

Magical Portraits

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ABSTRACT | Visual portraits can be alluring by being very lifelike. This feature has been a favorite one for artists to explore in film and fiction: it sometimes leads to romance and sometimes to danger and obsession. Whereas Pygmalion and Professor Higgins fall in love with their own creations come to life, in some stories and film portraits, as in the noir classics *Rebecca* and *Laura*, the powerful gaze of women in pictures exerts an uncanny force that extends beyond death. The Harry Potter books and films feature portraits that can move and talk, sometimes in amusing, sometimes educational, ways. My essay meditates on how artists across diverse genres have represented the magical powers of portraits, with a particular focus on one of the more fascinating fictional examples, Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Wilde's novella offers a complex consideration of relations between art and life. It shows both why portraits can be fascinating and how their magical art can become dark and dangerous.

KEYWORDS | Portraits; Dorian Gray; Pygmalion; Magic; Uncanny

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1 Magical Portraits

We often praise portraits for being lifelike. It is particularly meaningful if the person shown in the portrait is someone we have loved, but who is now lost to us. Portraits hold our attention when the people in them look especially real; their eyes seem to look back and follow us around the room.¹ In the world of Harry Potter, the eyes of people in portraits actually do this. The portraits in those stories can move and talk. Fans of the books will know many arcane details about the pictures at Hogwarts School, where buildings are decorated with portraits with subjects who regularly manifest various actions.² The Fat Lady beckons and toasts viewers with her wine glass. Sir Cadogan challenges people to a duel and falls off his horse. Even after his death, Albus Dumbledore, speaking from his portrait, offers advice to Harry and to other headmasters. Other characters in pictures curse, warn of upcoming dangers, guard secret passages, and so on. Some of the pictured people can shift location and move between portraits, as the Fat Lady does in Book 1 and Phineas Nigellus does in Book 7. These portrait powers and actions are, naturally, depicted in fun and colorful detail in film versions of the Harry Potter novels.

The explanation for the amazing properties of portraits in Harry Potter, of course, comes down to magic. The sitters' powers derive from the skills of the wizards who made the paintings. The greater the skill of the witch or wizard, the more detailed and lifelike the portrait. Portraits reveal what the artist observed about the people while making their picture. In certain cases, the pictures are especially detailed and active because they are portraits of the school's headmasters. These teachers, presumably persons with great magical skills, have gotten their portraits made at some point and afterward continued to teach their portraits things about themselves and their lives. Most portraits of past headmasters are kept in the rooms of the current headmaster, with some hidden away in a secret closet. Headmasters can visit and confer with the sentient, talking images of their predecessors, and glean advice from them if it is needed.

Students at Hogwarts do not have the same access as teachers to wise figures in portraits, but even a young wizard like Harry can sometimes benefit from the magical powers and actions of portraits of those who have gone ahead. In addition to portrait images, the Harry Potter novels also sometimes depict animated images of people in photographs and mirrors, ones in which a person's reflection (or a ghost) speaks back to them. This does not always work for the best results.

¹ I discuss this point and some examples in my article "Moving Picture Portraits" in (Freeland 2020, pp. 97–112).

² For further details along with a list of known portraits from the books, their locations and activities, see the section titled ("Portraits" 2021) on The Harry Potter Wiki.

In the first book there is a mirror named “the Mirror of Erised” (“desire” spelled backwards). Harry spends too much time viewing photos of the parents he misses, so Dumbledore hides the mirror away.³

2 Pygmalion and Beyond

The theme of artistic creations that magically come alive and begin to move and speak is a very old one in art. In ancient Greek mythology, the artist Pygmalion created an ivory sculpture of a perfect beauty who was more lovely than any real woman. After he prayed to Aphrodite to find a woman like her, the goddess magically brought the beautiful statue to life. The story has been re-told in many other versions, notably in the play of the same name by George Bernard Shaw (1913), and later in its film version, *My Fair Lady* (1964). In these works, the snobby Professor of Languages Henry Higgins bets a friend that he can educate a common flower girl and transform her from a coarse, ill-spoken woman of the streets into an elegant lady who gets accepted in Society at a fancy ball. After a year of intense instruction, his “creation” Eliza Doolittle helps him win his bet. But in the process the teacher loses his heart to his own artistic product. Professor Higgins must then figure out how to woo Eliza given that his treatment of her has been cruel and condescending.

