The Tragedy of Dorian Gray: From the Perspective of Lacan's Three Registers Hypothesis

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Abstract. Oscar Wilde's novel, The Picture of Dorian Gray, tells a story of the conflict between soul and body, with a tragic suicide of Dorian Gray as an end. Analyzing the reasons for the protagonist's suicide tragedy in The Picture of Dorian Gray can help readers better understand the development and literary connotation of the novel. This article takes Lacan's three registers hypothesis psychoanalytic method as the theoretical perspective, returns to the original text, focuses on the protagonist's psychological characteristics and interaction with the "Others," and analyzes the inner interaction of the "three registers hypothesis" in his growth process, thereby interpreting the reasons why Dorian Gray commits a tragic suicide. This paper believes that Dorian Gray leads to his internal imbalance while seeking harmony between the Imaginary and the Symbolic, eventually leading to his suicide. Analyzing the tragedy of Dorian Gray from the perspective of Lacan's "three registers hypothesis" theory enables readers and researchers to have a deeper understanding of the character of the protagonist in the novel.

Keywords: Lacan; The three registers hypothesis; The Picture of Dorian Gray; Oscar Wilde; Victorian Era.

1. Introduction

The wish of Dorian Gray was that "If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old⋯I would give my soul for that." This introduces the core premise of the structure-the separation of the soul from the physical body, highlighting the tragic theme of this novel: the misalignment of self-awareness. After making this Faustian decision, Dorian discovered that the corruption of his soul caused the portrait to age, while his physical appearance remained unscathed. The portrait becomes a visual manifestation of his soul, serving as a judge of conscience and revealing Dorian's darkest secrets. Dorian found his restoration until his suicide at the end of the book. His journey to a tragic ending is influenced by himself and "others", experiencing the process of "from love to fear", "overcoming fear", and "failed correction," ultimately leading to his destruction. Previous studies have also focused on using Lacanian psychoanalytic methods to analyze this work, but often overemphasized the "mirror stage," the Imaginary, while neglecting the inner interaction among it, the Symbolic and the Real: the fundamental role of the Imaginary, the strengthening function of the Symbolic, and the influence of external forces outside of the text. This paper aims to use a more systematic Lacanian "three registers hypothesis" psychoanalytic method to analyze the character psychology of Dorian Gray and his interaction with "the others," interpreting the cause of the tragedy and enriching the understanding of the text.

2. Lacan's "Three Registers Hypothesis" Theory

The Three Registers Hypothesis of psychoanalysis was proposed by the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, which mainly explains the process of self-construction, essence, and formation of self-identity. Lacan believes that human self-awareness has three stages of development, namely from the world of the Real (material world) to the Imaginary, and then to the Symbolic. Taking the growth of a baby as an example, the baby's body and the material entities seen by the baby belong to the category of the world of the Real. The Imaginary or "mirror stage" occurs after the world of the Real. In the "mirror stage," when a baby aged 6-18 looks in a mirror, it recognizes itself for the first time:

recognizing the "self" through the image in the mirror and the "other" that is distinct from its physical entity, and then gains self-awareness by reference to the "other." At this moment, the baby has the ability to imagine itself as a whole person and begins to differentiate the parts that do not belong to itself in the surroundings. After that, the baby enters the world of linguistic symbols and is able to symbolize and express the ego, entering the symbolic world.

The last two in the Three Registers Hypothesis theory both emphasize the influence of the "other." Lacan makes a conceptual distinction between the "other" and the "Other." The "other" refers to the mirror image mentioned above, corresponding to the Imaginary; the "Other" is an anonymous "other" generated by the language symbol system, corresponding to the entire symbolic world that is full of language, movement, symbols, and subjective experience. Both of these emphasize the external forces on an individual's self-awareness, which is the process of internalizing the "others," Forming a lifelong impact on the development of individual self-awareness.

The Picture of Dorian Gray is the only full-length novel of the British playwright and novelist Oscar Wilde. It tells the story of a noble and beautiful young man named Dorian Gray, who made a wish that his picture would age while he remains forever young, and his wish would come true. His beauty lasted, but his inner self deteriorated, eventually leading to his self-destruction. The "others" around Dorian Gray, from the initially beautiful painting to the interaction with various characters in the upper social circle, all played an important role in the negative change of his self-awareness.

