

## **DORIAN GRAY'IN PORTRESİ'NI, IMMANUEL KANT'IN AHLAK FELSEFESİYLE YENİDEN DÜŞÜNMEK**

Halilcan KOÇAK<sup>1</sup>

### **Makale Bilgileri/ Article info**

Makalenin Türü : Araştırma Makalesi  
Article Type : Research Article  
Geliş Tarihi / Date Received: 19.06.2022  
Kabul Tarihi / Date Accepted: 11.10.2022  
Yayın Tarihi / Date Published: 23.12.2022

### **Makale Künyesi/To cite this article:**

KOÇAK, H. (2022). Re-Envisioning The Picture of Dorian Gray Through Immanuel Kant's Moral Philosophy. *LOTUS International Journal of Language and Translation Studies*, 2(2),14-24.

### **Öz**

Victoria döneminin en ünlü romanlarından birisi olan Dorian Gray'in Portresi, yayımından bu yana hem edebiyat hem de felsefe çalışmalarının odak noktası olmuştur. Oscar Wilde, romanın benzersiz karakterleri aracılığıyla yalnızca Victoria toplumunu eleştirmekle kalmaz, aynı zamanda ahlakı da sorgular. Bu çalışma, Wilde'ın Dorian Gray'in Portresi eserini, Immanuel Kant'ın ahlak felsefesi aracılığıyla tetkik edecektir. Kant, ahlak felsefesinin büyük bir kısmını "hüsnüniyet" kavramı üzerine kurmuştur ki bu ayrıca onun "ödev" fikrinin temelidir. Bu fikre göre, "hüsnüniyet" ile yerine getirilen eylemler, ayrıca evrenselleştirilebilecek ilkeler ile yerine getirilmelidir. Bu eylemler insanlığı ve insanların hayatlarını da kolaylaştırmalıdır. Bu fikrin aksine, arzularını ve tutkularını takip eden Dorian'ın karakterindeki aşamalı değişimler, onun "hüsnüniyet"inin ve ahlak duygusunun kötüleşmesine ve yitimine sebep olur. Bu çalışma, Dorian'ın çalkantılı karakterinin, Kant'ın ahlak felsefesiyle olan uyumsuzluklarını tetkik etmeyi amaçlamaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Dorian Gray'in Portresi, etik, Immanuel Kant, hüsnüniyet, ödev.

## **RE-ENVISIONING THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY THROUGH IMMANUEL KANT'S MORAL PHILOSOPHY**

### **Abstract**

One of the most prominent novels of the Victorian era, The Picture of Dorian Gray has been a focus of both literary and philosophical studies since its publication. Oscar Wilde not only criticizes Victorian society through unique characters of the novel but also investigates ethics. This study will explore Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray under the light of Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy. Wilde grounds much of his understanding of morals upon the concept of "good will", which is also the foundation of Kant's "duty". According to his idea, the actions that are done in accordance with "good will" are supposed to be done with the maxims that can be universalized. These actions must develop humanity and lives of people, as well. Contrary to this view, gradual changes of Dorian's character, as he follows his desires and passions, leads to deterioration and loss of his "good will" and moral sentiment. This study aims to explore the incongruences of Dorian's fluctuant character with Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy.

<sup>1</sup> Öğretim Görevlisi, Abdullah Gül Üniversitesi, Yabancı Diller Yüksekokulu, Yabancı Diller Bölümü, [halilcan.kocak@agu.edu.tr](mailto:halilcan.kocak@agu.edu.tr), ORCID: 0000-0001-6957-9135  
Lecturer, Abdullah Gül University, School of Foreign Languages, Department of Foreign Languages, [halilcan.kocak@agu.edu.tr](mailto:halilcan.kocak@agu.edu.tr), ORCID: 0000-0001-6957-9135