Portraits in history often served as memorials to the dead, but they could also be a living emissary of a real person.⁴ Kings and queens sometimes sent their portraits to members of the realm to demonstrate their thanks and promise of patronage. Portraits served romance at other times, being sent abroad in diplomatic enterprises to help arrange or seal a royal marriage. A portrait could even stand in as a proxy for a royal person in a marriage ceremony for far-flung individuals. Artists as distinguished as Holbein and van Eyck were sent abroad on diplomatic missions to paint potential marriage partners for their respective royal patrons, Henry VIII of England and Duke Philip the Good of Burgundy.⁵

There are related fictional instances in which a portrait is the intermediary in a grand narrative of love. A famous Persian legend that was turned into an epic poem by the twelfth-century writer Nizami recounts the story of two young people who fall in love via a portrait. When the princely Khosrow is told of Shirin’s remarkable beauty, he longs for her. He sends his painter friend to see Shirin and to show her Khosrow’s portrait. She immediately falls in love with the handsome

³ Thanks to Barbara Urdiales and Ariana Peruzzi for these examples.

⁴ For more, see my book (Freeland 2010). For insightful criticisms of my view, see (Maes 2015). Helpful sources on the changing nature of portraits in art history are (West 2004) and (Brilliant 1991).

⁵ (Meares 2018).

young man in the picture. The two seek to be with each other but run into many challenges and misadventures; the tale ends tragically. Unsurprisingly, episodes from this epic were often illustrated in Persian miniature paintings. These include versions highlighting Shirin's fascinated gaze when it first falls upon the portrait of her future beloved.⁶

The plot lines of such Pygmalion-style stories tend to take two directions. Sometimes the "enlivened" artwork provides the creator with happiness, or at least with interesting challenges and intrigues, as in the stories of Shirin and Khosrow, Pygmalion, and Professor Higgins of *My Fair Lady*. But in other cases, the created being—the portrait or sculpture that comes to life—turns out to be flawed, or even worse, monstrous and threatening. Perhaps the best-known example of this latter path is provided by German writer E.T.A. Hoffmann (1776-1822). His 1816 short story *The Sandman* is a very disturbing tale in which the main character Nathanael falls in love with the beautiful Olympia. But she turns out to be a wooden doll who has been created by Coppelius, a mysterious and evil alchemist. Coppelius had frightened the young Nathanael on visits to his father, when the boy spied on them and learned that this man carried a collection of real human eyes.

Later in college, Nathanael meets a man named Coppola whom he believes is the evil Coppelius. Coppola is working with a physics professor named Spallanzani, and when Nathanael glimpses the professor's beautiful daughter Olympia through the windows, he is smitten with her. Eventually he meets Olympia and dances with her, falling so deeply in love that he ignores a certain mechanical quality she has. Eventually, he discovers to his horror that she is a wooden clockwork doll who was created by her father along with Coppola. He sees her body ruined and lying on the floor with its eye sockets empty because Coppelius has run off with the eyes. In this story, the magic of creating a lifelike animated being is what we could call bad or black magic. It leads the disturbed young Nathanael to madness and eventual suicide.⁷

Stories by Hoffmann's American contemporary Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) often have similarly eerie, tragic plots. Poe wrote a story about a portrait coming to life and haunting an artist, "The Oval Portrait," in 1842. Here the protagonist finds an illustrated book with a painting of a beautiful woman. He learns that the portrait was made by a painter who had asked his young bride to sit for him. But the painter's demands were so extreme, and his obsession with his art so complete,

⁶ For examples of these images, see (Rice, n.d.). I first learned of this story through Orhan Pamuk's 1998 novel *My Name is Red*, where it is mentioned numerous times, with the names written in English as Husrev and Shirin.

⁷ See (Hoffmann 1967). For more on the Hoffmann story and Freud's (mis)interpretation of it, see (Freeland 2004).

that he ignored and exhausted his wife in the process. So when he finally finished the picture and turned to show her, it was only to find her dead.