According to the three registers hypothesis theory, the effect of the portrait is similar to the mirror image in Lacan's "mirror theory," which is the "other." The social environment around Dorian represents the "Other" of the Symbolic. Through the former, like a baby retaining the image of the imaginary in its mind, Dorian enters the "mirror experience" and believes that the handsome man in it is himself, having the harmonious unity of mind and appearance. However, a playful wish leads to Dorian's separation of body and soul. His friend, Lord Henry, uses "toxic language" to lure him into seeking exciting experiences, exerting a bad influence. In reality, the sins of Dorian Gray's gradually corrupted soul go unpunished while his elegant and graceful appearance remains intact. The discrepancy between the portrait's evaluation and social evaluation leads to Dorian's increasingly distorted self-awareness. The climax of the contradiction is when Dorian pierces the portrait. At the moment when the portrait was punctured, Dorian instantly aged while the portrait returned to its original beauty. The fantastical suicide of "portrait restoration" allows everything to return to its origin, achieving a balance in the novel's structure and affirming the fact that Dorian has lost clear self-awareness.

3. The Fundamental Role of the "other"

The influence of the "mirror image" on Dorian Gray's self-awareness is the premise of the plots' development. In this book, the "other" that affects Dorian is the portrait. It appears after Dorian has grown up, so it is slightly different from the "mirror stage" of infancy, but it can still have a similar effect on self-awareness as the "imaginary world" and belongs to the "sub-imaginary world." The first chapter of the book focuses on Dorian Gray's portrait, pointing out that at this time his cognitive development is still innocent and ignorant, similar to the state of an infant who has not yet recognized his or her own completeness. When Basil painted the portrait, it triggered Dorian's heart like Narcissus with his beauty. When Dorian saw the portrait, he suddenly realized his own beauty and mistakenly believed that he is the same as the portrait. However, Basil "put too much of himself into the picture" and mixed in a lot of his own beautification and admiration of Dorian, so the portrait and the model Dorian Gray are not equivalent. When Basil wanted to destroy the portrait, Dorian Gray screamed "It would be murder!", which shows that Dorian has mistakenly identifies the portrait as a part of himself. This leads to the fact that every time he imagines his own image afterwards, he would use this "image" from his memory to recognize himself. This is the process by which the Imaginary influences Dorian's self-awareness.

It should be noted that, strictly speaking, according to Lacan's theory of the three registers hypothesis, Dorian is already an adult at this time and had entered the Symbolic stage, but the influence of the portrait in a phase as Sub-imaginary would still be retained in his subsequent development process. Therefore, the influence of the others that Dorian has received, namely the Imaginary and the Symbolic, are interwoven and accompany each other. In fact, before the influence of the "sub-imaginary world" of the portrait occurred, Dorian has already been partially influenced by the Symbolic. For example, Lord Henry's discourse on youth fleeting - "When your youth goes, your beauty will go with it...Be always searching for now sensations. Be afraid of nothing..." changes his self-awareness and strengthened the influence of the portrait, making Dorian realize that the beauty of appearance will eventually age, and he should seize the time to experience the "exciting" life of youth.

4. The Reinforcing Effect of the "Other"

"Words! Mere words… One could not escape from them." Compared with the theories of the Imaginary, the "other," Lacan's theory of the Symbolic, the "Other", emphasizes more the impact of social relationships on individuals' self-awareness. Dorian Gray, with his beauty and personality charm, emerged in high society thus received evaluations from social relationships, which gave him a new understanding of himself. At the same time, the portrait also changed with Dorian's evil deeds, giving him the opposite "evaluation" from that of high society. Both aspects of "evaluation" affect Dorian Gray's self-awareness: on the one hand, through the portrait, he recognizes the sinfulness of his soul; on the other hand, through the unchanging beauty and praise in reality, he is relieved that his sins are not suspected or discovered. This makes Dorian Gray's self-awareness split and leads him to extremism. The novel describes in detail the changes in Dorian Gray's self-awareness. Taking the change in Dorian's attitude towards the portrait as a clue, his personal cognitive development shows obvious characteristics of different stages: cherishing, fearing, contempt, correcting, and failing. The paper intends to analyze the character's psychological transformation process from the perspective of Lacan's Three Registers Hypothesis theory and interpret the reason for Dorian Gray's suicide tragedy.

