

# The picture of dorian gray: aestheticism and morality

[Experience](#), [Human Nature](#)



The Picture of Dorian Gray demonstrates a divide between aestheticism and morality that Oscar Wilde depicts by giving each character a very specific persona that either challenges or indulges in the immoral vices of life. This is all while Dorian remains paralyzed between two very different ideologies. The Freudian concept that within us all is a split between the ID, The Super Ego and the Ego; an inner battle between three distinct mindsets, becomes increasingly obvious as the novel progresses and highlights this war within the mind. Dorian is unable to find an equilibrium between these three subconsciouses; he feels as though he needs to conform and become a hedonistic aesthete like Lord Henry, or lead a life that coincides with the moral idealism Basil represents. If given the opportunity to analyze The Picture Of Dorian Gray, Sigmund Freud would most likely interpret it as an illustration of how his mechanism of understanding human behavior plays out in literature. Charles Darwin would most likely say that Dorian fails to maintain this crucial yin yang balance between aestheticism and morality and inevitably gives into his primitive animalistic instincts. These biologically programmed urges that Dorian acts upon in result can best be described in the perspective of Darwin, English naturalist and geologist, best known for his ground breaking work in evolutionary theory (Desmond). It's conceivable to assume that art critic, Walter Pater, had a profound impact on Wilde during their collegiate years that could have quite possibly influenced his quote in *De Profundis*, where he declares that Pater's work was "that book which has had such a strange influence over my life." (Michael, 1)

(Schroeder, 1) By analyzing the ideologies of these brilliant intellectuals to not only highlight, but to demonstrate the commonalities between Darwin's

evolutionary theory, Freud's perspective on subconscious human behavior, and Pater's idiosyncrasy of viewing art subjectively — all which play a crucial role in understanding Oscar Wilde's *Picture Of Dorian Gray*.

Charles Darwin set off on an endeavor which led to a discovery that changed the way we understood the origin of humanity. For once in history there was a logical explanation for our existence on earth and its unparalleled diversity that before could only be explained by means of religion or the environment. This notion and theory that the origin of species could be explained by science was considered immoral and non-contemporary. If Darwin hadn't begun intricate investigations in 1838 which led to the publication of *The Origin of Species*, we wouldn't be able to fully comprehend the inner workings of Dorian Gray's mind; Darwin's theories demonstrate how from a preprogrammed biological instinctual level, the hedonistic malevolent tendencies he displays are innate and unavoidable. (Darwin Manuscripts, 1) The character Dorian Gray is an example how these tendencies can consume an individual rendering them helpless and unable to fight primal urges.

Prior to the inception of Charles Darwin's *Origin Of Species*, even the world's brightest scientists attributed variations in species to strictly environmental factors; such as how readily available their food supply was, or the climate in which the species in question was raised. Darwin rejects this notion dismantling this narrow minded philosophy supposedly backed by science and demonstrates that there's much more to this idea of evolution, namely these instincts that are preprogrammed within us all to seek out a mate with

the most favorable traits in order to have best chance at having offspring that does well in life. In a process Darwin coins conscious selection, a breeder selects the animal with the most desirable traits like eccentric physical beauty and qualities that would assist in the overall perpetual survival of that species. All species, even human beings, are subject to this subconscious process called unconscious selection. In other words, we will instinctually act hedonistically, desire materialistic pleasantries, and embody vanity as our central focus when it comes down who we choose to procreate with; in Dorian's defense, it's in our nature to act on this principle of aestheticism and place decadence at the utmost value. (Darwin, 1-13)

Darwin demonstrates that even without the influence of breeders, it's shown that animals will instinctually fight to find the mate with the most appealing outward appearance and traits essential to the survival of it's species. (Darwin, 4-13)

After taking Darwin's philosophy into consideration, a different perspective of the inner workings behind the mind of Dorian Grey is consequently formed. The fact that he chooses to live immorally and place beauty in such high esteem could be considered a direct result of these inner biological urges he's unable to control. As a society in the 21st century, we see examples of this hedonistic shallow behavior everywhere we look as it's become inner woven within humanities' social, and biological fabric. For instance take the modeling industry into consideration; society tends to value outward appearance as one of the most important aspects of life. Girl's grow up seeing tabloids with scantily dressed quintessential centerfold models with

