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Theory of Love

by Ari Landando

The Picture of Dorian Gray by Oscar Wilde is a story full of unhealthy relationships between foolish people. Dorian Gray, a young man in possession of excessive beauty, has a portrait in his attic that ages and displays his sins while he remains young forever. The painter of this portrait, Basil Hallward, is deeply in love with the subject and blind to his flaws. Basil's old friend, Lord Henry Wotton, is fascinated by the young Dorian Gray and what he might become. Dorian in turn falls in love with the young actress, Sibyl Vane, who dreams of running away with him from the life she has found herself trapped in. These four people, as well as other players like Sibyl's brother James, and Dorian's estranged friend Alan Campbell, have their lives changed throughout the book by the vastly different perceptions they all have of each other, especially of Dorian Gray. Many of them end up in his life because they want to love him, and be loved by him, but his relationships tend to be influenced by idolatry, vanity, and dishonesty. These are some of the aspects of love that social psychologist Erich Fromm writes about in *Art of Loving*. There are many decisions and developments that can be related to Fromm's theories throughout the events of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. These events are set in motion beginning with Dorian and Basil's first meeting, at a party hosted by a woman named Lady Brandon.

When Dorian and Basil first saw each other from across the room, they immediately thought that they were destined to meet. Basil felt that Dorian would change his life completely. "I knew that I had come face to face with someone whose mere personality was so fascinating that, if I allowed it to do so, it would absorb my whole nature, my whole soul, my very art itself" (14). In this moment, Basil experiences something adjacent to love at first sight. Fromm writes briefly about this phenomenon, the feeling of a very sudden connection with a stranger, saying that it "...is one of the most exhilarating, most exciting experiences in life. It is all the more wonderful and miraculous for persons who have been shut off, isolated, without love...However, this type of love is by its very nature not lasting. The two persons become well acquainted, their intimacy loses more and more its miraculous character, until their antagonism, their disappointments, their mutual boredom kill whatever is left of the initial excitement" (4). For their part, Dorian and Basil became friends quickly, and for some time saw each other every day after that. Basil was captivated by Dorian's beautiful looks and nature. Soon he also found that Dorian's mere presence brought out the beauty in the rest of the world that he had always looked for, but never been able to capture in his work. When Lord Henry finally convinces Basil to tell him about Dorian, Basil has come to depend greatly on Dorian, saying that he can only be

happy if he sees him every day, and that “He is all my art to me now” (18).

Basil put Dorian up on a kind of pedestal, but in some way he knows he is the one who put him there. While he continues thinking of Dorian as the most beautiful, pure person he had ever met, he also sees that this admiration is one sided. As Basil says to Lord Henry, “Of course I flatter him dreadfully. I find a strange pleasure in saying things to him that I know I shall be sorry for having said. As a rule, he is charming to me, and we sit in the studio and talk of a thousand things. Now and then, however, he is horribly thoughtless, and seems to take a great delight in giving me pain. Then I feel, Harry, that I have given away my whole soul to someone who treats it as if it were a flower to put in his coat, a bit of decoration to charm his vanity, an ornament for a summer’s day” (21). Despite this imbalance, Basil remains devoted to Dorian. Basil has a tendency to ignore the flaws of his friends to a point that it becomes detrimental. This issue is clear from his very first conversation with Harry, when he responds to Harry’s many offensive and cynical opinions with comments like, “I don’t believe a single word you have said, and, what is more, Harry, I feel sure you don’t either” (17). This pattern continues in his relationship with Dorian, a relationship that likely would have faded away completely if not for Basil’s willfully ignorant love for him. Basil ignores the fact that Dorian doesn’t care much for him anymore, and as time goes on, he ignores everything that indicates the corrupted, careless man Dorian is becoming, until it is no longer possible to ignore.

