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Author: Colleen Cooper Harrison, Ed.D
Affiliation: Access International Academy Ningbo
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Abstract:

The use of satire in literature provides clues to the intent of an author. Yet, during the Victorian era, many authors cast aside the notion of deeper meanings and interpretations for the sake of aestheticism, or the appreciation of art and literature simply for the artwork, itself. Yet, what if the Victorian writers used the notion of aestheticism to create social commentary, thereby using the beauty of art and literature as a means of addressing a larger concern? Through the lenses of both deconstructionism and psychoanalytic literary theory, a close reading of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* may reveal social criticism through characterization and satire.

Keywords:

Author Bio:
Dr. Colleen Cooper Harrison has been an English scholar and educator for ten years. Starting her career as a high school English teacher in Virginia, she earned her doctorate in 2010. Her area of research was the use of Victorian vampire literature in the secondary alternative education classroom. She has also served as a secondary school administrator and as an adjunct English professor at the college level. Currently, Dr. Harrison teaches English and serves in the administrative capacity of Curriculum Coordinator for an American-style international school in China. She has a passion for Victorian literature, especially writing containing supernatural elements.

Author email:
Colleen.Harrison@aian.org.cn
Aestheticism, or the act of praising frivolity, is a concept explored by many authors. In particular, several Victorian authors addressed aestheticism in their work, primarily in satire as a way to explain the movement away from religion (Chai 25). According to Elizabeth Prettejohn, who wrote *After the Pre-Raphaelites: Art and Aestheticism in Victorian England*, aestheticism, which is the precursor to the twentieth-century movement to re-integrate art into literature, allows “art [to] become the content of art” (5). Yet, sometimes that art becomes a message beyond the frivolous façade, a warning against the behaviors of a society. As such, art can also act as a satirical prophecy. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde describes the impact of aestheticism on not only the individual, but society as a whole. This, coupled with the Victorian struggle between faith and doubt, culminates in an interesting dialogue in Wilde’s work worthy of a postmodern reading of the text. Further, Jacques Lacan argues that individuals cast a reflection onto the world that represents the Other, or the part of the individual that acts as a guise of something deeper and potentially darker (99). As such, if the satire contained in Wilde’s text is reflective of something deeper or darker from Victorian society, a psychoanalytic approach is equally appropriate. Therefore, through the postmodern lens of deconstructionism with support from the psychoanalytic lens of Lacan’s Other, one may better see how the role of aestheticism in Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* provides a satirical commentary on Victorian life.

According to Jacques Derrida, deconstruction is not only about what a text says, but what it does not say (109); that is to say, deconstruction welcomes commentary on both the existence of an object and the absence of another object. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the presence of the picture also equates to the absence of Gray’s soul. Therefore, through a deconstructionist lens, the portrait in Wilde’s work represents both material possessions and spiritual losses. Just as “deconstruction bends all its efforts to stretch beyond these boundaries, to transgress these confines, to interrupt and disjoin all such gatherings” (Derrida 32), it also allows for a deeper reading of a text designed to act as a commentary on social concerns. In the case of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the boundaries to be analyzed through the lens of deconstructionism involve the notion of religion and doubt, doubt that eventually becomes beholden to aestheticism.

According to Culler, “deconstruction, with its insistence on interpretation itself as a fiction-making activity, enables one to read such metalinguistic moments as allegories of reading, as comments on the interpretive process itself” (209). Yet, as a stand-alone theoretical lens, the postmodernist idea of deconstruction is not complex enough to analyze the satirical comments Wilde is making about Victorian society in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Considering Lacan explains that the “manifestation of transference” in literature arises when an individual’s expectations are projected and subsequently transferred from the reader to the character (17), a varied experience arises for each person who reads a text. It can therefore be inferred that Lacan argues language and literature come not from the individual, but from the Other who emerges (Lacan 3). Similarly, according to Derrida, “if philosophy is a questioning that pushes against the limits of language and knowledge, that is no less true of literature and of its experience of language; both philosophy and literature push against the impossible” (58). Quintus further explains that Wilde’s famous statement
of “there is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written or badly written” (562), reflects the Victorian struggle between faith and doubt with regards to morality and immorality. Therefore, the connection between postmodernist deconstructionism and psychoanalysis is not only fluid, but appropriate in an analysis of literature.

