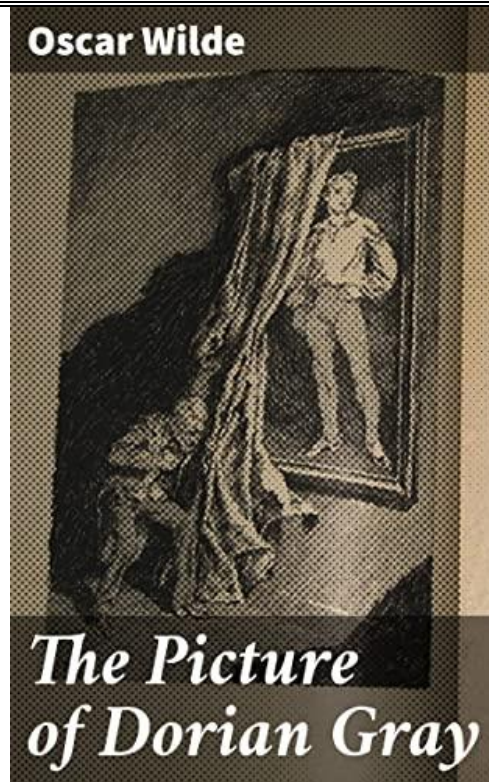


## The Living Dead and the Logic of Performativity: An Analysis of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

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### Abstract

Art-aided novels that make references to visual images like painting open up the possibility of examining artwork or fiction as transitive and performative because such novels have the potential to act beyond the plane of confinement to perform and bring into effect what they describe. Though there have been many studies and plenty of research on performance,

performance art and the application of the theory of performativity to texts and cultural practices, their application to novels and artistic works remains largely underexplored.

This paper is an attempt to apply the concept of performativity to the reading of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a novel which embodies painting as its focal theme. The study largely draws upon theoretical insights from J. L Austin's "speech act theory" to analyze performativity under three different heads namely, *the text*, *the painting* and *the reader* by using textual evidence to substantiate the theoretical argument. This approach informed by performativity directs attention to what visual art or texts can do, that is, its function apart from just focusing on the content or plot. The analysis challenges the long-held assumption that painting is representative and non-performative as it is complete in itself. Since a painting is a "trace structure", that is, since it carries traces of multiple factors which are suffused into its making, it acquires a dynamic quality by which it can assert and re-assert itself upon the consciousness of the subject with which it interacts and initiate strange transformations in them, thereby altering reality.

**Keywords:** Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Logic of Performativity, painting, the text and the reader.

## Introduction

Fictions are not just non-human word masses bound within the covers of the text. The ontology of fictional characters is ghost-like, for they inhabit a phantom structure and exist uneasily between the textual space and the minds of the readers. Despite the fact that the events being portrayed are unreal, books, like a haunting enigma, unsettle the readers because they can transcend their level of representation and perform the reality they describe. The concept of art coming to life can be traced back to the mythological story of Pygmalion, wherein the ivory statue sculpted by the artist comes alive and begins to perform in real life. This theme of transcending the boundaries between art and reality had a profound influence on novelists, especially of the nineteenth century. Writers have integrated visual arts like painting into their fictional narratives with the aim to highlight the marvelous power of art to influence life and act as a catalyst in instigating strange transformations in the characters and the readers by directly confronting their psychological state of mind.

## Performative Analysis

An analysis of the novels which employ visual arts in their textual narration throws light on how portraits or paintings that begin as a "supplement" to the main text gradually evolve and become full-fledged in their potential to move beyond their frames of confinement. The power of art or fictional narratives to dissolve the distinctions between fiction and reality points to the constitutive power of arts, and ultimately to the concept of performativity. A performative analysis calls for a shift in the focus of attention from the text's meaning to its function. The term

*performative* was coined by J. L. Austin to refer to the constitutive nature of speech acts. Austin advanced a methodology for examining language as performative. In his work *How to Do Things with Words* Austin claimed those speech acts or sentences to be “performative” whose utterance under “appropriate circumstances” is itself the “doing” or “performing of an action” rather than just describing the “doing” (6,5). The concept was later revised in various ways by the post structuralists, cultural theorists and art critics.

