



Write an essay examining Wilde's exploration of Art and Nature

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In the famous trial dialogue between Edward Carson and Oscar Wilde, Carson asks Wilde whether he considers his conduct 'natural' and 'proper', to which the accused replies that he 'cannot answer any question apart from art.'¹ In using the term 'natural' Carson simultaneously implies that Wilde has flouted both the order of the physical world and the moral values of human nature.² Through his defence, Wilde places Art in strict opposition to Nature and, as a consequence, reveals himself as a beacon for Aesthetic and Decadent philosophies. In relating himself to Art, Wilde attempts to assert his control and individualism to immunise himself against the Victorian society's harsh moral judgements. Somewhat ironically, Carson also forms a symbiotic relationship between Wilde and his art, but does so with the intent of condemnation, not liberation. While Carson implies that Art is a mirror to life, Wilde's views are epitomised by the words of Vivian in *The Decay of Lying*, who believes that 'Nature...imitates Art'.³ Wilde's notion of Art as detached from Life and as superior to Nature will be explored through an investigation of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and 'The Happy Prince'. These texts will be examined in light of three key themes; Wilde's prioritisation of artifice above Nature, his interest in the supernatural and the portrayal of the Christ-figure.

In Wilde's fiction, natural symbols are heavily featured, but serve as gateways to the higher realm of artificiality. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Dorian's consumer-drive forces him to reject the natural, which is presented as an unsatisfactory substitute for the glamorous veneer of artifice. It is therefore greatly significant that Henry Wotton's corruption of Dorian begins in the garden of Basil Hallward's studio. The garden epitomises the tension between nature and artifice, for although it is comprised of natural elements, these have been selected and sculpted to suit the requirements of man. The garden is also traditionally perceived as the site of original sin, where morality was rejected and humanity became disconnected from the natural order. The fact that this is the location where Henry encourages Dorian to 'yield' to 'exquisite temptations' and become the 'visible symbol' of a 'new Hedonism' is therefore important, as the conflict between Dorian and Henry expounds the tension between the natural and artificial that is already implicated by the garden setting.⁴ Before Henry's arrival, Dorian embraces Nature, burying 'his face in the great cool lilac-blossoms', yet after Henry's intoxicating words Dorian perceives the world in artificial terms, calling himself a 'green bronze figure' and falling in love with the actress, Sibyl Vane.⁵ Dorian's treatment of Sibyl, in particular, can be viewed as a crucial turning point when exploring the tensions between

¹ M. Holland, *Irish Peacock and Scarlet Marquess: The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde*, (London: Fourth Estate, 2004) pp. 104, 105.

² Where capitalised in this essay, the word 'Nature' will encompass both these definitions.

³ O. Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying' in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, by O. Wilde, (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003) pp. 1071-1092 (p. 1091).

⁴ O. Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) pp. 23, 22.

⁵ Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, pp.20, 25.