Another creepy portrait story is offered by the Russian writer Gogol (1809-1852). In his "The Portrait" (1835), a struggling young artist is so taken with a lifelike image of a man he finds in an art gallery that he buys it despite his poverty. That night he dreams that the man in the portrait steps out of it and offers him money. The next day he finds a fortune in gold hidden in the picture frame. He becomes a wealthy and successful artist but squanders his talent in making popular but mediocre work. He ultimately realizes his horrible mistake when he discovers a portrait by someone else that reveals genuine artistic creativity.

These Romantic tales of tragic love and dangerous portraits have echoes later in Hollywood movies about mysteriously potent pictures, especially films from the classic period of the 1940s and 1950s. Several films tell stories about characters who fall in love with or become somehow obsessed by portraits. The 1940 classic film noir *Laura* is a fine example. This murder mystery is still engrossing in part because it features wonderful dialogue, fun acting, and a wealth of suspects. The police detective hero (Dana Andrews) is charged with investigating the murder of a beautiful and alluring New York society maven, Laura (Gene Tierney). The cop searches for clues in her fabulous apartment, sniffing her perfumes and touching her dresses. He then meditates while drinking her liquor in a living room dominated by a large portrait of the victim. Eventually this hard-boiled cop becomes so entranced by Laura's portrait that a suspect accuses him of falling in love with his victim. *Laura* is a film whose plot takes many surprising turns, and it even manages to provide an unexpectedly happy ending.

There are more dire outcomes that involve portraits in several Alfred Hitchcock thrillers. In *Rebecca* (1940), based upon the novel by Daphne du Maurier, the newly married Mrs. de Winter (Joan Fontaine) is intimidated by everything she hears about the beautiful and imperious Rebecca, her predecessor as mistress of the grand estate Manderley. Her insecurities are furthered by the chilly housekeeper Mrs. Danvers (Judith Anderson), who remains devoted to her dead mistress. Danvers tricks the young woman into wearing a dress for a ball just like one that Rebecca had worn. The young woman lingers in awe before Rebecca's imposing portrait and has a copy made of her glamorous dress. But this has disastrous consequences: her appalled husband (Laurence Olivier) becomes furious when he sees it and orders her to change clothes immediately. She feels spurned because of some inadequacy, whereas in fact, as we eventually discover, he had detested his deceitful first wife.

Just as Rebecca's portrait preoccupies the second Mrs. de Winter, so too is the heroine of *Vertigo* obsessed with a portrait. The young and beautiful blonde

woman, Madeleine Elster (Kim Novak), makes repeated visits to a museum to stare at the portrait of her ancestor Carlotta Valdes. Along the way, she is tracked by the hero, a sleuth named Scottie (Jimmy Stewart). He finds her sitting in a room of the Legion of Honor in San Francisco, staring at a woman on the canvas whom she distinctly resembles. Madeleine wears similar clothes and the same hairstyle, and she even carries a bouquet like the one Carlotta holds in the picture. (The filmmaker actually had a portrait created especially for this scene.⁸) Although we later discover that much of this scenario rests upon a false setup, the young woman as we first meet her appears to be preoccupied, even haunted by, the mysterious Carlotta. Scottie falls in love with the beautiful Madeleine. Later, after he believes her to have died in an unfortunate accident, he becomes obsessed with her, just as she had appeared to be obsessed with Carlotta. He even attempts to recreate her as his ideal woman by refashioning another woman, Judy (also played by Novak), in Madeleine's image. We are shown his often cruel and controlling (Professor Higgins-style) efforts to mold and shape Judy into Madeleine's duplicate. The plot of *Vertigo* is complex, with multiple levels of deception and imitation; but the results are, inevitably, tragic.

The interesting thing about these two Hitchcock films, *Rebecca* and *Vertigo*, is that the power of the portraits they feature is not attributed to the skill of their painters but rather to the strong responses that they elicit in certain viewers (as happens too in *Laura*). Madeleine is (supposedly) being manipulated into suicide by Carlotta's portrait, and the second Mrs. de Winter is cowed by the portrait of Rebecca. In these cases, the magical power of portraits is an evil one, because the beautiful people (here women) in these portraits exert a hypnotic effect on viewers. Their portraits mysteriously entrap victims into layers of subterfuge, lies, and danger.

