Dorian gray and critical theory

Wilde’s The Picture of Dorian Gray is without a doubt a reflection of its author and its time. As an academic, social, and political figurehead of late 19th century London, Wilde was highly engaged in the ongoing public dialogue surrounding the stream of new social developments and philosophical creeds that flowed from London out to the whole rest of the Western world. As a center of developing thought, London’s Victorian society was under constant attack by new ideas generated by people like Wilde, resulting in a society rich with radical philosophies yet incredibly restrictive and resistant to change. The best way to avoid incurring societal damage from this deluge of thought was to avoid thinking about it at all, something the Victorians became highly adept at. Once filtered through their societal screens, radical philosophies became much more civilized. By alternatively establishing and destroying assumptions and ideologies throughout the text, Wilde creates a void in which he forces the reader to think about the validity of Aesthetic, Victorian, and contemporary ideologies rather than accepting a conclusion presented by Wilde or by the reader’s societal assumptions.

The Picture is, in particular, highly reflective of the philosophy of Aestheticism which became popular at the time greatly thanks to Wilde’s work and influence. This philosophy gained steam in England because of the academic celebrities’ rejection of the ugliness and robotic inhumanity of the industrial revolution. Aestheticism espouses the idea that “ All art is quite useless” (Wilde preface), but that its beauty serves as something of a counterbalance for the hideous functionalism of the day. Wilde establishes the tenants of his personal brand of Aestheticism in his epigram-filled preface, saying that “ No artist desires to prove anything… No artist has

ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style" (Wilde preface). Art, Wilde asserts, has no inherent meaning, and should not aim to be anything beyond beautiful. He calls art " useless," but believes that its creation is excusable as long as one " admires it immensely" (Wilde preface). If a beholder perceives some meaning in art, it is a reflection of himself rather than the work, Wilde reasons.

This philosophy is examined throughout the book, largely and most directly through the character of Basil. At the beginning of the novel, he explains to Lord Henry that " An artist should create beautiful things, but should put nothing of his own life into them. We live in an age when men treat art as if it were meant to be a form of autobiography. We have lost the abstract sense of beauty" (Wilde ch. 1). Basil believes that he has revealed too much of himself in Dorian's portrait, and that it is therefore inappropriate for others to view because they may perceive some moral or meaning within it, ruining its artistic value. Later in the novel, however, despite still feeling " that I had put too much of myself into it," Basil reverses his stance on art's biographical nature and decides that " it is a mistake to think that the passion one feels in creation is ever really shown in the work one creates. Art is always more abstract than we fancy… It often seems to me that art conceals the artist far more completely than it ever reveals him" (Wilde ch. 9). This change in thinking is one of the devices Wilde uses to force the reader to examine the implications of Aestheticism. He suggests that art's meaning or beauty is a one-lane channel between the viewer and the work. Instead of being a social phenomena used to influence society or create movements, art is- or should be- solely an individual experience. To Dorian, the portrait said nothing about

Basil and everything about himself. The yellow book given to him by Lord Henry was the same- Wilde does not blame Henry, the author, or the book itself for ‘ corrupting’ Dorian, he points to Dorian’s personal interpretation and application of the work as the reason for its perceived wickedness. “ There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book,” Wilde asserts, “ Books are well written, or badly written. That is all” (Wilde preface). This statement addresses the yellow book as well as the critics of Wilde’s original edition of The Picture- is it the book that is immoral, or is it your inappropriate analysis of the book beyond what the author was intending which creates immorality, reflecting on you as a person rather than the writer?

As we proceed through the narrative, however, the questions Wilde poses have increasingly unclear and delineated answers. Since a majority of readers do not come from the same aesthetic critical background as Wilde, we are constantly analyzing the book through two lenses that give contradictory answers: one being Wilde’s art-is-meaningless philosophy, and one being the modern formalist perspective which our society’s current systems of thought often default to. Wilde claims that, to be properly received, we must only read his book for the enjoyment or beauty we find in the tale, ignoring any implication of sub-surface meaning. However, our traditional training is flashing red lights at the plethora of symbols, themes, and literary devices which suggest that the work is more than appropriate for much, much further dissection. We are therefore left suspended between diverging tracks- what, if anything, is Wilde trying to say with this narrative? The only appropriate conclusion when analyzed from an aesthetic point of

view is that the book is simply an informative brochure for the Aesthetic movement. Yet we know that Wilde was deeply involved in the politics of his time and that he made strong public commentaries about social issues (such as blind rationalism, the abandonment of romanticism, and the plummeting value of human life) which our formalist perspective tells us this book contains. It's here that it is helpful to analyze Wilde's text through a deconstructionist lense to see if we can find significance in this contradiction.

The work's existence is itself a complete contradiction. Despite Wilde's insistence that art should not be analyzed or moralized, the very act of reading involves constant analysis of incoming information. Even Wilde later said in a letter to a newspaper that " Dorian Gray is a story with a moral. And the moral is this: All excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its own punishment" (Wilde, letter). That much would be clear through our lense of formalism; Dorian's ruin is his excess and his renunciation of limits, while Henry's excess is of the lips and Basil's of the eye- all three men overstep what is acceptable to their Victorian society and in doing so contribute to the downfall of themselves and their friend. In Wilde's hands, however, that criticism could easily point to the excesses of English social constraint and the renunciation of so many human desires that characterized Victorian society. The same statement can be turned two ways, creating different meanings for different readers.

