

The 2nd Runner Up of English Section

Senior Division

Name of Winner	: Jasmin Tsang
Name of School	: St.Paul's Convent School
Book Title	: The Picture of Dorian Gray
Author	: Oscar Wilde
Publisher	: Penguins English Library

“Those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt without being charming. This is a fault.”- Oscar Wilde.

The Picture of Dorian Gray is a satirical, witty and immensely dark guide to the spectrum of higher social class during the 19th century in Britain. If I have to liken this novel to a kind of food, it would be some red wine, or anything with a perplexing aftertaste that joyously celebrates its triumph over my inability to react long after reading this novel. I love this novel not only because it not only mercilessly reminds me of how low humanity can stoop but also the problems of our evilness that exist in the modern world.

Dorian Gray finds his path to darkness

The Picture of Dorian Gray is about the metamorphosis of a young man named Dorian Gray. The story begins with a meeting between the talented artist Basil and Lord Henry. Because of Lord Henry's ardent requests, Basil reluctantly introduces the model of his recent paintings, Dorian Gray, to him. The artist draws a perfect portrait of Dorian that bears the burden of immorality and the age for Dorian as he wishes. Intriguingly, the young man in the portrait grows old and hideous as his sins accumulate, while Dorian remains young and beautiful until his suicidal destruction of the portrait.

Since the first encounter, Lord Henry poisons his mind with ideas of hedonism and egotism, urging him to appreciate beauty and discard his passion for philanthropy. Dorian Gray soon finds his path to darkness and cruelly abandons his first love, Sibyl Vane, after her flawed performance in *Romeo and Juliet* on stage. At the end Dorian stabs his picture using the same knife he kills Basil, which results in his own tragic demise.

Oscar Wilde's artistic use of imagery

Being a fan of Wilde's works, I truly admire the beauty of language demonstrated by the author. From the beginning, Wilde already mesmerises us with his vivid use of imagery. We are gently ushered into a world of "rich odour of roses", "honey-sweet and honey-coloured blossoms of a laburnum" and "fantastic shadows of birds in flight". The mixture of visual and olfactory imagery is rich, elevating the level of exquisiteness described in the novel. Even though the novel is far from being delightful, its setting is always fascinating except for the scenes of

murder and Dorian's dark attic. Reading the novel is like having a chance to revel in the luxuries in the 19th century. The author's excellent use of imagery allows us as readers to experience all the temptations of wealth that draws Dorian to evilness. Sometimes I can literally feel Wilde's passion for aesthetic studies that is embodied in his novel.

Though less pleasant, the author's artistic use of imagery in his gothic elements is haunting yet spectacular. In the murder scene, Dorian "could hear nothing, but the drip, drip, drip on the threadbare carpet". The use of auditory imagery heightens our fear, as our minds are occupied with the repetitive "drip". Whenever I read this chapter, I can feel goose bumps on my neck. When all the pervious glamour in the setting is stripped off, the novel is like a terrifying horror movie with unveiled bloodlust.

Lord Henry's quick wit, apathy and ego

Besides the beauty of language, Wilde's views towards the world are embedded in some of his characters. I believe there has to be a love-hate relationship between the readers and Lord Henry, arguably the most debauched character in the novel. Based on the author's use of indirect characterization, Lord Henry Wotton is quick-witted, charming and rich. Sadly there is one problem about him -- the complete lack of morality. Throughout the novel he whole-heartedly advocates for excessive self-indulgence without any thought for the consequences of his actions. He subtly reduces Dorian Gray into a bloodless monster with nothing but a pretty face simply by his speeches.

As Lord Henry reveals about himself at the beginning of the novel, “all influence is immoral-immoral from the scientific point of view”, he twists the beauty of youth into his own employ. His hedonistic view towards the world, “Youth! Youth! There is absolutely nothing in the world but youth!” unexpectedly strikes me as it reveals people’s heathenish obsession with youth. By examining Lord Henry, readers can recognize how some people see life as a journey to self-discovery through pleasure alone, as well as the evils of this kind of view. For instance, Dorian recklessly wastes his youth in meaningless parties and opium dens under the immoral influence of Lord Henry.

Being a modern reader, I did not understand Wilde’s use of motif, “the yellow book” on hedonism that Lord Henry gives to Dorian, until I finished my research on its background. Though I think the author’s exploitation of this motif might be too ambiguous, it still fascinates me how passionate Wilde is towards his studies in aestheticism.

Apart from being a worshipper of hedonism, Lord Henry often unashamedly displays his contempt towards the idea of sympathy, most probably because he has none. His reply to his aunt, “I can sympathize with everything, except suffering”, is paradoxically frustrating, similar to the heartless condolences he offers to Dorian who is devastated upon the news of his lover’s death. The author’s masterful manipulation of indirect characterization again suggests that Lord Henry “found an exquisite pleasure in playing on the lad [Dorian]’s

unconscious egotism” and preaches self-centered values to Dorian as if the world is at his command.