### **Austinian Idea of Performativity**

The Austinian idea of performativity, understood as the act of doing or accomplishing something in the real world, gives a new impetus to approach art and literary works from a totally different paradigm. Fiction and performance are artistic terms that are generally conceived as oppositional, the former being an inert medium and the latter associated with liveliness. However, like speech utterances, even fictional works have a performative dimension because as Barbara Bolt in her work *Art Beyond Representation* argues, art does not represent but performs radically.

### **Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray***

The article attempts to apply the theory of performativity in the reading of Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by focusing on the performative dimension that operates at various levels in the text, namely that of, the painting, the text and the reader.

Painting, as is commonly understood, is not just a copy or a mimetic image produced by the artist, but it comes into being through a process of mutual interaction or dynamic relationship that issues between the artist, the object/ sitter, material surroundings and the viewer, all of which together account for its performative force. The performativity of painting is studied not in Austinian terms as the notion of “doing something” in uttering a sentence but the performative force of the portrait of Dorian Gray is analyzed with respect to its ability “to effect movement in thought, word and deed in the individual and social sensorium” (Bolt 142). This is because as Gilles Deleuze maintains, an image “can assert and continuously reassert itself precisely because we cannot ‘frame’ it as a picture” (qtd in Kenaan).

In other words, a painting acquires an agency by which it can overrule the artist’s control and perform on its own by entering into dialogue with the external world. The influence of the physical environment in the making of the painting and its ability to resonate in unison with the changing moods of nature and the individuals is emphasized when artist Basil Hallward tells Lord Henry how the mere presence of Dorian Gray beside him while he was engaged in a landscape painting infused into the “plain woodlands the wonder that he had always looked for, and always missed” (Wilde 17). This shows how personal influences or surroundings can embed themselves into the artwork, even without the consciousness of the artist.

The painted subject or the portrait could be considered as analogous to the performative speech act because it has the potential to recognize its viewers and elicit affective responses in them depending on their previous interpersonal and intersubjective encounter with it. Its performative power lies in moving beyond just “saying something” to actually revealing different things to different characters by appealing to their emotions. Oscar Wilde in his Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* writes that “It is the spectator and not life that art really mirrors” (6). Since the artist Basil adores his subject Dorian Gray, the painting reveals to him his own homosexual desire for Dorian. The picture turns out to be for him, more of a portrait of his inner self. Although Basil at first insists that he has “skillfully mirrored” his sitter onto the canvas, eventually, as the work progressed, the painting acquired an autonomous quality by which it began to perform such that “every flake and film of color seemed to him to reveal his secret. He grew afraid that others would know of his idolatry” (129). In the process of being produced, it surpassed the identity of the model and made the artist realize without any conscious intention that he “has put too much of himself into it” (129).

Francis Bacon in referring to the accidental quality involved in the process of painting also expresses a similar idea when he says that “I had no intention to do this picture; I never thought of it in that way. It was like one continuous accident mounting on top of another” (“Francis Bacon and the Practice of Painting” 2).

A similar idea is expressed by R. G. Collingwood who maintains that “You see something in your subject, of course, before you begin to paint it and that, no doubt, is what induces you to begin painting; but only a person with experience of painting, and of painting well, can realize how little that is, compared with what you come to see in it as your painting progresses” (303). The term performative in itself implies the copresence of an addresser and an addressee. In carrying considerable affective force to stimulate emotional responses in the individuals, the painting could also be considered as analogous to the “perlocutionary speech act” as discussed by Austin which refers to the relation between the utterance and its causal effects on the addressee.

## **Dorian Gray**

The portrait of Dorian Gray, through its intersubjective encounter occupies multiple subject positions and identities. Lord Henry sees the painting as a “fetish or token of sexual possession” (Gomel 81). As far as the subject of the painting Dorian Gray is concerned, the painting elicits a different psychological experience in him. It was an eye opener, which for the first time, made him aware of his own sense of beauty. When Dorian looked at his portrait, “his cheeks flushed for a moment with pleasure. A look of joy came into his eyes, as if he had recognized himself for the first time. He stood there motionless and in wonder...The sense of his own beauty came on him like a revelation. He had never felt it before” (Wilde 32). This revelatory power of painting says James Elkins, “lies in its capacity to bypass and short circuit our normal cognitive perceptual

mechanisms, to enact itself directly upon us and our bodies, instantaneously overriding all the ‘clearing house’ mechanisms of intellect and reasoning” (Francis Bacon and the Painting 2). Dorian was left transfixed and spellbound because his double in the painting gains mastery over him and transcends his perceptual and intellectual faculties to produce a direct impact upon his senses.