3 The Uncanny

Portraits that seem too real or too powerful, like those in Hitchcock's movies, can be creepy or eerie. Sigmund Freud wrote about this feeling in discussing Hoffmann's "*The Sandman*" in his famous essay "The Uncanny" (1919).⁹ Freud described the uncanny as an uncomfortable feeling that arises about something familiar that is coupled with strangeness. It often has to do with stories of a double or doppelgänger; the discovery that one has an unexpected twin can cause feelings of great unease.

⁸ See (Dowd 2019).

⁹ (Freud 2001). See also (Windsor 2019).

Uncanny tales involving doubles, and films with images of twins, often appear in the horror genre. A well-known example is the twin girls in Stanley Kubrick's film version of *The Shining*. They appear in several visions that the young boy Danny sees while riding his tricycle down the long hallways of the mysterious hotel where his family is staying for the winter. We learn that the girls are ghosts, because they were in fact killed by their father years ago. We eventually see their bodies ourselves, along with young Danny, in a very chilling scene of the film that presents a sudden vision of them lying butchered and bloody.¹⁰

Freud laid out his influential account of the uncanny in 1919, but the term has acquired a new usage more recently that applies to a field unanticipated by him: the creation of robots, androids, and more generally, products of artificial intelligence. The new descriptive term "the Uncanny Valley" was coined and explained in a 1970 essay in a Japanese journal by the Tokyo professor of robotics Masahiro Mori.¹¹ Mori's basic idea is that we humans are attracted by examples of very humanlike robots, but that as their realism is increased, we eventually test it and become disappointed as we ascend and cross over a kind of slope of similitude—the uncanny valley. Although greater lifelikeness is initially appealing, after such creations reach a certain point of realism, there will be inevitable flaws or cracks, at which point the robot is seen as so eerie or uncanny that it becomes repulsive.

This is very much like what Nathanael in "The Sandman" experiences when he begins to sense that the beautiful Olympia is not actually a living human being—especially when he realizes that her eyes were artificial. Such a discovery would indeed be repulsive. Mori's key premise was that robot designers desire to create a truly lifelike robot. But the robots at the time he wrote were not very lifelike. Robot designers can increase our human affinity for their creatures by adding certain realistic features, such as covering a prosthetic hand with flesh and the right sort of shapes. And yet even if we encounter a very "real-looking" hand in a certain context it will drop us into that uncanny valley and become repulsive. He explains,

When we realize the hand, which at first sight looked real, is in fact artificial, we experience an eerie sensation. For example, we could be startled during a handshake by its limp boneless grip together with its texture and coldness. When this happens, we lose our sense of affinity, and the hand becomes uncanny. (Mori 1970, 2012)

¹⁰ See chapter 7 of my book (Freeland 2000). There are numerous horror movies about the creepy nature of twins; see for example *Sisters* (1973) and *Dead Ringers* (1988).

¹¹ The original essay can be found in English translation here: (Mori 2012). For some updates and critical assessments, see ("Who's Afraid of the Uncanny Valley?" 2010).

For example, a robot with a face designed to smile in a sequence of motions roughly like those produced by our own face muscles would appear creepy if the speed with which it made these relevant shifts was a bit off. Mori suggests that perhaps robotic replacements for human parts should have a deliberately false design so as to avoid the uncanny valley effect. He gives the example of eye-glasses, which do not try to be replicas of human eyes but can have their own charming designs. Beings like zombies or corpses are also uncanny. Mori wonders about the origin of this feeling in humans—much as Freud did—and speculates that the uncanny evolved as an essential part of human nature as “an integral part of our instinct for self-preservation” (Freud 2001).

Although the concept of the uncanny valley is still much-cited, more recent researchers in robotics and AI have expressed reservations about its validity as an actual scientific hypothesis. Remember that Mori emphasized the importance of how robotic creations like prosthetic hands or facial muscles move. However, some current critics feel that believable, socially familiar kinds of motion in a robotic creation may overcome the fact that the item in question (a hand, a face) doesn't actually look like an actual replica of the human version.