Art and Nature within the novel. While she is an actress, and thus a beacon of artifice, her beauty is described in natural terms, as her ‘little flower-like face’ holds ‘eyes that were violet wells’ and ‘lips...like...a rose’.⁶ John Pappas highlights that ‘both these qualities in Sibyl- her artificiality and her...naturalness are what make her attractive to the inwardly divided Dorian.’⁷ Thus, when Dorian becomes angered by Sibyl’s prioritisation of reality above artificiality, the reader realises that a turning point has been reached, where the artificial can no longer co-exist with the organic, but must triumph over it. This is consolidated by Dorian’s later fascination with *A Rebours*, which ‘seemed...to contain the story of his own life’⁸. Notably, after rejecting Sibyl, Dorian sees nature as a commodity, as ‘carts filled with nodding lilies rumbled...down the polished...street’ and he watches ‘boys carrying crates of striped tulips’.⁹ Later, he will turn nature into his own commodity, as, for Pappas, ‘after Sibyl’s death, flowers continue to serve as an index of Dorian’s condition, suggesting its increasingly unnatural quality...[He] turns flowers into...ornaments for his button holes or...uses them, transformed into opium, simply...[to] escape...reality.’¹⁰ His rejection of physical nature thus becomes inextricably linked with his rejection of morality. Natural elements are clearly adopted selectively by Dorian to create an outcome that exceeds nature itself, and that instead belongs to the superior realm of Art. Just as the artist selectively uses the works of his predecessors to produce a superior outcome, so nature, too, can be selectively adopted in the hope of highlighting Art’s superiority. By standing between the natural and the artificial, Dorian stands as a symbol of Decadence, as the movement simultaneously acknowledged Romanticism and anticipated Modernism. As Clyde de L. Ryals acknowledges, Decadence was not opposed to Romanticism, but arose from a distortion of the characteristic Romantic balance between the beautiful and supernatural.¹¹ Equally, *Dorian Gray*’s Twenty-First Century reader can see that such a treatment of Nature anticipates Modernism, for the idea of an invention rooted in tradition was central to early Twentieth-Century writers. Therefore, in emphasising the tensions between Nature and Art, Wilde highlights Decadence as a development from, not rejection of, Romanticism, and heralds Dorian as the visible outcome of this new philosophy.

By avoiding marriage, Dorian actively defies the expectations placed on him by Victorian society and thus retains his autonomous, individualistic existence at the expense of communal integration. Dorian’s rejection of Sibyl symbolises his rejection of heterosexuality, as rather than producing children, he enters into a male realm dominated by Lord Henry. He therefore not only rejects his natural, biological duties but rebukes the natural laws of society. Dorian’s actions imply that while Nature is connected to women and the community, Art is the preserve of an individualistic, male dominated culture. Through Dorian, Wilde indicates Art’s exclusivity, and thus its superiority, to Nature.

In ‘The Happy Prince’ too, nature is rejected in favour of the man-made. The garden also features as an important element, for during his life, the Prince spent time in a garden, around which ‘ran a very lofty wall’.¹² The fact that the Prince ‘never cared what lay beyond it’ suggests that he delighted in an idea of the natural which was artificially constructed and secluded from society.¹³ The swallow, too, prioritises artificiality, rejecting the Reed for the

⁶ Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, p. 45.

⁷ J. J. Pappas, ‘The Flower and the Beast: A Study of Antithetical Attitudes Toward Nature and Man in The Picture of Dorian Gray’, *English Literature in Transition: 1880-1920*, 15/1 (1972) 37-48 (p. 41).

⁸ Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, p. 108.

⁹ Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, p. 77.

¹⁰ Pappas, ‘The Flower’, pp. 41, 42.

¹¹ C. de L. Ryals, ‘Toward a Definition of Decadent as Applied to British Literature of the Nineteenth Century’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 17/1 (Sept. 1958) 85-92 (p. 87).

¹² O. Wilde, ‘The Happy Prince’, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* by O. Wilde (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003) pp. 271-277 (p. 272).

¹³ Wilde, ‘The Happy Prince’, p. 271.

more aesthetically splendid prince. The fact that the Reed possesses no individuality, for 'the river was quite full of Reeds', while the Prince is conversely revered on the grounds of his extraordinary appearance, again connects artifice to individualism.¹⁴ The swallow's desire for the Prince also echoes Dorian's desire for youth, suggesting that both protagonists are discontented with the natural world and desire the superiority of the supernatural. The swallow, like Dorian, also rejects the female companionship represented by the Reed and instead reveres the company of the male Prince. Thus, it is further suggested that the artificial is not only associated with an elitist detachment from the community, but also leans towards masculinity. Without the female, beauty and individuality triumph, yet the world of aesthetic pleasure becomes sterile, and therefore both *Dorian Gray* and 'The Happy Prince' end in death, rather than reintegrating their protagonists into the community through the traditional marriage ending.

