

# The Incompatibility between Art and Morality: Oscar Wilde's Aestheticism in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

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## ABSTRACT

"All art is quite useless" is one of Oscar Wilde's epigrams prefaces his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. He argued that art did not hold any purpose, nor did it take any responsibility in influencing society's morality, religion, or education. Its sole purpose should be to find beauty, attain beauty and please its appreciators and nothing more—"Art for art's sake." This statement of Wilde encapsulates the very core of the aesthetic movement in Victorian England, of which Wilde himself was a fervent supporter. Proponents of the aesthetic philosophy, known as the aesthetes, extend the theory to life itself. "It is life that mimics art." To them, ideal life is also quite useless. It should be all about beauty and happiness and nothing more. Therefore, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was overtly read as an espousal of an aesthetic lifestyle. However, that would be too arbitrary and shallow an interpretation. Upon further examination, we would note that Dorian's embrace and unrestrained practice of new hedonism led to his utter depravity and corruption. A juxtaposition of the philosophy of aestheticism and Dorian's ruination would intrigue us to further probe into Wilde's actual stance in aestheticism and, more importantly, the seemingly predetermined incompatibility between art and morality.

**Keywords:** Oscar Wilde, aestheticism, art, morality, incompatibility

## 1. INTRODUCTION: THE AESTHETIC MOVEMENT AND WILDE'S INTERPRETATION

The fin-de-siècle in England was characterized by several contradictions. It was the time that witnessed the culmination of the rise of science and industrialization when science posed a tremendous influence on people's everyday lives and mindsets. Science replaced religion in social thinking, especially among the intelligentsia; it also caused general worship for fact, rationality and reason. What used to function as the resort to support theological doctrines now served science and secularization.

Yet industrialization and science evolutionism were accompanied by materialism and commercialism, which resulted from Victorian capitalism. Further, the mechanized mass production and the consequent richness in material satisfaction also caused a permeation of utilitarianism among society, advocating that individuals should seek happiness to the full by the pursuit of utility. The maximum happiness principle developed by Jeremy Bentham led many to form a notion

of usefulness and fiercely chase after material interests. According to Bentham, pleasure was the only thing that was good and pain the only thing that was bad, and the right action was the one that could produce the greatest overall good. It perfectly justified the general pursuit of happiness and material interests which was further cloaked by a showy fulfillment of moral standards. This later caused widespread hypocrisy among bourgeois.

Thus, the aesthetic movement was born partly to revolt against the coldness in machine manufacturing and the blind pursuit after utilitarianism. The origin of the aesthetic movement was to be found in German writers of the Romantic period such as Immanuel Kant, Goethe, and Schiller, who argued for the autonomy of art. According to Kant, "the beautiful, the judging of which had at its basis a merely formal purposiveness, i.e., a purposiveness without purpose, was quite independent of the concept of the good" [11], which noted that art, or beauty, the pursuit of art, could not be assessed by any criterion external to it. Similarly, the credo of aestheticism in England at the turn of the century was the well-known slogan "art for art's sake," meaning that "art had no reference to life, and therefore had nothing to do with morality" [4]. Supporters of this doctrine contended

that art does not and should not have any moral, political, religious, or educational purpose and that the quality of art mustn't be evaluated by how well it answers the question of right and wrong. They, therefore, rejected the utilitarian concept that viewed art through the lens of morality and utility. As Wilde directly put in the preface of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all."

Beauty is a word that cannot be bypassed when discussing aestheticism. Art should be beautiful and pleasing, that is all. And so is life, art's ideal imitation. The bloom of the aesthetic philosophy fin-de-siècle English society was not confined to the field of art and literature; its avid supporters, as exemplified by Oscar Wilde, called for its extension and application to life itself. To them, it is not art that mimics life, but life ideally imitates art. For aesthetes, instead of following the pattern of utilitarianism and adopting the criterion of usefulness, beauty, the most useless thing in life, is their new deity. The pursuit of beauty is the most important thing in life. Every behavior of individuals is oriented to maximize beauty and happiness in one's life through the practice of a form of modern Epicureanism, as distinguished from Bentham's hedonism.

