Aesthetics: The Epicenter of Dorian Gray

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Read a full-length work by an author studied in class and explain why the work read would have been a good addition to the course. This assignment was completed for Dr. Terry Sosnowski’s Literature in English II.

Oscar Wilde once said, “I have put all my genius into life. I’ve only put my talents into my works” (Ellis 192), which is a statement that’s not entirely true because it’s too vague and rudimentary to be an accurate description of his literary accomplishments. Talent consists of a person’s capability and Wilde indisputably had a great capability to write remarkable literature, but what exactly did he create with it? What did he address? Well, Oscar Wilde, in every sense of the word, was a critic and a “protest against current ugliness and smugness, a fine frenzy set against average goals and commonplace platitudes” (Ellis 191). He was renowned for his satire where he would unapologetically share his struggles with English morality during the late nineteenth century and make an absolute mockery out of Victorian society. A popular work that exemplifies this is Wilde’s Edwardian comedy The Importance of Being Earnest which is a play that was explored as a class during our time learning about Victorian poets, but unfortunately it was the only piece by Wilde that we examined. Although it is one of his most famous works, there is another that is even more famous and probably the most celebrated, and that’s The Picture of Dorian Gray. It is the only novel that Wilde ever wrote, and it was both his greatest creation and his definitive ruin. It was the epitome of everything that is Wildean – from the style and content to the handling of social issues, and it is a work that unquestionably needs to be read by all who wish to gain a full understanding of just who Oscar Wilde was and what he brought to the literary table.

In Wilde’s preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray, he states: “All art is quite useless,” which is the main principle of the Aesthetic Movement in Victorian England during the Industrial Revolution (Wilde 4). Aesthetics is the notion that true art should take “no part in molding the social or moral identities of society” but instead it “should be beautiful and pleasure its observer [and] to imply further-reaching influence would be a mistake” (Duggan 62). During the time that The Picture of Dorian Gray was published, aestheticism was flourishing and so was Wilde’s involvement in the movement. The ideals influenced him so significantly that aestheticism became the epicenter of his book. It was the leading concept that made every theme and every conflict connected and possible. Not only is this the key reason why one should read The Picture of Dorian Gray, but it also opens one’s eyes to the characteristics of fin-de-siècle English society and how the
movement was "a mixture of straightforward rebellion against Victorianism, new theorizing, and extravagant posing" (Matsuoka 78). Essentially, to understand aesthetic ideals, to understand this pursuit of beauty, is to understand Wilde and his world completely and there is no greater instance of aestheticism than in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Now, it must be made clear that Wilde was not a textbook aesthete. Although he advocated the pursuit of beauty and happiness in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, he also recognized that aestheticism "needs to be properly controlled" for there are consequences when acting on such self-serving drives (Duggan 67). Through this view of aestheticism, many themes come to light and the first of them is the power of influence. Dorian Gray and Basil Hallward are two characters who are unquestionably the most easily manipulated by aesthetics. Basil’s character is the first to introduce the audience to such manipulation within the first chapter when he is explaining to Lord Henry what Dorian Gray’s beauty and boyhood innocence means to him, which appears to be quite an obsession. Hallward compares the face of Dorian Gray to that of Antonius and proclaims to Lord Henry that he sees everything - all of his art - in this youthful lad. This is where Basil’s idolatry of Dorian becomes quite problematic. Basil adores everything about a boyish, charming and virtuous Dorian, but because it’s such a fixed and temporary image of him, it’s a drawback and unintentionally sets Basil up for imminent disaster. People are not young forever. People are not pure forever. Ultimately, Dorian’s morality will deteriorate to sin – and it does. The power Dorian’s beauty has over Basil inspires the painter to create a portrait that both their demises, causing Dorian to be vain and curse himself to a life of depravity, which leads to not only destroying Basil emotionally, but also to Dorian murdering Basil many years later.