bodies and faces that are typically out of reach and unobtainable to the vast majority of the population. This results in this desire to be beautiful because being physically attractive tends to get people what they want in life and biologically speaking, gives them the best opportunity of getting the most desirable mate. From Dorian's perspective, his appearance is the one thing he can't imagine living without; this inevitably leads to his demise in a way. The thing is, animals always act in this manner, they mindlessly act on these impulses because it's in their nature; humans on the other hand have the intellectual capability that enables them to consider factors aside from just appearance and qualities that would result in the most promising offspring. We take many other characteristics into consideration because we're human, not animals. Dorian's inability to act in this manner is mainly due to Lord Henry's influences and his own mindlessness; this paints him as someone who is acting solely on his animalistic primal instincts. Darwin might consider people that act like Lord Henry and Dorian Gray to be more primitive and less evolved than the majority of the human race that has the ability to think subjectively about another human being as a whole, not just their physical appearance. By thoroughly examining *The Origin Of Species* by Darwin, we're enlightened by scientific facts that can explain why Dorian acts in the manner he does from a biological evolutionary standpoint. To extent, his behavior is a result of these innate biological tendencies we share with every other species on earth. (Wilde)

Sigmund Freud, a world renowned neurologist, devised a system that allows us to illustrate human tendencies by separating what we conceive to be the

human consciousness into 3 separate drives. Essentially the result of this was three personality types; namely the id, the ego and the superego." The id is the agency of bodily desires, the ego the mediating function, and the super-ego has the care of moral prohibitions." (Rieff, 173) The ego is often considered the executive branch of our personalities because unlike the ID and the Super Ego, it uses reasoning to weigh it's options and come to an appropriate conclusion of what to do in the particular situation by envisioning the moral implications of ' it's' actions, but also what feels good and is best for them. The ID prefers to live hedonistically, it's based solely on the pleasure principle and prefers to act on impulse without reason regardless of whom they hurt in the process; if they happen to do the morally acceptable thing it was most likely by accident. The superego is another extreme and essentially the antithesis of the ID due to the fact it's usually derived by common conservative religion based on beliefs we acquire during our upbringing as children. For instance, it weighs the religious implications, what's morally right, as well as what's socially acceptable. (McLeod, 1)

With Freud's ideology in mind we begin notice correlations between the characters in A Picture of Dorian Gray and these 3 diverse discernible personality types. Essentially the novel illustrates exactly what Freud has been saying all along in an easy to understand manner because each character represents a specific segment of the subconscious. By understanding this correlation we come to terms with a better overall understanding of the novel in it's entirety and specifically Dorian himself. Lord Henry is undoubtedly Wilde's attempt to create a literal representation

of this ID personality type which he demonstrates through this quote “ If one man were to live out his life fully and completely, were to give form to every feeling, expression to every thought, reality to every dream - I believe that the world would gain such a fresh impulse of joy that we would forget all the maladies of medievalism, and return to the Hellenic ideal” (Wilde, 19) Lord Henry is constantly working to corrupt Dorian and coax him into living a life of hedonistic decadence that he prefers to lead. He believes that in life it's always best to do what's self-beneficial, not always what's right. Lord Henry changes and shapes Dorian's ideology to the point where he no longer believes morality even plays a role in life until it's too late. By promoting this idea of always living in a selfish hedonistic manner that disregards morality, he's essentially overcome by the ID portion of his personality and exemplifies Freud's theory. Furthermore you have Basil and his infatuation with Dorian Gray, he represents the super ego because he genuinely wants Dorian to remain this clean pure uncorrupted entity. To basil, Dorian is essentially a work of art literally and metaphorically, he believes that it's his duty to maintain Dorian's innocence that Lord Henry is constantly trying to rid him of. (McLeod, 1)

How Dorian comes into play is by essentially being Freud's concept of what the ego represents. Dorian is perpetually faced with moral dilemmas and he's forced to weigh the benefits and implications of living one way or another. Much like how Freud depicts the Ego as this force that lies between the Super Ego and the ID, Dorian is constantly being pulled in two opposite paths. One direction being Lord Henry and his hedonistic ideology that relies

mainly on this ' ID-like' principle. Another is Basil attempting to help him live a morally conscious lifestyle that coincides with the Super Ego. Much like a devil on his shoulder, eventually Lord Henry's influence on Dorian comes to a head when he finds Sibyl entirely undesirable after her performance on stage wasn't up to his standards. He became infatuated with the art she created and did truly love her for her; when he finds out she committed suicide, he moves on like business is usual in a cold callous manner giving into carnal pleasures and living hedonistically. By understanding this basic Freudian theory, we see the novel in an entirely different light since it tends to highlight all these themes that before were apparent but weren't as comprehensible without a concrete understanding on how these subconscious forces come into play to influence human behavior. We can now see that essentially Dorian Gray is a literal representation of Freud's Ego concept.

