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THE DOPPELGÄNGER AND THE FRAGMENTATION OF IDENTITY IN OSCAR WILDE'S THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY

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Abstract

The doppelgänger motif has long been an important literary device for investigating identity, psychological conflict and the divided self. We also discover this motif in Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray, where the portrait serves as Dorian Gray's psychological and moral double. This study explores Wilde's use of the doppelgänger to express fragmentation, repression and duality of the self. This article employs qualitative textual analysis and psychoanalytic literary criticism to examine the symbolic function of the portrait, the influence of Lord Henry Wotton, and the critique of Victorian social values in the novel. The results show that the portrait is a reflection of Dorian's hidden self, showing the impossibility of separating the external appearance from the inner reality.

Moreover, the novel challenges the traditional idea of a stable identity, presenting the self as divided and subject to the ongoing forces of desire, guilt and social pressure. The study concludes that Wilde transforms the traditional Gothic double into a complex psychological symbol that still resonates with contemporary discussions of identity and selfhood.

Keywords: doppelgänger, double, identity, Oscar Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray, psychological fragmentation, Gothic literature

1. Introduction

The doppelgänger, or double, is one of the most persistent motifs in the literature of the world. Traditionally associated with supernatural experiences and divided identities, the doppelgänger has become a powerful literary tool for exploring the intricacies of human consciousness (Webber, 1996). Literary doubles frequently appear as manifestations of repressed desire, repressed emotions, or conflicting aspects of personality thus questioning the notion of a unified self.

The Picture of Dorian Gray (1890) by Oscar Wilde contains an original interpretation of this motif. In contrast to the typical doppelgänger story involving a human double, Wilde has Dorian Gray's double in a portrait. Dorian himself is young and beautiful but the portrait shows the effects of his wicked lifestyle. A split between appearance and reality.

Existing studies have addressed the novel from aesthetic, moral, and psychoanalytic standpoints, but the role of the portrait as a psychological doppelgänger is particularly relevant for understanding Wilde's conception of identity. Hence, the purpose of this study is to investigate how the motif of doppelgänger contributes to the representation of identity fragmentation, repression, and moral conflict in The Picture of Dorian Gray.

The research seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How does the portrait function as Dorian Gray's doppelgänger?
2. In what ways does the doppelgänger motif represent psychological fragmentation?
3. How does Wilde employ doubling to critique Victorian social and moral values?

2. Methodology

In this study, we use a qualitative research design with textual analysis and literary criticism. Main source Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray (1890/2003). The analysis is based on the

psychoanalytic theories of the double and identity formulated by Jung (1969), Rank (1971), and on contemporary scholarship on the doppelgänger by Webber (1996), Punter and Byron (2004), and Živković (2000).

The main analytical tool used in this study is close reading. The key passages involving the portrait, Dorian Gray and Lord Henry Wotton are analyzed to find out the representations of duality, repression and fragmentation of identity. Thematic analysis is then used to explore recurring themes of appearance, morality, selfhood and psychological conflict.

The interpretation of the findings is guided by psychoanalytic concepts such as the shadow self, repression, and divided identity. This methodological approach enables a deeper understanding of how Wilde adapts the traditional doppelgänger motif to investigate psychological and social concerns.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. The Portrait as a Psychological Doppelgänger

The analysis reveals that the portrait functions as Dorian Gray's psychological double rather than merely a supernatural object. Following Dorian's wish that the portrait age in his place, the painting begins to absorb the consequences of his actions while preserving his youthful appearance (Wilde, 1890/2003). As a result, the portrait becomes an external representation of his hidden self.

Wilde introduces this process when Dorian passionately exclaims:

"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!" (Wilde, 1890/2003, p. 28).

This moment serves as the foundation of the doppelgänger relationship. The wish creates a division between Dorian's physical body and his moral identity, allowing the portrait to become a repository of his sins and experiences. Unlike traditional literary doubles that appear as separate individuals, Wilde's doppelgänger manifests through an object that acquires psychological significance.

As Dorian's moral corruption increases, the portrait increasingly reflects his hidden nature. After the death of Sibyl Vane, Dorian notices the first alteration in the painting:

"There was a touch of cruelty in the mouth" (Wilde, 1890/2003, p. 89).

The transformation symbolizes the emergence of repressed impulses and demonstrates that the portrait functions as a visible record of Dorian's psychological decline. Consequently, the portrait acts simultaneously as a conscience, a mirror, and an alternative self.

This finding supports Jung's (1969) theory of the shadow, which suggests that individuals repress aspects of their personalities that conflict with their desired self-image. The portrait embodies precisely those qualities that Dorian refuses to acknowledge.

3.2. Identity Fragmentation and Repression

A second significant finding concerns the fragmentation of identity. As Dorian increasingly separates his public appearance from his inner reality, the gap between the two selves widens. Although society perceives him as beautiful and innocent, the portrait reveals the corruption concealed beneath this façade.

