

Dorian Gray and a Journey from Immaturity to Maturity

Atefeh Salemi¹, Najmeh Salemi²

¹ MA, Assistant Professor, Islamic Azad University, Boroujerd Branch

² PhD Student, Tehran University

Abstract. How unusual it seems for a man to fall in love with himself. How unusual it seems to be able to wear a long-life mask on ones face to be able to pass a fake life. This is the case with Dorian Gray, the anti-hero of Oscar Wilde's "The Picture of Dorian Gray". A child's journey from immaturity to maturity presupposes a separation from the first object of love- that is the mother- and goes on with ego-formation. The last stage of the journey is entering the Law of the Father, when an individual finds a real identity. The journey is a hard one but necessary for an individual who wants to pass a normal, social life. But Dorian is a Narcissist who fails to accomplish the journey from immaturity to maturity.

Key Words: Narcisism, immaturity, maturity.

1. Dorian Gray and a Journey from Immaturity to Maturity

For a new born baby mother is the first object of love, "an unmediated, unsymbolized object"¹.

This Edenic state is disturbed by the entrance of father-the Symbolic. This separation, although necessary for ego- formation, is experienced as a kind of lack for which the child searches a substitute. According to Freud there are two modes of choosing an object as a substitute; anaclitic and narcissistic. In narcissistic mode the chosen object of love is a pure reflection of either one's own ego or one's ego-ideal. It is evident that ego at this stage searches what it lacks; that is to say, "what possesses the excellence, which the ego lacks for making it an ideal, is loved."² The object of love in this stage must be from external world. If the external world fails to provide an ideal, ego will turn inside for the ideal. It is at Lacan's mirror stage that Narcissus penetrates his own image and when he "finds itself possessed of every perfection that is of value"³ he becomes narcissistic. Oscar Wilde's character, Dorian Gray, is a Narcissist as well.

From the very beginning of the novel one can find that Dorian-Basil relationship is not a mere friendship. Basil is certainly more than a friend for Dorian Gray and vice versa. Basil Hallward is the creator of another Dorian Gray; he has the feminine characteristics to play a mother, or a semiotic for Dorian. This fact is pointed out by the artist himself; "I really can't exhibit it. I have put too much of myself into it"⁴. The artist is the creator of the picture and due to the fact that "masculinity and femininity are not tied to biological sex"⁵ it can be stated that Basil may be interpreted as the feminine force that influences Dorian. Basil loves Dorian because "every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter."⁶ Dorian, for Basil, is an object of love a semi-child; they are "destined to know each other".⁷ His love for Dorian is to the degree that he supposes it to be absolutely necessary for him to meet him everyday; "I couldn't be happy if I didn't see him everyday."⁸ Basil himself feels that Dorian is something more than a mere influence on one's art. Dorian is his lost infantile Narcissism; "he is much more to me than a model or a sitter The merely presence of this lad-for he seems to me little more than a lad, though he is really over twenty."⁹

Though a young man of more than twenty, Dorian is much more like a child. He didn't surpass the first stage of his life yet and is on a borderline between rejection of the feminine force, chora, and identification, forming an ego-ideal. He is an immature young lad who becomes aware even of his beauty when the fact is pointed out by Lord Henry and immortalized by Basil. Lord Henry comes from the symbolic world and

disturbs the solitude enjoyed by Basil and Dorian. Dorian experiences a sense of loss entailed to the separation from the semiotic. Dorian desperately tries to identify with an ideal ego. It might be Lord Henry or another father figure. But the first thing Dorian finds "possessed of every perfection that is of value"¹⁰ is his own picture and he falls in love with it just as "Narcissus wants desperately to unite with the perceived other which is in truth the image of himself."¹¹ For Dorian Gray his picture is a thorough "otherness" to fall in love with. So here the libido does not strive for some external object, but uses the ego as its object; that is, narcissism or self love. And the portrait for Dorian is nothing more than ego. In Narcissism "the ego-subject makes itself an object to itself, once again bringing into question the notion of an entity identical with itself"¹² It cannot be denied that "the self-preservation of an image could of course have a deathly price, as it did for Narcissus"¹³ and for Dorian, as well. According to Kristeva Narcissism is not condemned, for self-love makes one capable of loving others. But the case is different with Dorian Gray.

