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# The Graceful Prince of a Trivial Comedy: Symbolism and Aesthetics in the Picture of Dorian Gray and "De Profundis"

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## Abstract

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The Graceful Prince of a Trivial Comedy: Symbolism and Aesthetics in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and "De Profundis"

Oscar Wilde was a renowned dandy and prominent spokesman of the Aesthetic Movement in the late 1800s who strove to live his life like a work of art. However, Wilde's life took a drastic turn after he was imprisoned for acts of sodomy. Thus, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, written by Oscar Wilde in the heyday of his academic career, can be contrasted against Wilde's "De Profundis," a letter written during his imprisonment, to provide a portrait of the author's transformed philosophy of a beautiful life. Following his loss of face, status and position in society, Wilde rages from his jail cell at his former lover and eventually changes his entire worldview. My paper discusses the importance of symbols to generate meaning, compares the semiotics and aesthetics in both works and considers how Wilde's transformed view of aesthetics is relevant in today's appearance obsessed society.

THE GRACEFUL PRINCE OF A TRIVIAL COMEDY: SYMBOLISM AND  
AESTHETICS IN *THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY* AND “DE PROFUNDIS.”

A thesis submitted to  
Regis College  
The Honors Program  
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by

Briana Regelin

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The Graceful Prince of a Trivial Comedy: Symbolism and Aesthetics in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and “De Profundis”

Briana Regelin

**Introduction**

Beauty was one of the key obsessions of the classic author and spokesman of the Aesthetic Movement, Oscar Wilde. Wilde wrote of transformational beauty in symbolism and pretty prose, even when transformation became deeply personal, and even painful, in his own life. Wilde impressed high society of the late 1800s as a man who embodied the ideals of the Aesthetic movement, originally valuing beauty for the pleasure its appearance gives. However, his fall from societal grace and following imprisonment due to his homosexuality and relationship with Lord “Bosie” Douglas, led him to experience beauty in a humbling, sacrificial and more ethical light, a viewpoint that preserves its relevance in today’s appearance-obsessed society.

Initially, Wilde was a spokesman at the forefront of the Aesthetic Movement in the late nineteenth century, penning beautiful prose and disdaining the ethics and comparatively mild morality of the Victorian Age, which claimed that art and literature should be connected with morality. The Aesthetic Movement preached that art should be for art’s sake only. This meant that beauty should be a sensual experience independent of didactic goals, existing only to gratify the senses. Proponents of the Aesthetic Movement



who wanted to live beautifully and fashionably believed that life should copy this morally empty view of beauty and art. Therefore, beauty, in Wilde's eyes during his literary heyday, dazzled and diverted observers, and was not, by any means, an avenue for higher thought or spiritual depth. In an essay entitled "The Decay of Lying," Wilde agreed that art should exist for its own sake: unconcerned with utility and morality, and disconnected from truth; following that line of reasoning, a person intent on living a beautiful life may say pretty things that are not correlated with any facts or depth.

This mentality is explored in Wilde's most famous novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, written in 1890, which details the captivating (and sometimes scandalous) qualities that constituted the life of higher society during the Aesthetic Movement. Repeated throughout the novel is reproach for looking beyond surface appearances, although the novel is rife with characters and situations symbolic in nature that challenge the reader to look deeper into personalities, plots and morality. Although the novel denies beauty of any transformative qualities and considered a trait to observe and obtain, the main character, Dorian, finds that leading a life obsessed with beauty leads to a degenerative transformation through the most emphasized symbol in the novel, Dorian's changing portrait. Such a symbolic tale contrasts Wilde's original censures and speaks to the very danger of not looking beyond surface appearances.

Wilde's exploration of Aesthetic culture lived by high society takes a sudden turn after his imprisonment on charges of sodomy. In prison he writes "De Profundis," which means "From the Depths," in Latin. In this letter-essay, Wilde reveals how he is no longer dazzled by the sensual life, no longer diverted by novelty and pursuit of physical aes-

thetics. His breaking of self in prison leads to a new understanding of the beautiful life and an obsession with truth and symbolic exploration of the life of Christ and the life of an artist as creators of beautiful things.

Wilde uses symbolism to add depth to his writing, exploring and revealing the Aesthetic Culture of his time. This coincides with Roland Barthes' theory of semiotics, which I used to analyze Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and "De Profundis." Barthes theory claims that symbols reveal much about dominant and performed culture and I argue that Barthes semiotic theory, when applied to Wilde's works, reveals the shallowness of Aesthetic culture and that the demise, characters and struggles in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* prophesize and mirror personalities, declines and catastrophes in Wilde's own life. Joseph Carroll states that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* "is not a fairy tale but a horror story, and in that respect, it is perhaps more true to Wilde's own life" (Carroll 292). Dominic Strinati states that Barthes described semiotics as "a science of signs that not only possesses a notion of ideology against which the truth of science can be measured, but it promises a scientific way of understanding popular culture" (Strinati 97). Thus, a semiotic perspective provides audiences with a lens with which I examine not only Wilde's life and the Aesthetic Movement of Wilde's time, but also modern culture and modern obsession and methods of living a "beautiful life."

## **Beauty and Semiotics Represented in The Picture of Dorian Gray**

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, written by Oscar Wilde in 1891, is a Gothic horror novel that explores the idea of living a life committed to Aesthetic ideals, and its repercussions. The novel begins with two friends, the languid and charming Lord Henry and his painter friend Basil in his home. Basil is intensely working on a painting of his adored new friend, Dorian Gray, a young, incredibly handsome, but thoughtless young man. Henry is intrigued by Basil's description of Dorian, and when the man himself comes to pose for Basil's picture immediately begins to charm him and invites him into his society. Although the painter begs Henry not to steal Dorian away from him, Henry decides to take Dorian under his wing and to influence him into chasing a lurid and Bacchante lifestyle. The vain Dorian is quickly won over by Henry's mentality that youth, beauty, and sensuality are the only things worth pursuing, and zealously declares that he will always be jealous of his portrait that will remain forever young, while his material body degenerates. Dorian soon becomes entirely self-absorbed under Henry's influence, disregarding Basil, who is more sensitive and moral and often reprimands Dorian for his thoughtless behavior. As Dorian slights a lover, leading to her suicide, and becomes more depraved and insatiably materialistic, he notices that his portrait magically begins to bear the marks of his sin and age, leaving him with the appearance of youthful and innocent untouched beauty. The picture grows uglier and uglier with Dorian's sins as the years pass; Dorian's paranoia and fear of the portrait increase and when Basil finally sees the hidden portrait, Dorian kills his friend and disposes of the body in a gruesome way by blackmailing a former friend. Finally, the portrait taunts Dorian with the ugliness and

horror of his own soul, and a crazed Dorian knifes the portrait, killing himself in the process, returning the portrait to its former splendor and withering Dorian's body in accordance with his age and sins.

