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Dorian Gray's Anatomy: A Decadent Dissection

When one thinks of commentary on scientific progress in nineteenth-century British literature, Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* hardly comes to mind. Compared with novels such as Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, or Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein*, Wilde's novel seems to focus more on themes of good and evil, the function of art, and society's preoccupation with beauty, not the horrible consequences of man's tampering with unregulated scientific experimentation. However, upon closer inspection of some of the passages within *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, science seems to play a significant role in the novel. Lord Henry constantly refers to Dorian as a fascinating creature or psychological experiment, while many of Dorian's sinful experiences are explained in a very analytical manner. However, Wilde also provides many allusions to anatomical science. Upon closer inspection of these passages, it becomes clear that Wilde's use of bodily analysis provides insight into the novel's theme of necessary self-experimentation to achieve one's highest form of self.

In looking at different critical interpretations of Wilde's scientific critiques within *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, there seems to be a recurring argument about the tug of war relationship between science and the arts, that analytical thinking discolors aesthetic illusion and reverie. Heather Seagroatt's article entitled "Hard Science, Soft Psychology, and Amorphous Art in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*," argues that, due to Wilde's paranoia about the growing authoritative influence of the sciences in nineteenth-century society, he attempts to aestheticize the sciences

to usurp its power. Seagroatt states that Wilde's scientific critique was *only* about art and "its status in world dominated by a new imaginative science" (9). While Seagroatt's article makes excellent points about the detrimental effect of scientific materialism on art, she seems to overlook Wilde's use of science from a decadent perspective, especially through allusions to anatomical study and practice. One must analyze and realize the carnal and hedonistic passions to experience any form of artistic growth.

To gain a better understanding of Wilde's idea about the necessity of uncensored bodily exploration, one must understand the basis of the decadent movement and its relation to Victorian anatomical and physiological studies. The decadent movement's aim was to challenge the norms of society (Denisoff 32), and included imagery of "bizarre creatures, physical distortions, pain, opulence, and explicit and unconventional sexuality" (42). Most importantly, for the sake of this paper's argument, the decadent movement was thought of as a "guerilla war against dominant culture" (Cohen). Generally, its main objective was to shock society, and anatomical displays gained the same reaction from society as they were considered pornographic and morally disturbing (Durbach 61).

Firstly, to refute the idea of Wilde promoting self-destructive behavior, the preface of the novel gives a very insightful view of his many paradoxical ideologies; it also shines light on the idea of Wilde's rebellious statement of reckless experimentation as a necessary means gaining a higher knowledge of the self and all its passionate, perverse musings. Specifically, it is the part of the preface that states "those who go below the surface do so at their peril" and "those who read the symbol do so at their peril" (Wilde 43) that demonstrates this paper's theory. Not only does this reel off the ideologies of aestheticism, which stresses form over subject matter and promotes escape, fantasy, and reverie (Cohen), but it also implicitly asserts the very

individualistic statement that those who choose to cut deeper into matters of life and art, do so at *their* own exposure and that they are given every right to explore their own immoral and creative muses, uncensored.

Wilde's novel is notoriously known for its homosexual overtones, most notably, the ambiguous relation between Basil Hallward and the young Dorian Gray. Symbolically, Basil's character demonstrates of how carnal censorship and the ignorance of one's natural, carnal passions, staggers artistic, growth. Basil's character is not only a representative of aesthetic ideology, but a representation of censorship and purity. At first, it can easily be seen how Basil's condemnation of scientific analysis is purely a fear of losing aesthetic reverie and illusion:

I will never lend my soul to their shallow prying eyes. My heart shall never be put under their microscope. There is too much of myself in the thing...we live in an age when men treat art as if it were meant to be some form of autobiography. We have lost the abstract sense of beauty (52-53)

Of course, Basil fears the breakdown of his work; putting it under the analytical microscope for the masses to speculate upon would reveal too much of the basis of its creation. However, upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that the anatomical imagery that Wilde conveys in this passage presents a much more decadent interpretation. The image of the heart under the microscope is not just a representation of the soul of Basil's creativity, but his socially unacceptable relationship with the young Dorian Gray, the more fleshly and decadent passions of the heart. Added to this, Lord Henry follows Basil's claim, "Poets are not so scrupulous as you are. They know how useful passion is for publication. Nowadays, a broken heart will run to many editions" (52). Basil censors what Victorian Society would condemn as a fleshly sin, his desire for Dorian Gray. The fact that Lord Henry teases Basil with the possibility of fame and

success symbolizes Basil's missed opportunity for growth and becoming one with his separate corporal double.

