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Pacs III

The Picture of Dorian Gray - Responces

**Question #1**

**Dorian Gray:**

The most complex character in the novel Dorian Gray continues to change and shape his moral outlook on the world as the novel progresses.

Dorian Gray begins the novel without any convictions to affect his world view. This makes him pliable and significantly affected by the people with whom he shares company. The only portion of Dorian’s character made clear before the novel proceeds is the fact that Dorian himself is unclear of his own moral outlook. As The novel progresses Henry’s influence shapes Dorian into a very egotistical and self-serving manner. This transition is defined by the occasion when he rejects Sibyl Vane’s pleas and left her sobbing on the floor. His downfall into cruelty is here marked as the point where he could not see anything except the fact that she did not please him, symbolically marking his portrait with a cruel smile. From this point in the story forward Dorian proceeded down a path which was ideologically to follow the teachings of … from the book given by Lord Henry Wotton; a path which is designed to follow the pleasure seeking course a very hedonistic viewpoint which Dorian Gray never finds content but cannot escape. Even in his final act to rid himself of the portrait he does so out of a selfish desire to rid himself of what he thought had caused his downfall into cruelty. Dorian’s downfall into cruelty was so complete in the novel that he cannot even feel strong remorse for having killed his old friend, Basil Hallward. Instead, justifying his actions by how it was Basils own fault for making him feel that way. Dorian’s entire world revolved around placing a such significant importance on beauty that it becomes a moral ideology, that eventually leads to his death.

**Lord Henry Wotton:**

Lord Wotton holds the most impressive array of selfish and egotistical opinions in the novel. His opinion is always controversial to those around him. While Henry’s opinions are many throughout the novel, and by far the most influential no poor Dorian Gray, Henry’s viewpoint is never as absolute as Dorian Gray’s becomes. Henry, while disclaiming his desire for an utterly pleasure seeking life, does in fact live comfortably with those around him as well. His worldview would definitely be classified as ethically egoistic on one hand but at the same time, to hold such a view point and yet stay married and maintain relations in the manner that he does he would almost certainly have to be more in-between egoism and altruism. The out word projection of altruism would have Henry laugh as ridiculous yet he still attended parties he did not wish to attend for the sake of a person there, he maintained a relationship with his wife, and he did not venture into cruelty as poor Dorian Gray did while attempting to follow Henry’s ideals. With these thoughts in mind I would much more put Lord Henry Wotton as ethically egoistic with a touch of altruism in those areas that would correspond with avoiding cruelty or criminal acts.

Another interesting point of discussion is Henry’s description of his own moral philosophy as the natural way. In Lord Wotton’s opinion his course of selfishness is in fact the way nature would have everyone act and it is out of some other reasoning that people are altruistic at all. This I found to be an interesting explanation and cross over between two moral categories we had defined in a slightly differing manner.

**Basil Hallward:**

The simplest and yet still complex character in the novel. Basil’s outlook is far more altruistic than either of his two compatriots but he has a healthy regard for he egotistical views of his friend Henry.

Basil Hallward plays an interesting character in the novel. Unlike Lord Henry Wotton or Dorian Gray we do not get as clear a picture into the ethical opinions of character. There are times we get glimpses but most of our analysis will have to come from looking deeply at his actions and reactions to events in the story. Basil is in one regard a very selfish person. He wanted his friend Dorian Gray to be his and his alone to benefit is artistic career. Basil was always selfish in his friendship to Dorian throughout the novel, but while desiring to keep Dorian to himself he always allowed Dorian to be pulled away by the stronger willed friend, Lord Henry Wotton. Basil also presents other actions that would cast a more significant light on the altruistic perspective. His compassion for Dorian and Sibyl after Sibyl took her life showed a deeper care for others around him. These events are however small section of the text in which we are able to look into Basil’s thoughts more deeply. Except in the beginning of the novel we do not get to see Basil’s opinions clearly without the overshadowing of Dorian or Henry’s opinions or thoughts.

**Question #2**

Of the three characters the one who remains the most unchanged while simultaneously projecting the greatest influence would be Lord Henry Wotton. Lord Wotton’s dialog at the end of the novel is very similar to his dialog at the beginning of the novel. In one of Henry’s first conversations with Dorian he expresses his belief in the ultimate Hellenic ideals or even something more than Hellenic; his pursuit of a pleasure seeking pleasure fulfilling life. When a man is shot, James Vale, at the end of the novel Henry goes on to explain how it is not a bad omen that a man died but it is in-fact better than if the day would have been boring, the ultimate sin to a Hellenic idealist; or as Henry puts it, “The only horrible thing in the world is *ennui*”, boredom.