Beauty is instantly introduced as a dangerous, sensual and powerful force in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Wilde displays the power and appeal of physical beauty, the pursuit and preservation of which leads to the main character's spiritual corruption and death. Within the novel, the protagonist, Dorian Gray, somehow swaps appearances with his portrait, remaining forever young while the painting accumulates age and the ravages of his sin. In order to understand beauty as portrayed in the novel it is important to examine the details and symbolism of Dorian's life and relationships, the most important of which are with the seductive Lord Henry, whose influence leads Dorian down a pleasing and superficial path to hell, and Basil Hallward, Dorian's painter, who madly adores Dorian with a selfless love and who sees in him the true "ideal" of beauty. Both of the men play a vital role in creating Dorian and the dominant view of the novel, which states that beauty is found on a mere surface level, emphasizing pleasures, hedonistic pursuits and fantastic novelty, insisting that men, like art should be independent of morality, utility and truth. Questioning the morality of this aesthetic lifestyle was considered unsophisticated and coarse. "Those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt without being charming. This is a fault. Those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated," Wilde states in the novel's preface. This immediately lays the groundwork of superficiality and surface appeal that guides the novel and Wilde's probing of the Aesthetic Culture.

Symbolism becomes immediately relevant for analyzing the novel as Wilde implies through the novel that the characters and their beliefs hold a sub-surface duality in meaning. Endeavoring to see beyond mere appearances is censured by Wilde in the opening of the novel as foolish, supporting the notion that beauty is just as it appears: simple, solely existing on an observable level; an objective trait that exists independent of desire and corruption. However, he goes on to admit that a deeper meaning exists if readers look closer: “All art is surface and symbol,” Wilde states in the novel’s preface. “Those who go beneath the surface do so at their own peril. Those who read the symbol do so at their peril.”(Wilde 4). Such a phrase implies that something dangerous lurks when readers attempt to delve beneath the surface, a moral that hints that beauty and the obsession behind obtaining it leads to some sort of personal harm.

*Beauty as a Sensual Experience: The Two Painters of Dorian Gray*

From the very beginning of the novel, beauty is lavishly laid out as something to be consumed by the senses, defying further thought and contemplation. The opening chapter describes in lush detail Basil’s blooming flower garden, mirroring a biblical resemblance to Eden, the first haven of beginnings, beauty and pleasure. In similar detail Wilde describes the languid Lord Henry, who immediately states that “beauty, real beauty, ends where an intellectual expression begins” (7). Next we see Basil Hallward intent on capturing the vividness of Dorian’s grace and youth, and eventually Dorian himself, trembling and flower-like like the plants that grow in Basil’s garden. Lord Henry is the

only character that does not contain some facet of vibrancy, but his spotty moral nature, clever turns of phrase, “lily white hands” and languorous nature enable him to be pleasing without much personal effort or thought on his part. He knows exactly what to say to impress or gain favor, instilling him with a charming sensuality that has earned him the companionship and friendship of the artist Basil.

Basil, on the other hand, has an animated and focused artistic nature. The novel opens with him busy painting Dorian’s portrait, totally consumed, by his fascination of Dorian’s character, although he admits that the young man can be “horribly thoughtless, and seems to take a real delight in giving [Basil] pain” (16). The painter overlooks this pettiness in the young man, captivated by his beauty, which he believes mirrors the brilliance of his spirit. Basil pours himself into the portrait, investing his own soul in his adoration of Dorian, who he believes represents the ideal beauty, a harmony caused by both physical and spiritual beauty. In his adoration of Dorian, Basil mirrors the Socratic Idea of beauty, that is, seeing Beauty in levels and forms of truth, looking to interpret it in Dorian’s finery:

His beauty is such that art cannot express...I see things differently, I think of them differently. I can now recreate life in a way that was hidden to me before...Unconsciously he defines for me the lines of a fresh school, a school that is to have in it all the passion of the romantic spirit, all the perfection of that spirit that is Greek. The harmony of soul and body-how much that is! We in our madness have separated the two, and have invented a realism that is vulgar, an ideality that is void...I see everything in

him. He is never more present in my work than when no image of him is there. He is a suggestion, as I have said, of a new manner. I find him in the curves of certain lines, in the loveliness and subtleties of certain colours. (14)

In Basil's eyes, beauty is seen as high, good and capable of revealing some sort of personal truth; a higher form of thinking that exists beyond mere visual pleasure. Basil, in his passion as an artist believes that physical beauty represents something deeper; something that lasts and transforms on a spiritual level as well as enchanting the eye.