As one of the leading characters of aestheticism, Oscar Wilde undoubtedly has his own interpretation and behavioral expression of the doctrine he espoused. As for the practice in his own markable life, Wilde laid a great deal of emphasis on the perfection of appearance by intensely focusing on the elegance of lifestyle. "The Wildean dandy is the advocate of the supremacy of artistic form" [1]. To him, form is everything. As one of his famous quotes goes, "only a fool would not judge by appearances." Wilde practiced his exalt of the external by wearing bizarre and flamboyant dresses for which he was renowned. He advocated a revolution in clothing and would wear in public a velvet coat edged with braid, knee-breeches, black silk stocking, a soft, loose silk shirt with a wide turn-down collar, and a large flowing green tie [9]. At the turn of the century, British society was still guided by rigid conventions in which the wearing of striking and splashy colors was unheard of and disapproved of. The common choice of colors would be black or grey that were much more conservative and moderate. He used his outlandish clothing style to attract attention on public occasions and showcase his character and, hopefully, his aesthetic pursuit.

In addition to the careful choice of clothes, Oscar Wilde's aesthetic lifestyle was also defined by his zeal in the collection. Wilde began the hobby of collecting exotic antiques at an early age. His room at Oxford was filled with exquisite items, including celadon vases, Greek statues and rugs, and photographs of favorite paintings. He included lilies and sunflowers as decorative elements as if they were talismans [9]. He

claimed that this was essential in cultivating one's temperament. He wittily expressed his aesthetic pursuit in doing so in one of his epigrams: "I find it harder and harder every day to live up to my blue china" [9]. It reveals that decorative art to him was not some accessories that just decorate life, but one manifestation of the purpose of life.

Apart from these two concrete forms of expression, the paradoxical epigram is also a powerful tool of Wilde in rejecting bourgeois society. The most distinguishing feature of his works which reflected the hypocrisy and hollowness in the upper class of Victorian England is the use of clever and paradoxical phrases. He satirized the fact that the English upper class sanctimoniously decorated themselves with morality and elegant choice of words but was irresponsible and immoral inside. As Kohl accurately stated that, their style of epigrammatic compression gave striking form to their ostentatious dismissal of established current views of reality. By this means, they demonstrated their intellectual superiority, concealed their own opinions, and left themselves sufficient latitude to escape all commitment [12].

Oscar Wilde's interpretation of aestheticism can be reflected in his response to morality. When the press harshly criticized his works for being vicious, evil, and anti-moral, he defended himself by stating that no artist had moral sympathies because aesthetics were higher than ethics [17]. He pointed out that art and morality belonged to totally different spheres, and therefore art should never be judged by any moral standards. Further, he argued that all art was immoral. He was fascinated by good and evil alike, and his works were indeed built on the exploration of the evilness in characters and the ambivalence of morality.

Beauty and ugliness can be found both in good and evil; this notion underpins the direction in Wilde's numerous works and determines the complexity in the characters. The second part of the essay will delve into the three intricate characters in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and thereby reflect on the real stance of Wilde between the incompatibility of art and morality.

## **2. THREE MAIN CHARACTERS IN THE NOVEL AND THEIR ATTITUDES TOWARDS ART AND MORALITY**

The novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was first published in 1890 in Lippincott's Monthly Magazine but was then harshly criticized for being immoral. So, Wilde had it revised and published again later with a preface that explained his aesthetic credo, stating that "no artist has ethical sympathies."

In the novel, Wilde portrayed three distinctive but complicated characters who possess different attitudes towards morality. They also form a triple reflection of the complexity of Wilde's personality. Wilde himself also

said in a letter that the three main characters in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* were in different ways reflections of himself. “Basil Hallward is what I think I am; Lord Henry is what the world thinks me; Dorian is what I’d like to be — in other ages, perhaps” [5].

