

Multiple Dorian Grays: Yinka Shonibare Photographical Take on Oscar Wilde's Only Novel

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Abstract: Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) is one of the cornerstones of Victorian literature. Having this in mind, this paper intends to ponder on Yinka Shonibare's transmedial work, titled *Dorian Gray* (2001), compiled in eleven black and white photographs and a coloured one, depicting himself as Dorian. The pillars of such work go back not only to the novel itself, but also to Albert Lewin's film adaptation of the former [*The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1945)]. As such and having the photographic pieces as the focus, a reflexion will be conducted to understand in what ways the vision of the authors changed the already shifting nature of Wilde's main character and how referred mutations were impacted by their context of creation, as well as how they may have influenced the reception of the literary work and Dorian himself. It also aims to think about the significance behind such transformations, along with reflecting on the contemporaneity of reimagining this idealised perfect persona as something very distant from the Irish writer's primary depiction, crystalized by an art that, in the nineteenth century, was gaining popularity but was yet far from assuming the lead role as the key media to represent one's external aspect.

Keywords: literature, photography, transmediality, cultural approach

Resumo: *O Retrato de Dorian Gray* (1890) de Oscar Wilde assume-se como uma das pedras de toque da literatura vitoriana. Tendo isto em consideração, o presente artigo pretende refletir sobre o trabalho transmedial de Yinka Shonibare, intitulado *Dorian Gray*

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(2001) e composto por onze fotografias a preto e branco e uma a cores, colocando-o no papel do próprio Dorian. Os pilares deste último trabalho baseiam-se não apenas no romance mas também no filme de Albert Lewin que o adapta [*The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1945)]. Assim, colocando o foco sobre a compilação fotográfica, conduzir-se-á uma análise que possibilite compreender de que forma a visão destes últimos dois autores alterou a natureza já de si mutável do protagonista da obra de Wilde e de que maneira essa mesma metamorfose poderá ter influenciado a receção do trabalho literário e da personagem principal. Além disso, refletir-se-á sobre o significado daquilo que catalisa tal transformação, bem como sobre o processo de reimaginar contemporaneamente esta *persona* idealmente perfeita enquanto bastante diferente- cristalizada através de uma arte que, no século XIX, adquiria popularidade mas estava ainda longe de assumir o papel principal na representação externa do indivíduo- daquela que o escritor irlandês primariamente descreveu.

Palavras-chave: literatura, fotografia, transmidialidade, abordagem cultural

Introduction

The current article intends to explore the British Nigerian photographer Yinka Shonibare's work depicting himself as one of the most famous characters in Victorian literature: Oscar Wilde's Mr. Dorian Gray. Its main objective is to analyse Shonibare's potentially transmedial work, titled *Dorian Gray* and released in 2001, which is compiled in eleven black and white photographs and one in colour.

Despite being a tremendously well-known work, it is important to start by providing some information about the context of creation of the Irish writer's only novel, and, more specifically, about its plot and main character. The story, which was written during the reign of Queen Victoria in the form of a novel - the genre which became most popular during this period - revolves around a young, beautiful gentleman of English upper-class society. He has his portrait painted by Basil, a painter and friend of Dorian who is marvelled by his model's perfect appearance. The extraordinary nature of this story is related to the fact that, after being finished, the painted figure starts changing and ageing, while Gray himself preserves, throughout the years, his impeccable, divine, and youthful looks. The decay of the portrait is not only provoked by the natural passage of time but also - and above all - by the model's actions themselves: after realising that he can follow a bohemian immoral life without suffering any visible consequences, Dorian does not hesitate to engage in self-destructive behaviour, as well as incurring in acts that certainly harm, in serious ways, those with whom he relates.