In Lord Henry's eyes, on the other hand, beauty is something to be utilized and sensuously enjoyed. Henry's character is instantly set up as clever, rather devious, and continuously bored by society around him. "You like everyone; that is to say, you are indifferent to everyone," Basil says of Henry (12). Henry represents the model of man Wilde thought ideal of living a beautiful life: he says pretty things and acts charmingly without considering truth, for the mere reason that his behavior and turns of phrase are pleasing to hear and observe. Henry is sophisticated and fascinating to high society, and particularly to the inexperienced Dorian. Likewise, Henry is intrigued by Dorian and from the very start sees the young man as a clean, impressionable slate upon which he can work his influence, interested in transforming Dorian into his own likeness:

To influence a person is to give him one's own soul. He does not think his natural thoughts, or burn with natural passions...He becomes an echo of someone else's music, an actor of a part that has not been written for him. (22)

He enhances the young man's desire and curiosity for pleasure and novelty in an impassioned sermon where he disdains the moral life and exhorts Dorian to pursue every pleasure and passion imaginable. Henry casts his rhetoric of beauty like a net over Dorian, captivating him with the enthralling nature of physical beauty. He reveals to Dorian a life that is fascinating and sensuous, an alluring doorway open to excitement because Dorian, for a brief while, holds all the keys for success: youth and beauty, transient aspects society favors:

It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances... You have only a few years to live really, perfectly and fully. When your youth goes, your beauty will go with it, and then you will suddenly discover that there are no triumphs left for you... Don't squander the gold of your days, listening to the tedious, trying to improve the hopeless failure, or giving away your life to the ignorant, the common, and the vulgar... (26, 27)

Henry argues the Aesthetic Movement's beliefs: that the way things appear is how they are. Henry's graphic and morose statements about the withering of the human person presents to Dorian with a horrible fate: once his beauty, youth and vigor fade, his enjoyment and meaning in life will cease; his life will no longer be profitable, and he will fall from being adored and glorified to being abhorred and loathed in society. Thus, Henry encourages investigation and experimentation of every sensual experience to amplify the pleasure of those all-too-fleeting youthful years, all the while withholding the potential consequences such a sensual life could impose on Dorian.



Dorian himself, as seen in the beginning of the story holds no real depth of character, except that which is impressed upon him by Basil and Henry. Symbolically, Wilde introduces Dorian as a clean slate, a fresh canvas, upon which both Henry and Basil invest themselves into creating a masterpiece that suits their tastes: “There was something in his face that made one trust him at once. All the candour of youth was there, as well as youth’s passionate purity. One felt that he had kept himself unspotted from the world (20).” While Henry resolves to “make that wonderful spirit his own (42)” and make Dorian akin to himself, Basil impresses his lofty and morally-connected ideals of beauty into the portrait, even admitting, “It is not he who is revealed by the painter; it is rather the painter who, on the colored canvas, reveals himself...I am afraid that I have shown in it the secret of my own soul” (14). Dorian’s portrait is as much an image of the artist’s personal beliefs as it is of Dorian’s likeness, enacting the very censure that Wilde warned against in the preface, thus dooming Basil from the beginning of the novel: “An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style”(4). Both men can be considered creators of Dorian: Henry as the creator of Dorian’s character and conscience and Basil as the creator of the portrait that bears Dorian’s real character and personality.

The philosophy of beauty that guided the Aesthetic Movement and the entire novel is summed up by Lord Henry when he states, “A new Hedonism- that is what our century wants... Youth! Youth! There is absolutely nothing in the world but youth...Sin is the only real colour element left in modern life (27, 33).” Although youth, beauty, hedonism and novelty are considered a “beautiful” style of living by society, this sense of beauty is heavily temporal and bound by corporeality. Henry emphasizes transience, echoing

an age-old fear of death and decay, and an amoral exploration of the term “carpe diem.” “But we never get back our youth,” he states. “Our limbs fail, our senses rot. We degenerate into hideous puppets, haunted by the memory of the passions which we were too much afraid, and the exquisite temptations that we had not the courage to yield to (27).” Instead of considering Henry’s logic, the impressionable Dorian thinks only of loss, declaring that beauty and youth are the only things worth having in the entire world:

I am jealous of everything whose beauty does not die. I am jealous of the portrait you have painted of me. Why should it keep what I must lose? Every moment that passes takes something from me, and gives something to it. Oh, if it were only the other way! If the picture could change, and I could always be what I am now! Why did you paint it? It will mock me some day- mock me horribly! (30)

Thus, he utters a self-fulfilling prophecy that transfers the image of his soul and conscience into his portrait while his own facade bears the youth and vibrancy captured by Basil. Dorian is caught in the obvious net of the physical world, eager to live the easy and pleasurable life advertised by Henry, who offers Dorian a chance for pleasure and excitement in an obvious way, a way that is engaging, does not require much thought, and is easily attainable. It is a superficial, amoral life that disregards all internal morality. Although Dorian fears transience and loss, he ironically throws himself with abandon into a life that celebrates mortal, ephemeral and transient experiences.

Dorian neglects his relations with Basil and grows in friendship with Henry, who introduces Dorian to the “little yellow book” that instructs on a Bacchante and vice-filled

life. Dorian's thirst for novel experiences and excitement, grows harder and harder to satisfy. "I had a passion for sensations...I remembered what you had said to me...about the search for beauty being the real secret of life (54)." The little emotional depth he holds is vanquished and he becomes utterly self absorbed, wrapped up in vice and increasingly insatiable desire, lulled into safety by hiding his changing portrait and preserving his youthful good looks: "Eternal youth, infinite passion, pleasure subtle and secret, wild joys and wilder sins-he was to have all these things. The portrait was to bear the burden of his shame: that was all!" (113) His pursuit end exploration of novelty becomes increasingly perverse and his whimsy negatively impacts those around him. "He saw that there was no mood of the mind that had not its counterpart in the sensuous life (143)."

As Dorian's portrait accumulates age, spiritual corruption and ugliness in his stead, Dorian finds perverse pleasure in observing his own physical beauty that continues to dazzle those around him, because that is all he has to sustain him; he is a hollow and spiritual shell. As he begins to feel paranoid and anxious about his portrait, he hoards material items of beauty and strangeness, such as magnificent tapestries, incredible jewels and bizarre instruments and frequents deplorable places, such as brothels and opium dens. Wilde describes how the material presence of beautiful objects consoles Dorian because they are lasting objects that he can grasp and continue to obtain; it is an effort to capture and contain the beauty and brilliance he desperately fears losing:

He was almost saddened by the reflection of the ruin that time brought on beautiful and wonderful things...For these treasures, and everything that he collected in his lovely house, were to be to him means of forgetfulness,

modes by which he could escape for a season, from the fear that seemed to him at times to be almost too great to be borne. (147,150)

Dorian sees that his inner self is deteriorating and cannot avoid what he fears most: loss of beauty. The only permanency found in Dorian's life is not in his sensual experiences, but in the hoarding of objects that will endure when he has passed; thus *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is haunted by Dorian's fear of transience, and particularly his paranoia of the reality of loss, fears that are mirrored by society at large.