A few more of the book's key contradictions are Dorian's lack of thought set against Lord Henry's over-thought, and Dorian's complete embrace of raw experiences versus Henry's lack thereof. Despite encouraging Dorian to pursue every avenue for pleasure imaginable, Henry's life stays well within

the confine of social acceptability even if his words do not. While Wilde repeatedly claims that “ art has no influence upon action,” (Wilde ch. 19) we see Dorian’s every move directly linked to the effects of his portrait or the yellow book. A last very important opposition is Dorian’s angelic physical appearance and the ugly, sinful nature revealed by his portrait. Throughout the work, we see the the dominant ideological set of Victorian cultural assumption annulled by the very things it so condemns. The beautiful young Dorian is easily manipulated and can barely think for himself, while Lord Henry’s vile, scandalous nature is accompanied by cunning intellect and social skill. To suggest that such noble virtues could be the downfall of these characters is to contradict these prevailing cultural ideals and truly deconstruct the assumptions of Victorian society, giving greater validity to things that would have been looked down upon at the time- namely Aestheticism.

Towards the end of the book, Lord Henry tells Dorian that he is “ really beginning to moralize. You will soon be going about like the converted, and the revivalist, warning people against all the sins of which you have grown tired. You are much too delightful to do that” (Wilde ch. 19). The virtue of morality here, something celebrated by Victorians, is implied by Lord Henry to be something unfortunate, a disease to avoid, suggesting that those moral champions who warn people against sin are in fact trapped in a restricted, ‘ undelightful’ existence. The pleasure Dorian experiences in life results in his downfall, while the traditionalism of other characters is clearly theirs, living lives in boxes with no room for new experience. By rejecting the dominant moral code of the day, and filling that void with a new creed which he then

seemingly disproves, Wilde creates a void such that a determinate meaning is impossible to reach. Thus, by the end of the text, we are left with a gaping hole from which little definite meaning can be pulled. Wilde's tracks are all destroyed, with no good suggestion as to what Wilde believes or what we should believe. The pillars of beauty, morality, and reason have all been toppled, art is claimed to be meaningless but shown to mean all, Victorian sensibilities and Wilde's own philosophy have been dismantled, and the very fact that the book exists seems to contradict itself. The text is extremely unstable, alternatively making assertions and disproving them by example, or the other way around, such that we lose track of what is valid and trust nothing. By the end of the book, a deconstructionist would say that there is no solid ground left.

It is in this vacuum that I believe Wilde is imploring us to think- the one thing left standing in his story. Dorian, Henry, and Basil all to fail to think of consequences, lacking thought of restraint, implication, or the world outside the self. The rest of the Victorian puppet characters are the most blind of all, lacking thought of nearly anything. Society shepherds them along so gently that they have to do no thinking themselves, merely repeat what they see done: " the terror of society, which is the basis of morals, the terror of God, which is the secret of religion– these are the two things that govern [the masses]" explains Lord Henry (Wilde ch. 2). With its thorough condemnation of blind society ands its blurring of the line between salvation and damnation, The Picture discards popular morality based on others and God as its first example of thoughtlessness.

Next, Wilde disavows the radicals like Dorian, someone who Lord Henry says “ never thinks… He is some brainless beautiful creature” (Wilde ch. 1), a prime vessel for the Lord’s manipulation. He is too easily influenced, and “ There is no such thing as a good influence,” as one man influenced by another “ does not think his natural thoughts” (Wilde ch. 2). Dorian’s inability to think is highlighted early on in the text: “ I don’t know what to say. There is some answer to you, but I cannot find it. Don’t speak. Let me think. Or, rather, let me try not to think” (Wilde ch. 2). Who is caught in this net of individuals surrendering independant thought to the influence of others, lacking ‘ natural’ thought? People who have discarded traditional values for equally restrictive philosophies and creeds without realizing their entrapment; Dorian, Henry, and even Wilde among them. For much of the book, it seems that Wilde has been foolish to resign himself to a philosophy such as aestheticism which appears to hugely limit what he is able to accomplish. Much the same, while Dorian believes he has freed himself by adopting his new Hedonism, he loses himself in the process, going from a state of restricted identity in Victorian society to a complete lack of identity by blindly following the influence of Henry and the yellow book. The disciples of radical new schools of thought can be just as thoughtless as the societies they believe they have escaped, Wilde illustrates.

By examining The Picture from a biographical perspective, we are able to discern the Aesthetic basis of much of Wilde’s thought, and the contradictions which arise from that philosophy. Through our biographical lense, it would initially appear that the book has no valid meaning or really anything to say at all. However, by examining through a deconstructive

lense the contradictions between Wilde’s Aestheticism and the traditional critical analysis we are trained in, I believe that we are able to see how the huge amount of contradiction and gaps in the text’s ideological composition force the reader to examine their own philosophy and the presented ideas for themselves, as Wilde wanted. Both lenses demonstrate that life requires thought, that you cannot relinquish your mind to the influence of others, and that you must live an examined life, not blindly following contemporary societal thought or any limiting, dogmatic philosophy. It is through this negation by contradiction that Wilde is able to achieve by the end of the book an Aesthetic tale that in some ways really is meaningless and impervious to traditional analysis such that “ Those who read the symbol do so at their peril” (Wilde preface).

“ Yes, there is a terrible moral in “ Dorian Gray”—a moral which the prurient will not be able to find in it, but it will be revealed to all whose minds are healthy. Is this an artistic error? I fear it is. It is the only error in the book.” Wilde, letter to Editor of St. James’s Gazette