Upon further examination, it can be noted that the different choices of these three characters match, to some extent, the id, ego and Superego of Oscar Wilde as according to Sigmund Freud’s “structural theory.”

According to Freud psychoanalytic theory, the id is the primitive and instinctual part of the mind that contains sexual and aggressive drives and hidden memories; it operates on the pleasure principle (it seeks pleasure and avoids pain), which is the idea that every wishful impulse should be satisfied immediately, regardless of the consequences; the Superego operates as a moral conscience, and the ego, following the reality principle (considers social realities and norms, etiquette and rules) is the realistic part that mediates between the desires of the id and the Superego.

In this part, I will analyze the three main characters and try to demonstrate how Dorian symbolizes the id of Oscar Wilde, and Basil the Superego, Henry the ego, thereby revealing how each personality of Wilde responds to art and morality differently.

### 1) Dorian Gray as the Id

Dorian was born at first with a simple and beautiful nature; he was “a brainless beautiful creature,” as described by Lord Henry. He lost his parents at an early age and was brought up by his grandfather, who did not like him. He learned the rules of how to behave and caught the manners very early and proficiently in his life. Also, Wilde depicted him as with a perfectly charming appearance, “startled eyes and lips parted in frightened pleasure he had sat opposite to him at the club, the red candle shades staining to a richer rose the wakening wonder of his face.” (33). Basil, the painter, was immediately fascinated by Dorian when he saw Dorian for the first time as if Dorian would “absorb his whole nature, his whole soul, his very art itself.”(9). If it weren’t for Henry’s latter poisonous theories, it is fair to speculate that this perfectly created creature would have earned himself quite a reputation among the upper society.

However, the simple and impressionable soul was at once infatuated by Lord Henry’s tempting philosophy, whose mentorship made him believe that “nothing can cure the soul but the senses, just as nothing can cure the senses but the soul,” which latter guided Dorian to pursue after the extreme exhilaration of the senses. He lectured to Dorian that “We are punished for our refusals. Every impulse that we strive to strangle broods in mind and poisons us... Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden itself.” This is the fundamental credo that lay underneath Dorian’s

degenerated lifestyle: not to resist temptation but to embrace them with enthusiasm. It can appear as a new hedonism in its form. In fact, its kernel is the same as the id in Freud’s theory that desires after the fulfillment of instant gratification regardless of reality, and the denial of id will result in anxiety and tension.

Dorian was sitting to have himself portrayed by his friend Basil while conversing with Lord Henry. The latter lectured to him that the ultimate and sole purpose of life is uninhabited self-development and that youth and beauty are of the highest value. When he realized the magnificent charm of his youth and the fate that it is doomed to fade away, he felt unfortunate and painful in front of his finished portrait, “a sharp pang of pain struck through him like a knife and made each delicate fiber of his nature quiver.” (25) That was when he made a deal with the devil and sold out his soul with his eyes fixed upon the portrait.

How sad it is! I shall grow old, and horrible, and dreadful. But this picture will always remain young. It will never be older than this particular day of June... If it were only the other way! If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old! For that—for that—I would give everything! Yes, there is nothing in the whole world I would not give! I would give my soul for that! (25)

Dorian’s later untamed aesthetic lifestyle and thorough degeneration are based on his possession of eternal youth. And the eternal youth defies reality, just as the id gives no consideration to reality. Therefore, the purely aesthetic life of Dorian is a live experiment of the primitive desire of Wilde’s id, which longs for the sheer pleasure of the senses and seeks after beauty. Wilde gave Dorian the most beautiful appearance and eternal youth to discard reality, thus making his instinctive desire come true. Consequently, what Dorian then did in the novel, without doubt, is to “exercise” Wilde’s id, indulge in instant gratifications, and seek the ultimate enjoyment of the senses with an attitude indifferent to ramifications. His newly adopted tenet is “never to accept any theory or system that would involve the sacrifice of any mode of passionate experience. Its aim indeed was to be experience itself, and not the fruits of experience, sweet or bitter as they may be.”(111) And this is, of course, immoral. Thereby Dorian, the once wide-eyed young man, embarked on his path of degradation.