#### *A Semiotic Perspective*

Exploring Wilde's use of symbolism in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* adds an additional level of depth to observations about beauty in the novel. The study of semiotics factors two things in the creation of a sign: the signifier, which is the actual thing being observed and the signified, which is the concept (which is usually abstract). The combination of the signifier and the signified merge to generate the sign, which communicates the concept, particularly a message that explores cultural beliefs. "Barthes looks at semiotics with the purpose of unmasking particular pieces of cultural material which in his opinion were being used by the bourgeoisie as tools to impose their values on others," states Paulo Emanuel Novais Guimarães in an article analyzing Barthes' semiotics. Signs and symbols are crucial in Wilde's work and his exploration of the Aesthetic Movement. The greatest and most ominous symbol is Dorian's portrait, which cannot escape warning readers of the danger and corruption inherent in seeing physical beauty as the ultimate

comfort. Also, through these symbols Wilde reveals a didactic moral, defying his declared intent at the beginning of the novel, leading readers to look deeper into the represented culture.

Henry is the ultimate amoral character of the novel. The only rule he cares to follow is his devotion to his personal whims and appetites. Henry's wry, witty turns of phrase seduce Dorian and his various acquaintances and mistresses. Wilde uses Henry as to signify peer pressure and the dominating views of proponents of the Aesthetic movement. He represents moral vacuousness, emptiness, and the danger of harmful influences. Henry disdains steadfastness of character, often disdaining the sensitivity and unselfishness of Basil, and embodies the illusion of instant gratification without any real consequence or self-harm. He refuses to see beyond surface value and appearance, abhorring the realities and tragedies of life, instead commending a continual pursuit behind what is pleasing and exciting, a view that beauty in obvious prime and splendor is the most valuable thing in the world:

I can sympathize with everything, except suffering...I cannot sympathize with that. It is too ugly, too horrible, too distressing. There is something terribly morbid in the modern sympathy with pain. One should sympathize with the colour, the beauty, the joy of life. The less said about life's sores the better. (45)

Through Henry Wilde makes apparent that following the fads of a fashionable and fascinating movement may lead to an unfortunate downfall. Henry is a constant companion, a role model of refined sensuality and amorality in Dorian's life. Henry's presence and

influence haunts Dorian and is even ominous at times during the novel. “Yes, Dorian, you will always be fond of me,” he says. “I represent to you all the sins you have never had the courage to commit (86).” Also, Henry represents living as a work of art: he is constantly pleasing, but disassociated with truth, never seems to age, remains constant throughout the novel and never suffers any serious or harmful consequences of his dubious actions. Henry is the fantasy of indulgence without consequence, sin, transience and corruption independent of man’s efforts embodied; he is the true work of art in the novel that supports the Aesthetic Movement and not Dorian.

Basil the painter is an arguably moral character, sensitive and full of devotion to his art and his companions. Basil represents the Socratic idea of beauty and a connection with the sublime; Basil realizes that beauty is to be found within, although he is deceived by Dorian’s perpetual youth and blinded by his love for the young man. Wilde uses Basil as an example of a true lover of beauty, and a creator of beautiful objects. Basil sees within beauty something haunting, eternal and good, rather than fleeting, pleasurable and temporal as Henry and Dorian believe. “You became to me the visible incarnation of that unseen ideal whose memory haunts us artists like an exquisite dream... When you were away from me you were still present in my art” (123). Also, Basil finds it hard to fathom a division between physical and interior beauty and goodness; he believes that Dorian’s angelic looks mirror a benevolent soul. Basil sees, and is haunted by this ideal of beauty:

In his soul there had been wakened that wonderful vision to which alone are wonderful things revealed; the mere shapes and patterns of things becoming, as it were, refined, and gaining a kind of symbolical value, as

though they were themselves patterns of some other and more perfect form whose shadow they made real... Was it not Plato, that artist in thought, who had first analyzed it? (41-42)

Basil sees the idea of unified beauty of spirit and soul and beauty connected to truth in morality; he believes in it so passionately that he creates a portrait of Dorian that perfectly reflects Dorian's spiritual state of being. In fact, when Basil is killed, it is a sign of the death of real beauty, ironically at the hands of Dorian, a supposed lover of beauty and a sign of ultimate corruption, callousness and ugliness.

And finally, the symbolism of Dorian himself, particularly his portrait, which bears the moral heart of the story. The portrait itself, created by Basil, begins as an icon of adoration that perfectly captures Dorian's essence in every way. Wilde uses Dorian's portrait to signify that the portrait is indeed Dorian's true self: deplorable, blood-stained, cruel, aged and unfeeling:

Now it was to hide something that had a corruption of its own, worse than the corruption of death itself-something that would breed horrors and yet would never die. What the worm was to the corpse, his sins would be to the painted image on the canvas. They would mar its beauty, and eat away its grace. They would defile it, and make it shameful. And yet the thing would still live on. It would always be alive. (128)

It is the ultimate sign of Dorian's degenerative transformation and the bearer of Dorian's soul, ethics and conscience: "The picture, changed or unchanged, would be to him the visible emblem of conscience (99)." Although Dorian hides the portrait so that he is the

only one that sees it, he cannot ignore it, and cannot ignore his conscience and the ugly deterioration of his inner self. It is ironic that Dorian kills himself by stabbing the portrait, his death causing a rightful swap of appearance: proof that Dorian's quest for a beautiful life has led to ultimate ugliness and degradation. Wilde reveals that although Dorian became a perfect man of the Aesthetic Movement, reality, horror and his conscience led him to death by his own hand. Joseph Carroll writes that Dorian tried to live like Henry, who failed to understand that "the self cannot be cultivated or 'developed' in isolation from its relations with others. Nor can it be developed with an emphasis on isolated moments of sensation; it bears within it the burden of all its past acts" (Carroll 293). Dorian's fate shows the reality and consequences of attempting to live like a work of art; unlike Henry, Dorian cannot escape from the effects of his actions.

