The paradox of the perfect self in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

How, and to what effect, does Oscar Wilde use contrast to explore self-realisation throughout *The Picture of Dorian Gray*?

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Introduction

The late 19th century movements of Aestheticism and Decadence were defined by their subversions of traditional artistic standards. Characterised by poet Arthur Symons as "a new and interesting and beautiful disease," (Symons 1893), the movements were marked by their deliberately provocative exploration of sensual indulgence and pleasure. Artists of the movements challenged the contemporary expectations placed on art through the exclusion of conventional elements from their works; form, plot, and didactic purpose could all be rejected to create "art for art's sake" (Burdett 2014).

Oscar Wilde, a prominent Aesthete, aligned himself with these ideals: he famously asserted that "all art is quite useless," (Wilde 2022, pp. 4). Wilde saw art as a form of creative indulgence that enriched life precisely because it was removed from it. His 1891 novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, exemplifies the Decadent philosophy through its focus on artifice and indulgence. The novel, however, simultaneously rejects many of Decadence's 'diseased' ideals, and can be interpreted in a plethora of ways that lend it a strong purpose and overt moral message. It follows the titular character, Dorian Gray, as he is impressed upon by two significant figures: artist Basil Hallward and aristocrat Lord Henry 'Harry' Wotton, who make "a delightful contrast," (20) with their differing world views. Basil idolises Dorian's beauty and seeks to capture it in a faithful portrait, while Lord Henry preaches to him a worldview that celebrates pleasure and self-indulgence. In the exploration of his identity, Dorian grapples with the contrasting influences of Basil's idealism and Lord Henry's cynicism, propelling internal conflicts between self-indulgence and morality. This conflict causes Dorian to curse Basil's portrait of him, such that it "bear[s] the burden of his passions and his sins," (90) while Dorian himself retains his beauty.

Contrast, by its nature, heightens discrepancies and creates conflict between or within themes and characters, which propels and enriches a plot. Wilde employs stark and subtle contrasts throughout the novel. The oppositional characterisations of Basil and Wotton presents the difficulty of self-development, as they impose their contradictory ideals of who Dorian should be onto him. Dorian's dualistic relationship with his portrait depicts the deterioration of his character, and is symbolic of the discrepancy between his internal and external identity; his actual disposition and moral values versus his public image and behaviour. Similarly the oppositional spatial settings of East and West London demonstrate the decline of Dorian's morality as he attempts to self-develop, and highlight the complexities of agency in self-development between the upper and lower echelons of society.

Dorian's exploration of his identity fits comfortably within Wilde's oeuvre; much of Wilde's work, especially his essays, presents ideas of self-development and self-indulgence as the requisites for attaining an enriched existence (Wilde 1987). This 'enriched existence' is the culmination of an individual's evolution of identity and access to pleasures, a process which Wilde called self-realisation (Gupta 2015, Critchley 2009).

This essay will contend that Wilde's use of contrast establishes self-realisation as a necessary aim of life, but through paradox suggests that the pursuit of this ideal is presently futile. He calls for the removal of societal obstructions to self-development and self-indulgence, thus allowing for individual fulfilment and the enrichment of society. This topic is worthy of investigation because the struggle of self-realisation that Wilde presents is perennial and inextricable from the human condition. Regardless of the temporal or cultural context of reception, these ideas are universally applicable. By analysing them through art and interpretation, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of our shared human experience, allowing us to lead

more authentic and fulfilled lives.

The ideal self

In the context of Wilde's body of work, self-realisation is a recurrent theme. His essay *De Profundis*, written from prison and perhaps his most introspective work, explores the notion of personal perfection. In it, Wilde claims that "[e]very single human being should be the fulfilment of a prophecy, ... the realisation of some ideal," (Wilde 1987, pp. 872), establishing his belief that each individual has a perfect realisation that is their 'ideal' self. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde's interpretations of self-realisation manifest through Dorian's characterisation. Lord Henry and Basil Hallward are arguably the largest influences on Dorian's development, embodying contrasting philosophies on the purpose of self-realisation and the means of attaining it that shape Dorian's character arc.

