

Metaphysically Challenged: Dorian and Sibyl's Confusion of Reality and Non-Reality in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

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Reality and non-reality, life and art: sometimes, it is difficult to distinguish between these elusive ideas. For some, these ideas are so closely enmeshed, that they are not capable of distinguishing between reality and non-reality. Non-reality can become a person's reality, which only produces problems. Such is the case with two characters in Oscar Wilde's novel. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Dorian Gray and Sibyl Vane, because of their confusion between life and art, base their feelings for each other on non-reality; and when they are faced with reality, they are unable to handle it.

Dorian first speaks of his love for Sibyl when talking to Lord Henry Wotton on the subject of marriage. Dorian says, "I don't think I am likely to marry, Henry. I am too much in love" (71). When Henry asks with whom he is in love, Dorian replies "With an actress" (72). Here is the first hint that Dorian's shallow love is not based on reality. Instead of telling Henry the woman's name first, he says that she *is* an actress, as if that were her entire identity. Only later does Dorian tell her name, "Sibyl Vane" (72). Dorian tells Henry that he had met Sibyl at a theater, at a time when he "had a passion for sensations...determined to go out in search of some adventure" (73). He had passed by a theatre where he first saw and fell in love with Sibyl Vane. Nassar remarks, "In his new thirst for sensations, Dorian's first action is to fall in love with Sibyl Vane" (362). The fact that Dorian falls in love with her at a time when he is *seeking* adventure, excitement, and passion, betrays that his love for her is not based on reality. His first impression of her is one that is tainted and made larger than life because he is looking for adventure and passion. Gillespie confirms that Dorian also "acknowledges [Henry's] role in sparking

the infatuation he develops for Sibyl Vane (65), by telling Henry that his love for Sibyl would not have happened “if I had not met you” (73).

Enraptured with the very thought of Sibyl, Dorian describes her to Henry, “Imagine a girl, hardly seventeen years of age, with a little flower-like face, a small Greek head, ... eyes that were violet wells of passion, lips that were like the petals of a rose” (75). So far, it is obvious that Dorian is captivated merely by Sibyl’s outward appearance. Dorian goes on, “She was the loveliest thing I had ever seen in my life. You said to me once that pathos left you unmoved, but that beauty, mere beauty, could fill your eyes with years” (75). Dorian’s description of Sibyl is only of her outward appearance, not of her character. There is no depth at all to his enchantment with her; he is only enchanted by her physique. Gillespie supports, “Sibyl has stirred Dorian’s imagination in much the same way Dorian has affected Basil’s aesthetic sense, but ... Dorian has no sense of the humanity behind the stimulus” (85). In other words, he has no sense of the *person* that Sibyl is. Dorian even speaks of Sibyl’s inner self as “the wonderful soul that is *hidden away* in that little ivory body” (79, emphasis added). From this quote, one can see that Dorian does not care to see Sibyl’s soul (the *real* Sibyl). He is more interested in her “ivory body.” He likes the fact that Sibyl’s soul, the *real* Sibyl, is hidden away; he does not want to see it. Erickson mentions how Dorian has become “entranced by her beauty and ability to act,” not with the woman herself as a person (98). Despite this, Dorian still has the bravery to claim “Harry, I do love her” (76).

Dorian’s initial enchantment with Sibyl leads him to go night after night to see her act at the theatre, where she plays various characters. Dorian says that one night, she is Juliet; another night, “she is Rosalind, and the next evening, she is Imogen. I have seen

her die in the gloom of an Italian tomb ... I have watched her wandering through the forest of Arden” (76). This once again shows that Dorian is *not* falling in love with the real Sibyl Vane. Rather, he loves an actress who plays different roles on stage; the woman to whom he is attracted is not Sibyl, but is Juliet, Rosalind, and Imogen. Dorian has never even seen the real Sibyl. Henry asks him “When is she Sibyl Vane,” and Dorian replies, “Never” (80). Sadly, this is the way he wants it to be.