Dorian is unable to replace his ideal ego that is his own ego with any real object. This is the reason why he fails to love Sybil, the young actress. A narcissist's love is passive and feminine and passive love is doomed, Lacan believes. What does feminine or passive love mean? In his "On Narcissism" Freud distinguishes between male and female love or their type of object choice. Maturity in female intensifies the original narcissism so their need lies not "in the direction of loving, but of being loved."¹⁴ So the feminine love is not active for it does not really look for any real love object; "to remain, as do Narcissus and the ideal child, at the passive, pre-objectal stage, is thus to thwart the formation of an adequate social being."¹⁵ As it was mentioned before separation, physical or mental, is painful and brings about a psychic space which should be completed or occupied by the love object. Narcissus has no real object "to fill the psychic space with; in fact Narcissus' object is psychic space (the image) as such?"¹⁶ Dorian Gray at the edge of forming an ideal ego penetrates his own portrait. Lord Henry advises the immature, young man in this way; "the aim of life is self-development, to realize one's nature perfectly."¹⁷ And Dorian at the beginning of his "self-development" views himself; "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."¹⁸ This is the end of Dorian's first stage of life; he peacefully separates the semiotic, Basil, in order to come under the law of the Father, which is represented by Lord Henry. Lord Henry is the man who quickens Dorian's journey through semiotic or his rejecting the painter. This may be interpreted as "an attempt to confirm the separation from the pre-Oedipal mother."¹⁹ But instead of finding an external ideal ego he searches it in himself and his picture truly satisfies him because it is and is not himself at the same time. It is an image of Dorian himself and an external object as well. So, for Dorian, the picture functions as the best ideal ego and he really falls in love with it, and becomes jealous of his own portrait. But when Basil intends to destroy the portrait Dorian cries; "Don't, Basil, don't! It would be murder!"²⁰ and then he continues; "I am in love with it, Basil. It is part of myself. I feel that."²¹ And the portrait is not treated as an object anymore; "well as soon as you are dry, you shall be varnished, and framed, and sent home. Then you can do what you like with yourself."²² But at that special moment nobody is conscious of Dorian's praying having been realized;

- "It will never be older than this particular day of June If it were only the other way! If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old! For that-for that- I would give everything!"²³

Narcissism for a short period of time "covers over the emptiness wrought through separation."²⁴ The sense of loss felt after the separation would be healed by self love. But Lacan believes Narcissism is doomed and it should not last too much. A love relationship involves an Other-it maybe God, a woman one loves, a child, etc. But for Dorian "the portrait that Basil Hallward had painted of him would be a guide to him through life, would be to him what holiness is to some, and conscience to others, and the fear of God to us all."²⁵ Narcissism, although necessary for forming an ego, should not be too much to make one fail to replace one's own ego with another one: "for love requires a third party (Other) whose role is to make possible the identification with another who is like himself."²⁶ When such a relation fails, the narcissist becomes melancholic. There is no real, external object for narcissist and sadness is :

- "The most archaic expression of a non-symbolizable, unnamable narcissistic wound that is so premature that no external agent (subject or object) can be referred to it. For this type of narcissistic depressive, sadness is in reality the only object."²⁷

This is why Dorian feels melancholic and horrified most of the times. He cannot speak out his secret and his melancholy is not redeemed by pleasure, innumerable collections of invaluable objects, or anything else.

And at last comes the time when Dorian should be released from his pain. It would be interesting to note that the setting in the last chapter of the novel is "a lovely night", as if Dorian has passed a dreadful day beginning with his birth, climaxing in his false identification, and now coming to its end in "a lovely night". It seems as though a complete circle is being rotated and then calmed in its original point. Dorian's false ideal ego should be destroyed. Had it been done before, he would have a better chance to fulfill his journey to symbolic. Therefore in the last chapter of the novel Dorian tries to get rid of this ideal ego. He picks up the knife, with which he has killed Basil Hallward, and tries to destroy the portrait.

- "He seized the thing, and stabbed the picture with it. There was a cry heard, and a crash. The cry was so horrible in its agony that the frightened servants woke, and crept out of their rooms."²⁸

The destruction of the ideal ego is the same as destroying oneself in narcissism;

- "When they entered, they found hanging upon the wall a splendid portrait of their master as they had last seen him, in all the wonder of his exquisite youth and beauty. Lying on the floor was a dead man, in evening dress, with a knife in his heart. He was withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage. It was not till they had examined the rings that they recognized."²⁹

So "desire fails and Narcissus dies." Dorian Gray dies and "Kristera sees the death as equivalent to the failure of Narcissism to develop with sufficient strength."³⁰ As a whole it may be put in this way that on a journey from semiotic to symbolic, Narcissism is a stage to be surpassed, otherwise, the individual fails to fulfill his journey. Dorian was an individual who remained a narcissus and it costed dearly for him. Dorian is a typical character in literature symbolizing the unsuccessful, narcissistic, young individuals who fail to fulfill the journey—a journey from semiotic to symbolic, the journey from immaturity to maturity.

2. Reference

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[26] Lechte, “Julia Kristeva”, p. 170.

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