Dorian’s relationship with the actress Sibyl Vane distinctly illustrates this marked turn of his life. Dorian is captivated by Sibyl’s performance and thinks that he has been in love with her from first sight. He intends to pursue her before he ever really knows her because, to him, the most devoted, beautiful, passionate performance is what his affection calls for. “That beauty, mere beauty, could fill his eyes with tears.”(45). However, that beauty Sibyl’s acting carries, again, comes from the defy of reality, the ignorance of reality. Sibyl knows nothing of

life, and to her, the scenes in the plays are more real than life itself. Therefore, her “sacredness” is based on a mental distance from the secular world, or we could say that the utter naivety in real-life corresponds with vividness in virtual performance. This thus explains why Dorian is passionately in love with her. This love is overtly superficial, and is only oriented towards superficialities, as Dorian described himself in his infatuation with Sibyl: “I loved you because you were marvelous because you had genius and intellect because you realized the dreams of great poets and gave shape and substance to the shadows of art.”(45) Dorian is not at all attracted by her personality but only by the splendor of her art. This is one more experimental practice of Wilde’s purely aesthetic code, which is so very fragile that once it touches reality, it would soon shatter. When Sibyl loses her interest in performance after she finds herself in love with Dorian, her dimmed performance shocked Dorian, who then abandons her relentlessly because she no longer serves a purpose in his aesthetic pursuit. “Without your art, you are nothing”(75). The hurtful remark of Dorian revealed that things are entirely worthless once the aesthetic value is gone. And this is, of course, impossible and unacceptable under the criteria of morality. When facing Sibyl’s later suicide, caused by her utter despair after being deserted, Dorian showed little sadness and remained indifferent, and even savored the dramaticism of this experience, viewing it as a wonderful ending to a wonderful play. “It has all the terrible beauty of a Greek tragedy, a tragedy in which I took a great part, but by which I have not been wounded.”(86). Wilde’s id is not only reflected in that Dorian’s pursuit, which is incompatible with reality, but also in that Dorian’s unbridled aestheticism rejects morality, and it would escape the remorse and the sense of guilt which are supposed to be brought by the judge of conscience.

Dorian Gray, who follows an uncontrolled aestheticism and is in constant pursuit of sensuous pleasure, can be interpreted as a manifestation and an experiment of Wilde’s id, which completely defies and rejects morality. Just as Wilde said himself: “Dorian is what I’d like to be, an eternal youth, one who, at any price, connives to escape moral responsibility. He is the very image of the feckless Irish lad — ‘the great irresponsible,’ living only for the pleasure of the moment” [14]. However, as Dorian’s inglorious death at last suggests, the purely aesthetic lifestyle, if left rampant, will only make one “pay heavily for his feckless in the end.” [14]

## **2) Basil Hallward as the Superego**

In this “immoral” book, Basil, the painter, is the only voice of conscience and morality. He is talented, gentle, and kind-hearted, a sensitive artist with a conventional mind and moral awareness. He also longs for beauty in his works of art, yet he strictly obeys the social strictures.

He is the embodiment of Wilde’s Superego, which holds the moral standards and attempts to restrain the impulse of the id that only cares for pleasure. That’s why he is considered dull by Lord Henry, the irresponsible interpreter of the aesthetic lifestyle, “he puts everything that is charming into his work. The consequence is that he has nothing left for life but his prejudices, his principles, and his common sense.” (50) Henry’s remark implied that the charming things ought to be put into life itself rather than into his artworks which are substantially imitations of life. Also, a life without the application of “charm,” which defies and crushes the restrictions of morality, will therefore be inundated with tedious principles and becomes dull. This clearly showcased the collision between the Superego and the id, which I will reveal more later.