Dorian does not even have a romantic friendship with Sibyl. When Henry asks Dorian what his “actual relations” are with Sibyl, Dorian cries, “Sibyl Vane is sacred!” (77). This comment shows that Dorian has Sibyl placed on a pedestal, so much so, that he cannot even have a proper human relationship with her. Instead of being able to communicate with her as a man to a woman, he views her as a goddess who cannot be touched or known on a human level. Dorian comments, “The Jew [the owner of the theatre where Sibyl is employed] wanted to tell me her history, but I said it did not interest me ... What is it to me where she came from?” (79). He is not the least interested in trying to know Sibyl’s personhood. Because of Dorian’s very shallow attraction to Sibyl, she and her history (her reality) matter nothing to him; he would rather keep watching the characters she acts out on stage. Dorian remarks, “Every night ... I go to see her act, and every night she is more marvelous” (79). It is crucial to note the fact that Dorian does not say that he goes to see *her*, but he goes to *see her act*, which once more confirms that he is more fascinated with Sibyl’s art and her acting than with her person. Meyers explains that Dorian fools himself “by believing that he is able to love a woman and that his unreal and selfish love would yield to some higher influence, would be *transformed* into some nobler passion” (372). Dorian is only lying to himself.

The first time that Dorian speaks to Sibyl is on the third night he goes to the theater. The Jew encourages Dorian to go and meet her, but Dorian is reluctant at first. Being in love with Rosalind and Juliet, he does not want to meet Sibyl and hence know another “ordinary woman,” as he later calls them. Sibyl the actress is much more intriguing. Since Dorian is in love with Sibyl’s beauty, which is not part of her *real character*, he is reluctant become acquainted with the real Sibyl. Wilde himself confirms this in a letter to the editor of *The Scots Observer*. He writes, “If a man sees the artistic beauty of a thing, he will probably care very little for its ethical import” (Hart-Davis 84). Since Dorian is too interested in the outside beauty of Sibyl, he does not *care* to see any real value in her, proving that his love is falsely based.

Though disinclined to meet her, Dorian finally agrees to do so. He then tells Sibyl of the power she has in her performances, showing her from the beginning his infatuation with her art. Dorian declares that he “can’t help going to see Sibyl play ... even if it is for a single act. I get hungry for her presence; and when I think of the wonderful soul that is hidden away in that little ivory body, I am filled with awe” (79). Dorian has a fetish for Sibyl’s acting, or in other words, a fetish for the non-real Sibyl. He claims that he cannot help it; he is, as San Juan, Jr. says, “enraptured by personae, by masks, and not by persons” (352). Dorian dotes only on Sibyl’s acting and Sibyl’s beauty: the non-real Sibyl.

The reason that Dorian loves Sibyl, even though it is the false Sibyl, is because “Ordinary women never appeal to one’s imagination ... They are quite obvious. But an actress! How different an actress is!” (76). McCollister comments, “Indeed, Dorian falls in love with Sibyl ... when she speaks for other women as she plays her roles” (19). Her

acting, or her art, is what attracts him to her. Meyers also confirms that Dorian is “attracted to Sibyl partly because she is an illusion who is idealized and distanced from him by the stage” (372). It is Sibyl’s art that keeps Dorian enthralled with her. Erickson furthermore validates, “When Dorian professes his love, he is professing a love not for Sibyl Vane, but for the art forms she is capable of creating” (108). Rather than basing his love on reality, he is enraptured by her acting. Erickson agrees that for Dorian, “Sibyl exists only as an artist who takes what is ‘course and brutal’ in her audience and in reality and spiritualizes it in the form of art” (Erickson 108).

Dorian’s false love for Sibyl Vane is a hurtful one, but he is not the only character in the novel who bases love on non-reality. Sibyl Vane is also guilty of doing the same. She might be excused from doing so because her whole life is based on non-reality—acting and the theatre—, and since she is only a young woman with not much experience during a vulnerable time in her life. Nonetheless, she too bases her love on non-reality.

When Sibyl first meets Dorian, she tells him that he looks “like a prince. I must call you Prince Charming” (79). The very name Prince Charming alludes to fairy tales, which, of course, are not real. She therefore begins her relationship with Dorian based on non-reality. She does not see him as a human with simple love, but rather as a Prince Charming or a knight in shining armor who will sweep her off her feet and save her from her life in the theatre.

