

Loss of Subjectivity: Analysis of The Picture of Dorian Gray from the Perspective of Lacan's Theory of Three Orders

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Abstract. On the basis of Jacques Lacan's theory of three orders, this paper studies Oscar Wilde's nominated novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and analyses the change of protagonist Dorian in three stages, which demonstrates the whole process in which he seeks to find his subjectivity in the "Imaginary Order" and "Symbolic Order" but finally lost his subjectivity in the "Real Order", which significantly implies the failure of subjectivity construction. Furthermore, The study explores that Dorian's tragic fall is closely related to the influence of the aestheticism and hedonism prevalent in Victorian society, which provides a profound social context for interpreting his alteration. This research not only enriches the psychoanalytic criticism of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by applying Jacques Lacan's three orders theory, breaking through the limitations of traditional literary criticism perspectives, but also offers a new analytical framework for readers to understand the complexity of human subjectivity construction in the entire process.

Keywords: *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde, Jacques Lacan, Subjectivity

1. Introduction

Oscar Wilde(1854-1900) was an Irish playwright, poet and novelist. During the course of his life, he has created a large amount of famous works, including *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance* and the well known tale *The Happy Prince*. As an extraordinary representative of aestheticism, Wilde was praised by Algernon Charles Swinburne like this: "He is the perfect mouthpiece of the aesthetic creed ... a prophet who dares to declare Beauty itself as the supreme sacrament" [1].

As Wilde's only long novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a particularly significant work, serving as an excellent example of aestheticism and attracting considerable attention from scholars and critics. More importantly, the narrative chronicles about Dorian Gray's quest for identity go through three distinct phases, which aligns with Lacan's theory of three orders. Initially, Basil's portrait situates him within the symbolic order and subsequently, his romance with Sibyl facilitates entry into the imaginary order-an experience of idealized self-recognition. Finally, the corrupted portrait's transformation signifies his confrontation with the real order, marking his ultimate self-awareness. Due to its changeable plot, Jonathan Goldberg commented in a psychological aspect, "When Dorian gazes at the portrait, he repeats the primal scene in which humans first acquire the illusion of 'self' in

the mirror, yet becomes trapped in an eternal narcissistic prison by refusing to acknowledge the reality of the aging physical body (Real Order)” [2].

2. Literature review

According to the papers concerning the analysis of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in the CNKI database, there are three major search perspectives, including morality, aestheticism and psychoanalysis.

From a moral perspective, studies attempt to analyse the characters and Wilde himself, explaining how their inner worlds influenced their behaviors or thought. For instance, Chen XiaoLin analyzes the moral dilemma Dorian faced in “Ethical Predicaments and Ethical Implications in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*”, concerning his love with Sibyl and friendship with Henry and Basil. “Dorian embodies the principle that art surmounts life” [3], in this case, he broke up with Sibyl cruelly because he realized that he loved the artistic image of the person rather than herself. Different from Chen XiaoLin, Li ZhiYan tries to understand Wilde’s pursuit of art and morality through the murder cases Dorian committed in “Paradox and Unity, “Analysis of the Murder Cases in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*”. Wilde had Dorian Gray follow in Henry’s footsteps as a response to societal culture, while on a deeper level it was “reaction against a utilitarian culture” [4]. In short, researches concerning the role of morality have played in this novel provides an inspiration to know more about the main characters beyond the plot.

Aestheticism is a well-studied theme of in many domestic papers, since not only was it a significant aspect to understand Wilde’s thought about aestheticism, as it was not only a significant aspect of understanding Wilde’s thoughts on aestheticism, but also a practical way of analysing the contradiction between art and moral concepts. This contradiction is closely connected with the destiny of characters such as Dorian and Basil. For example, Tang Mei’s implies that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* pointed out such contradiction in “the Contradiction Between Wilde’s Aesthetic Principles and Morality” and “Art for arts sake” is at the very core of Wilde’s aesthetic theory. Wilde insists that art should be separated from life, and art has no responsibility to life [5]. What we can see from the plots in this book is that when Sibyl died and Dorian was overwhelmed with guilty and grief, Henry comforted him by defining her death as an “artistic tragedy” and convincing Dorian he was the “player that had not been wounded” [5]. The fact is that Dorian was mislead and mixed life and art, which contradicts Wilde’s promotion and indicates his further corruption. Yao XinYue also claims that excessively pursue “art” and ignore moral factors can lead to misconception of prioritizing sensory experience in “The Truth of Tomorrow and Mistake of Today --- Mistake Morality of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*”. “Yet it is precisely the seemingly extreme aesthetic demands in the works of Wilde and numerous other masters of aestheticism that endow this movement with a revolutionary and forward-looking quality” [6]. Therefore, aestheticism, though having been explored widely in various studies, remains to offer insights to understand the deeper reasons of Dorian’s corruption.