However, the innocent painter that is somehow considered tedious by the aesthetics is actually an acute artist in the first place, in terms of artistic perception. The moment Basil meets Dorian Gray, the young man that enjoys sublime youth and beauty, Basil is instantly, irreversibly drawn towards him, reckoning that Dorian’s personality has suggested him “an entirely new manner in art, an entirely new mode of style.” (12) Dorian’s presence altered his life completely, both in art and reality.

Dorian, from the moment I met you, your personality had the most extraordinary influence on me. I was dominated, soul, brain, and power, by you. You became to be the visible incarnation of that unseen ideal whose memory haunts us artists like an exquisite dream. I worship you. (97)

This abnormal, overly abundant affection towards Dorian makes Basil put too much of himself into the portrait he painted for Dorian, which he later refuses to exhibit. He fears that his affection towards Dorian, which he called “idolatry,” that he subconsciously and inevitably integrated into his work, may be found out by the world. This implied an underlying message that Basil’s already internalized moral standard is afraid of that emotion. It is seductive, holy, powerful, and affection that absorbs his soul, yet unspeakable, as it apparently transcends friendship. Whether this is one of Wilde’s implications of sexuality is a question yet to be discussed, but since it’s beyond our subject here, I won’t further elaborate on this matter. From here, we can see that Basil is also passionately drawn towards beautiful things; he can sensitively perceive the call of his soul like a talented artist, but when this desire clashes with social norms, he intrinsically chooses to hide it and tries to suppress it, rather than whole-heartedly respond to it like what aesthetics would do.

Every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion. It is not he who is revealed by the painter; it is rather the painter who, on the coloured

canvas, reveals himself. The reason I will not exhibit this picture is that I am afraid that I have shown in it the secret of my own soul. (8)

In Basil's world or Wilde's Superego, morality outstands beauty, or at least so judged by the result. Even if an artist should be the creator of beautiful things, he can only allow beauty to dominate his art but never life itself. If it does, somehow crossed the line against his own will, he would painfully resist it rather than embrace it. As Freud suggested, the Superego is the aspect of personality that holds moral standards and ideals that we acquire from society; it governs our sense of right and wrong. To Basil, answering his innate affection disregarding established morality is a resounding "wrong" under the worldly connotation. Therefore it wheeled his action, forebode him to satisfy his desire fully. Consequently, from time to time, Basil will also try to save Dorian from Henry's injurious influence, proposing objections to Henry's poisonous remarks. It is proved that his affection for Dorian and his concern for the salvation of Dorian's soul is with no doubt the most genuine, faithful, and fatal one. That's why we can understand the infinite sadness in his sincere but useless plead when he sees Dorian commit so many immoral deeds. "Yours seem to lose all sense of honor, of goodness, of purity. You have filled them with a madness for pleasure. They have gone down into the depths. You led them there. Yes: you led them there, and yet you can smile, as you are smiling now." (128)

Apart from Basil himself, his painting, the Picture of Dorian Gray, could also be considered a symbol of one's conscience. The portrait that "bears the burden of his shame" (90) that grows increasingly evil and soul instead of Dorian's own appearance embodies Dorian's conscience. But it is moved out from Dorian's heart, where it is supposed to be, and is veiled and placed deep inside the attic, revealing that when someone blocks out his own conscience, he will then irrevocably embark on a path of degeneration. In the last part of the novel, Dorian stabbed his portrait with a knife, hoping to end his degrading path once and for all, but only to find that the knife stabbed into his own heart. This unnatural scene again suggests the absurdity of completely turning against one's conscience: if one tries to kill it, it will only have himself killed.

