

Shakespeare

Literature



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“ The telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art” (Oscar Wilde). Oscar Wilde is as famous for his wit and legendary quotes as he is for his texts. In his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde explores the practical reality of a hedonistic, pleasure-seeking lifestyle without boundaries. During the 1890s, Oscar Wilde was one of the leaders of the so called aesthetic movement in England. In his novel he puts this theory into practice. His attempt makes up an interesting study of aestheticism and decadence, the Late Victorian Era, and of Oscar Wilde himself.

In this essay, however, this novel and its protagonist will be analysed from a psychoanalytic perspective with emphasis on Freud’s theories of the psyche. Freud’s psychoanalytic theories deal with the three-part psyche (Barry 97). He claims that the human mind contains the ego, the super-ego and the id; three parts that struggle to catch our attention. Lacan, similarly, acknowledges a struggle in the mind between seeking pleasure and doing good (Lacan 23). The character of Dorian Gray may be used as a prime example to explain the Freudian concepts of the ego, the super-ego and the id (Barry 97).

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, we can follow the degradation of what at first appears to be a healthy psyche. During the course of the novel, the reader follows Dorian as the three parts of his mind melt into one. Basil Hallward’s painting does, quite literally, take the shape of, and show the face of, Dorian Gray’s id, while Dorian’s physical face only shows traces of what appears to be a perfect, ideal super-ego. Oscar Wilde’s novel makes a very interesting foundation for psychoanalytic literary criticism with its worship of aestheticism and hedonism and the effect it has on a man.

I have chosen to apply the concepts of ‘evil’ and ‘good’ on Dorian Gray in accordance with the commonly accepted distinctions given in for example the Bible. 2 Thereby, I will show in what ways Dorian Gray’s psyche is disturbed. Thus, I will in this essay analyse what I call ‘the evil’ in Oscar Wilde’s character Dorian Gray. I will investigate in what ways the psyche of Dorian Gray is disturbed and how it came to be that way. To do this, I will use Freud’s concepts of the ego, the super-ego and the id, which I will apply to the character to find out how the evil is manifested in him.

To achieve this, I will first present a short introduction of the author, aestheticism and the time and society the novel is written in. Secondly, I will make a short summary of the part of psychoanalysis I will apply here, namely the three levels of the psyche as presented by Freud. I will also draw parallels to Lacan’s similar theories on pleasure-seeking. Finally, I will conduct a close reading of Oscar Wilde’s novel in order to apply these theories to the character Dorian Gray. Previous Research

The Picture of Dorian Gray was first published in 1890 in Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine, and through it Oscar Wilde set the norm for the new aestheticism of the 1890s (Ellman 305). Dorian Gray became an example of the pleasure-seeking hedonist – an art Wilde had already preached for fourteen years in articles such as “The True Function and Value of Criticism: With Some Remarks on the Importance of Doing Nothing: A Dialogue” and “The Decay of Lying” (Ellman 306). However, with The Picture of Dorian Gray, Wilde pointed out the tragedy of aestheticism.

Oscar Wilde’s hedonistic character fails, and thereby shows the reader that it is impossible to lead a similar life. Taking Wilde’s famous preface to the <https://assignbuster.com/shakespeare-essay-samples-2/>

novel into consideration, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* turns out to be a very contradictory text. In the preface Wilde celebrates aestheticism with lines such as: “Vice and virtue are to the artist materials for an art” and “there is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all” (Wilde 5). The novel itself, however, appears to be a criticism of aestheticism and hedonism in practice – it is impossible to avoid seeing a moral message in it.

Dorian Gray’s fate can be seen as either making him into a martyr for aestheticism or turning him into a victim of the same (Sanders 484). The inspiration to write *The Picture of Dorian Gray* allegedly came from several different sources, including Stevenson’s *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and Goethe’s *Faust* (Ellman 311). Wilde said about the story that he “first conceived the idea of a young man selling his soul in exchange for eternal youth – an idea that is old in the history of literature, but which I have given new form” (Ellman 311).

When studying the Victorian Era, and the literature of the time, the name of Oscar Wilde occurs repeatedly. There is plenty of information to find about this man that confirms his fame in the Late Victorian society. He was very influential in the intellectual circle of the time – both as a private person and as an author. His texts, theories and wit have outlasted the erosion of time and it survives into our days. In my reading and interpretation of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*¹, Richard Ellman’s biography on Oscar Wilde has been a great inspiration.

The biography reveals a lot, both about the author and about the writing of the novel. Regarding the time the novel was written in, I have found useful <https://assignbuster.com/shakespeare-essay-samples-2/>

information in The Short Oxford History of English Literature as well as in various internet sources such as The Victorian Web and Wikipedia. Concerning my theoretical approach, I have used Beginning Theory – an Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory by Peter Barry. For additional information I have read relevant parts of Psykoanalysens Etik by Jacques Lacan and In this essay I have used the Penguin Popular Classics' edition from 1994.

It will henceforth be referred to only by page-number. 1 4 Psykoanalysens Teknik by Sigmund Freud. Internet has proved a useful source on this subject as well through pages such as Wikipedia and kristisiegel. com. The Victorian Era and Aestheticism The Victorian Era is named after the rule of Queen Victoria, which started in 1837 and ended in 1901. This was the height of the industrial revolution in Great Britain and the British Empire was at its greatest. The time experienced a lot of changes, in science, politics, economics and culture alike. The Victorian Era was also a time of great paradoxes. Despite great changes and developments in the areas mentioned above, the era was also a time of traditionalism and repression. Still today, the term “Victorian” is associated with characteristics such as prudishness, repression and of being old-fashioned. During the High Victorian Era values such as earnestness and seriousness were highly praised, but by the end of the 19th century, however, such moral terms felt oppressing and were being mocked by Oscar Wilde and the likes of him (Sanders 465).

Aestheticism arose as a reaction against this High Victorian ethics with its prudence and feelings of duty. It started around 1868 and is generally thought to have ended with the trial of Oscar Wilde in 1895. Aestheticism is “

an (anti-Romantic) belief in original sin and in fallen man and nature; omnipresence of evil and the grotesque; lack of health, balance, and innocence”.

About the Author

Oscar Wilde is often thought of as a writer typical of the period subsequent to the Victorian Era: the Edwardian period. However, he was born in Dublin, Ireland, in 1854 and therefore belongs to the Victorian time. He is famous for his short stories, plays, poems, his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and, of course, his wit. Wilde spent his adult life away from his native country – he stayed mostly in London where he was a celebrity of the time. In the 1870s Wilde studied at Magdalen College, Oxford, where he distinguished himself as an excellent writer.

After graduating he spent several years travelling before settling down in London. In Oxford, Wilde was a student of Walter Pater, and it was here he founded the aesthetic movement. Oscar wore his hair long, dressed in colourful clothes and peacock-feathers. ⁶ All with the intention to shock and provoke. He praised “art for art’s sake” and stated that “all art is quite useless” (Wilde 6). Aestheticism can be seen in many of Wilde’s plays and stories – Lord Henry in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is indeed a follower.