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An essay examining Wilde's exploration of art, nature, love and desire.

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Wilde's exploration of art becomes multifaceted when considered in tandem with his exploration of desire and sensation. This essay shall examine the presentation of art in *The Decay of Lying* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*[1] to see what insight is offered into Wilde's ideology as an artist and consider why his treatment of love and dismissal of nature is so crucial to his argument for the aesthetic. Further, this essay shall consider Wilde's concerns with morality and ask whether the presence or absence of a moral conscience is responsible for the final destination of each character.

As a member of the aesthetic movement, Wilde purported the idea of art for art's sake; 'the object of Art is not simply truth but complex beauty'.[2] Art's objective is to be beautiful; an artist's objective is to be the 'creator of beautiful things' (17). Not only should art be beautiful but it should be 'quite useless.' (17). Wilde considered the most useful things the least beautiful- the lavatory for example- thus he desired art that pleased the senses. Consequentially art should not be moral; art should not endeavour to educate or moralise the spectator. Shoukry comments that for Wilde the aesthetic experience 'occurred in a special faculty that, unlike the moral sense, does not induce action. Thus art is immoral'.[3] Stunting stimulation of action allows the artist to remove accountability and present their art in a vacuum; if art has not the power or aspiration to provoke then any action that occurs after consuming the art cannot be attributed to the art or artist. This aesthetic notion is revealed through Lord Henry: 'As for being poisoned by a book, there is no such thing as that. Art has no influence upon action. It annihilates the desire to act.' (157) Despite reservations about attributing the views of Lord Henry directly to Wilde, it seems balanced to ascribe to Wilde Henry's musings on morality in art when considered alongside Wilde's theories in *The Preface:* 'There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book' (17).

Removal of morality means that art is not didactic- any responsibility on art to make changes to the world is diminished- and art, by never expressing 'anything but itself' (1087) can instead focus on sensation. In his preface to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* Walter Pater comments that the aesthetic critic 'regards all the objects with which he has to do, all works of art… as powers of force producing pleasurable sensations'.[4] These pleasurable sensations are confined to the individual and are thus a reflection on the individual as spectator, not a reflection of the artist; Wilde argues that to 'conceal the artist is arts' aim.' (17) In concealing the artist Wilde perhaps attempts to mitigate accountability for

[1] Further referred to as *Dorian Gray*
[2] Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde,* ed. by Merlin Holland, 5th edn (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003) p.1079. Further references to this edition given directly after the quotation.
[3] Sayed Hassan Shoukry, *Aestheticism in Theory and Practice in the Writings of Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde and the Poets of the Rhymers' Club*, (Nottingham: University of Nottingham, 1975), p.198
[4] Walter Pater*, Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p.4

the ideas in his work and interpretations of *Dorian Gray* that would accuse it of being an immoral novel inciting immoral action. When asked in his trial if the sin in *Dorian Gray* was sodomy, Wilde retorted that sin is 'according to the temper of each one who reads the book; he who has found the sin has brought it.'[5] Amalgamating this idea with his conception that art's aim is to conceal the artist, there is a sense that Wilde- akin to the work of postmodernism many years later- attempted to remove his authorial voice to give power to the reader and prevent himself from being blamed for any 'immoral' acts that his art inspired. Bennett proposes that 'a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination'[6] and this destination is the journey taken by the spectator, not a journey mapped out by the art.

One possible reading of *Dorian Gray* is the devastating consequences that arise from either a misinterpretation of aestheticism or a failure to embrace it in its entirety. Sibyl is guilty of such a crime. Through her relationship with Dorian she imagines a greater appreciation of reality: 'You taught me what reality really is… You had brought me something higher, something of which all art is but a reflection.' (71) Sibyl reasons that her life before Dorian was merely an imitation and that his love has allowed her freedom; a freedom no art could give her. Sadly for Sibyl this view is in opposition to the views of the aesthetes. Dorian was in fact in love with Sibyl as art; she was more 'real' and desirable to Dorian when acting: 'Sibyl is the only thing I care about. What is it to me where she came from?' (51) Dorian need not know about her past or the reality of her situation. When the disparities in their ideals are exposed, Dorian describes Sibyl like a piece of bad art; she was 'wrong in colour' and 'her gestures become absurdly artificial.' (69) Sibyl believed her art was imitating life 'I hate the stage. I might mimic a passion that I do not feel' (72) whereas Dorian, like Vivian, believes that 'Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life' (1082). Dorian was in love with the sensation of Sibyl but upon her realisation in the truth or 'lies' of her art- 'To-night, for the first time, I became conscious that… the words I had to speak were unreal' (71)- Dorian is unable to continue loving her as she ceases to produce an effect (72). Vivian pleads for 'Lying in Art' (1072) because lying and misrepresentation of the pre-existent startles an audience into 'fresh modes, fresh perceptions.'[7] Lying produces an effect and Sibyl, in producing no effect functions almost as a metaphor for the literature of the 19th Century; literature that presented 'dull facts under the guise of fiction' (1073) and avoided lying.