According to Tzvetan Todorov, “the very existence of literature implies that it cannot be replaced by non-literature” (23). As such, literature acts as a tool of self-reflection for the author of a text, not necessarily the audience. This is important to note in a discussion of satire in literature, for what is being represented in the text becomes wholly personal to the author of the piece. Further, Brigid Maher, who wrote Recreation and Style: Translating Humorous Literature in Italian and English, explains that the parody contained in The Picture of Dorian Gray is more representative of a self-satire than of one commenting on society (83); however, it can be argued that in his self-satirizing, Wilde embodies the Victorian parody through his literature. Indeed, Basil Hallward speaks of the picture he painted of Gray, stating, “I really can’t exhibit it. I have put too much of myself into it” (Wilde 2). Yet, the picture, so imbued with the essence of both the subject and the artist, becomes the focal point of Wilde’s piece as a satire. Truly, Basil Hallward states that his painting “if I allowed it to do so, it would absorb my whole nature, my whole soul, my very art itself” (Wilde 6). As such, the Self emerges in the portrait, and both Hallward and Gray are drawn to the mesmerizing nature of the material item embodied within the painting. The Self which therefore arises in parody to Wilde through the character of Dorian Gray is akin to what Lacan refers to as the Other (3).

According to Lacan, when the Other emerges, the repressed desires of the individual also emerge (582). Therefore, it can be argued that the desires of Wilde manifest in the character of Gray in an amalgamation of societal satire and self-parody. This is evident where Gray states, “but the world might guess it, and I will not bare 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 [portrait]” (Wilde 10). When first exposed to the painting, Basil Hallward is unable to accept that others would be able to see the vulnerability within his soul, thus exhibiting the apprehension of acknowledgement of Lacan’s Other. Yet, Lord Henry encourages Basil Hallward to embrace the material splendor represented by the picture when he says, “poets are not as scrupulous as you are. They know how useful passion is for publication. Nowadays a broken heart will run to many editions” (Wilde 10). While Lord Henry is overtly referencing the painting of Gray, Wilde is using Lord Henry as a means of satirizing Victorian society. Through Lord Henry, Wilde draws attention to the frivolity of poetry as a beautiful art form, suggesting that poets and artists are merely capitalizing upon the aesthetic pleasures sought by the Victorian populous. In this way, Basil Hallward represents the ideal behaviors of piety whereas Lord Henry represents the base behaviors of an amoral population bereft of faith. In the middle is the canvas, ready to define himself by either faith or doubt as represented by both the portrait and the man himself, Dorian Gray.

Yet, art cannot be fully separated from the artist. Maher explains that “like satire, parody is usually most effective when directed at the customs and discourses of people who take themselves very seriously” (83). As such, an understanding of the
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satire contained within a text is an incomplete analysis unless juxtaposed with an understanding of the motivation behind satirizing an aspect of society. Quintus explains that Wilde’s own experiences were rife with both educational and moral quandaries. Quintus writes,

Wilde, in a utilitarian and colonialistic [sic] culture, clearly feels out of place because of the value he accords art. Still, he invites his compatriots to share in the joy of self-awareness, of aesthetic criticism, of culture, while at the same time he satirizes the destructiveness of impulses which show no regard for art or culture. This part of Wilde's career has been ignored too often, perhaps because the real Oscar Wilde is little like the portrait which Toulouse-Lautrec painted of him in 1895 and which some critics continue to flesh out.

Interestingly, Wilde’s satire in The Picture of Dorian Gray may have stemmed from his own experience as the subject of a painting. Therefore, the Other of Wilde, arguing Lacan’s point, would have emerged to pen the novel in response to the suppressed feelings Wilde experienced as a result of his own portrait’s commission.

However, Wilde’s status as the subject of a portrait is not the only self-satirizing notion contained within The Picture of Dorian Gray. In his book Victorian Literature, David Amigoni explains that the love Basil Hallward, Lord Henry, and Dorian Gray all hold for the portrait of Gray is symbolic of male same-sex attraction (103). Wilde, a known homosexual, uses the symbolism of the image of the man to relay the message of gender identity; yet, Amigoni cautions against reading homosexuality in his pieces as the driving social criticism (103). Rather, the platform of the love of the painting of another man may reveal something deeper in the crux of social commentary: that the worship of an idol, whether a secular portrait of a man or the sacred image of God, is a driving force among the Victorian community. It is in that worship that his story satirizes the Victorian community, for the divisive nature of faith and doubt leads to a division in the society.