Later, in her frenzied excitement about Dorian, Sibyl tells her mother, “I am so happy, and you must be happy too!” (86). She then goes on to tell her dream about how her prince and knight will take care of her forever. She says, “Prince Charming rules life for us now” (86). When her mother chides her for being foolish, Sibyl laughs, for the

“joy of a caged bird was in her ... Thin-lipped wisdom spoke at her from the worn chair, hinted at prudence ... She did not listen. She was free in her prison of passion. Her prince, Prince Charming, was with her” (87). Sadly, Sibyl is so caught up in her dreams and false reality, that she cares nothing for the less attractive reality that her mother tries to make her see. Instead of listening to a wiser person who knows about reality, Sibyl instead remains involved in her daydreams. Sibyl goes on to explain to her mother why she loves Dorian, “I love him because he is like what Love himself should be ... Ah! let me be happy forever! (87-88). Sibyl’s mother warns her a second time, mentioned that Sibyl does not even know Prince Charming’s name. The only things that Sibyl does know about him are that he is rich, that he can rescue her from a life in the theatre, and that he looks like a prince. These fantasy-based ideas are obviously not founded on real love.

Even when her brother tries to warn her, Sibyl is still too enraptured to listen. James Vane sullenly mentions that, “He is a gentleman,” and Sibyl answers, “A Prince! What more do you want?” (94). This hints that Sibyl does not care about anything besides the fact that he is a “prince” because this will supposedly solve all her problems. It is clear that Sibyl is basing this on non-reality because it is a sad fact of life that princes do *not* solve all of life’s problems, even if they do care to show up. Overall, her giddiness about the entire situation shows that Sibyl is basing her love on fluctuating emotions instead of on reality.

Finally, Dorian and Sibyl’s false love for each other leads them both to misery. Because their loves are not based on something stable, but rather on art and fantasy, they are not used to handling reality. When they *are* forced to face reality, neither of them is capable of managing it.

Sibyl comes face to face with reality when one night she simply realizes that Dorian's love, although based on fantasy, is something real. All her life up to this point had been based on non-reality alone. Her career is acting—living on the stage and pretending for a job. The things she does on stage are not real life, and this night, she realizes that all those things are only shadows. Dorian's love is the one thing that is real to her. She later explains it to Dorian, "Before I knew you, acting was the one reality of my life. It was only in the theatre that I lived. I thought it was all true ... I believed in everything ... The painted scenes were my world. I knew nothing but shadows, and I thought them real. You came ... You taught me what reality really is" (114). Dorian's love breaks her world of "shadows," and then she sees reality's face. Sibyl continues, "Tonight, for the first time in my life, I saw through the hollowness, the sham, the silliness of the empty pageant in which I had always played. Tonight for the first time, I became conscious ... that the words I had to speak were unreal, were not my words, were not what I wanted to say" (114-115). Dorian has brought her to something "higher," something that makes all her art a mere reflection (115) compared to his love. Being faced with this reality for the first time, Sibyl is not quite sure what to do. Suddenly, the life she has lived for so long in art is broken; now that life is made of "shadows." She begins to understand reality, but she staggers under the weight of it and cannot handle it.

On this night when Sibyl discovers reality, she is acting on the stage again, and Dorian is bringing Henry and Basil to see her art. This first time since her discovery of reality, Sibyl cannot find a balance between real life and her art on the stage. She forsakes her acting and focuses on the real love and real life that she has just begun to

understand. Therefore, her acting is poorly done. It is here that the cause of Sibyl's poor handling of reality (her bad acting) *becomes* Dorian's discovery of reality.

Dorian, with Henry and Basil, watch Sibyl acting. Dorian notices that "she was curiously listless" (111). She shows no emotion when speaking to other characters, "The voice was exquisite, but from the point of view of tone it was absolutely false. It was wrong in color. It took all the life from the verse. It made the passion unreal" (111). Dorian, Henry, and Basil are disappointed in her and in her bad acting. Sadly, even "her gestures became absurdly artificial. She over-emphasized everything she had to say ... It was simply bad art. She was a complete failure" to her audience (111-112). After the play is over, Sibyl even admits to Dorian, "How badly I acted tonight!" (114).