The analysis demonstrates that Dorian's attempt to avoid responsibility ultimately intensifies his psychological conflict. Rather than eliminating guilt and moral consequences, repression transfers them to the portrait. Dorian gradually becomes obsessed with concealing the painting from others because it exposes truths that he is unwilling to confront.

This psychological division is evident when Dorian reflects:

"Each of us has Heaven and Hell in him" (Wilde, 1890/2003, p. 134).

The statement encapsulates the novel's central concern with duality and suggests that good and evil coexist within every individual. Wilde rejects simplistic moral binaries and instead portrays identity as a dynamic interaction of opposing forces.

Furthermore, Dorian's growing fear of the portrait reveals the consequences of repression. The more intensely he attempts to distance himself from the image, the more power it gains over his consciousness. This process corresponds with Rank's (1971) interpretation of the double as a repository of fears and suppressed impulses.

Moreover, Wilde challenges the assumption that identity is stable and unified. The portrait's transformations reveal that selfhood is fluid, contradictory, and continuously shaped by personal choices and experiences.

3.3. Lord Henry and Ideological Doubling

The study further reveals that doubling occurs not only through the portrait but also through the relationship between Dorian and Lord Henry Wotton. Lord Henry's philosophy of hedonism and aesthetic pleasure significantly influences Dorian's worldview and contributes to his moral decline.

Early in the novel, Lord Henry encourages Dorian to pursue pleasure above all else:

"The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it" (Wilde, 1890/2003, p. 18).

This statement becomes a guiding principle in Dorian's life and initiates his gradual transformation. In this respect, Lord Henry functions as an ideological double who articulates desires that Dorian later internalizes as his own.

Unlike the portrait, which reflects Dorian's hidden self, Lord Henry actively shapes the development of that self. Their relationship illustrates how doubling can occur through intellectual and psychological influence rather than physical resemblance.

Consequently, Wilde presents multiple forms of doubling that reinforce the novel's exploration of divided identity. While the portrait represents Dorian's repressed self, Lord Henry symbolizes the external forces that encourage the emergence of those repressed desires.

3.4. Critique of Victorian Society

The findings also indicate that the doppelgänger motif serves an important social function. Through the contrast between Dorian's appearance and the portrait's corruption, Wilde critiques Victorian society's emphasis on beauty, status, and external respectability.

While society continues to admire Dorian because of his youthful beauty, the portrait exposes the reality hidden beneath social appearances. This contrast demonstrates the dangers of valuing image over authenticity and highlights the hypocrisy embedded within Victorian moral culture (Punter & Byron, 2004).

As Dorian becomes increasingly conscious of the discrepancy between his appearance and his true nature, he recognizes the symbolic power of the portrait:

"What the worm was to the corpse, his sins would be to the painted image on the canvas" (Wilde, 1890/2003, p. 156).

The image illustrates the destructive effect of moral corruption and reinforces the idea that external beauty cannot conceal inner decay indefinitely.

The culmination of this conflict occurs in the novel's final scene when Dorian attempts to destroy the portrait. Believing that he can eliminate the evidence of his corruption, he stabs the canvas. However, the act results in his own death. Wilde writes:

"When they entered, they found hanging upon the wall a splendid portrait of their master as they had last seen him... Lying on the floor was a dead man, in evening dress, with a knife in his heart, withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage" (Wilde, 1890/2003, p. 254).

This conclusion demonstrates that the self and its double cannot be permanently separated. The destruction of the portrait leads to the destruction of Dorian because both are inseparable components of the same identity.

Therefore, the doppelgänger operates not only as a psychological symbol but also as a vehicle for social criticism. By exposing the disparity between appearance and reality, Wilde challenges Victorian ideals of beauty, morality, and respectability while emphasizing the inevitable consequences of self-deception.

4. Conclusion

The current study has analyzed the function of the doppelgänger motif in Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray by means of psychoanalytic literary criticism. The results indicate that the portrait is the psychological double of Dorian Gray, externalising the desires, guilt and corruption that he attempts to repress.

Furthermore, the analysis shows that Wilde uses the doppelgänger motif to examine the splitting of identity and to question the usual notion of the unity of the self. In the relationship between Dorian, the portrait and Lord Henry, identity is presented as a dynamic and contradictory construct, shaped by internal impulses and social influences as well.

Finally, the study demonstrates the doppelganger as a powerful tool of social critique. Wilde faces up to the difference between appearance and reality.

By exposing the disparity between appearance and reality, Wilde challenges Victorian ideals of beauty, morality, and respectability. The enduring significance of the novel lies in its ability to transform the traditional Gothic double into a sophisticated exploration of psychological complexity and human identity.

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