**Keywords:** The Picture of Dorian Gray, ethics, Immanuel Kant, good will, dut  
**Introduction**

### **An Overview of Immanuel Kant's Ethics as Background Information**

Inarguably, Kant's ideas and his influence on the development of philosophy have not only contributed to the advancement of humankind, but also gave a shape to the formation of a new social, political, and scientific milieu in the 18th century when dogmatism began to be replaced with enlightenment. Especially, his groundbreaking rationalist approaches to moral philosophy led to an unprecedented understanding of it, characterizing its modern definitions and interpretations within the era. Kant handsomely critiqued antecedent notions through which he formulated his own unique understanding. It will be apt to utter that Kant annihilated the last traces of the middle age ideology and constructed a definite humanism with all of its components. In his endeavor to establish a new sort of humanistic thought, he utilized from the former ideologies; he partially rejected some ideas of empiricists, whose most prominent representative is David Hume, to whom he had a great admiration. Similarly, he strived to formulate a new rationalism by critiquing former rationalists. With all of these contributions, he became the most outstanding figure of enlightenment era.

Toward determining the tenets of moral action, Kant primarily bases his philosophy on reason, rather than sensations or emotions. Because reason is sufficient, on its own, for humankind to explore the fundamental principles of their actions without getting a divine help. With this help of reason, individuals can regulate their actions and lives morally. As he indicates in Kant's famous work *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, reason assists people to act in accordance with the moral laws of the nature. (Kant, 2002, p. 12) Kant draws attention to the necessity of "good will" in any action that is conducted. Good will is that which construes morality. Kant indicates the nature of good will as follows:

"The good will is good not through what it effects or accomplishes, not through its efficacy for attaining any intended end, but only through its willing, i.e., good in itself, and considered for itself, without comparison, it is to be estimated far higher than anything that could be brought about by it in favor of any inclination, or indeed, if you prefer, of the sum of all inclinations."(Kant, 2002, p. 10)

In other words, good will is the pure duty of people that is immersed within themselves. Through this good will, the world can be a habitable place, where people live happily. However, it is

---

highly necessary to know that Kant's thought of "good will" is not even partially based on utility or consequences. Rather, good will naturally cause to general happiness without aiming it. Because under the circumstance under which utility is prioritized or aimed, the nature of the good will is distorted, which breaks the universal moral law. Moreover, good will is not a phenomenon that can be taught. Instead, it is something that can be realized or enlightened. (Kant, 2002)

Kant proposes his prominent term of "categorical imperative" to determine if an action is moral or not. According to the requirements of categorical imperative, an action initially should be acted upon maxims that can be universalized into the law of nature. Secondly, this specific action must develop lives of people or the world. Kant distinguishes categorical imperatives from hypothetical imperatives, which corresponds to sort of a consequentialist idea. (Kant, 2002, p. 42) Because when an action is conducted based on hypothetical imperative, it is against the nature of good will, which makes it a non-moral action. They are based upon personal profits of dispositions. Hence, they cannot be universalized or applied for the whole humanity. In contrast, categorical imperatives are "apodictic" and a priori. Namely, these imperatives are necessary and true within their nature, which is why they are independent from any relative circumstances.

Kant categorizes "duty" as perfect and imperfect duties. This categorization does not only offer an alternative consideration of deontology but also provides a new interpretation within the discussion of agent centered and patient centered deontology. Kant identifies perfect duties as "a perfect duty that which permits no exception to the advantage of inclination" (Kant, 2002, p. 38) In other words, perfect duties refer to the duties whose negation cannot be excused by any natural choice or desire. The reason why perfect duties are not debatable in terms of exceptions is caused by the fact that negation of a perfect action contradicts with the first condition of the categorical imperative; this negation of perfect duty breaks the universal law. On the other hand, imperfect duties correspond to duties that do not enquire a similar necessitation. The individual has a "latitude" in imperfect duties, which offers a free choice in the way that the action is conducted. In a way, duties to oneself are only a matter a personal disposition. In this sense, all the duties to oneself are imperfect duties. (Kant, 1991, p. 242) Cummiskey tackles these two duties as "narrow and wide" duties in accordance with their scope. (Cummiskey, 1990, p. 607)

Before seeing Kant's ideas over agent and patient centered deontology, it is worth remembering the distinction that evaluation of perfect and imperfect duties is made within the scope of duty-