Wilde uses these principal characters to symbolize the dangers of mere physical beauty and to explore a culture and a life-style that gratified only the senses. In the introduction to the novel, Moira Muldoon writes, "Dorian, who lived his life as though it were a work of art unconnected to the question of ethics, dies by his own hand. Basil, who puts too much of himself into his art, is murdered. People cannot exist separately from morality, as works of art can (VII-VIII)." Unfortunately for Wilde, who lived as a dandy in the Aesthetic Movement and embodied its principles in his social circles, he would soon discover that he too could not escape the consequences of his actions, or live only as a beautiful and controversial work of art.



## **“De Profundis:” Oscar Wilde’s Plea for More**

### *Introduction*

Oscar Wilde met “Bosie” Douglas in 1891, a year after *The Picture of Dorian Gray* scandalized society with its hints of homoeroticism. Wilde, although married to a woman, was homosexual at heart and soon became infatuated with Bosie, who charmed the author with his good looks and wit. They soon became inseparable, frequently traveling together, with Wilde writing impassioned love letters while they were apart. However, they had a tumultuous relationship, as Bosie was often cruel and insensitive to his lover. “I cannot listen to your curved lips saying hideous things to me,” Wilde wrote in a letter to Bosie in 1893, “I would sooner be blackmailed by every renter in London than have you bitter, unjust, hating. I must see you soon. You are the divine thing I want, the thing of grace and beauty.” Unfortunately, Bosie had a very bad relationship with his possibly mentally ill and cruel father, the Marquess of Queensberry. Geoffrey Wheaton wrote in an article for *The Atlantic* that, “Meeting Alfred Douglas was the decisive moment of Wilde's life, and his great undoing. As his infatuation grew, he realized that he not only had fallen in love but had become caught up in a frightful family quarrel.” The Marquess was enraged when he learned of Bosie and Wilde’s relationship and sent Wilde a calling card, calling him a “posing sodomite.” Bosie urged Wilde to take the Marquess to trial for criminal libel, where Wilde’s works, particularly *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, love letters (considered erotic in nature) to Bosie, and relations with other men were picked apart to find evidence of homosexuality. Wilde was found guilty and was sentenced to

jail in H.M. prison from 1895-1897, effectively ruining his career, shaming him in the public eye, and separating him from his family and lover.

When Wilde was sentenced to trial and subsequently found guilty, Bosie was exiled from London, making Wilde feel utterly abandoned, broken and betrayed. In fact, Bosie's careless behavior, lavish gambling, demands to Wilde for money, and indiscriminate behavior with boys, whom he would give his old coats containing letters from Wilde, incriminated the writer further. When Wilde was released from prison in 1897, the two attempted to live together for a while in Naples, but soon parted irreconcilably. They never met again and Wilde died bankrupt in Paris in 1911. Bosie, also fallen from societal grace as Wilde's lover and as a homosexual, tried to improve his image by marrying an heiress, Olive Custance, and converting to Roman Catholicism. However, he founded an extremely anti-Semitic magazine and totally denounced Wilde later in life. Philip Hoare, writer of *The Guardian*, wrote, "Beloved of Wilde, betrayed by Wilde, betrayer of Wilde, Douglas was a man-boy who played on his charm until it ran out, then raged against Fate for that mortal fact... [he] took the stand to declare that Wilde was 'the greatest force of evil that has appeared in Europe during the last 350 years'." Bosie died in 1945, and, like Wilde, carried a legacy of his own to his deathbed.

While Oscar Wilde was incarcerated, he suffered acute physical, mental and emotional strain in prison and was dealt a grievous blow when his mother died in 1896. During his last year in prison, Wilde wrote a long and scalding letter-essay to Bosie reproaching his shallowness and selfishness during their relationship. Wilde also bemoans all the effort he put into satisfying Bosie, building him into a man of society and the ruinous ef-

fect that their relationship had on Wilde's life, relationships and career. Besides chastising Bosie, Wilde launches into a discussion of symbolism in the life of Christ and the artist, and explores the depth and beauty of suffering and sacrifice.

*Relationship with Bosie and Parallels with The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Wilde's criticism of Bosie portrays an unfair and exploitative relationship that was based upon emotional manipulation and guilt. Wilde explains that he stayed in the relationship because of the beguilement of physical attraction and a complex mix of love and responsibility that he felt for the careless and emotional Bosie: "I made your sorrow mine also, that you might have help in bearing it (266)." However, he continues to be shocked at Bosie's dumb and cruel personality. "Having made your most of my genius, my will power and my fortune, you required, in the blindness of an inexhaustible greed, my entire existence. You took it (Wilde 251)." Wilde states that he is an artist intent on observing the beautiful, but that Bosie had degraded him with his boorish behavior: "I blame myself for allowing an unintellectual friendship, a friendship whose primary aim was not the creation and contemplation of beautiful things, entirely to dominate my life (245)." This implies that although Wilde and Bosie lived the splendor and hedonism of Aestheticism, Wilde's internal intent was to find some sort of truth of lasting depth, rather than simple, fleeting pleasures, and that he himself, longed for something that went deeper than surface value.

Wilde paints himself as a personality much more morally upright than his former lover; however, it is clear throughout the letter that many parallels are drawn between characters and situations from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Wilde's own life. Wilde himself states the similarities that the characters had to his own self: "Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry what the world thinks me: Dorian what I would like to be—in other ages, perhaps." Wilde crafts the characters in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to symbolically represent himself and dueling aspects of his personality and views on aesthetics. Carroll quotes Barbara Charlesworth who states:

Wilde, even more consciously than most writers, split himself into various characters and saw in all them some portion of his actual or potential self... his was a nature of contradictions from which he could find no escape... with the intelligence to understand all the conflicts of his age, yet without the ability or will to resolve them, Wilde was finally broken by them. (Carroll 290)

Wilde symbolically represented himself in these three characters, an idea I will explore and unpack through "De Profundis."