The epitome of this attitude is attained when he assassinates Basil after the painter's attempt to retrieve the painting he once considered his masterpiece. Moreover, throughout the novel, the protagonist is characterised as someone deeply concerned with his physical appearance and with maintaining a perfect image, idolised by the other members of his social circle, which he seems to be able to manipulate at his will. Thus, the reader establishes contact with an utterly narcissistic individual, who, in a progressive and conscient manner, becomes increasingly oblivious of ethics and morals to the detriment of aesthetics and luxury. Such problem is once again addressed by Albert Lewin's film *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1945) and recovered, once again, by Shonibare's photographic work. The problem regarding art and aesthetics is so fundamental to Wilde's work that Dorian - who is treated both as the art piece itself as well as the inspiration for it - is concomitantly dehumanised since he is sometimes perceived as an

object, to be admired and contemplated, and deified, since, in the mind of several of the characters who interact with him, he is the owner of an uncanny, almost magical, physical beauty, impossible to attain and imitate by any other being.

Writing, filming and photographing Dorian Gray: three diachronic cases

Notwithstanding, how is Dorian portrayed in each of the works mentioned above? For he - or them, if one chooses to consider, not wrongfully, that each of these characters is linked to one another but is not the same as each other - does not have the same appearance. At this point, the three cases in which Dorian is either literary described or visually portrayed should be comparatively analysed.

The first Dorian to ever come to exist is described² as a tall, thin, British man with pale, uniform skin and a head laden with light-golden hair. This representation evokes the classical canon of attractiveness, undeniably popular during the Victorian period. Related to the European, Western and Christian conception of ultimate beauty as something necessarily linked to very concrete concepts of purity and light, Wilde's Dorian works as the incarnation of the stereotypical dandy, as well as the perfect example of what the unattainable pattern of elegance should consist of. Thus, despite what could be considered nowadays as a childish visage, regularity and symmetry set the tone of his general appearance. By his turn, second world-war Dorian preserves the Caucasian features, but no longer possesses the blonde hair Wilde's did. It is then changed to black hair, brushed from front to back to allow his face to be completely visible. This Dorian still seems to be young, but perhaps not as much as the first one, despite his smooth skin. In this sense, it is possible to observe that the transformation which this character undergoes, although not drastic, is capable of placing the appearance of the protagonist within the horizon of expectations of the target audience, especially if we consider that, unlike what happens in the case of the novel, the film was made in America, employing mainly American actors and for a primarily American audience.

Finally, when we look at Shonibare's self-portraits, we are confronted with a completely different Dorian Gray from the one tradition has canonised, which is highly significant.

² And drawn, If we consider the first ever illustrations of the novel, made by Henry Keen for the 1925's edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

We are now dealing with an artwork dating from the twenty-first century that reinterprets a character created roughly one hundred years before and with whom the relation of the concepts of external attractiveness and inner immorality have constantly been associated. The bridge between the two works - Lewins' film - serves as an intermediate point, which begins to reveal, even if only slightly, an alteration of the perception of what Gray is or should be, which is recovered and reconstructed by Shonibare in a manner that recalls the recreation of the film, now through static image. Therefore, this photographer's work sheds some light upon how the Eurocentric and Westernised perspective tends to dominate and dogmatically dictate what is considered as the ideal example of something utterly desired, as is perfect beauty.

It should be added that the Dorian Gray created by Shonibare is also, in a certain way, the artist himself. In this sense and considering that Shonibare does not intend to represent merely his image but a Dorian who happens to look exactly like him, we are being confronted with the blurring of the barrier between creator and creation, besides the inevitable break with what, by traditional standards, the character written by Wilde is expected to be. Firstly and foremost, this new Dorian Gray is a black person. This is the most immediately noticeable characteristic for those who, accustomed to Western standards, are confronted with a character whose mental representation is prone to reject anything other than the canonical white man's skin tone. Besides, when the photographs were taken, Shonibare was already almost forty years old, calling into question another of Gray's seemingly core characteristics: his youthful age. Moreover, although it is something that may go unnoticed in this specific work, the photographer suffers from a serious health problem, causing one side of his body to be completely paralyzed. In short, the reenacted Gray is black, middle-aged, and disabled.

The Dorian from the photographs: opposition or alternative?