The painting with its performative power also challenges the ontological boundaries or the distinction between human and inorganic matter. When Dorian, for instance, notices the changes in the portrait for the first time, he begins to speculate on the possible reasons for the transformation in the picture, wondering if there was “some subtle affinity between the chemical atoms that shaped themselves to form and colour on the canvas, and the soul within him? Could it be that what that soul thought, they realised? - that what it dreamed they made true?” (Wilde 108).

Dorian’s long-term engagement with the portrait turned it into a part of his consciousness. Every time Dorian stared at the portrait, he felt as if “his own soul was looking out at him from the canvas and calling him to judgment” (134). It became “a visible symbol of the degradation of [Dorian’s] sins (Wilde 109). This is why Sherry Turkle in her work “Evocative Objects” defines objects as “things we think with” and “companions of our emotional lives and provocations to thought” (5). To the other characters also, the portrait appeared so life-like that at one point when Basil warns Henry not to talk sinful things in the presence of Dorian, Henry Wotton asks Basil which Dorian he was referring to- if it was “the one who is pouring out tea for us, or the one in the picture” (Wilde 37). Similarly, when Basil expresses his willingness to “stay with the real Dorian” he was in fact referring to the portrait rather than the ‘original’ of the portrait (37). A really good painting shows more of the given subject than we might see in the individual herself/ himself. This is why when Anne Marie Smith was asked in an interview if she would sit for a portrait, she replied “I felt a bit scared, I was a bit nervous, quite nervous about being pinned down in one place, in one spot and somebody actually getting hold of me. I was giving some of myself away” (Bolt 162). Painting thus challenges the ontological boundaries between the subject and the object.

### **A Blank Canvas**

Art is not merely an object over which human subjects can exert their mastery. Both mutually influence and constitute one another. This is manifested by the fact that in Dorian’s willingness to write himself onto the portrait and attain immortality, he was in turn simultaneously getting written by the portrait. Initially Dorian was like a blank canvas, a tabula rasa, “unspotted from the world”; however, he gets written and matures with the portrait’s performative effects (Wilde 23). Vicky Kerby, in her work “Telling Flesh” makes a similar claim drawing from Derrida’s notion of “arche writing” wherein she states that “the body is unstable – a shifting scene of inscription that both writes and is written; a scenario where the subject takes itself as its own object, and where, for example, an image could be said to re-write the image-maker” (Kerby 69).



Kerby's experiments with "derma graphism" show that matter is not an inert entity but can be transformed and is transformative in nature (65).

### **Performative Force and Performative Writing**

The performative force of the vibrant matter in controlling the thoughts of the human subject is also explicit towards the end of the novel, where the portrait acts as an agent to trigger a murderous instinct in Dorian. This is illustrated in the text and the narration reads:

Dorian Gray glanced at the picture, and suddenly an uncontrollable feeling of hatred for Basil came over him as though it had been suggested to him by the image on the canvas, whispered into his ear by those grinning lips. The mad passion of a hunted animal stirred within him, and he loathed the man who was seated at the table. (Wilde 175, 76)

The portrait, perhaps an extension of his conscience, or his diseased psyche was talking to him and controlling his actions all through his life. All these instances manifest that painting is performative. We constitute them and are in turn constituted by them. This explains why art critics like Dorothea Von Hantelmann and Barbara Bolt argue that there can in fact be no distinction between performative and non-performative art work because every art is performative in nature.

Like painting, the text or the words in print, can also act as performative counterparts of "speech act" as Della Pollock helpfully points out in "Performing Writing":

Performative writing is evocative. It operates metaphorically to render absence present- to bring the reader into contact with other worlds to those aspects and dimensions of our world that are other to the text as such by re-marking them. Performative writing evokes worlds that are otherwise intangible, unlocatable: worlds of memory, pleasure, sensation, imagination, affect and in-sight. (80)

The performativity of the text is evident from the fact that the novel created ripples among the reading public and also fueled a lot of debates and criticisms among the critics. It was conceived as invested with infectious or corrupting power because of which the critics condemned it as immoral and poisonous. Following its appearance in the Lippincott's Monthly Magazine in 1890, a critic responded that "it is a tale spawned from the leprous literature of the French decadents-poisoned book, the atmosphere of which is heavy with...moral and spiritual putrefaction" ("The Great Writers" 81). To quote Wilde's own words from the text:

Words! Mere words! How terrible they were! How clear, and vivid, and cruel!  
One could not escape from them. And yet what a subtle magic there was in them! They seemed to be able to give a plastic form to formless things, and to

have a music of their own as sweet as that of viol or of lute. Mere words! Was there anything so real as words? (26)

The writer uses Dorian as his mouthpiece to talk about the mysterious and performative power of the words in the text to stir the human imagination. This implies that it is not only spoken words but also the written words that entail a sort of performance rather than simply narrating a story. Unlike in speech, where the speaker's presence is more or less evident, in written discourse, the creator absences herself/ himself and this enables the readers to have a spatial confrontation with the text. In the interaction that follows, the words transcend the textual frame and take form inside the reader's head. Writing, says Peter Raby "entails the blurring of the boundary between the human and the artifact" (111).

The American novelist and critic Barbara Browning records a similar instance of the text's performative power by taking the example of Ngugi's novel *Matigari* after the publication of which, the Kenyan President Daniel Moi issued an arrest warrant against the title character and ordered the copies of the books to be burnt. Wilde's novel was also banned and rebuked as poisonous because it was believed to have a corrupting influence on the youth.

The performative writing as evocative can also be justified by using the text within the text which is a nameless 'yellow book' lent to Dorian by Lord Henry. The moment he began reading it, he was carried away by it into what Pollock mentions as an "otherwise intangible world of sensations" (80). Dorian became so absorbed that he felt that:

It was the strangest book that he had ever read. It seemed to him that in exquisite raiment, and to the delicate sound of flutes, the sins of the world were passing in dumb show before him. Things that he had dimly dreamed of were suddenly made real to him. Things of which he never dreamed were gradually revealed. (Wilde 139)

The yellow book, in which "the life of the senses was described in terms of mystical philosophy" does not simply describe an imaginary world but as Pollock puts it, "uses language like paint" (Pollock 80). The "curious jeweled style, the archaic and technical expressions, monstrous metaphors", etc. employed by the writer breathes life into the words by which they perform and set a trap for the readers to lure them into the sensuous and ecstatic world (Wilde 140). Here, the performativity of the text is accentuated by the use of metaphors, which intensify the affective function and thereby arouse the readers' engagement and involvement with the text. In the article entitled "The performative potential of metaphor", the writer alludes to Andrew Goatly's formulation of the functions of metaphor to substantiate what metaphoring can do in addition to what they mean.

Visual metaphors used in paintings can also function performatively because of their potential “to insinuate ideology, i.e., to maintain or challenge value judgements, social realities, power relations, etc.” (Tseng 120). To take an example from the Indian context, the gesture of Shakuntala removing the thorn from her legs as depicted in the painting by Raja Ravi Varma can be read as a performative reenactment of a male centered cultural hegemony, wherein the thorn acts as a metaphor for “the love of king that has pierced the heart of Shakuntala” thereby reducing her to an object captured in the love of man (Sharma et al. 9). Similarly, the painting ‘Reclining Woman’ by Amrita Sher-Gil does the ideological function of “demonstrating the indigenous patriarchal hegemony” which adds to its performative force of the visual image. The color red that dominates the scene (the bright red clothing of the reclining woman, the sindoor and the charpoy bound by red pillars) act as performative symbols for the status of a married woman within a patriarchal household.

The performative function of literary metaphors “to express and induce emotion” and “to call for action” find a powerful implication in the fictional narrative of the ‘yellow book’ that Dorian reads (Tseng 118). The words and metaphors employed in it are so powerful and evocative that Dorian could not help but unconsciously fall prey to it and momentarily forget the present in which he was living. It had such a drastic and evil influence upon Dorian that it encouraged his overindulgent pursuit of pleasure and sin. Eventually Dorian’s obsession for the book grew to such an extent that he wondered if the hero in the novel was “a prefiguring type of himself...the whole book seemed to contain the story of his own life, written before he had lived it” (Wilde 142). Hence the pages on the book act as a dramatic mise-en-scene for the words to perform which in turn transports the readers and invites their performance because “[...] when you read it you are performing it even when you are reading it to yourself in silence. I read, therefore I perform” (Kivy 20).

