

# Sibyl Vane's Life and Death in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*:

## Considering the Influence of Shakespeare

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### Introduction

In Oscar Wilde's (1854-1900) *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890: hereinafter referred to as "*Dorian*"), there is the scene where Dorian Gray cries over the death of Sibyl Vane, a talented and beautiful actress with whom he fell in love at first sight (98-100). In spite of his grief, Lord Henry, who is Dorian's older friend and a major character in the novel, comes to tell him about Sibyl's death, "She has played her last part . . . Mourn for Ophelia, if you like. Put ashes on your head because Cordelia was strangled. Cry out against Heaven because the daughter of Brabantio died. . . ." (104). This quote indicates that Sibyl played a number of female Shakespearean roles, including Ophelia, Cordelia, and the daughter of Brabantio. She lived her life as an actress until the end. In particular, her death reflected Ophelia in *Hamlet* (1601), who dies in the latter part of that play.

It is notable that Wilde was influenced by William Shakespeare (1564-1616). Regarding the links between his writing and Shakespeare, based on the example of *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* (1889: hereinafter referred to as "*Portrait*") and the sonnets (1609), Suda states that, highly interested in Shakespeare, Wilde kept creating *Portrait* until summer in 1889. He also formed his opinions on the sonnets and got around to *Dorian*

in fall of that year (35). As a fact, Wilde wrote *Portrait* in order to pay tribute to Shakespeare's sonnets (Suda 33). In addition to that, Suda's statement suggests that Wilde created and brought *Dorian* into society for the same reason as *Portrait*, since it was started to be written just after the completion of *Portrait* in the same year.

Considering these points, Sibyl Vane's death in *Dorian* can be influenced by Ophelia's in *Hamlet* as well as Wilde was by Shakespeare. The purpose of this study is to examine how Sibyl lived her life as an actress by comparing her scenes in *Dorian* with those of Ophelia's in *Hamlet* in order to see if there is the influence of Wilde's attraction to Shakespeare in this novel. The 1st chapter will show how Sibyl's death is described in *Dorian*, while the 2nd chapter will highlight similar scenes in *Hamlet*. Finally, the 3rd chapter will focus on Ophelia's death to contrast how Sibyl and Ophelia respectively ended their lives.

## **Chapter I . Sibyl's Death and Dorian's Involvement**

Sibyl's death is described as suicide which she committed as a Shakespearean actress, based on Henry's notion. Meanwhile, how was Dorian involved with her destiny? Sibyl tells Dorian that she has abandoned her job as an actress and lives for her love to him:

To-night, for the first time in my life, I saw through the hollowness, the sham, the silliness of the empty pageant in which I had always played. To-night, for the

first time in my life, I became conscious that the Romeo was hideous, and old, and painted, that the moonlight in the orchard was false, that the scenery was vulgar, and that the words I had to speak were unreal, were not my words, were not what I wanted to say. You had brought me something higher, something of which all art is but a reflection. You had made me understand what love really is. My love! my love! Prince Charming! Prince of life! (86-87)

This excerpt indicates that Sibyl has gotten sick of being an actress because she found no meaning in speaking “unreal” words or living in “false” worlds. And then, she decided to live for her “real” love with Dorian. It seems that Sibyl feels terrifically happy while speaking these words. However, after Dorian hears Sibyl, he gets furious and rejects her:

[Y]ou have killed my love. You used to stir my imagination. Now you don't even stir my curiosity. You simply produce no effect. I loved you because you were marvelous, because you had genius and intellect, because you realized the dreams of great poets and gave shape and substance to the shadows of art. You have thrown it all away. You are shallow and stupid. My God! How mad I was to love you! What a fool I have been! You are nothing to me now . . . (87)

Dorian loved Sibyl's “marvelousness”, “genius” and “intellect” in bringing the worlds of poems and art into being. In fact, he did not love Sibyl as an individual. Regarding Dorian's reaction, he thinks of art as a real world, and performing as a living form, but

his love for them has been “killed” by Sibyl. After all, Sibyl kills herself, and Dorian’s degradation is foretold since Sibyl is Dorian’s real world for which he has lived (Scheible 147). While Sibyl abandoned art and performing since they were unreal for her, Dorian loved and regarded them as real. That is, Sibyl’s decision to abandon acting started to destroy Dorian’s real world.

Concerning Sibyl’s suicide, Wilde’s elaborate choice of words can be seen in his naming the characters. The word “sibyl” means “[a] prophetess; a fortune-teller, a witch.”<sup>1</sup> Sibyl may play the role of “a prophetess” to predict Dorian’s destiny.