At the orientation of the novel, Wotton introduces to Dorian the concept of self-realisation, alongside his perception of the perfect self – his 'ideal'. Wotton asserts that "[t]he aim of life is self-development, to realise one's nature perfectly" (20). Through Wotton's dialogue with Dorian, Wilde presents "individualism," as "the higher aim," (78), suggesting that self-realisation is an almost divine objective, and is attainable through self-development because "action is a mode of purification," (21). Using this perspective, Wotton justifies self-indulgence under the belief that "self-denial ... mars our lives," (21). He suggests that forbidding oneself a pleasure is actively harmful to self-realisation: "[w]e are punished for our refusals," (21). Wotton's refrain of "[n]othing can cure the soul but the senses," (23) reinforces this presentation of individual pleasure as an avenue to 'healing' the soul. To him, moral values are "sickly aims, the false ideals of our age," (25), suggesting that one's focus should be on their own pleasure and development, not that of others. Wilde's metaphor of morality as a sickness and indulgence

as a remedy enhances his presentation of the hedonistic perspective that Wotton embodies, implying that those who do not indulge themselves are ailed. Through Wotton, Wilde presents the realised self as an individual who completely indulges their desires, prioritising their own pleasure and self-development.

Wotton's emphasis on self-indulgence is contrasted by Basil, who instead represents a morally righteous ideal and emphasises the aesthetic presentation of identity through a good public image. The artist asserts that "if one lives merely for one's self ... one pays a terrible price for doing so," (78), as "every gentleman is interested in his good name," (147). Wilde's diction of 'merely' belittles Wotton's 'higher aim' as facile or lowly, and serves to further polarise Basil and Wotton. Furthermore, Basil's emphasis on the respectability of public image aligns with his belief that "sin is a thing that writes itself across a man's face," and "cannot be concealed," (147), claiming that corruption is clearly visible on the corrupted. Wilde seems to suggest through Basil that when one sins, their image as an individual is tarnished. Conversely, this implies is that there is inherent purity in beauty. With these beliefs, Basil expresses the importance of vigorous moral values and external appearance as an indication of an individual's goodness. In this way, Basil acts as a moral foil to Wotton; his emphasis on external presentation and altruism implies one's worth is closely linked to their effect on others. He reinforces this by stating that a personality can be "spoiled" (17) by influence, and that one should never "bring ruin upon others, nor ... receive it from alien hands," (7). Basil emphasises the significance of public respectability and aesthetic virtue in the realised self. As a counterpart to Wotton, the artist presents the ideal self as being externally, not internally, pleasing.

By understanding the different ideologies of self-realisation presented through Basil and

Wotton, alongside Wilde's use of the third-person omniscient narrative perspective, both characters' perceptions of Dorian are elucidated. At the orientation of the novel, Dorian, a "young Adonis, ... made out of ivory and rose-leaves," (6), has "[a]ll the candour of ... youth's passionate purity," (19). Wilde alludes to the Greek figure's beauty, and uses the luxurious imagery of ivory and roses to connote a natural sanctity and affluence that elevates Dorian's aesthetic virtue. Similarly, Wilde presents the innocence of Dorian's youth, highlighting his unaltered personality that has remained "unspotted from the world," (19). To Basil, this is symbolic of Dorian's purity: his natural beauty and unwrought temperament are evidence that he has attained the ideal of a pure image and should not alter. Alternatively, Wotton sees Dorian as a canvas for development with which "[t]here was nothing that one could not do," (38); his purity indicating potential for, rather than achievement of, the ideal self.

With the ideologies he presents through Wotton and Basil, Wilde establishes the belief that there *is* an ideal self for each individual. Wotton and Basil impose their views onto Dorian, and inculcate his belief that "[t]he soul is a terrible reality [that] can be poisoned or made perfect," (212). However, Wotton and Basil present seemingly binary perspectives regarding the method of self-development, contrasting whether one should strive to live for themself or for others. In their analysis *A Tragedy of the Artist*, Houston A. Baker parallels Basil and Wotton to the ideas of *conscience* and *instinct*, respectively, that Wilde also raises in his essay *The Critic As Artist* (Baker 1969, pp. 355). Using this reading, Wotton and Basil represent the choice between indulging one's desires and adhering to societal expectations. Wilde uses Basil and Wotton to represent two contrasting philosophies of self-realisation, and illustrates through Dorian the challenge of self-development when faced with contradictory options of self-indulgence and moral conformity.

Efficacy of conscience and instinct

Despite their differing beliefs, both Wotton and Basil's philosophies both suggest that the individual has some degree of agency in their self-realisation – each presents our actions as defining who we are. This manifests most clearly through the duality of Dorian and his portrait; throughout the novel, the portrait serves to "reveal to [Dorian] his own soul," (105), tangibly showing the consequences of his actions on his internal goodness. By having the portrait reflect Dorian's internal transformation, Wilde illustrates the effect of our actions on our character.