---

based idea, the distinction of agent centered, and patient centered deontology is within the discussion of right-based idea. (Alexander, 2020, p. 7) Kant can be considered as a patient centered deontologist. Because for him concentrating upon neutral reasons or rights is necessary than personal or relative inclinations. For instance, killing a person for the purpose of saving two other persons is a wrong action for him. For his patient centered deontology, every person has a right not to be killed whatever the purpose or the intention is. Killing a person for this specific purpose would mean using him/her as means to an end, which contradicts with Kant's deontological view. Moreover, killing a person violates the first condition of categorical imperative. Particularly, his approaches to this discussion accounts for why Kant is the highest humanist in his era.

All in all, Kant's contribution to deontology has been a cornerstone for philosophers and researchers for his unique way of approaching to moral philosophy. With the help of given background information of Kant's deontology, moral analysis of the Picture of Dorian Gray will be elucidated.

### **A Brief Overview of Victorian Era Society**

The social structure and the political ground of the Victorian era are of a major significance within the analysis of The Picture of Dorian Gray as Dorian is highly sensitive to the norms and tenets of his society at the beginning of the novel. Holding a high and aristocratic status in the Victorian era, Dorian, just like other people that are on the higher strata of society, is not out of the expectations and norms of his society. He is expected to fulfill any of his actions by considering his status in the community. An aristocratic individual cannot be expected to behave as plebeians due to the extreme class differences in Victorian era. However, it should also be remembered that the 19th century England had drastic changes in the society as a result of industrialization and growing labor force, which inevitably brought about the emergence of a more apparent middle class.

“The success of the middle-classes in the Victorian period can be seen in their ability to universalize a set of principles based on individuality and progress. In moving from a society based on rank and privilege to one based on free exchange, the very idea that an individual, through hard work, thrift, and self-reliance, could achieve social and economic success provided an equalizing principle.” (Loftus, 2017)

The gap inside the social strata was gradually closing especially between the middle class and upper class. Meanwhile, the rich were still rich, and the poor were still poor. Considering that norms and moral understanding of the individuals are directly shaped by their economic power and social status, the moral values of the individual are accordingly molded. In other words, the gradual change in the social and economic structure brought along new expectations from individuals in this period. The newly established rules of the Victorian era enabled new patterns of social structure. (Wilson, 1965) Hence, these changes cannot be separated from the actions and moral values of the people. Even though England was undergoing a social and political transition, the established norms couldn't be easily abandoned by low and high classes. Thus, the individuals of the Victorian period were in a social adaptation process in which they were both confined by the established tenets of the previous period and liberated by the new conditions of their society. Many aspects of community such as family structure, understanding of morality and individual habits, were influenced by the changes in the social texture of England.

With the Reform Bill in 1832, Victorian Era started to change both socially and culturally. When Queen Victoria took over the throne 5 years after the Reform Bills, she greatly contributed to the changes of the society. Many different areas of social and political life were improved such as education and property ownership. The adaptation of individual to these changes took some time. The moral and social tenets of the community were mostly what they had learned from pre-Victorian era. The emergence of the middle class, particularly, changed the way how "individuals" should be defined and what should be expected from them as members of English society. It was quite natural for Victorian society to feel the betweenness among all these changes. With the growing power of industrialization, "labor" was the term that marked the individual. The emergence of the middle class did not change the conditions of working class. Prosperous as England was, working class were still suffering from sanitation problems, malnutrition, and lack of access to certain social rights like education. Children of the working class had to work for long hours to help their families getting by instead of studying. The sudden increase in the population of England also caused housing problems, which dragged people to inhabit in suburbs with awful conditions. Even though factories enabled common people to get a job in return for income, the amount of money they got were relatively low. On the other hand, the landlords and business owners had substantially higher income, which widened the gap between upper class and working class. (Humphries, 2010, p. 239) This circumstance changed the way how individuals sustain their lives. Most of their daytime were used for working, which

---

left quite little space for social interaction within working class whereas upper class had the opposite chance. Therefore, the social behaviors of the classes were also in transitions. These behaviors resulted in major shifts in terms of social norms and duties in Victorian Era. This circumstance affected the moral codes of the society since the actions and the expectations from the individuals took a different form.