Wilde obviously mirrors the character Henry in his life before his imprisonment. Wilde, in his past pursuits of aesthetic pleasure and "every sensation and beautiful experience" was a man considered an artist and intriguing writer of his time. In the same manner Henry took Dorian under his wing, Wilde took Bosie under his care and Wilde influenced and impressed the young man. Like Henry, Wilde also ran rampant with Bosie

in a pleasurable lifestyle, a lifestyle that was also considered by society to be controversial and admittedly perverse and deplorable in his own eyes:

I treated art as the supreme reality and life as a mere mode of fiction... To waste an eternal youth gave me curious joy. Tired of being on the heights, I deliberately went to the depths in the search for new sensation. (301)

Wilde helped to create the young man into the society pleasure hound that led the writer to court.

Wilde believes that his true self is represented by the painter Basil Hallward. Finding freedom to expose his true self behind bars and fallen out of grace with the public eye, Wilde exposes the thoughts of his heart. Like Basil painting and romanticizing Dorian, Wilde introduced Bosie to society, looked out for his well-being and was dazzled by love and a handsome face. Even when exploited, Wilde, like Basil's continuous attentiveness to Dorian, sticks around and helps Bosie. "The horror of the idea that so young a life, and one that amidst all its ugly faults had still the promise of beauty in it, should come to so revolting an end, merely humanity itself-all these, if excuses be necessary, must serve as my excuse for consenting to accord you one last interview" (259). Bosie, in turn, shows a callous face to Wilde when the writer falls ill and treats him with a contemptuous coldness. "You fell on me with every hideous word an intemperate mood... You accused me of selfishness in expecting you to be with me when I was ill... In you hate was always stronger than love" (262, 273). Bosie's self-centered behavior leads to public scandal and the eventual death of Wilde's career:

I, a man of world-wide reputation, was actually forced to run away from England in order to try to get rid of a friendship that was entirely destructive of everything fine in me, either from the intellectual or ethical point of view: the person from whom I was flying being no terrible creature sprung from sewer or mire into modern life with whom I had entangled my day, but you yourself, a young man of my own social rank and position, who had been in my own College at Oxford and was an incessant guest at my house. (256)

In the same way Basil created Dorian's portrait (that unarguably held the true essence of Dorian) so Wilde created and enhanced Bosie's selfishness, and with his letter, hopes to show Bosie the error of his ways:

I could have held up a mirror to you, and shown you such an image of yourself that you would not have recognized it as your own till you found it mimicking back your gestures of horror, and then you would have known whose shape it was, and hated it and yourself for ever. (281).

He describes an exposition of selfishness that directly mirrors Dorian's relationship with his portrait, and, just as Basil was destroyed by Dorian, Bosie destroyed Wilde.

Most importantly, Basil matches Wilde's deeper view on beauty, seeing beauty in love and seeing beauty as more than the pursuit of a Bacchante lifestyle "At all costs, I must keep love in my heart. If I go to prison without love what will become of my soul?" (281). Wilde, who also considers himself an artist, and a creator of beautiful things, through Basil recognizes the Socratic ideal of pursuing beauty "What the artist is always

looking for is the mode of existence in which soul and body are one and indivisible: in which the outward is expressive of the inward: in which form reveals.” (310) Also, although the Aesthetic Movement denied didactic purpose to art, Wilde could not escape imbuing *The Picture of Dorian Gray* with a moral, proving that he, like Basil, imbued spiritual truth into his art.

However, one cannot help but note the intense likeness between Bosie and Dorian himself. This symbolism could not be intentional, as the novel was published a year before Wilde met Bosie. Both Bosie and Dorian lose themselves in trivialities, shallowness and weak moral persuasions in order to chase pleasurable experiences. He is directly similar to that “beautiful and brainless creature” that Lord Henry describes in the beginning of the novel. Both are obsessed with charisma and are unreal in essence. Although Wilde sharply criticizes Bosie, there is no doubt that he is fascinated by him, although he labels him “intellectually degrading (247).” Bosie both deprecates and thrills Wilde, just in the way Dorian is both corrupt and adorable. Wilde reproaches his young lover with such intensity-sometimes bordering on outright disgust-that only depth and fervor of emotion-of love-can merit. Bosie is similar to Dorian, who, through his youthful beauty and charisma, inspired love and adoration in many throughout society. However, Dorian’s company, although fascinating, is destructive. Before his murder, Basil declares that certain young men have been corrupted and ruined in society through association with Dorian. Most notably, Basil is destroyed by Dorian, and he is the one who cared and loved for Dorian the most. This strikingly mirrors Wilde’s relationship with Bosie,

which led to ruination, defamation, and a metaphorical death, of sorts, for Wilde in prison, while Bosie continues on his decadent and destructive lifestyle.

*“De Profundis:” The Argument for Humility and Sacrifice*

“De Profundis” is striking in its stark difference to the views on the pursuit of beauty that Wilde promotes in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In this letter, Wilde explores the beauty of sacrifice and delves beyond the surface pleasures and the need for constant novelty and sensation he once endorsed. Faced with grueling life in prison, the destruction of his career and nuclear familial relationships, including the death of his beloved mother, Wilde comes face to face with his own folly and the emptiness of life that the pursuit of pleasures brought him. His explorations delve into beauty found in and through suffering and humility. Once aspects that he scorned, he now finds them incredibly valuable for living a meaningful life; a life that is full of depth, pulling it into the realm of higher beauty and shedding the superficiality and shallowness of mere prettiness. Also brought into contemplation is the Socratic ideal of beauty, which considers beauty in forms stemming from the ultimate ideal, considering beauty as linked to truth, morality and reality.

Wilde does not mince words when he discusses his pre-prison views of a beautiful life. “I used to live entirely for pleasure,” he states:

I shunned suffering and sorrow of every kind. I hated both. I resolved to ignore them as far as possible: to treat them, that is to say, as modes of



imperfection. They were not part of my scheme of life. They had no place in my philosophy. (309).

Wilde admits to being swept up in Hedonism and novelty, however, he found himself finding less and less real joy from shallow pursuits. He states several times throughout the letter that the “supreme vice is shallowness (278).” In recalling his relationship with Bosie, he found that:

The froth and folly of our life grew often very wearisome to me: it was only in the mire that we met: and fascinating, terribly fascinating though the one topic round which your talk invariably was, still at the end it became quite monotonous to me. (255)

Wilde began to long for something more, something with lasting depth and value.