In terms of psychoanalysis, the existing studies are mainly conducted by analyzing Dorian’s psychological activities and changes though Freudian psychology of three dimensional personalities. For instance, Lin XiaoJun’s figures out the reason why Dorian tried to destroy the portrait by referring to Freud’s concept of the death instinct in “Gothic Style and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*”. “This aligns with Freud’s concept of the death instinct, which he described as the force driving Homo sapiens back to a primordial state, causing their behavior to spiral out of self-control and giving rise to all forms of destructive acts such as aggression and devastation”(84) [7]. From this perspective, Dorian’s impulse of destruction might be arose from the fear of death. Yu Jing’s

analysis of the struggle between the id, ego and superego in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* uses Freud's three-personality structure theory, which suggests that "Henry embodies Dorian's id which identified as the unconscious reservoir of instincts, impulses, and desires" while "Basil, Dorian's superego, embodies the social norms and moral codes internalized through life experiences" [8]. Based on Freud's concepts, the study endeavors to find out more about psych-analysis through reading and scanning more resources and then discovered that Lacan's theory of three orders (symbolic, imaginary and real), which serves as the three phases of self recognition, could also be a practical way to analyze Dorian's mental activities and his final tragedy.

To be brief, the text has been studied from morality, aestheticism and psycho-analysis. However, there is not enough research to focus on the inner change of the protagonist and his subjectivity, leaving relatively research gap to bridge. Based on Lacan's theory of three orders, this paper will investigate the process of losing the subjectivity of Dorian.

3. Theoretical framework

On the basis of Freud's theory, Lacan reshaped psychoanalysis through structuralist linguistics, proposing the famous Theory of Three Orders in *Écrits* -namely the real order, the imaginary order and the symbolic order.

By definition, the imaginary order denotes a pre-linguistic domain encompassing images, fantasies, and processes of mirror identification. As Huang Hanping noted, "For Lacan, the ego emerges during the mirror stage and is intrinsically tied to the imaginary order" [9]. In this stage, an infant recognizes its reflection in the mirror, thereby establishing its primordial sense of identity. Crucially, although both the imaginary and symbolic orders originate from the mirror phase, they persist beyond its conclusion. Rather than dissipating, the "Imaginary Order" evolves into intersubjective relations with *homo sapiens*, coexisting dynamically with the symbolic order. The "Symbolic Order" refers to the realm governed by signifiers, which dictate the normative frameworks shaping a subject's existential conduct. Within this order, individuals engage with existing cultural systems through language and forge relational bonds with others. Conversely, the "Real Order" is characterized as the unsymbolizable, traumatic core of experience-encompassing chaos, lack, the death drive, and the impossible. It precedes language entirely and resists domestication by meaning.

In 1977, Lacan provocatively stated, "The unconscious is the discourse of the Other—this is the most radical proposition" [10], fundamentally subverting traditional subject-object dichotomies. Furthermore, Lacan elevates the triad of "Real, Imaginary, and Symbolic" to the foundational pillars of psychoanalysis, meticulously elaborating their dialectical interplay. Lacanian theory enriches our understanding of *Dorian Gray* by reframing his downfall as a failure to negotiate the three orders as well as a failure to seek his true self. He remains stuck in the "Imaginary", worshiping form over substance; he defies the "Symbolic", courting transgression without accepting responsibility. He flees the "Real", attempting to erase evidence of his evil and desire.

4. Text analysis

4.1 Imaginary order and perfect image

First of all, Dorian entered the imaginary order, which denotes a pre-linguistic domain encompassing images, fantasies, and processes of mirror identification according to Lacan [11]. He "knew" himself for the first time through the portrait Basil drew for him, which was a man bestowed

with youth, beauty and innocence. It reflects the perfect image of himself and is described as the “certainly a wonderful work of art, and a wonderful likeness as well” [12]. This portrait can be perceived as a mirror, which gave Dorian a kind of illusion about himself, however, it was too perfect to be true. Influenced by Henry’s opinion that “youth is transient, he made a wish that the portrait age on behalf of himself”, murmuring that “if it were I who was to be always young” [12]. Undoubtedly, this was a deeper illusion which was impossible since the portrait just serves as a mirror of self-identity for Dorian Gray, reflecting the perfect painting as an imagined version of himself, pursuing eternal youth. This imagination is a fantasy, akin to the self in the Imaginary Order mentioned by Lacan, manifesting the idealized image within one’s psyche.