4 Dorian Gray

Probably the most famous tale of an uncanny portrait is Oscar Wilde's 1890 novella *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the story of a portrait that takes on an unusual life of its own. I will discuss this book in detail here in the final part of this essay. Not only does it offer an interesting variation on the theme of the magical portrait, but it also serves as a meta-reflection on the nature and value of a life devoted to artistic pursuits. Wilde describes diverse modes of artistic creation that range from painting to acting to music. Also, in the revised and expanded version published in 1891, the author included a preface that made bold pronouncements about the relations between art and morality.

The Picture of Dorian Gray opens with the unveiling of a new portrait by the artist Basil Hallwell. He knows this new painting is his best one ever, but fears that it will reveal his idolatry of the beautiful young man, Dorian Gray, who is its subject. Dorian has remarkable good looks, with golden hair and ruby lips, and is especially attractive because of his purity. “All the candour of youth was there, as well as youth's passionate purity... one felt he had kept himself unspotted from the world.¹²” Besides being the portrait's subject, Dorian is also in a sense the

¹² All quotations from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are from the version which may be downloaded as a pdf for free here: (Wilde, First published 1890).

painter's product, in that the painting serves to reveal Dorian to himself. Although he has been told that he is both beautiful and charming, only upon seeing himself through the painter's eyes does he realize this truth.

A third man is present at the unveiling of the portrait, Lord Henry Wotton. He praises the painting and he also finds Dorian charming. But instead of admiring Dorian's purity, Lord Henry sees him as naïve and unformed, raw material to be manipulated and directed. The worldly-wise Lord Henry appears to find it amusing to experiment upon such an innocent nature. As the crafty man remarks upon Dorian's beauty, the young man begins to feel jealous of his own portrait. Henry's comments awaken a chord of vanity in him. He realizes that he will age while his picture does not, and fervently wishes that these processes could happen in the reverse way.

Strangely enough, Dorian's wish comes true. He first notices that the portrait has altered after behaving very badly to the young woman he was in love with, Sybil Vane. He had found her, a pure beauty blossoming like a lotus in the gross swampy environment of a cheap theater run by a nefarious man. Sybil captivates Dorian not only by her beauty but by her transcendent acting in many famous roles. He proposes and she accepts. But when Dorian takes his friends Basil and Lord Henry to see Sybil acting as Juliet, they are appalled to discover that she is a dreadful actress. She explains later to Dorian that her ability to act has left her because now she has a real romance, whereas before she had always believed in the fictional romances she was enacting. Sybil's transition from illusion to reality causes a parallel transition in Dorian: he now sees her as common and vulgar, and cruelly breaks off with her. Later that night when he examines the portrait, he notices that there are new nasty lines around the mouth of the boy shown there.

Over the course of the novel, Dorian Gray's portrait continues to change; his innocent visage in it becomes more and more stained and ugly. As a rich and high-ranking young man admired by everyone for his charm and beauty, he enjoys access to society. He travels and entertains, but gradually his reputation becomes sullied as stories and rumors circulate about him ruining others and even causing suicides. Dorian is driven to the wildest extremes of experience and desire. As his depravity increases, so does the hideousness of his picture. Recognizing what the portrait reveals, the horrified Dorian hides it away under lock and key.

There is an uncanny doubling in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The person takes on the quality we expect of the picture, and vice versa. In the ordinary case, living means changing and aging, but Dorian never ages. This is part of what I have been calling the "magic" of portraits. Dorian remains beautiful and is a voluptuary of elegance in all forms. The selfish and corrupt activities he pursues leave no mark on his person, only on his portrait. And yet he finds his beauty insufficient for

happiness. He feels shame over his “sins” of murder and worries that he may come to “loathe his own soul.” When he finally confronts the flaws revealed in his portrait, he cannot abide the knowledge and attempts to destroy it. What is left behind, mysteriously, is his own aged and decrepit body at the feet of the now restored, unspoiled picture.

The manipulative Lord Henry who sparked Dorian’s downfall continues to egg him on with praise of his continued beauty. Lord Henry tells Dorian that beauty is above all else in nature, even above genius.

It needs no explanation. It is one of the great facts of the world, like sunlight, or spring-time, or the reflection in dark waters of that silver shell we call the moon. It cannot be questioned. It has its divine right of sovereignty. It makes princes of those who have it.