Dorian Gray does not reciprocate Basil’s worship. Indeed, Basil is a good friend, but he does not stimulate Dorian’s interests as Dorian stimulates his. Instead, Dorian’s attention goes to Lord Henry Watton, the man whose influence draws forth every hideous action the boy commits and every hideous thought that he speaks. Lord Henry and Dorian’s relationship is fundamentally opposite to Basil and Dorian’s relationship. While Basil adores Dorian’s aesthetic image, Dorian adores Lord Henry’s aesthetic philosophy because, as Lord Henry himself words it, “I represent to you all the sins you have never had the courage to commit” (Wilde 86). Throughout the book, Lord Henry seems to treat Dorian as some sort of personal experiment. It’s as if he took one look at this attractive youth and asked himself, “What would happen if I exposed this unsullied child to the desire of seeking out the pleasures he has always resisted?” Certainly, Lord Henry, as well as the audience, succeeds in finding this answer. Dorian becomes “the aesthetic lifestyle in actions, pursuing personal gratification with
abandon”; however, “while he enjoys these indulgences, his behavior ultimately kills [himself] and others” (Duggan). The death of Sibyl Vane is a sound example of this. When Dorian begins to chase after Sibyl’s heart, it is purely because of what she is physically and what she is artistically. His pursuit of aestheticism warps his personality to such an extent that he has no interest in getting to know her personally for he is only enchanted by her acting talent. As Lord Henry tells Dorian during their first meeting, “beauty is a form of genius – is higher, indeed, than genius, as it needs no explanation” (Wilde 26). When Sibyl does not perform to her usually high standards, Dorian is completely repelled by her. It does not matter if she is entirely devoted to him. Without her art, she is nothing to him: “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 shadow of art. You have thrown in all away. You are shallow and stupid. My God! How mad I was to love you!” (Wilde 94-5). The following day when Dorian is given the news of Sibyl’s suicide, he laments that he had killed Sibyl Vane, a promising sign of self-awareness, but Lord Henry’s presence and never-ending control over Dorian quickly shatters that hope and Dorian, rather unbecomingly, compares his lover’s suicide to the “terrible beauty of a Greek tragedy” (Wilde 108). Of course, Sibyl Vane is not the only soul to be ruined by Dorian’s aesthetic lifestyle. Alan Campbell commits suicide as well after he aids Dorian in disposing of Basil’s body, Adrian Singleton frequents opium dens after forming a relationship with Dorian, and, as stated before, Basil devastates his career and his mind because of Dorian’s formidable influence. Through Dorian’s corruption at the hands of Lord Henry and Basil’s portrait, Oscar Wilde (although an advocate for aestheticism) cautions people by portraying “the dangers of the aesthetic philosophy when not practiced with prudence” (Duggan 62).

A second theme that Oscar Wilde focuses on through aestheticism is the hypocrisy of the ruling class in late nineteenth century England. Those who are familiar with Wilde’s works are no strangers to his disapproval of Victorian values. In The Picture of Dorian Gray, he uses aestheticism to expose Victorian high society as a false and materialistic environment – an environment Dorian’s existence can thrive in because what debaucheries one indulges in doesn’t matter much when one is as beautiful as Dorian. Beauty is not only the heart of Wilde’s book, it is the spirit that gives the Victorian lifestyle its vivacity. It’s all about the splendor. Who throws the most lavish parties? Who invites the best company? Who knows the best artist? As Dorian evolves into his aesthetic self, he experiences the freedom of abandoning his morality because to an aesthete “there is no distinction between moral and immoral acts, only between those that increase or decrease one’s happiness” (Duggan 61-2). The company Dorian keeps seems to feel the same since they are aware of his
immoralities, but never publicly ostracize him. They only whisper about the things he has done. Basil verifies this during his and Dorian’s last meeting before he is murdered:

I think it’s right you should know the most dreadful things are being said against you in London... your name came up in conversation... Staveley curled his lip and said you may have the most artistic tastes, but that you were a man whom no pure-minded girl should be allowed to know, and whom no chaste woman should sit in the same room with (Wilde 160).

It is rather duplicitous that even though all this awful gossip surrounds Dorian, he still remains a part of London’s social scene because of his innocent and handsome face. As Lady Narborough notes, there seems to be very little distinction between ethics and appearance in this Victorian world: “you are made of good – you look so good” (Wilde 192). This plainly shows how Victorians ignored the ugliness of an individual’s soul if this said individual peaked their aesthetic interests.