Basil Hallward underwent a change in the novel but not in his moral outlook. Hallward’s change was from aspiring artist, to great artist, to struggling artist to dead. His progression through the story was of great influence to the character of Dorian Gray however, he did paint the portrait of Dorian Gray after all. But we see little in the way of Basil’s moral character in the begging as we see little in the way of his character at the end and so we are unable to really see any significance morally to the changes that he went through as a character.

Dorian Gray is the central figure of the novel which undergoes the most change of anyone. His progression from literally and figuratively a blank canvas to his cruel selfish nature is a progression marked by many turning points. Significantly are those which happen in the opening chapters where Henry and Dorian meet for the first time, and again when Henry gives Dorian the “yellow book”. In the opening scene Henry tells Dorian about his moral philosophy, his Hellenic point of view. He also describes how influencing another is always immoral. I find the juxtaposition of these two side by side on the pages of the book ironic. Henry is both informing Dorian that to influence another is to give them their soul, not allowing them to think their natural thoughts, and simultaneously beginning the largest influence in Dorian’s moral outlook. Henry’s perspective of influence can be seen in many ways as the starting point for Dorian’s changes as well as an enabler for his changes. Henry gave Dorian the courage to think differently and to shape a moral view of the world which is even more extreme than Henry himself lives.

Aside from Henry, Hallward plays a large role in Dorian’s early development. His constant praising of his beauty and his emphasis on Dorian’s natural Beauty, coupled with Henry’s remarks about beauty not lasting, drives Dorian to make the wish he would later come to regret; the wish that his portrait would take all of those things which might mar his beauty. Hallward’s portrait of Dorian Gray includes within it Dorian’s own soul and all of the physical changes that Dorian should have faced when placed in his moral crossroads. Dorian remarked that it was the portrait being the cause of his decent into cruelty. If only he could bear the marks of his actions than he would have been unable to hide the consequences of his actions. In his final thoughts Dorian blames his beauty and youthful face for being his downfall, “youth had spoiled him”. Basil’s ultimate artistic goal to preserve Dorian’s beauty forever in a painting had eventually caused his own death and Dorian to become the cruel heartless person that he became.

**Question #3**

Reflecting back on this novel I find that Oscar Wilde’s perception of the moral world is a very complicated one. While he holds certain perspectives inward as ideas he shows how they can play themselves out in a negative fashion. Considering the direction and conclusions of the story I find that Oscar Wilde has an outlook similar to Lord Henry Wotton, but if possible even more complicated.

Lord Wotton’s perspective as described in question one is one that holds certain ideals in a place to be desired but still follows a more traditional English path. Very hypocritical almost, in that he preaches Hellenic ideals and ideals to follow nature’s way but is simultaneously not following his own ideals to the extent he is preaching them. Dorian Gray’s character does follow the ideals which he allowed Henry and Basil to formulate for him and in such he destroys his life, his soul, and the lives of many around him. Oscar Wilde makes it clear to the reader that a life focuses on the outward beauty is not the life which he idolizes.

There is an interesting parallel in Henry’s beliefs to the morals in the story. Nature is mentioned more than once in the discussions between Dorian and Henry. Natural morals, and nature’s way are what Henry supposedly preaches, if not somewhat twisted. However, even though Dorian thinks himself to understand Henry he does in fact not live the natural life that Henry suggests is the correct one. Instead he allowed himself to be made by others; literally in terms of Basil and the portrait and figuratively in terms of Henry and his ramblings. Dorian’s life is anything but natural. In fact he idolized beauty so much he stopped aging and if it was a completely Hellenic view that beauty equals pleasure than poor Dorian Gray took such an extreme perspective that he went far beyond the natural boundaries where Hellenic and natural ideals overlap. To this extreme we see that it is not Lord Henry’s proclaimed aspirations which are shared by Wilde, but his actions by which he follows.

Of all the characters in the novel Lord Henry Wotton is the most content and the least affected by those around him. He generally seems the same person, albeit older, as he was in the begging of the novel. He idealizes beauty and pleasure and selfish desires as nature intends but also moves forward with time. He communicated and participates in society around him and he makes himself happy with his situation.