4.1 Love to Hate

The first time Dorian Gray saw his portrait, he realized his own physical beauty and treasured the painting as a part of himself, even more beautiful than his own reflection in the mirror. However, his attitude towards the painting changed as it began to reflect his moral decay. After falling in love with actress Sybil Vinn and promising to marry her, Dorian impulsively abandoned her as his freshness faded away and caused her death. His betrayal was soon reflected in the portrait, as he saw "the lines of cruelty round the mouth as clearly as if he had been looking into a mirror after he had done some dreadful thing". Dorian remembers his wish for the painting to age and bear the burden of his sins while he remains forever young and innocent. He becomes afraid of the supernatural phenomenon and fears that his conscience will be exposed.

At this point, the "Other" begins to play a significant role. Lord Henry "helps" Dorian overcome his fear with his words, which tempts Dorian to take risks, ignoring the fact that his actions caused Sybil's suicide. He concealed the secret of the portrait from Basil, who was about to exhibit it, thus hurt Basil's love for him. He chose to live by Lord Henry's charming and poisonous philosophy. For example, when Dorian blamed himself for being cruel in love, Henry said, "They remain slaves looking for their masters…" Later, Henry gave Dorian a book promoting pleasure and an exciting life, to which Dorian became addicted. "It was a poisonous book... as he passed from chapter to chapter...made him unconscious of the falling day and creeping shadows." The social language of the Symbolic strongly changes Dorian's way of thinking. He unconsciously begins to act according to the instructions in the book, often disappearing to experience life and doing anything without restraint, resulting in many rumors. When Dorian suddenly turned back and lifted the cloth revealing the painting, he found the face uglier and more hideous than before. Every time he sees the portrait,

Dorian seemed to rediscover his soul that is full of sin. He hid the portrait in the attic, afraid to look at it again.

4.2 "Overcoming" Fear

Regarding the rumors about Dorian Gray's wicked behavior, he reminded to occasionally check the changes in the portrait. As time passes, Dorian discovers that his sins are never discovered nor punished, and the upper class still treat him well because of his pure appearance. As a result, every time he sees the strong contrast between the aging face on the canvas and the youthful face in the mirror, he would feel a twisted sense of luck and pleasure. The contradiction between the Imaginary and the Symbolic began to intensify. Although the portrait in the Imaginary becomes more and more ugly, it poses no threat to his beautiful face in reality and his prestigious reputation in the Symbolic. Dorian sneered at the aging limbs in the portrait and was pleased by his own appearance. The punishment for wrongdoings is imposed on the portrait, while Dorian escapes unscathed, which makes him feel a strange sense of joy. Dorian became increasingly disdainful of the portrait, no longer reflecting on his conscience. In order to keep the secret of the portrait and achieve eternal peace, he refused the painter Basil's request to visit, and even killed him for it. He then called another friend he has hurt to destroy the body. Faced with the corpse and his guilt, now, he fears nothing. This transformation indicates that Dorian is no longer pursuing a good personality and pure soul; the portrait replaces Dorian's conscience to receive punishment, and he becomes more reckless. At this point, the most important thing in his mind is to experience the excitement of life.

4.3 Correction and Failure

Years later, the young elites of high society had all grown old, except for Dorian Gray, who remained unchanged. "Tell me… how you have kept your youth. You must have some secret." Lord Henry envied his appearance, but Dorian knew the truth: Sybil killed herself for him, Basil died by his hand, his scientist friend risked everything to cover up his crimes, Sybil's brother was shot dead by him, who narrowly escaped... This is not the perfect Dorian Gray that Henry praises. Living a double life, where his conscience conflicts with society's view of him, Dorian is exhausted. He thinks of the portrait that could destroy all his happy memories and decides to see if "good deeds" could make the portrait beautiful again and erase the marks of evil. "Perhaps if his life became pure, he would be able to expel every sign of evil passion from the face." So, he tried to change his sinful life, deciding to never again seduce any innocent girl, and even "let go" of the lovely and innocent country girl Hetty. At this stage, the protagonist believes that he can "balance out" his actions and save his soul by sparing the girl who falls in love with him. He wants to achieve harmony between the Imaginary and the Symbolic.