From a certain perspective, one could be led to think about the wholeness of this character as being shattered: Shonibare's Dorian is not a complete Dorian, but rather a severed figure who serves the purpose of defying a canonical view. However, the question here is a lot more complex, since it is exactly by presenting an alternative - and not an opposite figure - to the already established protagonist of *The Picture of Dorian* (Wilde, 1890) that these photographs contribute to demystify the prevalent notion of beauty dictated by the occidental model as the uttermost desirable set of physical characteristics for a person to

possess. Since this type of conception works using an exclusion mechanism, Shonibare's work show exposes such binary reasoning³ precisely through the act of presenting an individual whose appearance is closer to the average human being as occupying the place reserved for Dorian Gray. What, by conservative standards, is seen as undesirable, unsightly and even repulsive is owned and openly displayed by Shonibare as an integral part of the essence of the renewed protagonist of these photographs. Therefore, if Gray cannot be anything different from what was written by Wilde and obsessively imagined and reimagined by his readers throughout decades, then Shonibare (re)invents and brings to light another Dorian, more human and tangible than the physical form the first is encased in.

Nevertheless, only the protagonist has these markedly different features from those first sculpted by Oscar Wilde and later calcified by further adaptations. The metaphor thus seems quite understandable: the extraordinary figure - here, in the sense of "out of the ordinary" and not necessarily in the positive significance of the term - moves in a world composed of normative and dominant white characters. He is the exception, this time not because the others (and the spectators) see him as superior, but because he is simply considered different. Therefore, not only is Shonibare's Dorian's appearance divergent from the majority of his homonymous, but it is also entirely distinct from the characters around him. If Wilde's main character is the outlier for reasons considered the best, Shonibare's protagonist recovers this conception, highlighting the negative view European and North American society historically developed towards Afro-descendants and turning a popular character, taken as the model of male ideal beauty, into a bastion of resistance against that very ideal.

The negative view previously alluded to is intimately connected with another question which, in turn, links the corporeal dimension to the spiritual one, since, in Western society, traditional folklore and Christian matrix tend to associate the existence of an unblemished soul with the perfection and integrity of a person's outer form. Such perfection is based on several dominant - but not exactly common - characteristics, which start at skin tone, go through gender, and end up in smaller features, such as the colour of the eyes or the width of the mouth. Therefore, someone who lacks certain traits - many

³ Which dictates that to be aesthetic is to have the entire conjunction of features without failure and to bear no other with power to either cancel or diminish one of the desired qualities.

of which are genetically inherited and impossible to acquire in any other way - will consequently never be able to attain the degree of moral and spiritual elevation of another who possesses them. For centuries, perception of the allegedly evident relation between outer form and inner content has contributed to reinforcing the barrier between the plenitude of the white male colonialist and the shortcoming nature of the overpowered non-Caucasian individual, who, nevertheless, is surrounded and asphyxiated - not necessarily numerically, but certainly mentally and emotionally, constantly deprived of space and, most importantly, of identity - by the ideal Man.

The Nigerian British artist's take on this literary *persona* also serves to problematize the concept of ideal beauty, interconnecting it with issues related to a colonialist heritage and a current neo-colonialism that, despite not appearing to be necessarily linked to politico-military factors, continues to express itself largely in the realm of abstract ideas and, consequently, social, aesthetic and moral precepts. In this sense, the mere idea that Shonibare's Gray is opposed to the one written by Wilde and reinforced by Lewins carries in itself a much stronger charge than it appears, since it forces one to take as a referent - that is, as an "original"⁴ - a character developed during a period when the conception of what a human being is (and, consequently, of the rights associated with it) was still quite embryonic and deeply deficient. Consequently, we use as a reference an anachronistic artificial construction of what is the desirable Man, comparing all the others with the latter who, invariably, will always come out as the winner.

