

Morality and immorality (the picture of dorian gray and a streetcar named desire)...

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



The measure of a man's character is what he would do if he knew he never would be found out.

Thomas Babington

Morality is the very foundation of goodness and the pillar of righteousness. Immorality, however, is the threshold towards conspicuous malevolence. These two extremes are often but a step between which we are baffled and bemused. Morals undeniably establish the confinements of one's behaviour in any given society. Should these principles crumble, ethical boundaries would give way to anarchical freedom. Both works explored in this analysis illustrate the succumbing to immoral conduct for selfish purposes. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, by Oscar Wilde, we are intrigued by a charming Englishman who discards his innocence and embraces loathsome hedonism. Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* confronts us with a stout and virile figure who abides to no opposing authority than his own. Two unscrupulous characters surface from different worlds with the equivalent dismissal of moral values common to humankind. Although one is characterised by beauty and the other, by potency, they share the same vivid animation of unrestrained cruelty. It is in their ominous acts that their factual embodiment is exposed. Wilde and Williams reveal, through these depraved beings, the basis of humanity's intrinsic flaw: the loss of inhibitions. I will further discuss, by means of relevant characters, the yearning for moral ideals as well as the clinging onto immoral philosophies.

Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is set during the late nineteenth century England, a period marked with the exceeding importance of social

stature and personal image. The protagonist, Dorian Gray, rises as the archetype of male pulchritude and youth. His aristocracy and stunning beauty enthral his surroundings. He often poses for Basil Hallward, an artist of great talent whose art is inspired by Dorian's charisma. While Basil's most prodigious painting is in the midst of being completed, Dorian is introduced to Lord Henry Wotton, a cynical philosopher and skilful orator. Dorian is easily seduced by his manipulative tongue and his scornful theories. Wotton envisions fashioning, corrupting the vulnerable boy into an unrelenting hedonist. Through him, Dorian faces the harsh realisation that his physical attributes are ever fading. Upon this sudden insight, he dreads the physical burden of ageing. He envies the perpetual attractiveness of Basil's masterpiece. ...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! (Wilde p. 31). The materialisation of this wish and the metamorphosis it will ensue are to bring his demise.

Dorian's figure remains immaculate while the picture bears his abhorrent transformation. This is first confirmed following his amorous liaison with Sibyl Vane, an actress he meets at an infamous theatre. Like him, she is characterised by an entrancing beauty and a youthful naivety. Mesmerised by one another, they promptly exchange vows of fidelity. Dorian invites Henry and Basil to the theatre, if only to be dreadfully embarrassed by Sibyl's artificial performance. In a fit of anger yet unknown to him, Dorian reluctantly reprimands his fiancée. You are shallow and stupid. My God! How

mad I was to love you! What a fool I have been! You are nothing to me now (Wilde p. 98). This vindictive refusal leads to her suicide. Upon returning to his dwelling, he is bewildered by a hideous discovery: his portrait had slightly altered, hinting the sinful transfiguration that would occur throughout his debauched existence.

Dorian conveys strong feelings of contrition upon learning of Sibyl's needless death. He is conscious of his wrongdoing and feels profoundly culpable.

However, Lord Henry encourages him to discard the incident and to revel in his present freedom. Dorian is torn apart as his egoism weighs heavily over his conscience. By overlooking the death he caused and indulging in pleasure, Dorian incarnates Lord Henry's philosophy. With the knowledge of his physical imperviousness to the aftermath of any consequence, he adopts hedonistic values. The complete denial of responsibility in Sibyl's death is but the beginning of his moral degradation. He relishes in observing the mutilation of the picture, thus his soul. His further meetings with Henry simply magnify this descent into profligacy. ...You were the most unspoiled creature in the whole world. Now, I don't know what has come over you. You talk as if you had no heart, no pity in you. It is all Harry's influence. I see that (Wilde p. 120) From then on, Dorian progressively mingles with sin; provoking scandals, visiting opium dens and frequenting prostitutes.

Dorian often gazes at the painting with horror, but is unable to divert from this lifestyle, aroused by its wickedness. He is undoubtedly aware of his ethical dissipation and, despite the beautiful items in which he surrounds himself, is appalled by the ugliness of his soul. He knew that he had

tarnished himself, filled his mind with corruption, and given horror to his fancy; that he had been an evil influence to others, and had experienced a terrible joy in being so (Wilde p. 241) Dorian's fear of his predicament being discovered grows as the tableau alters with every misdeed. Although it is hidden from prying eyes, the bareness of his soul is ever-present in his mind. His hot-tempered murder of Basil not only signifies the peak of his immoral demeanour, but his obliteration of moral barriers. His iniquitous act throws him in a state of guilt-ridden paranoia. He is world-weary and borne down by the weight of this infamy.

Wilde's protagonist was not a villainous nor unprincipled man, simply pliable and somewhat narcissist. Under Lord Henry's overwhelming influence and the portrait's enticing protection, he succumbs to a world free of restrictions, tempted by self-gratification. When breaking apart from the moral confines that establish order, Dorian is thrust into a chaotic freedom. Without the ubiquitous prison that symbolises morality, anarchy and evilness reign, destroying the goodness in one's nature. When he strikes the diabolical picture, beleaguered by remorse and maddened by regret, he wishes to purge his soul and reacquire the proper values that once governed his life. Therefore, by destroying the wantonness that marred his spirit and the guilt that plagued his conscience, he kills himself.