Now that Sibyl loves Dorian, she can no longer pretend that she loves someone in a play. She later explains to Dorian, "I shall always be bad ... I shall never act well again ... Before I knew you, acting was the one reality of my life ... You taught me what reality really is. Tonight ... I saw through the hollowness of the theatre" (114). Now that she knows what "true reality" is, she is unable to act and pretend. Her love, at first exclusive to non-reality, is made aware of reality, and so she cannot act. In a way, she fails; "The obvious reason of course is the fact that Sibyl, no longer immersed in her act, becomes aware of her spectators; she loses unity of self as person and actress" (San Juan, Jr. 359). She is physically unable to dramatize because Dorian and his love have spoiled all the false love that she once pretended in the theatre. She will never be able to act again, she says, for "You have made me understand what love really is...I have grown sick of shadows" (115). Erickson confirms this idea, "When she falls in love with him, she loses her ability to perform" (98). Furthermore, "When Sibyl confesses her love for

Dorian, she in effect, is rejecting art” for the reality she has never known until this night (Erickson 102). Nassar also speaks of this rejecting of “art for life” (363) and shows how Sibyl rejects it because of her sudden realization of the reality of Dorian’s love.

Sibyl’s rejection of art for life is the reality with which Dorian is suddenly faced. The things that made him love Sibyl (her art and her acting) have suddenly disappeared. She is now just an “ordinary woman” who will not keep his imagination guessing. She has none of the fervor and excitement that attracted him to her in the first place. Faced with the *real* Sibyl Vane (rather than her art), Dorian suddenly does not love her anymore because he cannot manage the reality of who Sibyl the person is. Dorian tells her: “You have killed my love. You used to stir my imagination. Now you don’t even stir my curiosity. You simply produce no effect. I loved you because you were marvelous, because you had genius and intellect ... You are nothing to me now...A third-rate actress with a pretty face” (115-116).

Dorian’s cruel rejection of Sibyl simply because she loves him is one of his lowest acts. Dorian never truly loved Sibyl; “He tries to love her because he believes it will be good for him to love a woman, but recoils when confronted with a real woman who loves him” (Meyers 372). Furthermore, Dorian does not care that he might be hurting Sibyl. He is hard-hearted because he hates the reality with which he is now faced. Because he is too concerned with his own beauty and youth, this “leads him to place the stimulation of the senses through exotic beauty above every other value” (Fido 85). Though Sibyl begs him not to leave her, he departs with one last remark, “You have disappointed me” (117). Dorian can allow himself to be this cruel because he is

responding “only to the actress in Sibyl rather than to her daylight personality” (San Juan, Jr. 352). Left alone, Sibyl feels that there is only one option left to her: suicide.

The next day, when Henry tells Dorian about Sibyl’s death, he says, “The girl never really lived, and so she has never really died. To you at least she was always a dream, a phantom ... The moment she touched actual life, she marred it, and it marred her, and so she passed away” (133). Sibyl cannot handle reality, and her bad acting marred reality. The bad acting causes Dorian to reject her, which leads her to commit suicide (reality marred her). In other words, faced with the reality of love, she cannot act anymore. Faced with the reality of Dorian’s rejection, she dies. Nassar asserts, “She exists in a protective world of art from which she cannot emerge without dying” (363). When she emerges, reality cause her death. Dorian himself sums up the idea, “She acted badly because she had known the reality of love. When she knew its unreality, she died, as Juliet might have died” (139). To the end, Dorian still thinks of Sibyl as another character in a play.

Dorian and Sibyl’s experience causes them both troubles: Dorian was disappointed in Sibyl, and Sibyl was rejected by someone she loved. Indeed, it is “the irreconcilable conflict between art and life,” between reality and non-reality, that “led to the suicide of Sibyl” (Meyers 373) and the disappointment of Dorian. Nietzsche even speaks of how one can be so “ensnared by art’s seductive veil of beauty fluttering before his eyes” (109). This very idea happens to Dorian and Sibyl, and sadly, Dorian does not learn a lesson at all. Rather, he stays in a state of metaphysical confusion for the rest of his life.

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