Just as Dorian perceives Sibyl as art, so too do Henry and Basil perceive Dorian as art: 'Life has been your art. You have set yourself to music.' (155) Dorian produces an effect and Henry wishes Dorian to maintain this life so that he might always produce such an effect upon him. This 'effect' is not threatened until Dorian starts to moralise his life and as discussed, only bad art moralises. Thus Dorian no longer functions as a piece of art by aesthetic standards. Basil however attempts to paint life as he sees it- he does not lie- 'As the painter looked at the gracious and comely form he had so skilfully mirrored in his art' (18). Basil lets life inform his art rather than create art that informs life and in not conforming to aesthetic values, pays for it with his life.

Integral to aestheticism is the element of sensation, manifesting frequently in the form of desire. The OED defines desire as '…that feeling or emotion which is directed to the attainment or possession of some object from which pleasure or satisfaction is expected.' This feeling is the sensation achieved upon satisfying said desire; the hedonistic side of aestheticism focused on pleasure and consumption. In *Dorian Gray*, desire is multifaceted; desire between characters, desire for eternal beauty and desire for physical fulfilment: 'The

[5] Merlin Holland, *Irish Peacock and Scarlet Marquess: The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde,* (London: Fourth Estate, 2004), p.78
[6] Andrew Bennett, *The Author,* (Oxon, Routledge, 2005), p.18
[7] Guy Willoughby, *Art and Christhood: The Aesthetics of Oscar Wilde,* (USA: Associated University Press, 1993), p.65

hideous hunger for opium began to gnaw at him.' (134) Like art, desire places importance on visceral sensations over psychological reactions and thus desire often exists as transient disposable objects; 'The ephemerality of individual desires heralded in *Dorian Gray* can thus be read as the subjective correlative of the obsolescence built into the objects that the dandy prefers… such as the cigarettes that he never stops smoking'[8]. Lord Henry, epitomised as the dandy through the indulgence of such activity, endorses desire in Dorian: 'The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it. Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden to itself, with desire for what its monstrous laws have made monstrous and unlawful' (28, 9). Desire for such temptation most likely refers to homosexual activity, a desire frequently deemed 'monstrous' and 'unlawful' in 19th Century society. However to Lord Henry- and I would argue to some extent Wilde- it is this taboo labelling of such an activity that makes the pursuit of it all the more desirable. Ultimately desire is, as the OED states, the 'condition of desiring'; that is the act of wanting. Once this desire is met, it ceases to exist.

Consequentially, heterosexual relationships in Wilde's work evade the language of desire. As McGhee discerns, 'rarely do his marriages convince us that duty has become the same thing as desire.'[9] In this way, Wilde suggests that it is the duty and expectation from society for marriage that results in homosexual desires; desire forms in the void between duty and sensation. The dandy seeks pleasure and if this cannot be fulfilled within the restrictions placed upon him by society then he will seek it elsewhere. I would argue that Wilde is perhaps holding the conservative Victorian society accountable for any activity that is outside the realms of their expectations; their conservatism breeds this desire. Further, Sedgwick proposes that boredom also breeds desire; 'a psychoanalyst designates boredom as… a period during which the psyche feuds off and thus also manifests the unbearable because double burden of desiring desire.'[10] Desiring desire feeds directly into the aesthetic movement of desires of sensation. Where Dorian succumbs to his desires, Basil, Gomel argues, is saved by a desire which 'drives a wedge between the self of the artist and the erotic Other'.[11] In desiring Dorian the man, Basil 'saves himself from the total immersion in the image that ultimately destroys Dorian.'[12] However Basil arguably does not save himself- he does meet a tragic end- and I would argue that actually it is his desire for the 'real' Dorian- that is Dorian the man- over the painting of Dorian that destroys him. Basil finds more beauty in life than in art and his desires react accordingly; his un-aesthetic resolve is ultimately to his undoing.

