

ELE9, SESSION 2008 (Lambourne, Cameron, Wilde)

Suggested plan

Intro: Introduce the 3 documents (only the *relevant* details): English taste for (miniature) portraiture in the 19th c. + artistic photo by one of the first photographs of all time (a woman too) + most famous excerpt from Wilde's *only* novel. One of the main topics of this set of documents = power of art to imitate / represent or, on the contrary, depart from nature. Opposition between canvas surface & human depth = thread running through these docs.

1) the prevalence of the portrait in many art forms: paintings, photographs, literature here

a) Cf. Lambourne's assertions, with the English preference for the miniature. The fact that 2 presidents of the RA were portrait painters.

b) in literature, naturally, to help characterize (mimetic) and/or to symbolize types (didactic). A good ex. of this = Dorian, and the moral dilemma (doing good or LOOKING good?)

c) obviously, a lot of beauty attached to it Cf. photograph (clear blue eyes, formal attitude, almost angelic pose, melancholy, arouses the viewer's sympathy, etc.) Beauty and grandeur attracts every one of us → hence the appeal of the great, the fashionable and/or beautiful.

d) fin de siècle ambiguity: Dorian's beauty / ugliness, and the perverting role of art / artifice: decadence, too much emphasis on luxury (explain in detail). Art as a medium for morality in the novel, even though the protagonist falls short of any moral code.

2) the ambiguous relation between portrait and truth

a) face seen frontally, delicate hand = symbol of honesty, purity, innocence. Cf. lady in the photograph. Lily white, downcast eyes, saintly appearance. The same goes for Dorian's picture after the wish is granted: picture = truth, however sordid it may be. But henceforth this truth will be hidden from view (at Dorian's sole pleasure)

b) tho' a picture may be worth 1,000 words, those words may well be lies. Cf. other reflected image in *Dorian*: that of the mirror & its polished surface = unable to see the truth / hoax. Chalon agrees, believing that portrait painters will survive thanks to their ability to *flatter* ungraceful subjects (as if photography couldn't do just the same, with the correct angle / amount of light, the use of low / high angle shots, light & shade, etc. The very word "likeness" is therefore problematic: how like is a *likeness*? With which amount of trust should we invest those representations? The power of images is such that domestic scenes (Islay, parrot, provincial lady at a private view) can make or undo a person's reputation or standing with the general audience.

c) moreover, the portrait has always been used for political reasons too = a show / display of power (12: "communicate the awe of majesty"). Images therefore tell various stories & serve sundry purposes: power, influence, rewriting history, social renown. Not just neutral "recorders" of the past, etc. Cf. Wotton in *Dorian* and his morbid, maddening influence on the hero.

3) portraits and symbolism (semiotics)

a) Dorian = a study in self-complacency (internal focalization, free indirect speech), soulless cruelty, belief in determinism, the absence of free will / morality / hope of self-improvement (unresisting decadence). Symbolism in the narrative: fire jets that are snuffed out (= Sybil's death), fantastic shadows vs. ardent light, phantoms = echoes of his debauched lifestyle, etc. All this is made manifest by the cruel grin on his "painted face."

b) the danger of portraiture is thus underlined: too much stress is usually laid on surfaces, at the expense of depth; it is easy to be taken in by the re-presentation of the human face (staging, unnatural posing as neutral). Dorian = Narcissus-like figure whom the strange fulfillment of his wish forces to reconsider his past behavior. The same goes for the avid search for representations of social figures: surface interest only in the way the rich and famous are supposed to look & behave.

c) the power of art = makes us look beneath the surface & look for hidden meanings. Cf. Cameron's model, like a spectral presence coming out of a wall, ghost-like. Both Echo (the nymph hopelessly in love with Narcissus) and *The Echo* = from the past? Many shades of grey, not just black and white Cf. oxymoron "its beautiful marred face" (74). Cameron's poses = a put-on act, several minutes necessary

d) hence Lambourne's judgment on several portrait artists: some are made too much of, others are unduly forgotten (according to him), depending on the echo they find in us or not.

Concl: Art can be powerful enough to transform a narcissistic impulse / voyeuristic instinct into a search for meaning, symbolism, multilayered depths, etc. Though posing as neutral or immediate, it is anything but that: it fashions its material in a cleverly thought-out way that leaves nothing to chance. Art = artifice, know-how, experience, appeal to the senses and to reason.