Wilde demonstrates the destructive consequences of excessive self-indulgence on one's self by contrasting Dorian's appearance with that of his soul. As Dorian commits increasingly immoral and criminal acts – moving from cruelty to addiction, before being implicated in the deaths of four characters – the portrait mirrors "the ruin he has brought upon his soul," (127) while he retains the purity and innocence of his appearance (127). By the conclusion of the novel, Dorian's "exquisite youth and beauty," and the "loathsome ... visage," (220) of his soul are only recognisable through the examination of his rings (220). Wilde's presentation of the consequences of hedonism is grotesque, and condemns excessive self-indulgence by illustrating the destructive effect it has on one's character. He complements this portrayal of Dorian and his portrait with imagery of floral decay, further illustrating the deterioration of Dorian's morality. Seeing him for the first time, Wotton likens Dorian to "a Narcissus," (6), evoking both the beauty of the Greek mythological figure and the eponymous flower, which is symbolic of unparalleled admiration (Boeckmann 2023). Similarly, his observation of Dorian's "rose-red youth," and "rose-white boyhood," (21) establishes the purity of Dorian's appearance. Wilde's floral imagery elevates Dorian's initially innocent characterisation, equating his "simple and beautiful," (17) temperament to the undisturbed purity of nature. As the portrait decays, so too does Wilde's imagery; the portrait "wither[s] to grey," (92) and "[i]ts red and white roses ...

die," (92), revealing Dorian's sin. This deterioration culminates in Dorian's development of an addiction to opium, a drug made from treating poppy seeds. Dorian's "hideous hunger," (182) for opiates illustrates the final perversion of his flower-like soul with his twisted dependency on manufactured pleasure. The use of decaying floral imagery connotes a pure existence being depraved by neglect, likening Dorian to a flower that loses its vigour in favour of rot. Wilde's decaying imagery portrays the viscerally destructive consequences of excessive indulgence on one's character. He suggests that exclusively pursuing Wotton's ideal of indulgence degrades the internal self, leading to a corrupted and immoral existence. Wotton's ideal is thus insufficient for self-realisation, as it destroys internal integrity and results in a corrupted self.

The contrast between Dorian's appearance and the portrait's reflection of his morality is also symbolic of the distinction between his internal and perceived quality of character. As the portrait decays, Dorian's beauty is but a "mask of goodness," (219) to the "hideous corruption," (121) of his soul. In this way, Dorian's external appearance can not be used as being indicative of his internal goodness; the portrait is symbolic of the division between appearance and reality. Through this distinction, Wilde exposes the flaws in Basil's aesthetically idealised philosophy. It is in Basil's idolisation of beauty that he paints Dorian's portrait; his faith that external appearance *is* indicative of purity allows him to see Dorian as "such an ideal as [he would] never meet again," (154). Basil's idolatry results in an internal dissonance between his belief of Dorian's "harmony of soul and body," (14) and the "vile and degraded," (147) Dorian he has heard of. The artist "can't believe the rumours [of Dorian's corruption] when [he] sees [him]," (147), unable to accept the dichotomy between Dorian's inner and outer self. It is at the climax of Basil's conflict with this dissonance that Dorian murders him in cold blood – Basil is killed by the corrupted reality that he could not recognise. Basil's death can be read as symbolic of his overcommitment to his own moral ideal; being too willing to take

beauty at face value he becomes unable to see reality, and this idealisation is fatal. Through Basil, Wilde presents the extent to which reality and appearance can be disparate. He highlights the naïvety of forming judgement using only aesthetics, suggesting that this is insufficient for an authentic understanding of a person. The artist's moral ideal is thus also shown to be insufficient for self-realisation, leading to self-deception that distances one from the moral ideal.