4.2 Symbolic order and constructed subjectivity

Then, Dorian made his next step, which Lacan named as the symbolic order, the realm governed by signifiers, which dictate the normative frameworks shaping a subject’s existential conduct [6]. He fell in love with the actress, Sibyl, which represents the very first time he voluntarily establish a romantic relationship with others. In the romantic relationship, he idealized both himself and Sibyl and praised her as “genius” and “sacred” [12]. However, when this kind of idealism was broken when Sibyl “played with absolutely the false tone”, he tried to establish superior self-identity through devaluing the “Other”, Sibyl [12]. The “other”, consisting of language, culture, and social rules, provides a framework of meaning, but also imposes limitation. This limitation pushed him to broke up with Sibyl cruelly and led to the first change of the portrait—“a touch of cruelty in the mouth” [12]. The effect of this limitation stretched far beyond love relationship. Apart from Sibyl, Dorian also built a friendship with Henry and Basil. The former one influenced him most, who upheld hedonism, which was derived from the social trend of thoughts. Dorian then intended to establish his subjectivity through emerging into the so called social trend including aestheticism and hedonism.

By definition, aestheticism is a philosophical and artistic movement that emerged in the late 19th century, primarily in Britain, advocating for the pursuit of beauty as an end in itself. It emphasizes “art for art’s sake”, rejecting utilitarian or moral purposes in art. The core tenet lies in prioritizing sensory and aesthetic experiences over practical or didactic functions. In the face of the erosion of the purity of art by commercial civilization, aestheticists proposed “art for art’s sake”, advocating artistic autonomy free from moral constraints and social functions. Hedonism is a philosophical doctrine centered on the pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain as life’s ultimate goals. It encompasses both psychological determinism (pleasure as a behavioral motivator) and ethical normativeness (pleasure as a moral standard). In the Victorian era, the hedonistic philosophy had evolved into a consumerist symbol, as described by Marcuse: “Man has become a servant of commodities, with a disconnection between the roles of producer and consumer” [13].

Obviously, Dorian was greatly influenced by these two social trends. On the one hand, the firm belief of aestheticism pushed him to fall in love with the artistic performance of Sibyl and ignore the life or death of Sibyl Vane in the real life. On the other hand, it was due to hedonism that he gradually immersed himself in the decadent lifestyle of the aristocracy, evolving from moral corruption to ultimately crossing the legal boundaries. In conclusion, symbolic order can only find his subjectivity through social relationships.

4.3 Real order and loss of subjectivity

Lastly, Dorian entered a state where Lacan called the real order-the unsymbolizable, traumatic core of experience-encompassing chaos, lack, the death drive, and the impossible [14]. He was driven by both his inner fears and the growing unease of recognizing his loss of subjectivity beneath the hypocritical mask, attempting to utterly destroy the portrait.

This act, undoubtedly led Dorian toward death and self-destruction, signals that he finally failed to establish his identity any more. “The picture itself that was evidence...He would destroy it” [12].The problem worth noticing is the reason beyond Dorian’s failure. One of the possible reason was the prevailing hedonism in the society, therefore, people followed the social trend and indulged themselves in consumption and the pursuit of joy. Due to this certain social background, it was hard for homo sapiens are unable to find a unified sense of self during the period of social transformation. Another reason might be Wilde’s proposition of aestheticism, which means that Dorian’s failure was a kind of demonstration of art. Wilde viewed life itself as an object of artistic imitation as a prominent representative of aestheticism. In that case, as an important character by Wilde, Dorian was then created and featured.

5. Conclusion

In summary, The Picture of Dorian Gray is a novel with undulating plots and indicative ending. The change and evolution of the portrait demonstrates the protagonist, Dorian’s process of seeking to establish subjectivity. Affected by the social trend of aestheticism and hedonism, his identity has been continuously shaped by the outside world, which led to the loss of subjectivity and destruction. As a mian representative of aestheticism, Oscar Wilde depicts how a person get lost under the social trend and illustrates the core concept of “ art for art’s sake” by the ending of his novel. The Picture of Dorian Gray evokes people’s thoughts about life and about subjectivity. Based on the theory of three orders, this paper make a detailed analysis of Dorian’s establishment of subjectivity and revealed the reasons about the failure of seeking subjectivity, which refers to the influence of social trends. In that way, this paper provides readers a new perspective to make psycho-analysis for Dorian Gray’s inner world.

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