When doubt is cast over religion, people seek other items to worship. In the case of the intellectual movement of aestheticism, Chai explains that the Victorian people shifted worship from God to art in an effort to fill the void of consciousness (25). There are, indeed, two types of aestheticism: “the aestheticism of consciousness and the aestheticism of form” (Chai 43). In the aestheticism of consciousness, individuals are drawn to feelings of happiness, whereas in the aestheticism of form, individuals are drawn to material things that bring them feelings of happiness and the admiration of others (Chai xii). Yet, Prettejohn explains that Wilde created his own definition of the notion of aestheticism; rather than appreciating beauty for the sake of beauty, Wilde explores beauty for the sake of status (6). This is evident where in an exchange with Lord Henry and the Duchess, Gray states that art is a malady, love is merely an illusion, and religion is “the fashionable substitute for belief” (Wilde 188). This is an important distinction, for Wilde’s interpretation of Victorian aestheticism shapes a scholarly analysis of The Picture of Dorian Gray. However, both forms of aestheticism are present in The Picture of Dorian Gray, as the character of Dorian Gray progresses in his aesthetic endeavors as he devolves into a base villain through his selfish desires.
Quintus explains that “although Wilde stresses the uselessness of beautiful things, the uselessness of the province and product of the artist, he still holds that art has meaning, that ‘all art is at once surface and symbol;’ and so he believes that art reaches beyond sensation” (563). This is important to note, for Wilde is demonstrating some contradictions here worthy of being called satirical. Wilde writes, “All art is quite useless” (iii), and further, through Basil Hallward, explains “I won’t tell you that I am dissatisfied with what I have done of him, or that his beauty is such that art cannot express it. There is nothing that art cannot express, and I know that the work I have done, since I met Dorian Gray, is good work, is the best work of my life” (9). Where Wilde stresses the importance of art, he also stresses how useless beautiful objects are. In this, it can be argued that Wilde is displaying intentional duplicity: his literature is art, and the message contained in that art reflects not a denial of material pleasures, but a balance of materialism and faith. In this way, the character of Dorian Gray reflects Oscar Wilde; in his criticism of the aesthetic movement, both the character and the model for that characterization struggle to find a balance between the beauty of art and the beauty of religion.

Derrida calls his own work in deconstructionism the result of aestheticism, citing that the analyzation of discourse threatens that literary analysis will “spill over into the streets of ethics and politics” (125). In this way, deconstructionism is the ideal lens through which to analyze literature, for ethics and politics lie at the root of Wilde’s own views of aestheticism. Indeed, Wilde implies that Dorian Gray contains such meanings; the book is a work of art from which one may derive a discursive understanding as well, presumably, as an aesthetic sensation. Even in his definition of aestheticism, Wilde implicitly argues that ‘beautiful meanings’ can be found in literature more than in any other art form. (Quintus 563)

As such, aestheticism acts as an “engaged protest against Victorian utility, rationality, scientific factuality, and technological progress – in fact, against the whole middle-class drive to conform” (Gagnier 3). Through such a call to reform, it can be argued that The Picture of Dorian Gray was designed to highlight the evils of aestheticism and the loss of faith among the Victorian people. This is evident where Wilde writes, It was rumoured [sic] of him once that he was about to join the Roman Catholic communion, and certainly the Roman ritual had always a great attraction for him. The daily sacrifice, more awful really than all the sacrifices of the antique world, stirred him as much by its superb rejection of the evidence of the senses as by the primitive simplicity of its elements and the eternal pathos of the human tragedy that it sought to symbolize. (127)

Wilde questions the role aestheticism plays in the loss of religion among the Victorian people when Basil asks Gray, “I wonder do I know you? Before I could answer that, I should have to see your soul … to see your soul. But only God can do that” (146). Gray does reveal his soul to Basil, but he does so by unveiling the portrait he painted so many years ago. Reflected in the paint are all of the sins Gray has committed. It can therefore be argued that Wilde’s interpretation of aestheticism lies in the physical manifestation of sin through the worship of material objects.
Satire, which followed realism as a literary movement, relies heavily on the psychological impact of everyday life on the individual (Amigoni 194). Given the interpretation of Lacan’s Other as a psychological manifestation of transference in Wilde’s writing, satire is therefore an appropriate tool for Wilde to use. Ironically, in his book *Satire in an Age of Realism*, Aaron Matz explains that Wilde used satire in his writing because the limits of realism do not allow for a sympathetic exploration of social commentary (2). Additionally, Wilde was known for being especially vocal about his distaste for the realism movement (Matz 1). Because both “satire and realism are both fundamentally representational modes: both depend on the connection between what they describe and the referents of those things or persons or situations that we know from the world we inhabit” (Matz 5), the juxtaposition of religion and doubt with morality and amorality through aestheticism is a natural comparison.