The very next day after Dorian says cruel words to Sibyl, Henry tells him that Sibyl has died, and that the morning papers have reported her death:

I have no doubt it was not an accident, Dorian, though it must be put in that way to the public . . . They ultimately found her lying dead on the floor of her dressing-room. She had swallowed something by mistake, some dreadful thing they use at theatres. I don't know what it was, but it had either prussic acid or white lead in it. I should fancy it was prussic acid, as she seems to have died instantaneously.

(99)

Henry’s intimation that Sibyl’s death was “by mistake” may leave doubt that she really committed suicide. However, given that a substance like prussic acid was left in her dressing-room, it is suggested that she had been thinking of killing herself for some

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<sup>1</sup> See Simpson, J. A., and Weiner, E. S. C. 407.

period of time. This implies that it could have happened even before Dorian abandoned her. After Dorian hears Henry, Dorian says, “So I have murdered Sibyl Vane” (100) to blame himself for her death, but Henry responds to him, “[s]he has played her last part” (104) as a Shakespearean actress probably for consolation.

Although Sibyl abandoned her career as an actress, she ended her life as that by killing herself. Considering that Sibyl died after hearing Dorian’s cruel words, it is suggested that his words were involved to connect her to one of the Shakespearean roles, and she performed a scene where the role appears. After all, Sibyl was influenced by the words and the worlds of the Shakespearean plays since she performed many of its roles. Moreover, Wilde might have shown his interest in Shakespeare through Sibyl in *Dorian*.

## **Chapter II . The Similarities between *Hamlet* and *Dorian***

As mentioned in the introduction, Wilde was influenced by Shakespeare. In order to make clear that *Dorian* is also influenced by *Hamlet*, their similar points should be considered, especially Ophelia’s family members and Hamlet’s words.

### **Section I . Family’s Attitudes to their Daughter or Sister’s Love for Boyfriend**

Ophelia has a father, Polonius, and an older brother, Laertes. They are subordinates of Claudius, Hamlet’s uncle who became the king of Denmark after killing his older brother. Both of them are suspicious of Ophelia's love for Hamlet because of a

disparity of their social statuses. Polonius also wonders why Hamlet often comes to visit his daughter (1.3).

In contrast, Sibyl has a mother and a younger brother, James. Both of them hear of Sibyl's love for Dorian, whom she calls "Prince Charming". They are suspicious because of the possible difference of their social statuses, like Polonius and Laertes are (60-65). Moreover, James says to his mother, "I hear a gentleman [Dorian] comes every night to the theatre, and goes behind to talk to her [Sibyl]. Is that right? . . ." (64). This sentiment is similar to Polonius's suspicion about Hamlet's visit to Ophelia.

## Section II. Hamlet's Cruel Words

Hamlet says cruel words to Ophelia in the play (3.1), and this scene is similar to the one where Dorian abandons Sibyl in the novel. In addition to the similarity, are there noteworthy points that relate to *Dorian* in his words? In *Dorian*, the relation between beauty and morality is discussed several times, and the lines below are linked to those discussions:

HAMLET. Ay, truly; for the power of beauty will sooner transform

honesty from what it is to a bawd than the force of honesty can

translate beauty into his likeness: This was sometime a paradox,

but now the time gives it proof. I did love you once. (3.1.111-14)

Here Hamlet admits Ophelia's "beauty" but implies that she is not "honest". Borrowing the words from *Dorian*, Ophelia has come to look "beautiful" but "immoral" for Hamlet.

According to Gunji, Hamlet is disappointed by his mother's too early remarriage, and his disappointment has been directed to every woman. Ophelia plays the major role of a woman whose sexual charm is completely denied despite her beauty. In other words, she is a perfect maiden without sexual charm, and after all, Ophelia is just a symbol of beauty for Hamlet (158). Hamlet loved Ophelia's beautiful appearance as Dorian loved Sibyl's. In discussing the relation between beauty and morality in *Dorian*, Henry, probably Dorian too, insists that they are irrelevant, and that the former is important. Hamlet does not verbalize which is important like the characters of *Dorian* do, but in light of the relation between the two stories, it is clear that he thinks similarly with Henry and Dorian. The following excerpt indicates what Hamlet came to think of women:

HAMLET. I have heard of your paintings too, well enough; God

has given you one face, and you make yourselves another: You

jig, and amble, and you lisp, you nick-name God's creatures, and

make your wantonness your ignorance. (3.1.139-42)

Here Hamlet likens women to actresses by saying "paintings", "make yourselves another" and so on. Sibyl does these types of things as an actress. Although there is no description of Hamlet hating theater or actresses, it is possible that he never had a good image about

them. Given that Dorian loved “Sibyl as a beautiful actress”, however, this point is not fully mutual.

