

# The unconscious image of the conscious mind



The Unconscious Image of the Conscious Mind“ Psychology helps us to talk about what the novelist knows” (Fish and Perkins), as through the meticulous analysis of a literary work, its major themes or symbolism, one can theoretically reach at the personality and mind-frame of the author. It is via the use of literary psychoanalysis that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* can be read as the unconscious image of Oscar Wilde, whose major characters reflect, in fact, the internal conflicts of his own, struggling mind. The main trio that emerges from this arrangement: Lord Henry Wotton, Dorian Gray, and Basil Hallward, represents the human mind described by the Austrian psychologist, Sigmund Freud: made up of the id, ego, and superego. Freud believed that no man is ever in his full mental capacity, or health, for that matter; likewise, the artist, “ like the neurotic, is oppressed by unusually powerful instinctual needs which lead him to turn away from reality to fantasy” (Eagleton 179). Only in the safety of such an illusion, can the irrational, unconscious id surface in a character like Lord Henry, the symbol of those dark and mischievous forces, or men, who find ill pleasures in tormenting the weak and deceiving the inexperienced. Watching his test subject gradually drift towards emotional annihilation, he plays the role of the writer’s personal Eden snake, and represents all the repressed temptations that seduce the fragile ego, a. k. a. Dorian. “ You will always be fond of me,” he tells the confused lad, explaining, “ I represent to you all the sins you have never had the courage to commit” (Wilde 71). His mentality, life ideology and principles (or the lack of them) ultimately stem from the deepest, wildest source of psychosexual desires and intuitive energy, widely known to psychologists as the libido, and defined by Lord Henry himself as the “ New Hedonism.” This philosophy is that of the unrestrained, of what <https://assignbuster.com/the-unconscious-image-of-the-conscious-mind/>

has long been rejected as barbaric, disdainful, and most of all, immoral - since it stands in opposition to the basic concepts of civilization, primarily social unity and the repression of wild impulses for the sake of reason. The id not only defies morality in the cultural-intellectual sense; as Dorian Gray submits to Lord Henry's corrupting influence, he irreversibly loses his own humanity, because as much as one's actions are always motivated at the core by "the avoidance of pain and the gaining of pleasure" (Eagleton 191), once pleasure becomes the sole purpose for earthly existence, common sense is replaced by a mental condition called a psychosis. It is thus reasonable to say, as has been assumed by Freudians, that the artist is just as fixated as their patients, with the sole difference being that the painter or composer can channel his untold phobias or cravings onto the canvas, or music notes, lessening the tension between the conscious and the inherent. Still, the psyche is in ceaseless conflict between its major forces: the id, ego, and superego. In this concealed battle, the ego is continually torn between the secret yearnings of the id, and the guilt that results from harboring socially inappropriate thoughts, such as the indulgent notion that "pleasure is the only thing worth having a theory about" (Wilde 69). Dorian Gray is the personification of this "pitiable, precarious entity," which is forever "battered by the external world, scourged by the cruel upbraidings of the superego, plagued by the greedy, insatiable demands of the id" (Eagleton 161). Thus, "Prince Charming" finds himself caught up between the self-proclaimed hedonism of Lord Henry, and the regulatory teachings of Basil Hallward - his long-time friend, admirer, and, eventually, victim. The emotional transformation of the ego from an unspoiled lad of exceptional beauty - whose oblivion to the flaws and passions of the world make him the

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perfect target for Lord Henry's fiendish experiments – into a heartless murderer, is one of the most comprehensive and believable psychological studies in literature. For the ego is the most changeable of the three aforementioned fractions: it undergoes various stages, organized by Freud into the so-called psychosexual stages of development. This theory states that all social and sexual problems emerging in adult life ultimately stem from a fixation which occurred during one of the five focal stages. Dorian's promiscuous and apathetic behavior is most probably rooted in the phallic stage: the time of "morality and sexuality identification" (Fleming and Neill). It is due to the theatrical death of Sibyl Vane and the influence of Lord Henry that Dorian demotes himself to become but a spectator to his own life, perceiving people as oblivious marionettes, whom he learns to play like "an exquisite violin" (Wilde 34). Following in the tracks of his decadent guru, the lad loses all respect for human dignity and morality, to eventually grow sick of his notorious misdemeanor. Yet, it is not the conscious burden of sin that makes him despise his luxurious practice; the reason behind Dorian's breakdown is the realization that he can never rid himself of the most awful memories, let alone the tedious fear of being exposed. His paranoia stems from the lack of balance between the id, ego, and superego; and as Lord Henry completely takes over his mind and soul, it is Basil Hallward who desperately tries to balance the equation. After all, the role of the superego is to control the egotism and mischief of his shameless counterparts, censoring the commonly unacceptable or just overly narcissistic urges of the mind. Although Freud's famous slogan, "where id was, there shall ego be" (Eagleton 160), stresses the importance of the ego resisting the immoral impulses, the process is supervised, and in large part stimulated, by the

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superego - or, in our case, the principled Basil. Its most powerful weapons being fear and guilt, it acts as the ultimate defender of morality and social norms; it is because of the eventual revolt of the superego, disgusted at Dorian's corruption, that the murderer cannot help noticing what he believes are scornful looks on the street or hushed snickers behind his back. Finding it impossible to launch a full scale offensive on the id, the superego resorts to the next best thing: relentless guerrilla warfare. For only through the persistent reminders of sin (Basil's continuous preaching) can the unconscious guardian of ethics make sure that "in her dealings with man, Destiny never closed her accounts" (Wilde 164). What pushes the persona of Basil Hallward even further into the realm of the superego, is his profession: being a gifted painter, he depicts the artistic notions that are said to be closely "intertwined with the repression and pain" (Spurgin). Self-expression is the only way for a painter, poet, or musician to deal with the unconscious feelings of guilt, fear, and suffering. As the censor of everything ever thought or felt by the id and ego, the superego must find some sort of a tolerable site for the unacceptable to be let out, freeing the mind of what it cannot contain within. Nevertheless, art provides a catharsis not only for the creator, but also for the spectator: that is why Dorian's existence consists solely of nights at the opera, rich buffets, and elite discourses about everything but life itself. "Without your art you are nothing" (Wilde 77), he tells Sibyl Vane, leaving the desolate actress at the mercy of her broken heart, just as he comes to disregard Basil for his moral preaching and reminiscence of the world's sins. For as much as the superego invokes inspiration to relieve the internal pressure, its ultimate strife is gaining enough strength to face the horridly un-artistic reality without fright or uncertainty. In summary, through the <https://assignbuster.com/the-unconscious-image-of-the-conscious-mind/>

grafting of techniques of literary psychoanalysis onto the text, the work of Oscar Wilde acquires an intriguing, though often unnoticed, layer. Here, each character plays a dual role of both a fictitious individual – like Lord Henry, Dorian, or Basil – and an unaware representative of the author's own personality. Picturing the eternal clash between the self-gratifying id, indecisive ego, and righteous superego, the novel acts somewhat therapeutically on the writer, as it provides him a secure dimension to deal with his most ineffable passions and deepest anxieties. Similarly, literature proves purifying to the plagued reader, setting in motion “ an interplay of unconscious fantasies and conscious defenses against them” (Eagleton 182), and justifying man's fascination with the written language. After all, one does not really care about the universal truths, or moral messages conveyed in poems or paintings; the truth is that man's fascination with art is merely the ego's desperate cry for individuality and self-knowledge. Works

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