Wilde’s ambitious tale addresses important issues about the relations among art, beauty, genius, creativity, morality, and death. Commentators have sometimes remarked that there seems to be a contradiction between the apparently moral “message” of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Oscar Wilde’s well-known “aestheticist” position, according to which art is something apart from morality and beauty is its own justification.¹³ He wrote in the preface to the version published in 1891 that “There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all.”

How does this bold proclamation fit with the strong moral elements to the story, in which Dorian Gray’s trajectory appears to be a tragic downfall? Dorian feels he has “blood on his feet” from the murders he has committed. His moral self-assessment is very clearly stated:

He knew that he had tarnished himself, filled his mind with corruption and given horror to his fancy; that he had been an evil influence to others, and had experienced a terrible joy in being so; and that of the lives that had crossed his own, it had been the fairest and the most full of promise that he had brought to shame.

We must keep in mind that the supposed moral viewpoint of a novel or any other artwork is not necessarily that of a character depicted in it. Also expressed in the book is what appears to be a version of Wilde’s own position in the remarks of Lord Henry, who insists that there is no such thing as the soul, because everything in

¹³ The term “aestheticism” is used differently in literary studies than in philosophical aesthetics, but Wilde is associated with it in both fields. In aesthetics this position is sometimes instead labeled “autonomism.” For further discussion of these terms and related issues, see (Gaut 2009).

life depends upon the body and on sensations. He claims that art is independent of action (and hence presumably of moral action) when he tells Dorian,

Art has no influence upon action. It annihilates the desire to act. It is superbly sterile. The books that the world calls immoral are books that show the world its own shame. That is all.

These remarks resonate with Wilde's point in the preface that "All influence is immoral, because the aim in life is self-development."¹⁴

Does Lord Henry's remark apply to the book in which he is a character? Perhaps we should regard *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as an inert artwork. It may only seem immoral if it "shows the world its shame"—that is, our own shame. The book is as innocent as Dorian's portrait. And if the true aim in life is self-development, we can judge that although Dorian did devote himself to sensory and other pleasures, these did not leave him satisfied with the self he had created. He used the portrait as an excuse to act immorally because it would spare his beauty from the consequences of his behavior. But as I just noted, the portrait itself bears no responsibility for Dorian's actions. This is why in the end it remains pristine and beautiful, while Dorian is hideous—and dead.

The Picture of Dorian Gray is a complex novel about characters who all practice art: Dorian is a skilled pianist, Sybil Vane an actress, Basil Hallward a painter, and Lord Henry a man molding those around him—a blend of sculptor-cum-dramaturg. As the book's author, Oscar Wilde created a work that is a better as a story—as art—because of its tragic ending. Consider: A beautiful man gets an amazing gift of a portrait that will age in his place, but he cannot live well with this gift. The portrait makes him "look... on evil simply as a mode through which he could realize his conception of the beautiful." Dorian's conception of the beautiful was a weak one that did not satisfy him. So when he attempts to destroy his fateful portrait, he only kills himself, leaving the portrait to live on, eternally beautiful. In the end, the book functions as proof of the superiority of art over life.

5 Conclusion

Portraiture involves a triangular relationship among the artist, the sitter, and the viewer. The magic of portraits can happen at any point in the triangle. Sometimes the artist is the source, with wizardly abilities to render a person lifelike and knowable. This aspect of portrait creation is emphasized in the Harry Potter series. In

¹⁴ Wilde also says in the final sentence of the preface that "All art is quite useless."

other examples, what makes a portrait magical rests with the sitter who is someone with a mysterious allure, like the stunning women pictured in *Laura* or the Hitchcock films I discussed. Finally, magical effects sometimes happen because a viewer is particularly vulnerable to becoming magnetized by the person in the picture. This was true of Nathanael in “The Sandman,” whose passion blinkered him so that he could not see the truth about the lovely Olympia. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* explores all three points of this potent portrait triangle. In the story the artist is especially inspired, the subject is surpassingly beautiful, and the effect of the portrait on one viewer of the picture, Dorian Gray himself, is momentous and deadly.

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