Lord Henry is an extremely patronizing and cynical character. His actions are not as overtly sinful as Dorian's, since he is not shielded from their repercussions. Although preaching hedonism, he never acts on his philosophies, remaining within the boundaries of what society deems

tolerable. He thus has little knowledge of the pragmatic effects induced by his philosophy. He is portrayed as a coward, utilising Dorian to make flesh of his theories, but not venturing on them himself for fear of ruining his social figure. He is a brilliant intellect, although he has a narrow understanding of human behaviour. For instance, when he asserts: All crime is vulgar, just as all vulgarity is crime. It is not in you, Dorian to commit a murder... (Wilde p. 234), he is entirely oblivious to Dorian's tragedy.

While most of humanity is constrained to moral hindrances, there are those who drift away from these ideals, and become the source of misdemeanours. Although morality and ethics are restraining concepts, they shelter the individual and thus, mankind. Without them, there could only be degradation and self-destruction, as illustrated by Oscar Wilde in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. As Mahatma Gandhi once said: The human voice can never reach the distance that is covered by the still small voice of conscience. One may enjoy life and have no fear from death if he obeys his scruples.

Tennessee Williams *A Streetcar Named Desire* formulates a medium to reflect upon the morbid aspects of humanity and the result of these societal downfalls. Stanley Kowalski emerges from an impoverished rural setting in New Orleans as the epitome of flagrant barbarity. His speech is coarsely uneducated and his actions display instinctive crudeness. He adheres to mankind's most primitive rule and basic code: to hunt or be hunted. His household symbolizes his territory and anyone who menaces this tenure should be eliminated. The metaphorical episode in which he casually tosses

to Stella, his wife, a bundle of bloody meat emphasises his ape-like qualities. He has little notion of courteousness, which understandably repulse his pampered sister-in-law, Blanche.

The image of a delicate flower amongst a mound of litter is comparable to Blanche Dubois arrival at the Kowalski household. Her expression is of shocked disbelief. Her appearance is incongruous to this setting (Williams p. 15). She appears inherently refined and somewhat ostentatious, having seemingly never witnessed indignity. However, her false decorum is a rather deliberate effort to save herself from misery. Blanche exists in a self-fabricated universe in which she blinds herself from reality's bleakness. Her haughty manners contrast with Stanley's uncouth behaviour and clash from their first encounter.

Stanley imposes his animalistic vigour upon Blanche since he feels threatened by her presence. He despises her aristocratic ways, her diminutive expressions concerning his origin and her dallying about with his friend Mitch. His hatred of Blanche is intensified by her unflattering dialogue with Stella. He acts like an animal, has an animal's habits! Eats like one, moves like one, talks like one! There's even something - sub-human - something not quite to the stage of humanity yet! (Williams p. 72). This culmination of anger is manifested in his enquiry of her promiscuous past and in his spiteful birthday gift. He relentlessly thwarts her relationship with Mitch, sabotaging her illusions of rescue. In his vile quest to bring Blanche's ruin, he brutally exposes her to the harshness of her position.

Stanley's final effort in tarnishing Blanche's image is animated by chauvinism. Although his past attempts were strictly psychological blows, he now wishes to exert physical power upon her. In Blanche's state of vulnerability, he rapes her, devastating the remainder of her sanity. His degenerate character, first insinuated after hitting his pregnant wife, is given full evidence following this acrimonious sin. The concluding scene consists of Blanche being ostracised to an asylum and the depiction of Stanley as the dedicated husband, soothing his wife as she embraces their newborn child. The fallaciousness of this image, given what we have learned throughout the play, paradoxically brings into perspective society's erroneous conception of right and wrong.

The settings of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and of *A Streetcar Named Desire* differ immensely. Dorian is immersed in a tumultuous social environment, caught in the intricate web of social demeanour. Stanley, on the other hand, resides in a modest yet impecunious milieu. In Wilde's work, the innocent is poisoned, succumbing to immoral growth and subsiding into internal deterioration. In Williams play, remorseless animosity is the dominating asset, as modern man's conduct is banished. Although these events take place at nearly a century's interval, one remaining constant is observed : the consequences on the self and on others resulting from the dismissal of morals.

Dorian and Stanley are above all human, and as every human, are subjected to the similar dilemma: to remain within the borders of moral beliefs, or to venture across into immoral conditions. The laws of ethics impose

restrictions and greatly limit humankind's actions, but allow the world's proper functioning. Both characters break free from this psychological incarceration and therefore, represent the dark side of human nature.

It is critical that we, as a community, comprehend the necessity to abide by the restraining order of morals. Only then will violence and havoc cease to exist. Is it not in our power to differentiate the good from the bad? This question lies not underneath a compulsory set of rules, but rather within the depths of our conscience. Wilde and Williams have magnified, through their enlightening characters, the step between morality and immorality. In the end, it is in our hands to decide on which to stand.