Another interesting perspective Wilde produces more than once from Henry is the idea that faith is an illusion. “The things one feels absolutely certain about are never true”, is an uncomfortable idea and one that many people would not feel comfortable uttering. It goes against religion and everything we hold dear. But as I read it, it is also the common message of the day. Question everything. Are we to believe everything is exactly as we are told or do we question it and find reality in doing so. This is my interpretation of Wilde’s meaning to this quote.

Over all I feel Wilde portrays an array of ideals in this novel. His agents to explore these ideals are played out in his characters: Basil Hallward, the one who needs and idolizes beauty selfishly; Lord Henry Wotton, the man who portrays great lists id ideologies but in reality does not follow any of them; and Dorian Gray the main actor to play out he primary discussion for the novel and find its faults and downfalls. Through these characters we can piece together an understanding of the necessity for balance. Admiring beauty, and pleasure mixed with compassion for those whom we affect, are admirable combinations. Dorian lost his compassion when he was painted by Basil. Basil lost his admiration for beauty when he could no longer paint Dorian. Between the two lies Lord Henry, a man who appreciated beauty and pleasure possible too much but is always filled with compassion for those whom he affects directly even if he would call it something else.

**Question #4**

Being good versus doing good.

The novel the portrait of Dorian Gray addresses an interesting connection between human character in regards to internal identity and with human character in regards to external identity. In The Picture of Dorian Gray we are given a vivid example of the inner turmoil both not leaving any outer traces and showing fully on the picture of the same man. Fundamentally we can almost always see traces of our inner character reflected in our actions and even our bodies as we age and live lives according to our character.

The picture of Dorian Gray shows us an extreme example of actions scarring the outer character. In an extreme manner Dorian’s decent into cruelty and criminal actions are shown across his face and body. His first cruel action in the novel places a cruel smile on the portrait. When he murders Basil, blood covers his hands. These kinds of outward marks may not appear in the same fashion in our real persons but it is not far from the truth. The saying his blood is on your hands is often accompanied by feelings of being weighted down, regret, or remorse. As in other studies of murder, such as *Crime and Punishment*, we can see that for most people murder results in a psychological hurdle that we cannot overcome. This causes us to undergo physical changes to our bodies as we struggle with this inner turmoil. Stress induced wrinkles, grey hair, weakness, hunched back, or other effects.

Aside from extreme cases such as murder there are other aspects of our lives which we can see in our faces. Living in a drug infested area as a child I was witness to people making bad decisions on a daily basis. People less than thirty years of age looked older than many people over fifty. They would have rotten yellow teeth, be missing teeth, and have deeper wrinkles than my ninety year old great grandmother. The decision that they had made in their life showed vividly on their faces.

Not everyone has this extreme level of reaction but also most people do not dedicate their life to living on the wrong side of the law. Being a good person is in many ways synonymous with doing good things. There are always exceptions to this as good people can occasionally do bad things and bad people can do good things. But the person who is considered a good person by those around him usually is considered this way because he acts in a manner which is to do good things.

In the previous paragraph I listed a connection between good people and good actions. What is good and what is not good I will not discuss in detail but in the conditions with which I am applying this principle I am considering the strict Kantian definition as well as the situational definitions. Whatever a person considers truly inside to be good or bad will affect how his actions will affect him psychologically and therefore physically.

People’s actions and belief in the goodness of those actions all play a role in how their character is shaped internally and externally. People who do good things are more likely to do good things internally as they are more likely to look like a good person externally. People who do bad actions tend to have scars from those actions left behind in some manner. With enough scars build up someone will show visible signs of that scaring as well as internally tending to behave in a manner which will increase the number of scars. In much the same manner as Dorian Gray, once you have started down a path filled with actions that are bad even deciding to change that path may be simply a propulsion of desire to keep doing bad actions. In this way both in reality and in the novel intent is a key proponent in regarding the effects of ones actions.

Concluding this discussion we are left with these key points. How one perceives their actions, as “good” or “bad”, will affect how those actions affect the person. Actions affect people physically and psychologically. This will in turn affect that persons view of themselves. At times this last step helps to stop a cycle of repeating mistakes or other times it makes it easier to make those mistakes again. In the case of Dorian Gray he did not suffer any outward signs of his inner turmoil’s and instead was able to place those signs onto a replacement of his soul. This perpetuated his immoral actions causing him to start down the downward spiral into areas of criminal and cruel actions he would have originally detested.