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Why, Wilde? Alternative Motivations for *Dorian Gray*

To the casual reader, Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is an entertaining novel depicting the struggle between a moral Basil Hallward and his less pure-of-thought acquaintances, Lord Henry Wotton and Dorian Gray. Oscar Wilde reveals the series of events that accompany Basil's introduction to Dorian, his adoration of Dorian, and then Lord Henry's corruption of Dorian and the multitude of consequences that follow. The obvious lesson to be learned from the story is to avoid the mindset preached by Lord Henry and consumed so ravenously by Dorian – the mindset of pursuing pleasure and beauty at the expense of all other people, morals, and interests. Dorian's criminal record, which grows so massive that other people vacate rooms upon his entrance, along with Dorian's growing guilt, show the costs of living Henry's lifestyle. Perhaps, however, Wilde intended for a different idea to be drawn from this work.

Two aspects of the novel are not immediately obvious. One is Wilde's effort to expound upon the realities of an artist finding his inspiration, and another is his effort to give his readers a glimpse of how artists hope certain dialogue will follow the release of their work. After publication of *Dorian Gray*, Wilde sued John Sholto Douglas, eighth Marquess of Queensbury, for libel following some ill-intended remarks by the latter. When being cross-examined in court by Edward Carson, who was Douglas' attorney, Wilde was faced with charges and accusations of producing a vile piece of art in *Dorian Gray* that corrupts those who read it. Wilde, however, responded that his intention in writing *Dorian Gray* was to show the type of motivation that an artist can find. He did not try to argue any position of morality or immorality through his writing

but allows his readers to draw their own conclusions from his work. He wanted to stir emotions in them; in his eyes, “no work of art ever puts forward views” (“Art Versus Morality” 382). Of course his readers’ individual perceptions will cause them to hold a moral stance regarding the ideas present in his work, but that is not his goal. As he states in the introduction to the novel, “there is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book” (“The Preface” 3). It seems that he is not at all interested in writing about morality or its converse and is trying to transmit a much more nuanced idea than either of them.

Carson uses the “immoral” ideas in the novel to try and assert Wilde’s inappropriateness, but Wilde responds strongly that his text reflects the point of view of an artist searching for inspiration and that Carson cannot understand it. Indeed the premise of Carson’s argument – that *Dorian Gray* contains immoral ideas – allows for no other option than, given Wilde’s public belief concerning morality in art, for Wilde to see his complaints as invalid.

Now I ask you, Mr. Wilde, do you consider that that description of the feeling of one man towards a youth just grown up was a proper or an improper feeling?—I think it is the most perfect description of what an artist would feel on meeting a beautiful personality that was in some way necessary to his art and life.

You think that is a feeling a young man should have towards another?—Yes, as an artist (“Art Versus Morality” 384).

The majority of the general population likely falls into the same category as that into which Carson is placed, since only a small fraction of people are artists. Wilde recognizes this characteristic of society and tries to include elements in his work that help to elucidate the quest for motivation involved in being an artist, whether a visual artist, an author, or a musician. He argues that there is significant intrinsic value in seeing true beauty in life, whether it be in a

human or in something inanimate, and that an artist can draw invaluable inspiration to produce his own beautiful work by seeing beauty elsewhere. Dorian has “suggested to [Basil] an entirely new manner of art, an entirely new mode of style. [Basil] sees things differently, [he] thinks of them differently,” and the result of this influence is that Basil’s work is the best it has ever been (*Dorian Gray* 13). Basil feels no doubt that Dorian is the source of his inspiration and the catalyst of the improvement in his work. However, even within the novel others don’t understand this relationship between Basil and Dorian. Lord Henry makes something of a joke of it, and Dorian himself doesn’t comprehend the nature of the artist’s feelings after Basil confesses them. “How much that strange confession explained to [Dorian]! The painter’s absurd fits of jealousy, his wild devotion, his extravagant panegyrics, his curious reticences—[Dorian] understood them all now, and he felt sorry. There seemed to him to be something tragic in a friendship so coloured by romance,” (*Dorian Gray* 97). Wilde shows his awareness of the public’s skepticism of artistic inspiration by endowing other characters in *Dorian Gray* with the same uncertainty.