### **The Picture of Dorian Gray within the Moral Sphere of Kant**

Wilde published *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which is the only novel of him, ten years before his death in 1900. He both created a reformist idea of aesthetics and criticized Victorian society through philosophical questioning. Moreover, it is seen in the novel that many aspects of ethics are highlighted. Notwithstanding the fact that the ensuing oppositions against the novel caused much trouble to Wilde, both literary and social significance of the novel holds a sensational place even today in terms of both ethical and aesthetical sense.

At the beginning of the novel, Dorian Gray is introduced as a young noble man in the Victorian society. He does not only epitomize “a decent man” of his society, but also, he is greatly admired by others. His impeccable beauty charms the painter, Basil, who paints a picture of Dorian Gray. Indisputably, meeting with Lord Henry, a friend of Basil, is the most important part of the novel. Because the philosophical and brave utterances of Lord Henry have a great deal of influence on Dorian. Moreover, Lord Henry’s endeavor to convince Dorian about his hedonistic philosophy can be said to be a sort of a “wickedness”, considering that some of his suggestions are not that much innocent or benevolent. (Weedman, 2014, p. 15) In the hall where Basil is painting Dorian, Lord Henry says:

“...To influence a person is to give him one’s own soul. He does not think his natural thoughts or burn with his natural passions. His virtues are not real to him. His sins, if there are such things as sins, are borrowed... The aim of life is self-development. To realize one’s nature perfectly—that is what each of us is here for. People are afraid of themselves, nowadays. They have forgotten the highest of all duties, the duty that one owes to one’s self. Of course, they are charitable. They feed the hungry and clothe the beggar. But their own souls starve and are naked.” (Wilde, 2017, p. 29)

It is overtly seen in Lord Henry’s utterances that he relates most of his ideas to passions and the necessity of them. In a way, the expression of “burn with his natural passions” implicitly refers to the notion that one has to live in accordance with what his natural passion requires him to do.

---

His emphasis of “self-development” is coherent with Kant’s idea of “imperfect duty to self”. However, the motives behind two ideas seem different from one another, in that; Lord Henry considers self-development as a means to obtaining a state of sovereignty through which one can “burn with his natural passions.” On the contrary, self-development in Kant’s deontology does not function in the same way. Instead, self-development can only be seen as an imperfect duty to self. Lord Henry’s indication of the highest duty does not refer to the same highest duty that of Kant’s. Because Kant’s understanding of highest duty corresponds to the duty that is fulfilled with no condition or any relative purpose. Lord Henry considers this duty as an ultimate purpose or at least, as a primary purpose, which contradicts with Kant’s idea in that sense. Lord Henry continues his speech as follows:

“We are punished for our refusals. Every impulse that we strive to strangle broods in the mind and poisons us. The body sins once, and has done with its sin, for action is a mode of purification. Nothing remains then but the recollection of a pleasure, or the luxury of a regret. The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it.” (Wilde, 2017, p. 30)

Lord Henry’s decisive remarks perplex Dorian’s mind as they are totally different from his ideas and mindset. Lord Henry tries to encourage him to follow his impulses and his passions. For Kant, such actions are not moral as they can violate categorical imperatives. Yielding to temptations might require an immoral action to be fulfilled. For instance, if one is tempted to be rich person, the decision to steal money would be a solution. However, as this action cannot be universalized and considered as a good action for the humanity, it should not be followed according to Kant’s idea. Thus, the conspicuous suggestions of Lord Henry apparently are not something that can be morally good for Dorian even though these suggestions can bring him pleasure and individual happiness.

