

Examine the significance of the portrait in "The Picture of Dorian Gray."

The portrait in the book was originally painted by Basil Hallward who believed it was the greatest thing he had ever done. Everyone admired the painting and it wins him the respect of all his friends. Another significance of the portrait to Basil Hallward is that it poignantly turned out to be the cause of his own death when Dorian madly murders him, as he was the man who painted the portrait that went so wrong.

"The mad passions of a wild animal stirred within him..." (Dorian Gray)
This shows how angry and disturbed Dorian had become. The portrait was also a physical representation of Basil's fascination with Dorian and how much he admired him that the painting he did was thought to be the best he had ever done.

This leads to the significance of the portrait and Dorian. When Dorian first met Lord Henry, he had no idea of how good-looking he was. Lord Henry alerted him to the power of his appearance. This led to Dorian becoming narcissistic and obsessive, he looked upon the painting with genuine fascination. Dorian believed that it too was the loveliest portrait he had seen.

Wilde uses Dorian's obsession with the painting to implicitly condemn aestheticism. However, this is contradicting what he said in his preface and how he portrays Lord Henry, which is a representation of himself. Lord Henry believes that art is completely distinct from morality. Lord Henry like Wilde is an aesthete. So, when he says that the way Dorian is obsessed with the painting, he is being hypocritical as he thinks that beauty is the ultimate pursuit in life. In the preface of the book Wilde says that,

"Beautiful things mean only beauty."

Wilde is also ironic when he says that

"There is no such thing as a moral or immoral book."

He is being ironic because after the preface is a book, which is very immoral as it is full of aesthetic beliefs.

Basil Hallward adheres to the conventional belief that looking at beautiful things innately improved a person's moral values. So, he is not an aesthete but he believes that looking beautiful is a good thing but not the most important thing.

The portrait enables Wilde to explore the relationship between art and philosophy and so he uses the portrait as a source for philosophical discussion.

When Dorian first saw the painting, he made an awful, impetuous prayer that the portrait would show his age and sins while his face stayed the same being young and youthful. By this prayer coming true it means that the book has a real story for us to read, and the magic realism involved makes it very exciting. Wilde's use of the magic realism is very good; it is almost exciting that we know about Dorian's secret. At the end of the book, the eventual state of the portrait is a powerful indictment upon Dorian's moral deterioration. The painting shows Dorian's true colours. He is a blackmailer, a drug addict and a murderer who hurts everyone around him and who knows him. If the portrait hadn't been there, we wouldn't have known how corrupted Dorian's soul was.

From this book, it makes you wonder if everyone you know is just covering up their real self and the painting gives you a real insight as to who people could be. So, for example, a murderer could be anybody, you might not be able to see it on their faces but inside their soul is terribly corrupted. From reading this book and especially about the portrait, I have seen how corrupted your soul can become by doing just one wrong thing. The idea in the portrait has made me want to be more careful about the

Alex Carpenter

things I am doing. It shows that the soul is utterly unforgiving. For example, immediately after Dorian killed Basil Hallward there was a red stain on the portrait's hands. The portrait in the book shows Dorian's absolute corruption. In the last paragraph of the book when Dorian kills himself, the painting is restored to what it first looked like and Dorian changes into looking like what the painting did. He is described as

“Withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage.”

This is how you would expect a real bad man to look like and so the portrait has a real significance in this book especially to Dorian Gray as his true soul is just covered up by his face and it really makes you think about what is underneath everyone's face and if their faces are only a veneer covering up something horrible.