Further, according to Frances Russell, who wrote *Satire in the Victorian Novel*, “a satire should expose nothing but what is corrigible, and make a due discrimination between those who are, and those who are not the proper objects of it” (37). The satire embedded in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is therefore as much about the criticism of negative aspects of society as it is about celebrating the positive aspects of society. Russell explains that “the sin, not the sinner” (37) is the subject of appropriately-constructed satire. As such, the interpretation of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* should focus not on the behaviors of the characters, but on the impact sin had on those behaviors. It is this point which lends itself to the complexity of analysis in Wilde’s piece, for through deconstruction, one can better see how the experience of an author impacts the reading and interpretation of the text not only by the words on the page, but by the words that are omitted; however, through psychoanalysis, one can better see how the experience of an author impacts the actual composition of a text. Neither of the aforementioned stages of the writing process can be studied in isolation, so both approaches create a more complex interpretation of a text so influenced by the society that engendered it.

According to Michele Mendelssohn, who wrote *Henry James, Oscar Wilde and Aesthetic Culture*, Wilde saw aestheticism as a means of antagonizing a society (15). Similarly, as a precursor to the movement of decadence, Wilde interpreted aestheticism as misappropriated worship of material objects and frivolity (Mendelssohn 31). Indeed, the notion of the decadence movement is rooted in “pleasure and fulfillment from extreme, often morbid, sexual and erotic fantasies” (Amigoni 189), and *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* certainly does play with erotic fantasies of a painting, especially when juxtaposed with the notion of female sexuality. Lord Henry tells Gray, “women are a decorative sex. They never have anything to say, but they say it charmingly. Women represent the triumph of matter over mind, just as men represent the triumph of mind over morals” (Wilde 44). Wilde’s idea of aestheticism may therefore stem from his desire to move beyond the subversive Romantic notion of beauty (Cruise 181). Yet, he takes the interpretation of beauty beyond nature and incorporates material objects in his perception of aestheticism. This is particularly evident in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, where Gray is enamored with a portrait, a symbol of material status and of natural beauty, both culminating in a single object.
Painted by Basil, the portrait of Dorian Gray captivates all men who gaze upon it. Gray, himself, views the picture as the most beautiful projection of himself: a canvas whose subject rivals all others. When Basil and Lord Henry discuss the ownership of the portrait, Basil reveals that because Gray was the subject, the picture belongs to him (Wilde 23). At this moment, Gray’s mood shifts from elation to sadness, for he reveals that “I shall grow old, and horrible, and dreadful. But this picture will remain always young. … If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old!” (Wilde 23) Therefore, it can be interpreted that Gray desired not only the picture, but the power of captivation the picture seemed to hold over others. Further, Gray’s ideals have begun to shift from those of happiness to those of greed: his selfish desire of eternal youth emerges as the focal point of his hubris, thus foreshadowing the impact physical beauty has on aesthetic desires and, eventually, on the soul of the Victorian man.

Lacan explains that the uncanny thrives on the “manifestation of transference” (17). As such, the author transfers his or her expectations and beliefs onto the character, who in turn projects those experiences onto the reader. Further, Lacan explains that the transference as an uncanny notion can be interpreted as literature being formed by the Other that resides within the author, the uncanny double of the artist that resides within the psyche of the man or woman who pens a piece of prose (3). Given that assumption, the projection of literature onto paper and the projection of art onto a canvass can both be interpreted as the outward extension of the internal Other. Therefore, it can be argued that the portrait of Dorian Gray was not painted by Basil Hallward, but by the Other of Basil Hallward.

According to Cruise, Wilde typically uses multiple meanings in his literary symbols, thus leaving much of what he writes open to interpretation (171). Particularly regarding nature, Cruise argues that Wilde’s description of flowers can often be ambiguous (171-172). As such, a close reading of The Picture of Dorian Gray is likely to result in multiple interpretations of his satire, thus broadening the scholarly discourse of his work. Wilde writes, “the terror of society, which is the basis of morals, the terror of God, which is the secret of religion – these are the two things that govern us” (16). This is important, for when approaching aestheticism from multiple perspectives, the dialogue becomes richer and more complex. Therefore, it can be assumed that Wilde is satirizing the concept of material belongings as the new religion of the Victorian people, thus arguing that aestheticism is the result of a loss of faith in both man and God, both sacrificed for objects of beauty.