In the beginning, Dorian is also plagued with this unhealthy censorship of the flesh. Specifically, this is under Basil's influence. When readers are first introduced to Dorian Gray, he is very much conveyed as an innocent and impressionable child, a blank canvas ready to be exposed to worldly theories and methodologies. The scene in which Dorian first meets Lord Henry once again presents this idea about the censorship of the body. In this scene, Dorian's form is described as a being of ethereal purity, a young man "with the air of a young Greek Martyr" (Wilde 58). Dorian is innocently blind to his separate fleshly body, and Basil makes sure that Dorian ignores Lord Henry's ideas about self-development based on bodily ideals as states, "Just turn your head a little more to the right, Dorian. Like a good boy" (58). However, Lord Henry's theories begin to sink into Dorian's mind as he steps of the platform of corporeal censorship:

Then had come Lord Henry Wotton, with his strange panegyric on youth, his terrible warning of its brevity. That had stirred him at the time, and now as he stood gazing at the shadow of his own loveliness, the full reality of the description flashed across him...The life that was to mar his soul would mar his body. He would become dreadful, hideous, and uncouth (65)

On the surface, Lord Henry's insight into human ageing and decay seems to scare Dorian into switching his soul with the painting, therefore leading him to commit sins only for pleasure. However, Dorian also becomes conscious of his physical body, its natural urges and its decay. Basil's influence and carnal censorship is lost. While this may seem to be a harsh analysis, one must realize that Basil keeps Dorian on a pedestal, literally. If Dorian is to grow, to realize the physical world around him, and to explore his creative interests, it is necessary for him to become

familiar with his own decadent passions and truths of the flesh, otherwise he would still be frozen on Basil's pedestal of moral censorship. He would forever remain the subject, and he would not develop into an experimental, uncensored, and creative individual.

Dorian's changing relationship with his portrait also demonstrates Wilde's commentary on the need to confront corporeal truths to encourage creative growth. Multiple times throughout the novel, Dorian is described as hiding the portrait away from Basil and the prying eyes of the world, specifically in the attic. Of course, this conveys the idea that Dorian is ashamed of it, that he is ashamed of his decaying and rotting good looks. On the other hand, it's a denial of the more carnal aspects of the self, a denial of creativity and artistry that society deems to be immoral and unhealthy. Periodically, Dorian steals away to the attic to indulge in the decay of his painted body:

He grew more and more enamored of his own beauty, more and more interested in the corruption of his own soul. He would examine with minute care, and sometimes with monstrous and terrible delight, the hideous lines that seared the wrinkling forehead or crawled around the heavy sensual mouth (Wilde 162)

The fact that Dorian hides his sins, and secretly indulges in them explains why Dorian remains youthful. He is not fully involved with his uncensored and carnal self. The fact that he hides the (decadent) portrait behind a curtain suggests the shame of one's more worldly passions and creativity, thus violating the decadent ideal of immoral art.

Dorian's death is ultimately the final acceptance of one's worldly and fleshly self. There are several significant parts to Dorian's death in relation to Wilde's statement about the uncensored exploration of the self. In looking at the beginning of Dorian's bodily exploration, there is a significant motif of dissection surrounding his life and death. When Dorian first

becomes aware of his physical beauty, Basil threatens to slice the canvas with a knife, fearing that the portrait had upset Dorian. Dorian begs Basil to not stab the painting, stating that “it would be murder!” (67). Dorian’s life is supposedly ended with a knife through the canvas, more significantly, a knife through the heart (67). Symbolically, Dorian has made the final cut into the carnal and uncensored part of himself. The line that states “as it had killed the painter, so it would kill the painter’s work, and all that it meant” (250) not only means that it would set Dorian free from the consequences of his sins, but also from the self-censorship and creative boundaries instilled in him by Basil’s moral restraints.

While it is true that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* presents an argument against science and its harsh realities on the aesthetic illusions, it can be argued that through a more anatomical and physiological lens, Wilde encourages analytical exploration with one’s dark and creative desires. The novel ultimately depicts Dorian on his journey of self-development, his search for his uncensored creativity. If one limits himself to the morals and influences of others, he is unfulfilled and not in touch with the entire creative self.

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