The scene where Hamlet says cruel words to Ophelia in the play is not only similar to that of Dorian and Sibyl in the novel but also provided a lot of inspiration to Wilde for creating *Dorian*. The discussions of beauty and morality derived from the lines where Hamlet admits Ophelia’s beauty but denies her honesty, while Sibyl’s figure as an actress was made from the lines where Hamlet speaks ill of actresses. That is, Wilde picked up a variety of points from the lines in *Hamlet*, and put them into the plot and the characters in *Dorian*.

### **Chapter III. Comparison between Sibyl and Ophelia**

Given the similarity of cruel words between Hamlet to Sibyl and Dorian to Ophelia, Sibyl played the role of Ophelia when she committed suicide. How is the scene of Ophelia’s death described in *Hamlet*? Gertrude, Hamlet’s mother, tells Laertes that Ophelia drowned in the river:

GERTRUDE. [Y]our sister's drowned, Laertes.

LAERTES. Drowned? O, where?

GERTRUDE. There, on the pendent boughs her coronet weeds

Clambering to hang, an envious sliver broke,

When down her weedy trophies and herself



Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide,  
And, mermaid-like, awhile they bore her up,  
Which time she chanted snatches of old tunes,  
As one incapable of her own distress,  
Or like a creature native and indued  
Unto that element: but long it could not be  
Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,  
Pull'd the poor wretch from her melodious lay  
To muddy death.

LAERTES. Alas, then, she is drowned?

GERTRUDE. Drowned, drowned. (4.7.164-84)

Later Hamlet himself learns of her death when Gertrude and Laertes are talking about it where her grave is dug (5.1).

There have been discussions whether Ophelia's death is an accident or suicide for a long time. For example, Byington picks up three verbs - "clambering", "fell" and "bore" - from the lines above and says what occurred in the scenery can be learned from those words (28). Gertrude is about to tell promptly whether Ophelia died by accident or killed herself, between Laertes' immediate question, "O, where," and the depiction of her drowning. Gertrude also calls the branch "an envious sliver" like a person to be accused of Ophelia's drowning in order to obscure the possibility of her suicide (Byington 28).

That is, Gertrude concocts an accident by referring to the branch as her murderer, and obscure the possibility of her suicide in order to hide the fact here.

The ways Sibyl and Ophelia die are different. However, since she has similar family members and the same experience as Ophelia, Sibyl subconsciously remembers when she played her role, and their minds get connected after Sibyl heard Dorian's words. Given the meaning of "sibyl", a prophetess, which was mentioned above, it is also possible to consider that the spirit of Ophelia possesses and kills her. Furthermore, Wilde might have made Henry say "by mistake" about Sibyl's death from Ophelia's "accident-or-suicide debate".

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to examine how Sibyl Vane lived her life as a Shakespearean actress by comparing her scenes in *Dorian* with those of Ophelia's in *Hamlet* to see if there was the influence of Wilde's attraction to Shakespeare in this novel.

First, Sibyl abandoned her career as an actress in order to get out of the "unreal" worlds where she played, and decided to live for "real" love with Dorian. However, Dorian abandoned Sibyl since he had loved her beauty as an actress and sought a "real" world in her theatrical performances. Then, it was suggested that Dorian's cruel words somehow made Sibyl an actress again and play a Shakespearean role in the form of

suicide. Moreover, Sibyl was considered to have been influenced by the Shakespearean plays where she played its roles, and Wilde showed the influence of Shakespeare on him through the scene of her death.

Second, Ophelia's father and brother have points in common with Sibyl's mother and brother, including opposition to their daughter or sister's marriage due to the disparities of social status. In addition, Hamlet's cruel words to Ophelia acknowledges her beauty but doubts her honesty or morality. The same discussions were extended in *Dorian*. Wilde got an amount of inspiration from these scenes in creating the one where Dorian abandons Sibyl as well as the plot and the characters in the novel.

Finally, accepting the differences in how Sibyl and Ophelia committed suicides, it turned out that Sibyl was connected to Ophelia before she died. Since Sibyl had similar family members and the same experience as Ophelia, Dorian's words which resembled Hamlet's ended up bringing Sibyl to death as if she had gone the same way as Ophelia. Even considering the meaning of "sibyl", it is likely that the spirit of Ophelia possessed Sibyl's mind and body.

This study made clear that Wilde described Sibyl's life and death in *Dorian* from the scenes and the lines involving Ophelia in *Hamlet*, and showed his respect and adoration to Shakespeare through Sibyl. In this way, the plot and the characters that Wilde made in his books could be somehow linked to those of the Shakespearean plays as well as *Dorian* or *Portrait*.

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