By emphasizing Dorian’s youth and beauty, Lord Henry constantly suggests him to follow his desires without any hesitation. Moreover, he thinks that this is the only way to enjoy his life before getting old and ugly. In one of their conversations Lord Henry says:

“Live! Live the wonderful life that is in you! Let nothing be lost upon you. Be always searching for new sensations. Be afraid of nothing... A new Hedonism—that is what our century wants. You might be its visible symbol. With your personality there is nothing you could not do. The world belongs to you for a season.” (Wilde, 2017, p. 35)

---



These remarks of Lord Henry are the explicit proof that he is a hedonist. At least, that is what he suggests to Dorian. Even though this suggestion can make one happy, it will bring along immorality. Because they are not even the actions that are reached through reason, but sensations. As reason is out of function in this case, a person who acts in accordance with this suggestion will end up being the victim of his passions and desires. Perhaps, this can be a way to reach to an inner freedom, but that would be an inner freedom without morality. Because, for Kant, desires or passions can bring inner freedom only on the condition that they are under the control of reason. If they are not controlled by reason, they will begin to control the person, which degenerates his moral values. (Kant, 1991, p. 208) Moreover, embracing a hedonist idea is intrinsically against the principle of “good will”.

After such passionate and flamboyant suggestions, Dorian cannot help himself from realizing that he has an impeccable beauty. Especially after he sees the completed picture of himself on the canvas, he considers himself to be the perfect one, who should know the value of himself. This is the moment where Dorian turns into a self-indulgent hedonist as Lord Henry had already suggested him. He is so mesmerized by the beauty of the picture that his ideas abruptly, in a way, command him to be a hedonist. His idea of hedonism is triggered by two factors: initially, by the encouragement of Lord Henry, and his realization of his flawless beauty. This realization happens right after he sees the portrait. Then, he literally begins to express his supereminence over everything. This is clearly seen in these sentences “I’m jealous of everything whose beauty does not die. I am jealous of the portrait you have painted of me.” (Wilde, 2017, p. 40). He even tries to degrade the beauty of the portrait even though what he sees is nothing but himself. That clearly indicates that his narcissistic characteristic begins to emerge. His overestimating himself over others violates Kant’s understanding of humility. Kant posits that comparing oneself with others or belittling others is utterly against the duty to himself. It is a “false humility” to praise himself so that his inner worth can be understood better. Moreover, for Kant, it is a degradation of oneself if he tries to do praise himself or belittle others. (Kant, 1991, p. 231) Hence, Dorian violates the duty to himself in this aspect.

After Dorian falls in love with Sibyl Vane and he intends to marry her, Lord Henry tries to discourage Dorian lest he marries Sibyl. He not only harshly degrades women, but also sees them as huge obstacles in a pleasurable life. Lord Henry says to Dorian: “Pleasure is Nature’s test, her sign of approval. When we are happy, we are always good, but when we are good, we

---



are not always happy. To be good is to be in harmony with one's self" (Wilde, 2017, p. 101). He obviously places pleasure onto the center of nature. In other words, pleasure is focused on the personal level of the individual for Lord Henry. It should be noted that Lord Henry's association of nature-pleasure is different from Kant's consideration of the matter. Kant classifies pleasures into some categories such as practical pleasure or intellectual pleasure, depending on the motives behind the pleasure whereas Lord Henry focuses on the broadest sense of pleasure. In this broadest sense, pleasure is regarded as the only good for Lord Henry. (Manganiello, 1983, p. 28)

After Sibyl Vane commits suicide, as a result of Dorian's merciless attitudes and remarks toward her, Dorian blames himself for her suicide at first. Having talked to Henry about the incident, Dorian is convinced himself of his innocence in a very short time. He thinks that it is Sybil Vane, herself, that causes her death. Even he finds himself lucky for experiencing such a dramatic incident. Because experience is also a significant part of their (Dorian and Lord Henry) hedonism. Thus, Dorian feels very little upset for the death of the woman he falls in love with. By relieving himself with the help of Lord Henry, Dorian says, "How well you know me! But we will not talk again of what has happened. It has been a marvelous experience. That is all. I wonder if life has still in store for me anything as marvelous." (Wilde, 2017, p. 133) These remarks are his inner legitimization of his quasi-innocence. However, he is not fully clear of the cause of Sibyl's suicide. By doing that so, he contravenes what Kant calls duty to others. Kant proposes that each individual is responsible for loving each other even though some of them do not find others worthy enough to do that. Excluding oneself from this duty, by legitimizing himself for any reason, violates this rule. Because "I" is an important part of universality, which is the primary source of this duty. (Kant, 1991, p. 245) On the other hand, Dorian does not even take the necessary liability for the suicide of Sibyl let alone mourn after her. He solely focuses on his own pleasure in a selfish way. As Dorian discovers that the portrait mars when he acts immorally or violently, this magical trait of the portrait gives him the power to ignore what is bad or upsetting and to see what is pleasurable. The portrait, in fact, reflects Dorian's self-consciousness. (Li, 2017, p. 570)