### 3) Lord Henry Wotton as the Ego

"Lord Wotton is what the world thought of him: one of the new aristocracy, a dandy who lives by his wits, mocked as the 'prince paradox.'" [14] Like his creator Oscar Wilde, Henry is characterized by his paradoxical epigrams. They are both "the lord of language." Through remarks like "beauty is a form of genius — is higher than, indeed, genius, as it needs no explanation.... People sometimes say that beauty is superficial. That may be so, but at least it is not so superficial as thought is" (22), "it is personalities, not principles, that move the age" (49);

Wilde used the voice of Henry to regret the stifle of nature in Victorian England society and that the overemphasis of propriety and the supposed morality were corresponded by self-denial and the overlook of beauty. Lord Henry is apparently an attractive advocator of purely aesthetic lives, a smart seller of his theories, which are paradoxically characterized as "wrong, fascinating, poisonous, delightful" (67) by Dorian.

However, upon closer examination, we would note that the harsh cynic famous for his paradox still leads a "normal" life in his contemporary society. He does not practice his theory by indulging himself in sensual pleasures as Dorian does, nor does he restrain his behavior and feelings with a high sense of morality. He is posed as a dandy in the upper class that disdains aristocratic lifestyle and saturated hypocrisy. He calls for the passionate embrace of youth and a new hedonism, but there's no word depicting him implementing his doctrines. Just as his old friend Basil incisively describes him: "I believe that you are really a very good husband, but you are thoroughly ashamed of your own virtues. You are an extraordinary fellow. You never say a moral thing. You never do the wrong thing. Your cynicism is simply a pose." (8)

Henry is a sophisticated and complicated character; in fact, it is reasonable to say that Henry is the most genuine reflection of Oscar Wilde in Victorian society and the conflicts he was facing, the conflict between the extreme stance he took in art and morality and the fact that his contemporary society did not provide a mature condition for anyone, not even a cynical dandy, to practice that stance. The same is exhibited in the traits of Henry, who is, after all a theorist, and never an activist.

According to Freud, the ego is the personality that deals with reality. It develops from the id and ensures that the impulses of the id are expressed in a manner acceptable to the current society. It intermediates between the id and the Superego. Likewise, we could also deem Henry the intermedium between Dorian and Basil. He espouses the aesthetic lifestyle theoretically, yet his behavior is restricted by the morality of which he is scornful.

### 3. THE INCOMPATIBILITY BETWEEN AESTHETICISM AND MORALITY AND WILDE'S PROPOSAL

Another fascination about the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is that during the reading process, we are put in the same position, nudged through the same shift of personality as the protagonist. When Lord Henry infused his alluring philosophy into the once wide-eyed mind of Dorian Gray, we readers, under fragile mental guard, are similarly captivated. When I first read it, I was willingly led to retrospecting on my youth, examining it with the credo of aestheticism while condoling its

fleeting, seeking the pleasure of the senses from the most profound memory and lamenting its rarity. Not surprisingly, this reading experience made me interpret *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as a proclamation of a passionate espousal of aesthetic values and the disregard of worldly rules.

This interpretation also comes from the distinguished position of Oscar Wilde himself in the explosion of the aesthetic movement of Victorian England. During the era characterized by mechanized mass production and by a general pursuit of utilitarianism, when the social thinking was being assimilated by the mechanized, standardized, pragmatic values, Wilde voiced as a paradigm, for a completely different lifestyle that sought in life only the beauty, which seemed to have already been lost in that very age. He first argued for the autonomy of art, saving it from the indoctrination of utilitarianism that demanded it serves as an educational tool to mold the moral identity of society. The credo “art for art’s sake” clearly contended that art should be free from any secular responsibility. Further, Wilde extended his theory to, according to him, the ideal imitation of art, life. He espoused an aesthetic lifestyle that aimed to maximize the beauty and pleasure in one’s life through the practice of hedonism, or modern epicureanism, as some may put it. This attitude was distinctly posed to reject the hypocrisy of the English ruling class and to warn people against the intervention of machines that cloaked beauty. Wilde, speaking of his aestheticism, once said that the evil that machinery is doing is not merely in consequence of its work but in the fact that it makes men themselves machines also. Wilde labeled it evil that people were encouraged to exhibit the common idea of propriety rather than pursuing the maxim amount of beauty and happiness in their lives. To free oneself from this state would necessitate the adoption of a purely aesthetic lifestyle that mimics the form of art.