As Wilde rebukes a 'natural' heterosexual union in both narratives, he must sustain life within art through methods that supersede natural reproduction, which he achieves by adopting the supernatural. In *Dorian Gray*, Basil Hallward's portrait visually synthesises Art and the supernatural. After realising he will gradually age, Dorian exclaims "If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old!"¹⁵ His desire is granted, as Joseph Carroll argues, through the 'supernatural interchange that takes place between himself and the painting', which makes Art, not nature, the victim of decay.¹⁶ In adopting the burden of age, the painting gives Dorian license to turn against the natural laws of society without punishment. He kills Basil Hallward without affliction, and, although it initially seems he will be convicted by the presence of Basil's body, he again avoids punishment by calling upon artifice (in the scientific form) to destroy the corpse in a way faster and more efficient than natural decomposition.¹⁷ Dorian's unnatural youth also releases him from death at the hands of James Vane, suggesting that, for Wilde, Art is superior to Nature, for it allows characters to act according to their individual desires. While nature is traditionally associated with freedom, Wilde reverses this assumption to demonstrate that Art offers true liberation.

The supernatural also surfaces in 'The Happy Prince'. The fact that the story itself is categorised as a fairytale immediately suggests that realism will be undermined. Within the tale, the Prince is an object, whose body is comprised of sculpted metal, yet he is infused with humanity through speech and emotion. The swallow is also able to speak and feels empathy towards the Prince, suggesting that, through Art, Wilde is able to create characters that are beyond, and by implication, superior to natural design. The swallow's desire for an Egypt where there are 'yellow lions' also supports this notion, as the bird has transformed an already exotic location into one which transcends human expectation.¹⁸ By connecting natural components that are not usually found together, the swallow, like Dorian, selectively uses nature's most appealing elements to create a superior world that can only be sustained in Art. The tension again surfaces, whereby the artist is at once dependent upon, but creates a world superior to, the natural. Although the Prince and swallow die at the close of the tale, God offers them everlasting immortality in heaven. By transferring his protagonists to a realm of beauty beyond human intelligibility, Wilde defies the problems he faced by avoiding the marriage ending. Art is able to triumph over nature, because it can create supernatural realms and thus sustain the individual in a way that nature cannot.

Dorian's gradual dehumanisation throughout *Dorian Gray* has caused Patrick R. O'Malley to compare him to Christ. While Dorian's earthly actions are anything but holy, the

¹⁴ Wilde, 'The Happy Prince', p. 271.

¹⁵ Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, p. 25.

¹⁶ J. Carroll, 'Aestheticism, Homoeroticism, and Christian Guilt in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*', *Philosophy and Literature*, 29/2, (Oct, 2005) 286-304 (pp. 300, 301).

¹⁷ Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, p. 147.

¹⁸ Wilde, 'The Happy Prince', p. 274.

transformative nature of his death offers redemption. As O'Malley argues, 'salvation-not punishment- is enacted through the transubstantiation of the flesh into symbol'.¹⁹ In his reasoning, 'the specifics of the blood stains [on the portrait] are significant...both hands, both feet, precisely the locations of the nails of the Crucifixion', and it is for Dorian to provide the final side-wound by stabbing the painting.²⁰ The portrait thus becomes an enduring monument to signify Dorian's immunity from social judgment. The servants' discovery of Dorian's 'withered' body initially suggests that Nature has triumphed above Art, for 'withered' promotes imagery of natural decay and suggests that natural forces have punished Dorian.²¹ The human memory, however, is fallible, and thus this momentary revelation is unable to rival the permanency of the portrait, which is durable enough to crystallise the memory of Dorian's youth and beauty. Art can thus eliminate the weakness of Dorian's corporeality from human consciousness, and holds the power to influence the future onlooker's perception of him. In forging a link between Dorian and Christ, Wilde offers his protagonist liberation from the restrictions of the flesh and exemption from historically situated social codes.