I think Lord Henry is the best example in illustrating the results of unconstrained egotism supported by wealth. His distaste in philanthropy reveals how selfish humans can be. It also propels me to reflect upon how capitalists sometimes deprive others’ freedom of choice or intentionally ignoring the severity of poverty gap in the name of free market. Although there are colossal benefits brought by globalization, issues such as hegemony of large retail chains occur. This often leads to exploitation of workers in the less economically developed countries, such as child labour in African countries.

However, while readers enjoy condemning Lord Henry for all his immoral flaws, at times we smile at his satirical responses towards the ridicule and hypocrisy of the higher social class. One of Wilde’s characteristics in his works is his consistent use of sarcasm that rivals Shakespeare. During one of his gatherings with people of his class, the Duchess naively asks “And where do bad Americans go to when they die?” The answer to her explicit ignorance comes from Lord Henry, “They go to America”. In contrast to his conceited acquaintances with high social status, Lord Henry is sarcastic and intelligent. From time to time the readers are unconsciously coerced to smirk at one of Lord Henry’s sardonic comments. Although Lord Henry never repents for his immoral influences, his mockeries of the upper social class are always a refreshing surprise to the readers.

Lord Henry's contempt of females remains unchanged today

In addition to Lord Henry's sneers at morality, he casts a cynical light upon feminism. First of all, what is feminism? According to Emma Watson in her "He for She" speech at the UN, feminism by definition is "The belief that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities. It is the theory of the political, economic and social equality of the sexes."

In Lord Henry's view, women "remain slaves looking for their masters, all the same. They love being dominated." This highlights the submissive role that women in the 19th century are forced to take. Unfortunately this also applies to the world we live in. Despite the much improved standard of living and level of education in most places, child brides, unfair wage payments and domestic abuse still exist.

Even in Hong Kong, some TV programmes or advertisements are insults to gender equality, though most people might not be aware of them. In the advertisements for cosmetics, the female models who are surrounded by attractive male actors tend to be overly slim. This can also be an example of gender inequality because women are subjectified and shaped into what men want to see, instead of women themselves exerting self-autonomy over their images. The problems caused by these unrealistic advertisements are increased cases of anorexia nervosa and failed cosmetic surgeries.

Since we no longer live in an age where Jane Austen had to hide her manuscripts from her families due to patriarchal norms, we should take more actions in campaigning for feminism, showing how constructing a world of fairness would be better for all of us.

Obsession of beauty and youth

In this mesmerising novel, Lord Henry is not the only fascinating character. Its protagonist Dorian Gray is equally interesting. In particular, the last scene in the novel leaves the readers a chilling note.

Dorian once wishes “If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old! I would give my soul for that!” Unfortunately his wish comes true as his soul is shattered into pieces by his atrocities. In the end, Dorian experiences a baffling revelation in which he discovers “It was his beauty that had ruined him, his beauty and the youth that he had prayed for”. His determination is to confess changes into his desire to destroy the evidence of his crimes -- the portrait. However, in destroying the portrait, he stabs himself in reality while the portrait resumes its original glory.

There is a heavy sense of irony in the ending. The minor character Lady Narborough says to Dorian that “you are made to be good -- you look so good”. Her shallow comment equates beauty to goodness, yet ironically beauty is the cause of Dorian’s death. Through the ending, Wilde expresses humans’ innate evilness that is fueled by their maddening obsession with youth and beauty. Youth or beauty without conscience is horrible, as proved by

Dorian Gray's tale. The ending of the novel is a twist to the readers, though I have expected a tragic end at some point, for example, when Dorian brutally murders Basil. The protagonist deserves his punishment no matter how it is arguable that Lord Henry is the real perpetrator of evilness in the novel.

Although my hope for humanity rekindles when Dorian realizes his recklessness in youth, it relinquishes when he blames the portrait for his diabolicalness. Perhaps this shows that ignorance, like lack of conscience, is another inherent evil of mankind. Dorian's downfall is the direct result of his failure to grasp the true meaning of repentance. What if Dorian actually repents for his crimes? He might have been saved by his conscience -- to be able to coexist with his picture without being sickened by guilt. I think this is why the novel is a masterpiece, given its unexpected twist with such a deep meaning for readers to explore.

A brilliant work of Oscar Wilde

The Picture of Dorian Gray is the only novel of Oscar Wilde, the most celebrated playwright, poet and writer at his times. The novel is a combination of brilliancy and degeneracy, like how its author was accused later in life. His novel was said to be testified against him since there is implication of homosexual love between Dorian Gray and Lord Henry. This is not only discriminatory but also an insult to Wilde's pursuit in aesthetic studies.

The novel discusses perpetual themes that intrigue us, such as the apathy of mankind, our excessive obsession

with youth and beauty and our innate ignorance. Wilde's artistic use of language techniques is a pleasant torture to our minds, adding a sense of dark humour through satire from time to time. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* will always be one of my favourites, a world that will be revisited during weekends.