Therefore, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, whose publication coincided with the flourishing of the aesthetic movement, is overly read like an advertisement for this kind of aesthetic lifestyle in literary form. Also, in fin-de-siècle England, when social thinking was still conservative, and the act of decency was overly emphasized, it was a rather aggressive stance for its utter defiance of the commonly practiced propriety or morality. However reasonable and attractive it may be, this is too shallow an interpretation. A closer look into the novel would suggest a greater complexity in Wilde’s attitude. Dorian Gray’s rampant indulgence and his irretrievable fall at the end made us suspect the adaptability of this sort of unbridled aestheticism. Thus, a question is hereby left unanswered: what does Wilde propose through the incompatibility between art and morality represented in his novel? Is he suggesting a restrained aestheticism that must be practiced with caution, or is he showing the innate powerlessness in revolting against worldly indoctrination?

The answer varies in Oscar Wilde’s triple personality. As I have showcased in the previous part, the id of Wilde, as reflected by Dorian Gray, is unquestionably espousing an unrestrained aestheticism. “Dorian is what I’d like to be — in other ages, perhaps” [5]; the beauty in appearance Dorian possesses himself, and his overindulgence in sensuous pleasure is the innate desires of Wilde’s id, which functions according to the pleasure principle. However, Wilde himself, or more specifically, Wilde’s consciousness, was cautioning against, be it willingly or not, his own id — he gave Dorian corruption. What’s worth noting is that Dorian is awakened to his corruption at the very end, while he is also aware that he has gone too far from salvation. This cruel epiphany can be peeked from Dorian’s confession to Lord Henry: “The soul is a terrible reality. It can be bought, and sold, and bartered away. It can be poisoned or made perfect. There is a soul in each one of us. I know it” (211). What’s irresistibly dramatic is that the decay of Dorian’s soul is strikingly presented on a piece of canvas, harshly warning people of the ramifications of a rampant aesthetic lifestyle. Dorian’s ruination isn’t caused by the hindrance along his pursuit or other social reasons, but precisely by the defying of reality in every aspect. Dorian is destroyed by his self-absorption, a state of blindness into which he plunges himself. He is ultimately choked by this overwhelmed practice of hedonism. From here, we can conclude that although the id of Wilde represented an extreme espousal of the purely aesthetic lifestyle, Wilde himself was, through *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, alerting against the unrestrained practice of aestheticism. However, I wouldn’t say that Wilde argues for a controlled and restrained approach towards aestheticism, as there is no such thing as a bridled aestheticism because the restraint in approaching aestheticism would only come from moral disciplines, which reject outright reject the idea of aestheticism. Just as another Wilde’s epigram goes: “There are two ways of disliking art. One is to dislike it. The other is to like it rationally” [17]. The approach towards aestheticism could only be a dedicated, passionate one; it can not be tripped by the restrictions of morality. In my view, Wilde’s conservation lies more in the carefulness in guarding one’s soul. To seek and attain beauty in every aspect of life doesn’t mean the loss of temperance. One should always be careful not to become blind when savoring sensuous pleasures.

Basil, who functions as Wilde’s Superego, however, would take a firm stance on the side of morality when facing the dilemma. He holds that an artist should be the creator of beautiful things, yet he refuses to depart from the good and seek beauty in evil. The voice of conscience is frequently mentioned but not favored by Wilde in his novel. The omnipresent moral restrictions rendered basil a skilled painter but never a great artist. The fact that he doesn’t dare to exhibit his portrait of Dorian because he thinks he has infused too much of himself into it clearly

demonstrates Basil's predicament. He is skillful and sensitive in the field of art, yet never able to fully please himself in his works because of his unwillingness to sever the good from the beautiful.