Dorian Gray is also a prime example of how Victorians used aestheticism as a form of escapism – to mask what is unpleasant with things that are handsome. Wilde presents this observation through Lord Henry’s cynical judgments about the motivation behind human kindness: “The reason why we like to think so well of others is because we all afraid for ourselves. The basis of optimism is sheer terror” (Wilde 81). Positivity cannot be without negativity. Beauty cannot be without ugliness. However, Victorians don’t wish to focus on these latter ideas because beautiful things are privileges for the rich. What they are oblivious to is this kind of attitude makes life a heartless joy. For instance, Dorian collects jewels, fineries and artworks over a course of many years, falling to “the worst form of escapism” by “surrounding himself with nothing but beauty” (Matsuoka 88). He uses these treasures as a means of avoidance, replacing harsh realities with beautiful delusions, and when on his way to the opium dens outside London, he is brought down to the unsightliness of his life:

Ugliness had once been hateful to him because it made things real, became dear to him now for that very reason. Ugliness was one reality. The coarse brawl, the loathsome den, the crude violence of disordered life, the very vulgarity of thief and outcast, were more vivid, in their intense actuality of impression, than all the gracious shapes of art, the dreamy shadows of song. They were what he needed to be forgotten (Wilde 199).

This reality is not just Dorian Gray’s, but it is the reality of most English Victorians that is portrayed to the audience throughout the book. It is the reason why Adrian Singleton spends his time smoking opium with sailors, why Sibyl Vane committed suicide, why Lord Henry Wotton continues to fuel Dorian’s devotion to him: because they lost their
magnificence and it was too much for them to bear. Oscar Wilde very much supports humanity’s pursuit of all things beautiful, but he does not support humanity using aestheticism to bury their heads in gold and not seeing the world around them. The excerpt above is another occurrence of Wilde openly criticizing the aestheticism to those who “worship beauty for their own sake” and use it as a “romantic escapism into fantasy” in order to disregard the ugly realities hidden inside both aesthetic and Victorian society (Matsuoka 89).

The homoerotic bonds between men in The Picture of Dorian Gray plays a large role in the structure of the novel, but it is also vital when studying Oscar Wilde’s private and public life. Wilde is frequently recognized in literature as the tragic homosexual poet who was imprisoned after being found guilty for “gross indecency” with his male lover, Lord Alfred Douglas. At this time in the late nineteenth century, sodomy and other homosexual behavior was punishable by law. It is known that during the trial, the defense team used The Picture of Dorian Gray as evidence against Wilde by reading multiple passages from the book that could be interpreted as erogenous. Considering The Picture of Dorian Gray is deemed one of the most homoerotic pieces of literature in the English language, it’s safe to say that the evidence against him was probably very damning. Now Wilde utilized the concept of male camaraderie to disguise the heavy homosexual undertones in his book, but the concept also fits well into Wilde’s larger aesthetic principles, bringing him to antiquity, where the admiration of youth and beauty was not merely culturally fundamental, but it was also celebrated as a physical relationship between males. To Wilde, the acceptance of homosexuality was a sign of refined culture and the extension of the mind. Artists and philosophers like Plato, Michelangelo, and Shakespeare had been known to have male lovers and, according to Wilde’s thinking, to possess such a cultured attraction puts one in the tradition of the greatest intellectuals to ever grace the planet. Wilde used this aesthetic approach in order to justify his lifestyle in conservative Victorian society and showcases it significantly in his novel through the cycling relationship between Basil Hallward, Lord Henry Wotton, and Dorian Gray.

Basil Hallward is Wilde’s most prevalent character when it comes to expressing homosexual themes. As stated previously, Basil has an overwhelming adoration for Dorian Gray in the beginning of the book. He thinks that Gray is aesthetically pleasing in every way, which inspires him to paint the boy’s portrait and it turns out to be the best piece he’s ever created. Although Basil regards Dorian so highly in the first chapter to the point where is seems that Basil is talking about a lover, one can’t say that it’s utterly homosexual because it’s masked as conversation about art. To the audience it just appears as a man appreciating the handsomeness of another man from an aesthetic perspective. It’s not until later in the book that it’s more deeply hinted,
if not loudly broadcasted, that Basil favors Dorian as more than a muse during the scene where Basil explains that the reason why he didn't exhibit Dorian's portrait was because he feared it would expose too much of his idolatry for him:

I was dominated, soul, brain, and power by you. You became to me the visible incarnation of that unseen ideal whose memory haunts us artist like an exquisite dream. I worshipped you. I grew jealous of everyone to whom you spoke. I wanted to have you all to myself. I was only happy when I was with you. When you were away from me you were still present in my art... (Wilde 123). This is the turning point where Basil's aesthetic appreciation for Dorian is confirmed to have transformed into romantic feelings quite some time ago. Sadly, Basil never enjoys the fulfillment of his desire for Dorian because Dorian is too consumed with Lord Henry. However, Basil's feelings remain the same up until the moments preceding his death years after his confession. During Basil's last run-in with Dorian (who, at this point, is pretty far gone in his self-gratifying aesthetic lifestyle) Basil confronts Dorian on all the horrible chatter that is traveling around London about him. When Dorian claims that all of it is middle class nonsense, Basil becomes distressed, crying out, "You have not been fine. One has the right to judge of a man by the effect he has over his friends. Yours seem to lose all sense of honour, of goodness, of purity. You have filled them with a madness for pleasure" (Wilde 161).

Here, Basil admits to himself that "the object of his idolatry in no longer pure" and therefore the aesthetic value he has for Dorian is gone, which stifles his sexuality, but most importantly, with the destruction of Dorian's purity, Basil's art is gone as well, making his murder at the hands of Dorian - his one true artwork - beautifully tragic (Alley 6).

Similarly to Basil, when Lord Henry first encounters Dorian Gray he is captivated by his youthful appearance and overcome with the desire to use him and frame him into this ideal personality. Since Lord Henry "trumpets the aesthetic philosophy" with sophistication and bravado, he effortlessly persuades Dorian to "trust in the principles he espouses" (Duggan 61). The homoerotic attachment Lord Henry has to Dorian is very different than the attachments Basil had. Lord Henry has no inclination to be tender or actively attempt to preserve Dorian's good nature because he is everything that is negative about the Aesthetic Movement. He doesn't see reality. He only sees what will escalate his happiness and what escalates his happiness is his total influence over Dorian. It could be speculated that his influence over Dorian is Lord Henry actually seducing the boy and that he gets some sexual enjoyment out of it that heightens his self-satisfaction. Nevertheless, what is known for sure is that Lord Henry and Dorian are fascinated with each other and completely inseparable, but not romantically involved with each other in
the “lovingly” sense of the word. They can’t love one another if they’re constantly seeking their own pleasure.

Lastly on the topic of homosexuality, there are ideas that suggest that Dorian Gray was not only a subject to male advancements, but he was pursuing men as well in a very Lord Henry-like fashion. Dorian apparently had relationships with numerous young men in London, but it was a matter that was never talked about until Basil brought it up in his and Dorian’s last conversation together. So, it would lead one to believe that whatever occurred during the times these relationships were active could be something shameful. Basil intensifies these suspicions by telling the audience more of what he knows:

There was that wretched boy in Guard who committed suicide. You were his great friend. There was Sir Henry Ashton, who had to leave England, with a tarnished name. You and he were inseparable. What about Ashton Singleton and his dreadful end? What about Lord Kent’s only son, and his career? I met his father yesterday in St. James Street. He seemed broken in shame and sorrow. What about the youth Duke of Perth? What sort of life has he got now? What gentleman would associate with him? (Wilde 160-1)

It is highly implied that Dorian led these men down a path of corruption – the same corruption that he was introduced to by Lord Henry – and it begs the question: did Dorian have a homoerotic interest in them like Lord Henry seemed to have with him? It’s an inquiry that really doesn’t have an answer since these incidences were kept in secrecy and died with Basil’s character, but knowing Dorian Gray’s morality towards the end of the novel, how deep he was into the destructive side of aestheticism, it’s not a far-fetched assumption.

In brief summary, The Picture of Dorian Gray is a definitely novel that comes once every century. It was a work that really shook up Victorian society because it went against everything England believed in, uncovered the faults of the ruling class and their lifestyle, and presented male sexuality in an entirely new light. Oscar Wilde exhibits that he is a genius at his craft by giving his work this irresistible darkness that makes you feel as though you’re being manipulated along with the characters. He wrote about social issues in a way that no one else knew could duplicate because Wilde was a one of a kind artist. The Picture of Dorian Gray is without a doubt a must-read work if someone wants to experience Wilde in his best and most scandalous form.
Works Cited