For a man who once prided himself on being a fashionable dandy and literary genius, Wilde discovers beauty in humility. Also, he finds a purpose and a lasting joy and hidden beauty in his sufferings. “Now I find hidden somewhere away in my nature something that tells me that nothing in the whole world is meaningless, and suffering least of all. That something hidden away in my nature, like a treasure in a field, is humility (301-302).” He realizes, and tries to communicate to Bosie, that humility and suffering, once painful experiences he shunned, are the road to lasting beauty, and the tools needed to ignite beauty of the heart.

### **“De Profundis” and Semiotics: The Importance of Symbolism in the Artist’s Life**

In “De Profundis” Wilde takes on the notion of truth through symbolism. Wilde considers his personal and symbolic role as an artist, and the symbolic nature of Christ as an artist. Suffering led Wilde to reconsider life’s truly valuable relationships. He realizes his suffering has led him to humility and helped him shed his pride. Lives that are concerned with real beauty (the life of a true artist, and the life of Christ, the true epitome of sacrifice and humility) do not flee from suffering. “There is not a single degradation of the body which I must not try and make into a spiritualizing of the soul” (304). He considers how suffering, humility and the degradation of his character have actually brought about a deep feeling of peace and acceptance in his low situation. Wilde realizes the power of symbolism made real in his own life.

Wilde writes that an artist’s life and the life of Christ are similar symbolically. Connecting both the philosophy of Plato and Christ, Wilde claims, “There was nothing that either Plato or Christ had said that could not be transferred immediately into the sphere of Art and there find its complete fulfillment. I see a far more intimate and immediate connexion between the true life of Christ and the true life of the artist.” (315) In this way, Wilde believes that truth and beauty are irrevocably entwined. Both a true artist intent on portraying and understanding beauty and Christ are creative, bring life, and find transcendence in suffering. Also, in the sacrifice of self, Wilde unearths happiness, a happiness and peace comparable to Christ’s ultimate sacrifice of self for humankind. Although broken by his experiences, and departure from a life of physical ease and beautiful

experiences and company, Wilde claims that he has found happiness and peace in contemplating didactic beauty of spirit, while enduring his sufferings:

Curious as it will no doubt sound- I have been happier. It was of course my soul in its ultimate essence that I had reached. In many ways I had been its enemy, but I found it waiting for me as a friend. (319)

In the life of Christ, “Sorrow and beauty [are] made one in their meaning and manifestation” (318), revealing that beauty is linked inextricably to inner emotions and cannot realize its full potential in the human person when it exists merely for the sake of physical appeal.

Wilde emphasizes the power of symbolism and acknowledges his past ability to create symbols and meaning. Wilde considers himself an artist because he knows how to create, manipulate and understand beauty, abilities he also attributes to Christ, particularly in the written word and especially utilizing symbolism. “I was a man who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of my age,” Wilde claims:

Whatever I touched, I made beautiful in a new mode of beauty: to truth itself I gave what is false no less than what is true as its rightful province, and showed that false and true are merely forms of intellectual existence. (300)

It makes sense that Wilde would write *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as a symbolic tale analyzing society around him because of the immense weight he places on the value of symbols in communicating knowledge of and for human life, culture and experiences. Wilde explains the importance of symbolism in translating truth into reality. In fact, he considers literature the ultimate representative art (295), full of symbols that relate and

translate the human experience, saying that “Art is a symbol, because man is a symbol (315).” For example, in regard to Bosie’s prideful self-nickname, Prince Fleur de Lys, directly mirroring Dorian, who was nicknamed “Prince Charming,” Wilde states:

You were in your own eyes still the graceful prince of a trivial comedy, not the sombre figure of a tragic show...The little things in life are symbols. We receive our bitter lessons most easily through them. Your seemingly casual choice of feigned name was, and will remain, symbolic. It reveals you. (284-285)

Bosie and Dorian’s labels of “Prince,” although fancifully chosen, symbolically reveal much about the natures of their characters. Being labeled as Prince Fleur de Lys and Prince Charming remove both men from reality and establishes them as “unreal” characters. They are pretty and painted personas, attractive to hear about but full of artifice and mere prettiness; they do not contain real depth of character or personality; they stand as symbols in both literature and reality of fancy and of the unreal.

Wilde familiar with public attention, likens himself, and the true artist to Christ:

Christ...is so fascinating to artists. He has all the colour elements of life; mystery, strangeness, pathos, suggestion, ecstasy, love. He appeals to the temper of wonder, and creates that mood in which alone he can be understood... like all fascinating personalities, had the power of not merely saying beautiful things himself, but of making other people say beautiful things to him. (324, 326).

Also, the artist suffers translating his beauty into reality, as does Christ. Symbolism in art is vital to translating truth because:

Every single work of art is the fulfillment of a prophecy: for every work of art is the conversion of an idea into an image. Every single human being should be the fulfillment of a prophecy: for every human being should be the realization of some ideal, either in the mind of God or in the mind of man. (322).

According to Wilde, chasing a life of beauty does not eliminate desire, but causes its pursuers to lose themselves in the process. Desire is a potent emotion; it is a human drive that fuels thirst and passion. Speaking from experience, Wilde remembers:

I let myself be lured into long spells of senseless and sensual ease. I amused my self with being a...dandy, a man of fashion. I surrounded myself with the smaller natures and the meaner minds...Desire, at the end, was a malady, or a madness or both...I ceased to be lord over myself. I was no longer the captain of my soul, and did not know it. (301)

Ironically, chasing beauty and its physical manifestations do not lead to liberation, but rather enslavement to sensation and novelty. Levels of strangeness and delight increase when what previously surprised and entertained is assimilated to. Although an attractive or beautiful face or hobby can generate excitement for a few moments, it never gives lasting satisfaction. This explains why Dorian and Henry continuously changed hobbies, company and lovers; they soon grew bored with what once thrilled them. As Wilde suf-

fered in prison he mused on his toxic relationships and vices, realizing that he was killing himself spiritually:

When we begin to live, what is sweet is so sweet to us, and what is bitter so bitter, that we inevitably direct all our desires towards pleasures...ignorant all the while that we may really be starving the soul. (311)

Wilde mourns the pain that his relationship with Bosie brought about in his life and how his follies destroyed what had the most personal value: his friendship with his wife and mother and interaction and observation of the growth of his beloved sons. “I thought life was going to be a brilliant comedy, and that you were to be one of the graceful figures in it. I found it to be a revolting and repellent tragedy” (272).