Nevertheless, what's plausible about Basil is that both his pursuit in art and his caution in morality are genuine, rather than a pseudo posture as that of most bourgeoisies. The hypocrisy of the English ruling class is another subject that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* focuses on and stands against. As Dorian once put this contempt to Basil:

The middle class air their moral prejudices over their gross dinner tables and whisper about what they call the profligacies of their betters in order to try and pretend that they are in a smart society, and on intimate terms with the people they slander. In this country it is enough for a man to have distinction and brains for every scommon tongue to wag against him. And what sort of lives do these people, who pose as being moral, lead themselves? My dear fellow, you forget that we are in the native land of the hypocrite. (128)

The aesthetes' contempt for bourgeoisies and their double standards may naturally lead us to the most complicated character among the three, Lord Henry, Wilde's ego, who has found a safe sanctuary between the incompatibility of art and morality. Lord Henry fully shows his detest of his contemporaries, i.e., British aristocrats. He demolishes most of the worldly values of his age and tries his very best to distinguish himself from his class. However, to the outside world, he has always been and only been an aristocrat with smart talks, instead of a firm aesthete that embraces a completely different lifestyle. His rebellion only stays in the field of his paradox but never in action. He doesn't dare to touch upon sensuous indulgence like Dorian, and he never cares to explain himself. These all come from a fear that his privileged life would be under threat which is rooted in the harsh facts of reality. He bears an intrinsic anxiety that the practice of his theory would bring about ruination to his comfortable status quo. Therefore, he never dares to challenge morality or hold a revolution against the lifestyle he despises, but only to seek temporary releases in discourse and to depart his philosophy to young, beautiful youth like Dorian, hoping them to carry out his own dangerous desire. Henry is an unpleasant balance between aestheticism and reality. In the incompatibility between art and morality, he is an escapist, a theorist.

Lord Henry is also the character that resembles Wilde's own image in reality. "Henry is what the world thinks of me" [5]; through Henry, we can observe an innate powerlessness of Wilde in revolting the long-pervaded indoctrination. As a member of the British aristocrat, it is almost impossible to subvert a lifestyle influenced by mechanized production and utilitarianism and to uncover the veil of hypocrisy without backfiring his own life. Further, as the experiment of Dorian Gray

brutally shows, the approach towards pure aestheticism that demands no regard for morality is precarious and impractical, even for the most privileged ruling class.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The fin-de-siècle England was characterized by an overflowing materialism and hypocrisy which the aesthetic movement later revolted against by extolling the idea that the goal of life should be to maximize pleasure and beauty, thereby imitating its superior form, art. However, the destined corollary of this aggressive but tempting, also somehow impractical theory, is that it is bound to clash with contemporary morality. Facing the dilemma, Wilde, as the leading figure of the movement, however, did not voice his espousal unequivocally as what appeared to be at first glance. Rather, as can be closely examined in the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, his attitude towards pure aestheticism is threefold, each regulated by one part of his complex personality. Dorian is the id who passionately embraces an aesthetic lifestyle but is at last devoured by his self-absorption. Therefore, Wilde's id longed for the pursuit of maximum beauty but also cautioned against the blindness in its course. Basil, as the superego, embodies the voice of conscience, who wants to create beautiful things as an artist but refuses to defy mortality. Hence, he dares not to face the raw desire of his heart and is in a forever predicament. Henry, as the ego, tries to find a balance between an aesthetic lifestyle and the maintenance of morality. However, his rebellion lies only in paradoxical phrases but never in action, which rendered him an escapist. Wilde's ego reflected a sense of impotence in totally subverting his contemporary indoctrination that rotated about worldly interests and decency. Also, it proved the inborn impracticality of a purely aesthetic lifestyle in that age, even for an affluent aristocrat. Therefore, Wilde left three live and incisive experimental cases in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* for us to find our positions in the incompatibility between art and morality.

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