In Baker's analysis, they suggest that Wilde calls for a 'merging' of the opposed conscience and instinct that Basil and Wotton represent. They argue that Basil may not have met the fate he does "had he possessed a degree of Lord Henry's instinct and individualism," (Baker 1969, pp. 355). Indeed, Wilde demonstrates the insufficiency of Wotton and Basil's ideals through the fate of Dorian and the artist, respectively. This would imply that each philosophy alone is insufficient for self-realisation, supporting Baker's argument. However, if Wilde does call for a synthesis of Basil and Wotton's ideals, his presentation of them as foils becomes paradoxical. The perspectives that they present are clearly oppositional: Wotton's self-indulgent sins are inherently self-obsessed, while Basil's morals are instead focused on the implications of one's actions on others. Each preaches what the other condemns. Their exclusivity is further bolstered by Wilde's choice to personify each ideology through distinct individuals; he implies that the two outlooks can not be merged, and are independent entities. Sheldon W. Liebman, responding in part to Baker's interpretation (and, significantly, with a focus on moral beliefs instead of self-realisation), argues that Wilde – if calling for a merging of conscience and instinct – presents an unresolvable paradox. Liebman argues that "[Basil and Wotton's] principal task is to articulate mutually exclusive positions," (Liebman 1999, pp. 311) to Dorian. Presented with a choice between two insufficient options, "resolution is impossible," (Liebman 1999, pp. 313) and Dorian is doomed to fail. I find Liebman's argument convincing in the context of self-realisation, as their interpretation of Basil and Wotton aligns with Wilde's portrayal of

their exclusivity. However, given the prevalence of self-realisation in Wilde's other works, the conclusion that this paradox is fundamentally unresolvable seems insufficient for explaining Dorian and Basil's fates. Instead, I believe it necessary to examine Wilde's presentation of the self-development and self-indulgence as requisites for self-realisation, exploring the relevance of conscience and instinct in attaining the ideal.

The distinction between life and reality

The Picture of Dorian Gray is spatially set between the East and West Ends of London. Historically, the division between these locations has been a prominent social issue, becoming synonymous with inequalities between plight and privilege (Palmer 2000). Wilde explores this contrast through his imagery, establishing drastically different atmospheres for each setting and juxtaposing their residents to elucidate the unjust accessibility of self-realisation.

Upon introduction, the East End is described as a "labyrinth of grimy streets and black, grassless squares," (50), juxtaposing the sky of "pure opal," and the rooves of the West End that "glistened like silver," (89). Wilde's contrasting imagery between "the sordid shame of the great city," (181) and the aesthetic grandeur and material affluence of the West End opposes the settings, depicting them as antithetical to each other. His uncomfortable imagery estranges the East End with an oppressive atmosphere, positioning the reader to dislike it. This conversely heightens the pleasantry of the West End, and accentuates the physical distance between the districts. Wilde portrays the East End as impoverished, while the West End is prosperous.

The settings' contrast is foundational to Wilde's characterisation of each locations' residents. In Dorian's digressions to the East End, he sees "grotesque children," (88), and "dim men and women," (181) "cursing and chattering to themselves like monstrous apes" (88). "They moved

like monstrous marionettes and made gestures like live things," (182). Wilde's descriptions of the East End's population are extremely othering. He debases them, stripping them of their humanity through his animalistic imagery that portrays them as savage and without individuality. His similes of 'monstrous marionettes' and 'live things' further reduces their personhood by implying that they are externally controlled, lacking agency. Most importantly, Wilde suggests that those living in the East End are not entirely living. By reducing the autonomy of the East End's population, Wilde reduces their capacity for self-development. In a conversation regarding the quality of an individual's life, Wotton claims that "the real tragedy of the poor is that they can afford nothing but self-denial," (78), suggesting that they are not able to enrich their lives with indulgences. The East End's population does not have the agency to flourish nor an environment that facilitates pleasure, thus impoverishing their existence. Fundamentally, Wilde's characterisation of the residents of the East End implies that they are not capable of self-development or self-indulgence, and are therefore unable to self-realise.

By contrast, the inhabitants of the West End are characterised by their affluence and indulgences, and their distance from the suffering of the East End. Wotton continues that "[b]eautiful sins, like beautiful things, are the privilege of the rich," (78), reinforcing immoral self-indulgences as exclusive to the upper echelons of society. He "fanc[ies] that crime [is] to [the poor] what art is to [the wealthy], simply a method of procuring extraordinary sensations," (210). Wilde suggests that, without access to the 'beautiful sins' of the privileged, the poor must instead imitate them with conversely 'ugly' sins in an attempt at self-realisation. The presentation of artistic or beautiful means of self-realisation is a recurring one; Wotton asserts that we should "sympathise," (identify) "with the colour, the beauty, the joy of life," (41), rather than suffering or pain, which are "too ugly, too horrible, too distressing," (41). This is a belief that Dorian echoes: "becom[ing] the spectator of one's own life, as Harry says, is to

escape the suffering of life," (110). Wilde presents the notion that treating one's life artistically allows the abstraction of oneself from the suffering of reality, as "[u]gliness ... made things real," (183). This is thus an inauthentic way to live; an idealisation that is insufficient in the same way that Basil's artistic ideal is insufficient. The artistic ideal that Wotton presents is too far removed from reality to result in a truly enriched life, and thus does not facilitate self-realisation.