In 'The Happy Prince', the Prince is also a Christ-figure, who sacrifices his bodily splendour for the benefit of the poor. His actions clearly have Eucharistic resonances, for just as transubstantiation changes bread and wine into flesh and blood, so the riches of the Prince's body will be theoretically transformed into wealth for the poor. While Jesus offers bodily salvation, the Prince offers material prosperity, making him the Christ of a consumer age. One may argue for an inconsistency here, as Wilde's characteristic opposition between nature and morality on one hand and Art and immorality on the other, has become blurred. However, as Guy Willoughby has argued, the Prince's sacrifice remains 'unperceived by his beneficiaries' and 'in concrete terms, is quite futile.'²² Therefore, the Prince's moral deeds are somewhat superficial, meaning that the link between Art and immorality is not entirely severed. The Prince epitomises Hilary Fraser's description of the Aesthetic Christ, who is not only the 'sufferer and redeemer of sins...[but] both artist and work of art.'²³ Like the Christ of *De Profundis*, the Prince controls his own destiny, as *he* commands the swallow to remove the jewels of his body. By connecting his protagonists to a Christ who is in control, Wilde empowers them, and, by association, also empowers the Artist. By incorporating the Christ-figure, Wilde infuses Art with stability and superiority that counteracts nature's unpredictability.

By expressing Christ through Art in both *Dorian Gray* and 'The Happy Prince', Wilde promotes idolatry. In doing so, he echoes late medieval sentiments, for the laity often idolised images and invested them with supernatural abilities. Such nostalgia typifies Decadent thought, for Ryals argues that 'weary of his own time, the Decadent longed for a former age'.²⁴ By appealing to the past, Wilde justifies his reasoning and highlights that the argument for Art's supremacy over Nature is steeped in tradition. As Julia Prewitt Brown remarks of *Dorian Gray*, 'in this disenchanting world, the art object has achieved a life of its own'.²⁵ In worshipping Art, the medieval onlooker sought to defy nature's transiency and connect themselves to Christ's immortality. For Prewitt-Brown, Dorian's death also fulfils

¹⁹ P. R. O'Malley, 'Religion', in *Oscar Wilde Studies*, ed. by F. S. Roden, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) pp. 167-188 (p. 184).

²⁰ O'Malley, 'Religion', p. 182.

²¹ Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, p. 188.

²² G. Willoughby, *Art and Christhood: The Aesthetics of Oscar Wilde*, (Cranbury: Associated University Presses Inc. 1993) p. 26.

²³ H. Fraser, *Beauty and Belief: Aesthetics and Religion in Victorian Literature*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) p. 224.

²⁴ Ryals, 'Toward a Definition', p. 90.

²⁵ J. Prewitt-Brown, *Cosmopolitan Criticism: Oscar Wilde's Philosophy of Art*, (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1997) p. 77.

these desires, as his body becomes unrecognisable and the painting is seen in a new light, meaning that 'the historical context has now become unfamiliar, and the work of art recognizable as an enduring monument'.²⁶ The Happy Prince's death also reflects this reasoning, as although the townsfolk pull down his body, his man-made lead heart cannot be destroyed by the natural force of fire.²⁷ Thus, in both texts, Art defies nature and memorialises the individual, placing them outside of a fixed, historical context. Art celebrates the outsider figure, normalising and embracing individual identity, and thus rejects nature's favouring of communality.

Overall, it is clear that Wilde sought to infuse Art (and also the artist) with endurance and power that could outlive Nature's decay. Through his exploration of artifice, the supernatural and the Christ-figure, Wilde immunises and detaches his protagonists from conventional judgement, transferring them to a higher, ahistorical realm where individualism reigns. Wilde's own flamboyant personality distinguished him from his contemporaries, suggesting that his praise of Art also served to justify his individualism and defend him against the judgements of his peers. While such reasoning may have been beneficial to Wilde, the Twenty-First Century reader familiar with Reader-Response Criticism may find difficulty in perceiving Art as the elitist preserve of the intellectually superior outsider. Yet Wilde's contemporaries also found his approach problematic, for as the outcome of the Trial demonstrates, Art may boast of powerful individuals, but Nature will always show strength in numbers.

²⁶ Prewitt-Brown, *Cosmopolitan Criticism*, p. 81.

²⁷ Wilde, 'The Happy Prince', p. 277.

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