### **Conclusion: Oscar Wilde’s Aesthetic Message for Modern Society**

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* reveals a raw and gnawing fear in the minds of humankind: the fear of transience, change, and death. Time, and its effects, are uncontrolled by humans. Beauty is found in humans but is lost. Beauty is found incredibly in nature, where the paradox of eternal transience cycles through the change of the seasons; beauty dies in nature, but is replenished independent and above man’s efforts to contain, control and obtain beauty. Humanity’s fears of this transience and change are embodied in Dorian’s (and Wilde’s personal fears and explorations of) perverse fascination of his physical beauty. Dorian fears the change that time will ravage him with, egged on to an almost manic fear by Lord Henry; he fears that his beauty will change and his quality of

life will decrease. Dorian longs to be his own master, even though he is blind to how his character is influenced almost entirely by Henry. Wilde's characters explore his own, and the Aesthetic Movement's, search for the transcendent in the transient. It is a case, as in that of Dorian, of beautiful façades covering a dead object, like a wax apple, or a painted portrait, mirroring life so charmingly that every now and then someone is fooled into taking a bite, or in the case of Dorian, pledging their soul for a bit of surface glamour and interior rot. Dorian is model of how society rarely looks beyond the surface. He contents himself with an image that is merely for show. Dorian's idolized portrait is merely a reflection of a truth; until Dorian himself becomes so fake that he himself becomes an imitation, a parody of real beauty; he becomes a shell that hints at something real but actually fails to achieve the real thing.

Although written more than one hundred years ago, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and "De Profundis" reveal that chasing and prizing beauty are ageless and continually relevant aspects of the human condition; however, so is the human thirst for more, which can be seen in the drive of many who long to see beyond the surface and use beauty as a means to find truth; this transformation can be seen in Wilde's personal history and spiritual transformation. Wilde's aesthetic ideas, rife with symbolism in both his heyday and imprisonment transform the author from a renowned dandy to a broken man. Although brought from the peak of his success, Wilde's subsequent depths instigate a search and thirst for a beauty that transcends-and is ultimately more real than-physical reality. Wilde's obsession with beauty does not fade; rather, he comes to a new Aesthetic Movement within himself, one directly opposed to the style of life he once endorsed: a life of

bare humility, of sacrifice and contemplation of the symbolic relations of Christ's life and that of a true artist. Wilde's old and new modes of thinking, when exposed by a semiotic understanding of modern culture around us proves that obsession with beauty and disdain for sub-surface virtues and morality never fades, but renews itself in whatever ways may thrill and shock the public.

The Aesthetic culture of Wilde's heyday still remains, barely altered, in today's culture. People turn to physical and observable beauty as a means of validation and decadence to defy fear of transience and mortality. Diverting experiences, physical beauty and the accumulation of wealth still hold sway in society; physical beauty is idolized in the lives of celebrities, and the rich and the famous, their lives hounded by paparazzi and stalked through consumption of tabloids and avid social media use. In fact, to briefly apply semiotics to today's popular culture, celebrities stand as a symbol of idealized decadence and beauty, a symbol of society's favor for outside appearance and negligence of inner morality. The scandalous musical lyrics and performances of celebrated beauties and musicians that arrive with fresh material to disgust and titillate are symbols of how society still largely disassociates art with morality. The recent trend of the phrase "You only live once," was celebrated in popular culture as a way for youth to participate in wild sensuality and partying. The Aesthetic Movement lives on, attractive for exploring sensations and glorying in the physical. Wilde learned in his personal life that attempting to live like art often enslave participants in desire. Wilde learned that he could not uphold such a lifestyle without consequence. It is important to see that Wilde's fall from grace is still as sobering in present society as it was in the late 1800's. Muldoon writes of Wilde



in prison, stating that “His goal, his life, had centered around the pursuit of beauty and pleasure for their own sake. In the end, however, he was friendless, reviled, and poor. He with his own actions, had exterminated all that was beautiful in his life” (410). New sensations come and go, but *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and “De Profundis” reveal two possible, realistic fates in the pursuit of mere physical beauty with disdain for morality, utility or truth: paranoid, cruel and obsessed like Dorian, or like Wilde: broken, alone, but aware of a depth that we refused to look into.

Ironically, after Wilde was imprisoned in 1895, Moira Muldoon writes that the Aesthetic Movement was “widely considered to end with Wilde’s trial (XVIII).” One of its leading spokesman separated and disgraced by company he once bantered with, Wilde still carried a thirst for beauty within his heart: a new ideal, and one far less popular and sensational than the ideas he once perturbed and titillated society with. However, Wilde’s revelations of humility and sacrifice are not novel ideas, but rather ethics tightly linked with religion, preached by moralists and prophets and holy men; it is a life far less diverting and much less self-serving, and often irritating and bland in the public eye. Wilde, in “De Profundis,” comes to terms with repentance, humility and sacrifice. “A man’s very highest moment is, I have no doubt at all, when he kneels in the dust, and beats his breast, and tells all the sins of his life” (349). Wilde’s personal history and exploration of aesthetic morals through symbolism reveal that as beguiling living a moral-less, fascinating life is, mere superficiality leads to a thirst for more, challenging Bosie, and through him, his wider audience and culture at large, to consider the aesthetics of humility and sacrifice. “You came to me to learn the pleasure of life and the pleasure of

art. Perhaps I am chosen to teach you something more wonderful,” Wilde says in the final lines of “De Profundis,” “The meaning of sorrow and its beauty” (364).

Wilde’s life, the life of the humbled dandy himself, is a cautionary tale that warns observers of the danger of attributing beauty solely with fashion and sensation, and the dangers of appearance-based society. Wilde’s life and works covered in this analysis prove that humankind, in relationship with beauty, suffers without a deeper connection with the mind and heart. To pursue beauty without searching for this connection reduces people to mere portraits of humanity, rather than feeling participators, and removes an essential part of being human and the depth of human life.

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