So far we've come much closer to gaining a well-rounded perspective of the inner workings of Dorian Gray's psyche by evaluating his primitive instincts with the help of Charles Darwin's theories of natural selection in *The Origin of Species*. We can conclude that more often than not Dorian acted upon his animalistic carnal desires and placed an extremely high value on outward appearance. Furthermore, Freud's theories of these three concepts: ID, Super Ego, and Ego tended to run parallel with how Lord Henry, Basil, and Dorian himself truly are on a subconscious level. Next we'll delve into Walter Pater's ideology and the run ins he had with Oscar Wilde himself. By



understanding how Pater fundamentally understood art and its beauty, we come closer to understanding *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as a whole.

The year 1877 could have very well been a turning in point in Oscar Wilde's development as a writer; while attending Magdalen College, he met Walter Pater. Pater's work was rumored to be sought after by Oscar Wilde himself, they'd meet for tea, exchange ideas, and give each others pointers each others work. While there's no essentially no objective truth in how we define beauty, critics of the era would attempt to comprehend the abstractness of beauty and explain it in the most generic terms possible without the addition of personal preference or feelings. Beauty and how we interpret it tends to be subjective; in other words, how your interpret art and the feeling it invokes is dependent on who you are and where your values lie. Walter Pater for instance placed aestheticism at high esteem however he had this knack and ability that enabled him to not discriminate between what is considered beauty and what isn't. (*The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, 1)

The reason why understanding Pater's philosophy is so crucial to understanding *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is that fact that Wilde didn't actually intend for it to be viewed as a novel that concentrated solely on decadence or what happens when this concept is abused. In the preface of the novel Wilde even says, "There's no such thing as a moral or immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all." This idea Wilde demonstrates runs parallel with the ideology of Pater. As a whole it suggests that it's simply the reader himself that has the ability to think subjectively that considers the novel to either be entirely immoral or not — it's open to

interpretation, and that's truly what Wilde intended all along. (The Picture of Dorian Gray: Art, Ethics and the Artist, 1)

By examining Pater's philosophy and comparing it to what we know about Oscar Wilde; you begin to see this connection that inevitably leads to this notion that Pater was an essential element in Wilde's life that influenced the development of The Picture of Dorian Gray during the Aesthetic movement. While it's said they wouldn't particularly consider each other friends, this exchange of dialogue in an interview further backs up this claim that Pater had an influence on Oscar Wilde:

“ Pater disliked Wilde personally while admiring his cleverness’; in turn Wilde said, “ Dear Pater was always frightened of my propaganda” (Ellmann, 81).

This statement that indicates Pater disliked Oscar Wilde as a person, but admired his cleverness in the form of art, this enables us to draw another connection between Pater's philosophy and Dorian Gray in the novel. Namely where Dorian becomes infatuated by Sybil's art form on stage but at the end on the day, his reaction to her death proves that he never truly cared for her as a person, just her ability to create beauty through this visual aesthetic art form. Since it seems that Pater's ideology not only influenced the way Oscar Wilde perceived this distinction between art and morality but also made it's way into the mind of Dorian Grey, we begin to acquire a much more clear and concise understanding of The Picture of Dorian Grey in it's entirety. (The Picture of Dorian Gray: Art, Ethics and the Artist, 1)

Furthermore, it's reasonable to make the assumption that Pater's ideology made its way into the Lord Henry's outlook on the world. Pater says that:

" It doesn't matter what is said as long as it is said beautifully"

One again you can see this correlation between stereotypical Pater-like ideals and Lord Henry as a character. Since Lord Henry as a character tends to embody this belief system valuing the beauty of everything around him — specifically however, it's the most important aspect of his life. Much like how Pater demonstrates that he it isn't important what's on the inside, maybe it's just our outward appearance. A paradox emerges here, although Pater's ideology commonly sees beauty as being subjective based on interpretation, he still seems rather vain and considers beauty to be the most important aspect of any form of art without considering other factors; this is inherently why I believe that understanding Pater's ideology assists in the overall understanding of The Picture of Dorian Gray. His influence throughout the novel is irrefutable as seen through not only the way Wilde wrote, but how Dorian and Lord Henry developed as characters. (Levey, 1)

By examining the ideologies of scientifically minded naturalist Charles Darwin, the world renowned psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, as well as the aesthete Walter Pater, we gain an entirely new perspective and understanding of The Picture Of Dorian Gray. Suddenly the true intentions of the characters and the persona that they represent becomes rather clear and concise; whether it's the way Charles Darwin's discovery lead to this concept of natural selection that states that we instinctually value beauty

which the novel embodies, Freud's ability to divide the consciousness into 3 distinct parts that tend to coincide with the three distinct personas in the novel, or Pater's effect on Wilde which arguably lead to the creation of not only Wilde's ideology, but also the characters in his novel — all of which lead to a better understanding of the Picture Of Dorian Gray and the message Oscar Wilde intended to share with the world.