horror elements. Parker's interpretation vividly depicts Dorian's excesses and sins, making his descent into moral decay a visually striking experience. Unlike Wilde's more understated allusions, Parker's adaptation openly presents scenes of indulgence, hedonism, and horror, making Dorian's

inner corruption visually evident to the audience. The film's dark, haunting visuals draw the viewer into Dorian's decadent world, highlighting the weight of his moral collapse and the dangerous allure of his unchecked vanity.

Parker's adaptation introduces a significant change to the ending, creating a more visually striking and intense climax. Feeling that Wilde's original ending wouldn't have the same impact on screen, Parker uses Emily, Lord Henry's daughter, to shift the narrative's focus. Emily becomes a reason for Dorian to consider redemption, and her presence serves as a visual counterpoint to the darkness of his life. In contrast to the shadowy, morally corrupt world Dorian inhabits, Emily's vibrant presence is highlighted by brighter lighting and a more serene atmosphere, symbolising the possibility of redemption. The on-screen emotional conflict between Dorian, Emily, and Lord Henry is visually heightened, with Dorian's moments of lightness at Emily's side counterbalanced by the ever-present shadows of his indulgent life. This shift in emotional and visual tone leads to a more dramatic, cathartic climax in which Dorian's fate is sealed, giving the film's ending a powerful intensity that differs from Wilde's more ambiguous and internal conclusion.

Parker also delves into Dorian's backstory, using visual storytelling to evoke his traumatic upbringing with his abusive grandfather. Scenes from Dorian's troubled past are woven into the film, providing viewers with a

deeper understanding of the motivations behind his pact with the portrait. This suggests that Dorian's desire for eternal beauty and strength is driven by a need to protect himself from vulnerability and weakness - a powerful interpretation that ties his past pain to his present moral corruption.

A key element of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, both in Wilde's novel and in its film adaptations, is the portrait itself, which serves as a symbolic reflection of Dorian's soul. In Wilde's text, it is not the explicit features of the portrait that convey its horror, but Dorian's reaction to it. The painting is described in vague but powerful terms, as when it begins to reveal Dorian's moral decay, we are told that it has "a touch of cruelty in its mouth"⁶ and later, "in the eyes was the look of cunning, and in the mouth the curved wrinkle of the hypocrite."⁷ These descriptions leave much to the imagination, challenging filmmakers to translate this vague yet profound transformation into an effective visual experience. The adaptations thus become as much an interpretation of Wilde's story as they are a reflection of the directors' own visions, with the moment of the portrait's unveiling acting as a 'portrait' of the adapting artist.

Scholar Shannon Wells-Lassagne suggests that: "In his 1945 adaptation of the novel, Albert Lewin chose to represent the unrepresentable by mixing colour sequences into the otherwise black and white film."⁸ This innovative use of colour conveys both the beauty and

the horror of the painting by breaking from the monochrome palette to introduce sudden Technicolor⁹ sequences. Lewin's choice mirrors Wilde's own vivid language in describing the changes in Dorian's face, allowing the audience to witness his inner darkness through a visually striking contrast. The abrupt transition to colour heightens the shock, aligning the audience with Dorian's horror as he confronts his moral degradation. By employing this ground-breaking technique, Lewin not only underscores Dorian's descent, but also highlights cinema's ability to convey symbolic meaning in a way that literature alone cannot.

Oliver Parker's 2009 adaptation takes a different, more graphic approach to the portrait's horror, presenting it as a grotesque, almost living entity that reflects Dorian's corruption in raw detail. Here, the portrait is treated as a fully visual spectacle that changes and decays in real time: as Dorian's sins accumulate, the painting rots, with visible decay, festering wounds and even maggots overtaking the canvas. This transformation is a powerful symbol of Dorian's inner rot, as Parker uses vivid, horror-like imagery to create an immediate sense of revulsion in the audience. Parker also gave the portrait an uncanny life of its own, incorporating sounds - such as slurping and sighing - and showing the painting from a subjective, almost voyeuristic point of view, as if it were observing Dorian and the other characters. This technique makes the portrait an unsettling presence, capturing Dorian's sense of being haunted by his own hidden self.

Both adaptations offer unique interpretations of Wilde's symbol of moral corruption, but while Lewin's version stays closer to the subtlety of Wilde's narrative, Parker's is more explicit, creating a visceral horror that speaks directly to modern audiences. The result is a vivid exploration of the power of the portrait, with each adaptation using the medium of film to reveal different aspects of Wilde's cautionary tale. In both films, however, the portrait remains the central, haunting element - a mirror of Dorian's soul and a window into each director's creative vision. Through their contrasting treatments, the filmmakers not only bring Dorian's tragedy to life, but also explore the boundaries of cinema as an art form in its own right.

Through his unique use of ekphrasis and gothic horror, Wilde critiques the consequences of vanity and moral decay, inviting readers to reflect on the dangers of elevating beauty above matter. The novel's enduring themes have inspired several film adaptations, with Albert Lewin's 1945 version and Oliver Parker's 2009 retelling offering distinct visual interpretations of

Dorian's tragic journey. Lewin's innovative use of Technicolor creatively bridges the gap between literature and film, conveying Dorian's psychological descent through striking visual contrasts. His subtle integration of colour intensifies the psychological horror of Dorian's corruption, while also highlighting the evolving possibilities of cinema. In contrast, Parker's more graphic style takes a raw, horror-inflected approach to depicting Dorian's moral decay, emphasising the grotesque transformation of the portrait into a vivid, disturbing symbol of his inner corruption. Through their different techniques, both films expand on Wilde's themes, offering fresh perspectives while preserving the novel's central critique of vanity and self-indulgence. Ultimately, these adaptations demonstrate how cinema can reinterpret and enhance literature, reflecting the limitless potential of film as an art form. Through both Wilde's original work and its cinematic reimaginings, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* continues to resonate, reminding us of the dangers of unchecked vanity and the inescapable weight of conscience.

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⁵ Wilde, O., 1891. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Penguin Classics, 2009 ed. p. 14

⁶ Wilde, O., 1891. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Penguin Classics, 2009 ed. p. 88

⁷ Wilde, O., 1891. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Penguin Classics, 2009 ed. p. 211

⁸ Wells-Lassagne, S., 2015. *Little Boy Blue: Colour in The Picture of Dorian Gray (1945)*. Available at: https://www.academia.edu/16989947/Little_Boy_Blue_Color_in_The_Picture_of_Dorian_Gray_1945_ [Accessed 15 November 2024], p. 393.

⁹ "This innovative method used three separate strips of black-and-white film, each capturing one of the primary colours—red, green, or blue. These strips were then combined to produce a full-colour image with rich, vibrant hues." Cinema Waves, 2024. *What is Technicolor?* [online] Available at: <https://cinemawavesblog.com/film-blog/what-is-technicolor/> [Accessed 12 November 2024].