Wilde could have quoted the novel many times during the cross-examination, because ideas pertinent to Wilde’s defense – that artistic inspiration is a unique experience – litter *Dorian Gray*. He sees that the layperson doesn’t understand the impact of artistic inspiration, or the fact that this impact is not dependent upon the form in which it arrives. Consequently, it would make sense that he wants to expand the public knowledge about art and why artists value such inspiration. He comes close to saying that outright when Carson asks of Basil’s feelings toward Dorian.

“I grew afraid that the world would know of my idolatry.” Why should he grow afraid that the world should know of it?—Because there are people in the world who cannot

understand the intense devotion, affection, and admiration that an artist can feel for a wonderful and beautiful personality. These are the conditions under which we live. I regret them (“Art Versus Morality” 386).

To further the reader’s understanding of the significance of Dorian – who represents any artistic inspiration – on Basil – who represents any artist – and his work, Wilde shows the impact of Dorian’s friendship on Basil’s paintings. “...I know that the work I have done, since I met Dorian Gray, is good work, is the best work of my life,” Basil tells Henry (*Dorian Gray* 13). Once the portrait of Dorian is complete, Henry himself tells Basil that “it is the finest portrait of modern times” (*Dorian Gray* 24). Clearly Dorian’s influence on Basil’s work is not imagined. This effect of inspiration is not limited to those two characters, though. Part of Wilde’s argument is that any artist can experience and benefit from that strong of artistic inspiration.

In addition to Carson’s criticisms about Wilde’s novel, which mainly revolve around its suggestions of homosexuality within Basil Hallward, numerous other scenes can be seen as morally questionable or immoral. Most blatant is Lord Henry and his own personal theories on this or that which he is constantly espousing to Dorian Gray. His overwhelming influence over Dorian is established early in the novel, but telling Dorian “youth is the one thing worth having” marks the beginning of Dorian’s obsession with his physical appearance (*Dorian Gray* 22). Henry wildly objectifies Dorian, causing a “sense of his own beauty [to come] on him like a revelation” (*Dorian Gray* 25). Eventually, Dorian becomes yet another mirror of Henry’s views, as Victoria – Lord Henry’s wife – hears him say one of Lord Henry’s ideas and reveals that she “always hears Harry’s views from his friends” (*Dorian Gray* 42). Additionally, Dorian grows to dislike spending time with Basil, to whom he was a close friend early on and who was responsible for introducing Dorian to Lord Henry. “I don’t want to see him alone. He says

things that annoy me. He gives me good advice,” says Dorian about Basil (*Dorian Gray* 50).

Dorian not only favors friends with detrimental influence over him, but he actively avoids contact with friends who seek to benefit him. While this friend triangle and its dynamics could certainly be interpreted as an immoral influence upon readers, examining the trio while considering the struggle of an artist causes one to see that those three characters further represent the difficulty that artists face. The artist, although trying to connect with the other two, ends up being ostracized and misunderstood.

The struggle of the artist was no doubt made more public by the discussion that followed the *Dorian Gray*'s publication. The fact that so many people were talking about his novel allowed Wilde to further what may have been his agenda in writing the novel in the first place. He had readers regardless of the publicity that followed, but the effort put into describing the value of artistic inspiration certainly became more apparent when he was forced to use that evidence to defend himself and his novel against Carson and other critics. He had a larger audience than his regular readers and also didn't have to camouflage his ideas in the form of a novel. He could openly describe the significance of Dorian to Basil from an artistic point of view and argue that the same connection between an artist and his inspiration exists in real life. In the introduction to *Dorian Gray*, Wilde states that, “diversity of opinion about a work of art shows that the work is new, complex, and vital,” (“The Preface” 4). He wanted to generate the discussion surrounding *Dorian Gray* that followed its release because it meant that he successfully exposed the message of the artist's struggle. The general populace hadn't considered that struggle before, and the “diversity of opinion” that surrounded the novel shows that readers were greatly affected by the ideas that Wilde presented.