### **Performance Reading**

Peter Kivy in his work *The Performance of Reading* contends that act of reading is also a performance even if they are silent readings to oneself, which he calls as the ‘silent performance’. Kivy argues that as silent readers of novels, we are enacting the part of a storyteller or rhapsode such as Ion because as we read, we hear the “voicings” or performances in our heads where we are the audience to our own performance. Hence, novels are interpretation driven silent performances in the performer’s head. Peter Kivy quotes John Locke who maintains that pictures, like verbal descriptions, “almost as readily excite certain Ideas, as if the Object themselves, which are apt to produce them, did actually affect the Senses” (24).

As readers of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* we are also able to summon a mental image of Dorian Gray even before he has made his physical appearance in the novel through the entwined



acts of reading and imagining. He is described as a “young man of extraordinary personal beauty” with “finely-curved scarlet lips, blue eyes, crisp gold hair and the youth’s passionate purity” (Wilde 23). When one reads the passages that record the gradual transformation of the portrait from a beautiful Adonis like figure into a monstrous and loathsome thing, one could envision the changes in the image that pass before the mind's eye. Reading hence transforms a contemplative act into a dynamic drama.

Dorian Gray reading the yellow book is also involved in a sort of performative reading because he envisions a live performance in his head. He could hear the “delicate sound of flutes”, see “the sins of the world passing in dumb show before him” and smell the “heavy odour of incense” drifting from the pages of the poisonous book (Wilde 139, 40). The cadences and music together orchestrate a performance that “produced in the mind of the lad, as he passed from chapter to chapter a form of reverie a malady of dreaming, that made him unconscious of the falling day and creeping shadows” (140). Novel reading hurled him into a different universe in which the laws of space and time were completely absent.

The artist Basil Hallward “stepping back to look at his work from a distance” can also be considered as analogous to a silent reader because in evaluating his own artwork, he is involved in a silent performance whereby the colors begin to voice in his heads (Wilde 32). Part of his pleasure comes from the activity of painting and part from introspecting his own painting.

### **Silent Reader**

The fact that Dorian is also deeply and intensely affected by the mutating portrait implies that through his constant interaction with the portrait, he too, like a silent reader, envisions a violent performance of the image in his head. Like the poisonous ‘yellow book’ which had affected Dorian, with its venomous writing style and monstrous metaphors, the painting also had an overpowering influence upon him. This is achieved through the use of horrifying imageries like the “loathsome red dew” gleaming on the portrait’s wet hands, “the scarlet dew that spotted the hand” like newly spilt blood, “the red stain” creeping “like a horrible disease over the wrinkled fingers”, blood dripping from the painted feet and hands, etc. (Wilde 192, 246). The recurrent use of the color red and the image of blood give a vibrant portrayal that renders live enactment of the words to produce a direct impact upon our senses. The article “An Ethics of Everyday Infinities and Powers” which makes reference to the “affective power of refrains” maintains that:

The color red always bleeds. It summons up an unusually wide ranging—but often open, ambiguous—power to affect and be affected. Even in images, red bleeds into our real life, our real blood flows. Red bleeds and blood flows involve a literal affective contagion. It’s a bleed in which body meets image. (Melisa and Seigworth 139)

The hideous monstrous image hence continues to unsettle and disturb the readers like it does haunt Dorian. The image along with the words in the text with their unclear ontology enacts a spectral performance by which they blur the boundaries between the human and the artefact. This is probably why the French critic Mallarme responds to Wilde that “this disturbing, full-length portrait of a Dorian Gray will haunt me, as writing, having become the book itself” (qtd in McCormack).

## Conclusion

As far as genres like fiction are concerned, it is “not of an age, but for all time” and so as many readings and interpretations are possible depending on the reader’s performativity which in turn is shaped by their subjectivity, socio political background, ideology, etc. In other words, performative reading allows us to create and express indefinite interpretations beyond the author’s intention. Peter Kivy maintains that for “read-literary works”, each reading is a “token” of its “type” (3). Even if read twice by the same individual, each reading constitutes a different experience and so they are two tokens of the type of novel. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* even now enjoys wide readership because it has the performative force to make the narratives come alive several years after its publication.

Reading along the lines of performativity, we realize that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is not just a gothic or supernatural fiction. It throws light on the fact that art and life are always in a constant dialogue with each other in a performative process and in their dynamic interaction, they constitute and transform each other or to put it in Deleuzian terms, it paves way for the “double becoming. In literature as well as painting, the subject and object performatively constitute one another and so the question as to which comes first, the chicken or the egg still remains a fascinating and intractable conundrum.

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