According to Quintus, Wilde defines art as “morally neutral” (561). Therefore, if art is a reflection of the soul of the individual, as is overtly implied in The Picture of Dorian Gray, then the morality in question is that of the man, not of the portrait. This creates an interesting dynamic, for if Gray always had the potential to become a killer, his argument that the portrait is sapping his soul is not only inaccurate, it is reflective of something deeper. Wilde may be therefore satirizing the idea that a man’s soul is external of his actions. Todorov further explains that the role of literature is to serve as a tool for social commentary (72). This is apparent when approaching a text as an allegory of reflection rather than as a means of presenting a mere observation (Todorov 72). As such, Wilde’s choice to pepper the text of The Picture of Dorian Gray with religious overtones is interesting. Wilde writes, “a world in which the past
would have little or no place, or survive, at any rate, in no conscious form of obligation or regret” (Wilde 126). The aforementioned statement therefore assists in a satirical reading of the novel, for without the religion of the past, the future generations would have no hope to thrive, for there would be no glue connecting society into a cohesive and functioning communal unit. As such, Wilde is using the notion of aestheticism to demonstrate how the worship of material objects leads individuals down a path of selfish, base, and immoral behavior.

Gagnier explains that aestheticism in Wilde’s literature also refers to consumption and over-stimulation (7). Therefore, in addressing how aestheticism acts as social satire in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, it is important to look not only at material objects, but at behaviors in pubs or at parties where indulgence is not only experienced, but celebrated. One such example is evident where Wilde writes, “you will always be fond of me. I represent to you all the sins you have never had the courage to commit” (75). This represents Lord Henry’s projection of aestheticism onto Gray. At this point in the novel, Gray is faced with an internal struggle – should he become like Lord Henry, casting aside relationships for symbols of status, or should he continue his life as a dandy, never experiencing the finer things in life outside of observing the decadence of others? This becomes the turning point in the text, for Lord Henry is able to convince Gray that life’s pleasures go beyond love, they lie owning things that breed jealousy in others.

Amigoni explains that the literary dandy represents men who would dress in the finest attire and who would identify their success by their material belongings (189). The idea of the dandy, or “one whose defense against the accusations of artificiality and superficiality was more a critique of bourgeois values” (Gagnier 78). In aestheticism, the feeling of satisfaction is more important than any other feeling (Chai 26). Therefore, luxury becomes the physical manifestation of satisfaction, for surrounding oneself with items that are comfortable and beautiful satisfy both the physical and emotional needs of the literary elite, culminating in the archetype of the dandy. Therefore, “the dandy [can be seen as] a sort of pro-team loan for the cost of luxury: he accepts for his own benefit and others’ amusement the materialism of his affluent society at the same time that he superciliously mocks the tedious stability of its participants” (Gagnier 80).

The dandy in Wilde’s work therefore becomes “the human equivalent of aestheticism in art” (Gagnier 7). As a result, the dandy becomes the physical manifestation of aestheticism in literature, thereby enabling the literary archetype of the dandy to act satirically in its representation of vanity and luxury. An example of this type of satire is evident where Wilde writes, “there is only one thing worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about” (2). Here, Lord Henry and Basil are appealing to Gray’s sense of vanity, thus initiating his descent into the madness of aestheticism through consumption. Gray, who is described as much of a dandy as Lord Henry (Wilde 30), is dismissed by Sibyl Vane, the woman he loves, for being without substance. However, Gray’s status as a dandy takes an ironic turn when Sibyl committed suicide when Gray’s soul darkened in his quest for his own pleasure (Wilde 183). He began the novel wanting nothing more than to be adored by Sibyl, and he ended up being the catalyst for her death by not adoring her in return.
Lord Henry states that “nothing makes one so vain as being told that one is a sinner. Conscience makes egotists of us all” (Wilde 97). Vanity is Gray’s sin, and Sibyl’s last name, Vane, reflects how Gray’s vanity leads to not only the downfall of his own humanity, but to the suffering of the rest of society. Further, according to Culler, the portrait of Gray represents self-(mis)recognition in Gray (403). Therefore, Gray, himself, casts an ill-visage of his own reflection onto the world, for if he recognizes himself within the picture, the forces that drive him to commit evil acts were always dormant within himself. In discussing how Lord Henry is not a man to be trusted, Basil says,