Wilde does not intend for Dorian's behavior to be replicated by readers. However, he also does not try to prevent such behavior from being modeled. In fact, until the end of the novel, Dorian is quite content with his life choices and sees no reason to alter his path in pursuit of pleasure. What Wilde does intend for readers to do is judge the content of the book for themselves. During cross-examination, Wilde states that a good book will "produce a sense of beauty" to which morality is irrelevant ("Art Versus Morality" 382). An immoral idea can only be interpreted as such if the immoral aspects of it are promoted, and the same is true for a moral idea. Wilde does not promote any viewpoints in *Dorian Gray*. He strives to create something beautiful, and beauty requires contrast – both morality and immorality, both attraction and disgust. The inclusion of moral ideas and immoral ideas in Wilde's work does not signify an attempt to disseminate those ideas into his readers. He must include them both in order for readers to experience a more complete sense of beauty and immersion in different emotions and thoughts while reading his novel.

There are certainly others who have examined *Dorian Gray* and determined that there is more to be taken from the novel than a wariness of the pursuit of beauty. Simon Joyce, in *Sexual Politics and the Aesthetics of Crime: Oscar Wilde in the Nineties* is one such critic who takes an unorthodox approach to Wilde's theories and *Dorian Gray*. After presenting one of many uncommon ideas concerning Wilde and this novel, Joyce admits that "[he realizes] that [he is] conjuring up an unfashionably sincere (even *earnest*) Wilde here, which doesn't sit too easily with our dominant image of him as a kind of proto-postmodern jester who was largely uninterested in ethics or politics, or sacrificed both at the altar of aesthetics" (Joyce 417). He is approaching the author and his work from a new direction, which is necessary in order to gain a genuine understanding of any artist and his or her ideas.

I try to do the same thing in this essay. It is not often enough that Wilde's desire to expose part of an artist's life is considered a motivation behind writing *Dorian Gray*, although there is sufficient evidence to suggest that this is the case. While creating the novel, Wilde was forced to disguise these arguments in a form that could be interpreted as a fictional work intended for entertainment purposes. The plot, full of conflict between moral and immoral, between Henry and Dorian and Basil, might not serve as a statement on the pursuit of pleasure or the influence of friends upon one another. It could be that Wilde's main purpose in writing *Dorian Gray* is to shine a spotlight on the purpose of art and on the realities of being an artist.

Carson's cross-examination of Wilde allows him to articulate many of these concepts that drove the novel. Without that dialogue, it is more difficult to see Wilde's intent in writing *Dorian Gray* to spread his belief in the significance of inspiration to an artist. When presented with Wilde's defense of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, readers gain the opportunity to understand what may be a deeper underlying motivation for the novel.

Works Cited

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A letter to my professor regarding this paper

My thesis in this essay is still that Wilde's purpose in writing *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was to inform the general public of some of the realities of being an artist, particularly the struggle faced when including questionable content in one's work, the need to defend the work afterward, and the significance of powerful inspiration on an artist's work no matter in what medium the inspiration is found.

During revisions, I tried to focus on your suggestions and the suggestions from the peer review session we held in class. I did reorganize the existing paragraphs in a different order to help improve the connection from paragraph to paragraph, as you suggested. I also continued to develop my body paragraphs so that they more clearly articulated the idea presented in my thesis. Adding the secondary source helped further this paper more than I realized it would. It certainly added length, but I felt that it strengthened my thesis considerably as well.

Small grammar- or format-related revisions took up some time as well. I had to change my works cited page and my block quotations, and I addressed some odd diction and syntax that congested certain parts of the essay.

Compared to the first draft, I feel that this essay is significantly better. By addressing many of the seemingly out-of-place body paragraphs that failed to return to the thesis and editing the structure of the essay and placement of certain paragraphs, the essay became more complete and less disjointed. Were I to revise it again, I would take yet another look at my body paragraphs and how well they connect to the thesis. While I improved this aspect of my paper significantly since the first draft, my body paragraphs could certainly still be improved upon to further the argument of the thesis.

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