The choice of photography as a medium for this representation is not insignificant, since it serves as a lens for a world which, although different from what is considered real, historically tends to imitate and approach it. It constitutes an oversimplification to argue that photography serves simply and exclusively as a means of representing reality, and it is also somewhat naïve and scientifically wrong to argue that types of work such as this strive for fidelity to the real. As a form of artistic expression, this is far from being the role of photography, which can be worked upon and manipulated in the most diverse ways. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the capture, albeit static and silently, of moments and elements of reality, make this art one of the most powerful and potentially

⁴ Concept which should be avoided when conducting an analysis through an interartistic perspective.

successful means to express certain ideas such as those that Shonibare procures to convey.

Those ideas, which gain form through this series of photographs, work cooperatively to transmit a cohesive narrative, have as background the American film's story itself, which, in turn, has Wilde's novel as grid. Therefore, diegetically speaking, what happens to Shonibare's Dorian is the same as what happens to Lewin's one, which is (almost) what happens to Wilde's protagonist⁵. This means that, although his physical attributes are unquestionably different from those traditionally associated with Gray, the photographed Dorian will also kill Basil Howard and subsequently destroy the painting showing the corruption of his spirit. In this sense, Wilde's Dorian is brought from his (pseudo-)divine perfection to an earthly, flawed world, while Shonibare's Dorian occupies his rightful position as a human being. This may also sum up the notion so familiar to Shonibare of an identity hybridity built up by the contemporary world which, however, ends up seeing it in a tendentiously negative light.

Photography, like the mirror in which Dorian observes himself in one of the shots, works as a way to accentuate the *mise en abyme* perpetrated by the existence of several reinvented versions of this Victorian narrative. By looking at himself - and, by analogy, by making the beholders of Shonibare's work also gaze upon this protagonist, through the reflection offered by the mirror which, in turn, was captured by the mirrored mechanism of the lens - he establishes a metaphysical dialogue with the literary and filmic heritage that precedes him, showing, concomitantly, the infinitely repeated image of what the persona of Dorian Gray signifies. In a complementary way, underlining this same heritage also means deconstructing it. To look into its eyes, as Gray looks at himself, is to seek the essence that allows him to assume the identity in a categorical way and, at the same time, realising that, more than the set of physical characteristics that we usually associate with the character, it is his core as a physically extraordinary and morally degenerate being that serves as backbone of his existence and as a perfect allegory for what is the ugly visage of neo-colonialist perspective of much of the contemporary moral and aesthetic values.

⁵ Albeit certain modifications and inclusions.

The question of hybridism turns into an even more delicate matter when paying attention to the last photograph, which portrays the denouement of Dorian Gray's story. After stabbing the already completely decayed painted figure with a knife, he feels an outraging pain in his chest, making him dwell in agony, perishing at last. However, when his body is found, it no longer resembles the impeccably divine gentleman, who used to attend dinner parties and opera recitals all over London. He is now the decrepit, disgusting and putridly old ghoul who was previously incarcerated in Basil's portrait: his inner corruption had finally come out to see the light of day. The fact that this is kept by Shonibare as the end to his own Dorian shows how, despite the severe mutations he has suffered, there is still a need to eradicate the notion of perfect appearance that is professed by this figure, which is not exactly Wilde's character itself but rather a strong and consensual symbol for what is ultimately desired to attain, regardless of the means necessary to achieve so, and without any kind of respect or attention for the multiplicity of people and solutions available. The twenty-first century's Mr Dorian Gray - who, by Western patterns, is already less than the others because he diverges from the canon - injures the idea of himself and, with him, the tradition enclosed by it. He, as the perfect white man, is no more. Since Shonibare's protagonist is but one of the components of a lengthy line of characters with the same name, similar diegesis and alike backgrounds, its quality changes, forced by artistic activism to deal with alternatives of (re)construction and (re)creation, of which this photographic artwork is an active part of.

To conclude, it is necessary to add that Shonibare's work is but one of the many examples of how photography, a rather young and multifaceted artistic media, can contribute to defy, change and extend canonical conceptions, enlarging the notion of what his art, how it can be perceived and by and for who it can be made, regardless of the prescriptive and historically rooted ideas that revolve around the target of the reinvention.

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