

EXPLORING THE ETHICS
OF *THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY*

M. Kip Hartvigsen—Department of English

What makes a book a good friend? This is the question English majors have been debating in their capstone course this semester. The question itself is derived from Wayne C. Booth's *The Company We Keep* (1988), a text that has reinvigorated the discussion of ethics in literature. Essentially Booth sees a book as a friend and acknowledges that choosing what we read is not much different from choosing with whom we will associate. Both books and people have an impact on what we become. Most literary critics in recent decades would say, "Art is art. We create art for art's sake. We don't use it for moral instruction." Booth, however, believes art influences character, and so it is *also* important that we ask, "Does this book help me become a better person?"

In the capstone course, we've recently discussed a book that illuminates Booth's claim—that books, like people, have the power to inspire or corrupt. In Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the protagonist, Dorian Gray, is destroyed in part by a novel he reads advocating the thrill of sense experience divorced from moral consequence. Lord Henry Wotton, Gray's close friend, claims, "The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it," and "one's own life—that is the important thing." As a friend, Wotton shares with Gray a novel whose hero aptly exemplifies Wotton's hedonistic code. It is a novel Gray finds spellbinding.

Most of us remember hearing about, if not reading, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* during our high school days. Then the book truly sounded like an episode from *The Twilight Zone*. The young Dorian Gray's beauty and innocence are captured on an artist's canvas. Falling in love with his portrait, the innocent Gray makes a whimsical wish that comes true. (Interestingly Wilde is credited for having said, "When the gods wish to punish us, they answer our prayers.") In person, Dorian Gray will have eternal youth and good looks; his portrait will absorb the effects of aging and the consequences of his moral choices.

In the course of Wilde's story, Gray embraces the values espoused in Wotton's novel, a book that ultimately overwhelms him. Choosing a life of self indulgence, Gray himself radiates beauty and innocence as his portrait registers the state of his cankered soul. At one point, the artist responsible for the portrait presses Gray to see it. The artist is stunned: "This is what you have done with your life. . . why you must be worse even than those who talk against you fancy you to be!" Wilde describes the picture like this: "the surface seemed to be quite undisturbed. . . . It was from within, apparently that the foulness and horror had come.

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Through some strange quickening of inner life the leprosy of sin were slowly eating the thing away. The rotting of a corpse in a watery grave was not so fearful." In fact, the picture becomes so macabre, Gray conceals it in a locked room, drawn to and repulsed by it at the same time.

Finally Gray recognizes that the code of the novel he embraced has destroyed his soul and laments, "There is no one with whom I would not change places." In a climactic scene, Gray confronts Wotton: "You poisoned me with a book once." To this accusation, Wotton responds coldly, "My dear boy, you are really beginning to moralize. You will soon be going about like the converted, and the revivalist, warning people against all the sin of which you have grown tired. . . . As for being poisoned by a book, there is no such thing as that. Art has no influence upon action. It annihilates the desire to act. It is superbly sterile." Succinctly stated, here are the very conflicting views about literature we encounter in our own times: Gray claims, "a book *can* poison"; Wotton retorts, "art has *no* influence upon action." Where does Wilde stand in the debate? In *Dorian Gray* he stands with Booth. Wilde vividly represents the corrupting power of the book in Gray's gruesome portrait which reflects the wretched state of his mind.

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Where do the English capstone students stand in this debate? Is literature best studied merely as art? Or should it incorporate as well an ethical perspective? Having been counseled by Church leaders to be mindful of the moral content of books and movies, they willingly acknowledge the impact of art on their moral development—I'm certain a much different view from many of the students and faculty at State U.

Because we have become excited about the ethics of literature in the capstone course, we are now pushing ourselves to articulate a philosophy that helps us answer fairly and rationally that seminal question: "What makes a book a good friend?" Given the predominant popular culture, often so alien to that which is "virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy," I can think of no better time to consider the impact of books on our moral development.

My class has been provoked by *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. It has become for us a vivid study of how friendship with a book—Dorian Gray's devotion to Lord Wotton's tainted novel—can "poison." Yet, we have concluded that Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is, indeed, a *good* friend. It has encouraged serious conversations about the ethics of literature. It has helped us understand how evil can destroy goodness. It has showed us how art can communicate ideas forcefully. And it was a *good* read (the dramatic ending of which, please note, I have not given away). ☺