sin is a thing that writes itself across a man’s face. It cannot be concealed. People talk sometimes of secret vices. There are no such things. If a wretched man has a vice, it shows itself in the lines of his mouth, the droop of his eyelids, the moulding [sic] of his hands even. Somebody—I won’t mention his name, but you know him—came to me last year to have his portrait done. I had never seen him before, and had never heard anything about him at the time, though I have heard a good deal since. He offered an extravagant price. I refused him. There was something in the shape of his fingers that I hated. I know now that I was quite right in what I fancied about him. His life is dreadful. But you, Dorian, with your pure, bright, innocent face, and your marvelous untroubled youth—I can’t believe anything against you.” (Wilde 143)

Yet, in that speech, Basil reveals that men are speaking ill against Gray in the city, stating that their daughters would not be safe in the same room as him. As such, he is revealing how Gray had the potential to be either good or evil, yet in his friendship with Lord Henry, fell. Wilde is therefore implementing satire not only in the behaviors of the characters in The Picture of Dorian Gray, but also in the nuance of their names.

The fall of Gray makes sense, considering the battle for his soul between Basil Hallward and Lord Henry. Gray, a color between black and white, is open to interpretation. It is therefore relevant to assume that the gray area of morality in which he lives was tipped from neutral to evil by the influence of Lord Henry. Wilde explains that:

When Basil Hallward looked upon the picture of Gray, aged and rife with the evils Gray had committed, he thought, “it was some foul parody, some infamous ignoble satire. He had never done that. Still, it was his own picture. He knew it, and he felt as if his blood had changed in a moment from fire to sluggish ice. His own picture! What did it mean? Why had it altered? He turned and looked at Dorian Gray with the eyes of a sick man. His mouth twitched, and his parched tongue seemed unable to articulate. (149)

This idea further perpetuates an argument that the portrait was painted by Hallward’s uncanny Other through Lacan’s “manifestation of transference” (17). Gray’s soul was trapped in the picture, and the picture reflected the nature that had become of him. No longer was he living in a world of gray, where he could sway between good and evil. And yet the ability to traverse between those two extremes appealed to him. Wilde explains that “it was the creation of such worlds as these that seemed to Dorian Gray
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to be the true object, or amongst the true objects, of life” (126). It can therefore be argued that the possession of the picture and the influence of Lord Henry molded Gray into the true representation of the Victorian people, as seen through the eyes of Wilde.

Wilde explains that once Gray succumbed to the lifestyle of Lord Henry, he began to see the world in a fiery-colored hue, full of bright and vibrant blazes (97). A man whose very name depicts the area between both the absence and presence of color emerges once he steps into the role Lord Henry has assigned to him: the role of the amoral man whose only worry should be how to appease his aesthetic desires. Culler writes that “if Dorian’s life blazes out with fiery colors just as he seems to realize that he ‘had been walking in fire’ all along, it is because his perception has been influenced by the tropological [sic] construction, the rhetorical coloring, so effectively deployed in Lord Henry’s speech” (400). Lord Henry’s influence over Gray reflects how beauty leads the man to false prophets. His speech, for example, is eloquent and refined; therefore, it can be argued that Lord Henry’s mere words appeal to Gray’s desire for aesthetic beauty in his life. Lord Henry tells Gray,
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. It has been said that the great events of the world take place in the brain. It is in the brain, and the brain only, that the great sins of the world take place also. (Wilde 16-17)
Therefore, it can be argued that Lord Henry was able to influence Gray not because his words made sense, but because his words were colorful, powerful, and full of beauty, thereby satirizing the draw of aestheticism on the Victorian society.