It is here that I believe Wilde draws a distinction between the ideas of life and reality; reality can be seen as the ugliness and suffering of the world, and life as the artistic abstractions from it. The inhabitants of the East End are unable to self-realise because they can not access the pleasures that enrich existence. In contrast, the privileged who *can* indulge in 'beautiful sins' do so as a means of dissociating themselves from reality. The ideas of conscience and instinct presented through Basil and Wotton are necessarily both manifestations of the West End's artistic abstractions of life, as Basil and Wotton are products of these abstractions. Since the residents of the East End cannot access the artistic ideal, they are not granted the agency to try and merge conscience and instinct, as Wilde suggests is necessary. In this way, he suggests that the merging of conscience and instinct is impossible not because of the inadequacy of the individual, but because of the inadequacy of society to facilitate it. Once again, Wilde seems to call for a merging of two insufficient conditions, this time with life and reality. However, this does not seem paradoxical; life and reality are not presented as necessarily exclusive, but as products of social inequality. The burden of change is not placed on the individual, but rather the collective. By reducing the divisions between the upper and lower echelons of society, the poor would be granted the agency to self-develop, and the privileged returned to the authenticity of their ideal self. With this consolidation of life and reality, the pursuit of self-realisation is rendered universally accessible. Significantly, Basil and Wotton's ideals are 'de-abstracted', and rectified as feasible modes of self-development. The moral ideal, in

reconciling the suffering of the world, loses its vanity and becomes a genuine concern for the self-development of others. Similarly, self-indulgence is recognised as necessary for pleasure and self-development, and is permissible for the individual without being corrupt. By deconstructing the distinction between life and reality, conscience and instinct are rendered not only accessible but compatible. With this reading, Wilde calls not for a merging of conscience and instinct, but for their coexistence through the consolidation of life and reality. In this consolidation, Liebman and Baker's paradox is resolved, and each individual is empowered to authentically self-develop and attain self-realisation.

Conclusion

Self-realisation is a persistent and significant theme throughout Oscar Wilde's body of work. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, it manifests through Dorian's exploration of self. Wilde's use of contrasts between his characterisations, imagery, and spatial settings elucidates his interpretation of self-realisation, illustrating its complexity and the factors that shape it.

Basil and Wotton embody to Dorian two different philosophies of self-development, which Houston Baker parallels to Wilde's ideas of 'conscience' and 'instinct'. Each faculty of conscience and instinct alone is demonstrated to be inadequate for self-realisation by Basil and Dorian's failure, and so Baker argues that Wilde calls for a merging of the two. However, Baker's interpretation has limitations, as this merging results in a paradox. Sheldon Liebman argues that Wilde presents Basil and Wotton's ideals as mutually exclusive, necessarily condemning Dorian to fail. This argument, while applicable to Liebman's interpretation, does not align with the beliefs of self-realisation that Wilde expresses in his other work. By instead examining how Wilde represents the accessibility of self-development, it becomes clear that the unattainability of self-realisation is not a product the exclusivity of conscience and instinct, but

instead the inequality of access to them.

Interpreting Wilde's contrasting atmospheres and populations of the East and West Ends of London as a distinction between 'life' and 'reality', the paradox of conscience and instinct can be resolved. Wilde implies that the existence of a distinction between life and reality in *Dorian Gray*'s London inhibits the self-realisation of every individual. He suggests that neither privileged nor poor can authentically access both the self-development and pleasure that are necessary for a fulfilled and realised existence. Consequently, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* can be read as a novel with a direct moral purpose, and a powerful appeal for the advancement of society.

This interpretation suggests that Wilde's purpose in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a call for the deconstruction of social inequalities. It is only when the abstractions between the poor and privileged are removed that the poor are given access to Basil and Wotton's modes of self-development, and therefore have the agency to self-realise. Similarly, Basil and Wotton's opposed ideals become morally rectified and compatible, resolving the paradox presented by Baker and Liebman's arguments. Wilde's use of contrast enhances his presentation of self-realisation by establishing the conflicts and complexities of the development of identity, and ultimately presents an appeal for the collective improvement of society in the hope that every individual may self-realise and lead a fulfilled life.

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