Dorian, in his earlier months away from Basil’s influence and under Harry’s, meets Sibyl Vane. He had been making an effort to take cues from Harry, and one thing he resolved to do was search for some kind of adventure. He ends up watching a terrible production of *Romeo and Juliet*. That night, he falls in love with the leading lady. Her name, as he later learns, is Sibyl Vane. He is amazed by her acting and falls in love with each of her roles every night. He loves her for her art, describing his feelings to Harry by telling him, “She is everything to me in life” (70). He sees her in three different roles before he sees her as Sibyl, talking to her after a performance as Rosalind. Although they are both nervous, their meeting goes well, and they are soon engaged to be married. For Sibyl, Dorian is a way out of the situation she’s trapped in, and she also finds herself in love with him. She wants a better life for herself and her mother, so despite her brother’s hesitation, she is excited to marry Dorian. She calls him “Prince Charming” and says “... he is like what Love himself should be” (82).

Harry and Basil are both unsure about Dorian’s decision, but Harry is intrigued by how the affair might end. In order to convince them, Dorian insists that Harry and Basil join him to see Sibyl play the night after he proposed. That night, for the first time, Dorian finds himself disappointed by her performance.

In both of these cases, one party has elevated the other to a status above their fellow human beings, but when the illusion of their perfection is broken, things go very differently for the people involved. Basil specifically is actively working to maintain that illusion, and very much wants Dorian to confirm it. At first, Basil’s view of Dorian is fairly

harmless. The problem of Basil ignoring Dorian's flaws and instead constantly complimenting him isn't as much of a problem when Dorian is a young man who, for the most part, wants to help people, but who can sometimes be disrespectful in conversation. However, things change very early on, when Basil finishes his portrait of Dorian. This is the same day that Harry meets Dorian.

It is after Harry has told him how his youth and beauty will fade, and after Basil finally finishes his portrait, that Dorian realizes how important it is to him that he remain beautiful, and how jealous he is of the painting. "Why should it keep what I must lose? Every moment that passes takes something from me and gives something to it. Oh, if it were only the other way! If the picture could change, and I could be always what I am now!" (40). After this meeting, Dorian spends much more time with Harry, and much less time with Basil, sometimes going months without seeing him. Meanwhile Dorian tells Harry everything, and listens intently to Harry's many philosophies, opinions, and discoveries. As Harry remains fascinated by his development, Dorian becomes a very different person, acting only for himself, and leaving behind many ruined lives through the years. The first of these lives is that of Sibyl Vane.

On the night Dorian attends the theater with Basil and Harry, Sibyl plays very badly. Everything charming about her performance has left it, and Dorian is heartbroken. When he confronts her after the play, she confesses that in her very real love for him, she had realized how fake the play she was acting in was. "I might mimic a passion that I do not feel, but I cannot mimic one that burns me like fire" (114). Fromm focusses, from many points of view, on love being a way to escape feeling separate from the world as a whole. "Being separate means being cut off, without any capacity to use my human powers. Hence to be separate means to be helpless, unable to grasp the world—things and people—actively; it means that the world can invade me without my ability to react. Thus, separateness is the source of intense anxiety" (8). Dorian had given Sibyl the opportunity to interact with the world as whole, not just the small part of it that she was confined to. However, while he is inspired by her art and the roles she plays, he is not at all interested in her as a person. He tells her that her sorry performance has killed his love, calling her "A third-rate actress with a pretty face" (115), and leaves. That night, the portrait changes for the first time.

Basil allows his perception of Dorian to be challenged much later in the book. It is years later, on the eve of Dorian's thirty eighth birthday, that he finally confronts him. After years of being almost completely separated, Basil grew more and more concerned for his friend. He saw the evidence that Dorian was hurting the people he socialized with, but did not want to believe any of it. He continued doing what he usually did, making excuses for Dorian and trying to justify the things he had said and done. He spent years trying to continue seeing Dorian as the perfect young man he was when they met. Just before he departs on a trip to Paris for six months, he resolves to tell Dorian what he has heard, and that he wants Dorian to be better. After arguing with him about this subject, Basil tells Dorian, "You must give me