At this point in the text, it becomes vital to look between Wilde’s penned words and approach the text from the notion of Derrida’s deconstruction: identifying what is not being said, yet despite the words not existing on the page, identifying what Wilde is screaming about society through the text. Russell argues that the act of viewing art, whether on canvas or as a written tome, involves “negative value” (130). Essentially, Russell is stating that what is present is just as valuable as what is absent, and the combination of presence and absence is what makes satire so powerful. If “literature has been of greater social and ethical stimulus than ever before [in the Victorian Era]” (Russell 45), Wilde fails to overtly direct his criticisms of ethical and moral behavior onto society; rather, Wilde directs his ethical and moral questions, both of religion and doubt, onto single characters. Indeed, Wilde writes, “the moral life of a man forms part of the subject-matter of the artist, but the morality of art consists in the perfect use of an imperfect medium” (iii). This embodiment of society in a single man, Gray, is telling, for if a single man can represent the evils of a society, then a mere individual can also represent its salvation.

Further, as Maher explains, Wilde employs satire in the very speech of his characters (35). Through the words of Lord Henry, Wilde writes, “we are not sent into the world to air our moral prejudices. I never take any notice of what common people say, and I never interfere with what charming people do. If a personality fascinates me, whatever mode of expression that personality selects is absolutely delightful to me” (70). In this exchange, Lord Henry’s speech works as a satirized embodiment of
The upper class of Victorian society. Rather than choose a moral path, Wilde is displaying a man who casts aside his morality for the more attractive world of aestheticism. Lord Henry further presents the draw toward religious doubt when he says, “the terror of society, which is the basis of morals, the terror of God, which is the secret of religion” (Wilde 16); if religion is terrifying and aestheticism is appealing, the choice is clear for Gray. As a result, Lord Henry is able to corrupt Dorian Gray, a man who had the potential to be either moral or amoral, depending upon which aspect of society had a stronger draw: religion and morality or doubt and aestheticism.

Perhaps, then, the lens of deconstruction also overtly relates to The Picture of Dorian Gray in a satirical vein. Considering how Gray is able to destroy lives through his eternal youth, he, in fact, deconstructs the current incarnation of society to suit his aesthetic and decadent desires. Wilde writes,

He [Gray] used to wonder at the shallow psychology of those who conceive the ego in a man as a thing simple, permanent, reliable, and of one essence. To him, man was a being with myriad lives and myriad sensations, a complex multiform creature that bore within itself strange legacies of thought and passion, and whose very flesh was tainted with the monstrous maladies of the dead. He loved to stroll through the gaunt cold picture-gallery of his country house and look at the various portraits of those whose blood flowed in his veins.” (137)

In the aforementioned scene, Wilde gives readers a glimpse into the psychology behind Gray’s nonchalant demeanor. Gray no longer interprets acts as good or evil, but as pleasurable or boring. In his ageless body, Gray has not only lost his morality, but also his humanity. Amigoni explains that “religion was a powerful source of self-governance in Victorian culture and society” (14). It can therefore be argued that Wilde is satirizing the aesthetic movement by revealing the slippery slope of desire: once religion is cast aside, material desires consume the soul of a man.

As such, the end of the novel, the death of Gray through the destruction of the aesthetically-driven object of desire, the painting, represents the power of resistance in saving society from its downward spiral into aesthetic heathenry. This is, in itself, a satirized commentary on the destruction of society that Gray was able to accomplish due to his agelessness (Maher 92). Similarly, Quintus argues that:

The "moral" is that an absence of spirituality, of faith, of regard for human life separates individuals like Huysmans’ des Esseintes and Wilde’s Dorian Gray from humanity and makes monsters of them. The sense of loss, religious confusion, or moral doubt, so endemically recorded in Victorian literature, is as much a concern to Wilde as it is to men like Arnold and New- man, although Wilde usually treats the issue with less certainty than his predecessors and peers and with a good deal more deference to the issue’s complexity. (Quintus 563)

The omnipresent theme of the struggle between faith and doubt therefore sheds much light onto the role aestheticism plays in The Picture of Dorian Gray.

The impact of the waning faith among the Victorian people for the new religion of aestheticism leads to a greater interpretation of the text through both deconstructionist and psychoanalytic lenses, thus allowing for a deeper understanding
of the impact aestheticism had on Wilde, himself. The imparting of satire onto
characters who reflect the Victorian satire therefore allows scholars to analyze the
juxtaposition of faith and doubt in the stricter manifestation of good versus evil. As
such, through the use of Lacan’s Other as an observatory tool, a closer look at the role
Gray plays as succumbing to the evil represented by Lord Henry reveals the satire of
succumbing to doubt and shifting worship to the false idol of materialism. In the end,
when the picture is destroyed and materialism no longer becomes the focus, the faith
of the man, of humanity, is restored.
The Victorian

Works Cited