Dorian spends his years by following his pleasures and enjoyments. He travels and tastes bodily pleasures and turns into a person full of hedonism. He is now, utterly, a different person from what he was in his past. When he turns back to his home, the beauty of his face has the same beauty, because it is the portrait that has suffered instead of him. Hence, Lord Henry's curiosity

---

of the secret of his beauty grows rapidly, as everyone else. The painter and Lord Henry insist on seeing the portrait that has been kept hidden by Dorian to reveal his secret. When Dorian decides to show the decayed portrait to Basil, he petrifies and is suddenly killed by Dorian who tries to keep his secret from others. He dares to kill his friend for the sake of protecting the portrait. It can be understood that his moral and social values are blunter than it has ever been before. All the prices for his agonies, violent behaviors and hedonistic lifestyle are paid in return for his own death when he stabs the portrait.

### **Conclusion**

As a conclusion, Dorian turns into an immoral person from decent intellectual member of his society. By listening to Lord Henry, who is a reputed philosopher, he follows his pleasures and desires without considering the benefit of others and even himself. Lack of his common sense, Dorian goes against the moral maxim of Kant, who defies the notion that one has to consider the benefit others while acting. He not only mars his personality, but also, he becomes the arbiter of the death of Sibyl Vale and Basil. Moreover, as a pure hedonist, he never sees himself responsible for the suicide of Sibyl Vane and murder of Basil even though he is the one who leads to their death. The sole purpose of life is to reach his passions and get satisfaction of his instantaneous desires. His actions get so far away from being moral that they become even dangerous for the people around him let alone they can be universalized for the consideration of Kant' morality. This relative and personal focus on bodily pleasures cause Dorian to end up being immoral. As a consequence, Dorian loses his sense of "good will", which construes Kant's deontological foundation. Due to the lack of "good will", he is not able to act in accordance with the idea of "social and personal good". No matter how happy he is for his life, the source of his happiness comes from the hedonistic actions, not from the notion of duty. In other words, in Kantian sense, Dorian fails to sustain a moral life by contravening all the ethical duties he is supposed to fulfill in his life.

**References**

- Alexander, L.a. (2020, September 21). Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Deontological Ethics: <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/ethics-deontological/>>. retrieved on 05.03.2022
- Cummiskey, D. (1990). "Kantian Consequentialism". *Ethics*, 586-615.
- Humphries, J. (2010). *Childhood and Child Labour in the British*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Kant, I. (1991). *Metaphysics of Morals*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Kant, I. (2002). *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Li, H. (2017). "Vision and Self-Consciousness" in. *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature /*, 565-578.
- Loftus, D. (2017, 02 17). <https://www.bbc.co.uk>.  
[https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians/middle\\_classes](https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians/middle_classes):  
[https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians/middle\\_classes\\_01.shtml](https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians/middle_classes_01.shtml) retrieved on 15.03.2022
- Manganiello, D. (1983). "Ethics and Aesthetics in "The Picture of Dorian Gray"." *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 25-33.
- Weedman, D. (2014). "Men, Monsters and Morality: Shaping Ethics through the Sublime and Uncanny." *Humanities Capstone*.
- Wilde, O. (2017). *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. London: Macmillan Collector's Library.
- Wilson, C. (1965). "Economy and Society in Late Victorian Britain." *The Economic History Review*, 183-198.
-