Basil's desires destroy him because they are directed at nature- the 'real' Dorian. Aestheticism rejected nature as being 'always behind the age' (1078) and of being an ally of the 'natural'; natural being what was considered the 'normal', Victorian view on the world. The OED defines nature as 'To fix in one's nature, to make natural'. The verb 'fix' suggests that there is a fault which can be rectified by nature, by being made natural. Wilde opposed this notion for two reasons; firstly because he engaged in this 'unnatural' activity- relations between men- and secondly because it promoted the opinion that nature was a suitable canvas for art. As an aesthete, Wilde believed art had no social duty and was not the tool through which to 'fix' morality/immorality. This view countered the 19th Century realist movement and work of such writers as Charles Dickens and Charles Reade who attempted to arouse 'sympathy for the victims of the poor-law administration' (1077) by presenting the harsh

[8] Jeff Nunokawa, 'The Importance of Being Bored: The Dividends of Ennui in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*' in *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, ed. by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (USA: Duke University Press, 1997), pp.151-166, (p.161)
[9] Richard D. McGhee, *Marriage, Duty and Desire in Victorian Poetry and Drama,* (USA: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1980), p.269
[10] Nunokawa, p.153
[11] Elana Gomel, Oscar Wilde, 'The Picture of Dorian Gray, and the (Un)death of the Author', *Narrative*, 1, (2004) 74-92, pp.81, 2
[12] Ibid.

realities of life; the natural. Wilde's dislike of nature surfaces through the character of Vivian who states he does not 'admit anybody who is of the usual age' (1073) to his club. Synonymous with natural, 'usual' suggests something which is normal and conventional. If homosexual activity was 'unnatural', not considered the norm, then perhaps Vivian's club was actually a club for such activity.

Nature, as the opposite of true aesthetic art, is something which one should distance oneself from; Vivian proclaims with delight that he has 'entirely lost' the faculty to enjoy nature (ibid). 'Faculty' connotes ability and a physical feature that can be learned / unlearned. Vivian is perhaps alluding to his deliberate loss of the natural- heterosexual monogamous relationships- in order that he may engage in homosexual relationships. Lord Henry proposes that 'When one is in love, one always begins by deceiving one's self, and one always ends by deceiving others.' (50) Lord Henry is arguably referring to the Victorian idea of love- thus heterosexual- which represses desire through the deception that this 'natural' love is what is required. This deception is evident in the 'love' between Dorian and Sibyl. Dorian 'loves' Sibyl but becomes conscious that his love is for her art and the sensation her art provides him: 'How little you can know of love, if you say it mars your art! Without your art you are nothing!' (72) Sibyl attempted to detach her love for Dorian from her art in the fain hope that they might marry and conform to the expectation of love: 'take me away with you' (ibid). Dorian, as the dandy, cannot commit to such falsity and thus ends his relations with Sibyl. Although not commenting on *Dorian Gray* Shoukry's statement on love in Wilde's work is clearly apt: 'love between a man and a woman is never achieved or enjoyed'.[13] Willoughby argues that 'Dorian Gray's failure… is to adopt Lord Henry's cramping nominalist aesthetic… it is not that an aesthetic view is innately wrong, but that it needs to be redefined'.[14] I would have to disagree in part with this notion as I would argue that Dorian's downfall is not that he does not modify aestheticism to suit himself, rather that he abandons it altogether when he attempts to moralise his actions and 'deceive' himself by attempting to engage in a heterosexual relationship with Sibyl: 'He would not see Lord Henry any more- would not, at any rate, listen to those poisonous theories that… had first stirred within him the passion for impossible things. He would go back to Sibyl, make amends, marry her, try to love her again.' (75) As Mahaffey comments, *Dorian Gray* is a 'powerful indictment against the corrupting piousness of compulsory heterosexuality'.[15] Were Dorian to accept that love between a man and a woman cannot be achieved, then he would be able to fully embrace aestheticism and continue to live with his passions.

Ultimately, an examination of Wilde's impressions of art, desire, nature and love are always going to prove difficult due to the paradoxical nature of his work, as Vivian states 'who wants to be consistent?' (1072) However, what is evident is the extent to which the principles of aestheticism feed into Wilde's work. Wilde believed in 'useless' art that appealed to the senses and was fuelled not by love but by desire. As a writer Wilde was clearly very deliberate and conscious in his choices, commenting to a fellow writer that the word vice was not suitable as it was 'tainted in its signification with moral censure'.[16] Through *The Decay of Lying* and *Dorian Gray* Wilde proficiently expresses his desire for an art that is removed both from morality and nature. In dismissing nature as antiquated and unpleasant Wilde is able to allude to- arguably with or without great subtlety- homosexual activity; an activity repressed by Victorian conservatism. Underpinning such explorations is the eventual realisation that it is not a life lived immorally that will end 'withered, wrinkled

[13] Shoukry, p.191,2
[14] Willoughby, p.68
[15] Vicki Mahaffey, *States of Desire: Wilde, Yeats, Joyce and the Irish Experiment,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.83
[16] Ian Small, *Oscar Wilde Revalued: An Essay on New Materials and Methods of Research,* (Greensboro: ELT Press, 1993), p.47

and loathsome' (159). Rather, a life that has failed to fully embrace the true principles of aestheticism.

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