However, the portrait remained unchanged except for the addition of wrinkles around the mouth. Dorian was in unbearable pain. His sins cannot be washed away, and he can only live with the heavy burden of his guilty conscience. "Through vanity he had spared her. In hypocrisy he had worn the mask of goodness." The constant reminders of his sins gradually make him numb, and he feels bored with life. "Doing good" was just a new stimulus – a new form of evaluation, the praise of others (especially Henry, who often evaluates and influences Dorian), and the comfort of the unification of his self-evaluation and social evaluation.

The mismatch between the evaluations of the Imaginary and the Symbolic, the portrait that judged his conscience, and the secret social relationships torment him. "Once it had given him pleasure to watch it changing and growing old. Of late he had felt no such pleasure.". Whenever he receives praise from the ladies of high society, Dorian will think of the ugliness of his soul. The portrait reminds him constantly that his conscience is lost, casting a shadow over every moment of passion and joy in his life. "It (the knife) would kill this monstrous soul-life, and without its hideous warnings, he would be at peace. " He used the same knife that had killed Basil to stab the portrait, and the person in the portrait instantly returned to its original state, shining brightly. However, Dorian fell to the ground, old and ugly, with a knife in his chest and blood pouring out. Everything, whether in the

portrait or in reality, was finally in its place. The evaluations of the Imaginary and the Symbolic world are finally harmonized, and Dorian finally finds balance within himself.

5. The Other Beyond the Book: Historical Context

The Picture of Dorian Gray was published in 1891, during the most splendid and conflicting period of the Victorian era. The rapid development of social and economic conditions in the 19th century led to a separation between the art and society, and the strict societal moral rules of the "Symbolic" movement restricted the spiritual life of the masses, causing people to desire freedom and rebellion. At that time, England was extremely bound by tradition, even the principles of art and literature were abandoned, and social norms had to be strictly adhered to. In the literary field, the 19th century Realism and Naturalism movements pushed the "mimetic theory" to its peak, and literary works emphasized reflecting real life. However, Wilde believed this deviated from the imagination and beauty of art, abandoning the essence of artistic creation. Therefore, Wilde was determined to break free from these restraints and then created the character of Dorian Gray, who struggles between the pure aesthetic beauty and the immoral pain, timely responding to the social and spiritual needs of the time. Dorian's internal struggle shows the unease of the artists who were eager for innovation in this era, and its conclusion is a decadent rebellion.

6. The Three Registers Hypothesis and Dorian Gray

The growth process of Dorian Gray is a topic that cannot be ignored in the study of The Picture of Dorian Gray, for which Lacan's Three Registers Hypothesis theory provides a new perspective. Dorian Gray establishes a new self-awareness through portraits, generating new inner projections that echo the performance of the "mirror stage" in the imaginary world. The profound influence of the painter Basil and Lord Henry, the others, on Dorian further position his self-identity with the language of them. This can be analyzed through the theory of the Symbolic in terms of language symbols and social relations. Dorian can no longer break free from the constraints of language and thoughts under the influence of others and return to the Real. Under the fundamental role of the "other", i.e. the "mirror", the strengthening role of the "Other", and the influence of the "Other" in the historical background outside the text, the protagonist gradually loses balance and control, ultimately leading to a tragic ending of suicide.

There are many versions of interpretations at the end of the novel, the most popular two are that the ending belongs to fantasy description, and that Dorian was delirious and unable to distinguish between the portrait and himself before stabbing himself with a knife. In fact, both interpretations can explain the internal cognitive confusion that Dorian experiences in the process of seeking harmony between the Imaginary and the Symbolic - the others constructed Dorian's false self, which also lead to Dorian's disintegration of this false self and his realization that his true self was completely unrecognizable. Understanding Dorian Gray's tragedy from Lacan's Three Registers Hypothesis perspective can provide a more comprehensive way of helping readers appreciate the delicate inner activities of the protagonist and deeply understand the novel.

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