

What is in a name?:
close reading of
dorian gray and his
fellow characters



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French author Marcel Proust once stated “ Words do not change their meanings so drastically in the course of centuries as, in our minds, names do in the course of a year or two.” What this quote means is that while names merely are words, they hold a whole different meaning. Names, just like a person’s face, can hold their entire identity in just a few letters. They evoke feelings of rage, happiness, love, hatred. Simply put, there is a lot of meaning behind one’s name. Because of this, it is not a surprise that many authors put so much thought into the names of their characters—it gives the first impression of the character. The same can be said for Oscar Wilde, author of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In the novel, Dorian Gray makes a deal to remain young and beautiful forever. Instead of his body becoming old, a painting of him becomes more and more grotesque as the young man’s soul becomes corrupted. The novel portrays exactly how much the man’s vanity begins to deform him and the risks that he is willing to take as everything but his appearance begins to change around him. Throughout the piece, Gray makes a number of acquaintances: friends, enemies, and even lovers. For many of these characters, their name is also used as a source of characterization, holding a hidden meaning behind them that directly correlates to their personality or mentality. The characters Dorian Gray and Lord Henry, as well as the Vane family, can be analyzed further by their names.

Dorian Gray is probably the most key character in the novel, thus his name holds a lot of significance. The given name Dorian can be linked to ancient Greek culture. The culture from which the name is derived connects Dorian to Lord Henry. Lord Henry holds high esteem for Greek society, claiming that

“ the world would gain such a fresh impulse of joy” by returning to the Hellenic ideal (23). The Greeks were known for their appreciation of the human form and their focus on aestheticism, thus their olympian-like statues and art. Just like the statue of David or any other sculpture, Gray is described as being a “ young Adonis, who looks as if he was made out of ivory and rose-leaves”-something that the Greeks surely would have appreciated (7). As far as the surname of Gray goes, it can be used to characterize Dorian’s mentality and the progression of his personality as he becomes more and more corrupted by Lord Henry and the influences of the world. Simply put, Dorian occupies a “ moral gray area” in many aspects. He does not view his actions as particularly right or wrong, no matter how negative they may seem to others. For example, when Gray attacks Hallward and “[digs] the knife into the great vein that is behind the ear... stabbing again and again” he does not see it as demented. but a necessary task (174). The young man does not fully grasp the seriousness of his actions. Had he not murdered Basil in cold blood, as he believes, he surely would have been betrayed and berated by the painter. This justifies his actions in his mind, even when “ a distinctly narcissistic attitude emerges, and the incompatibility of morality and unconditional aestheticism becomes all the more apparent” (Duggan). Also, many of the things that Gray does are done with good intentions, yet end up resulting in a negative outcome. In an attempt to change his demented ways, Dorian leaves a young woman that he claims to have been in love with, reasoning that he wants to “ leave her as flower-like as [he] had found her” (231). However, are Gray’s righteous attempts really that righteous? Lord Henry sagaciously suggests that the “ first good action [Dorian has] done for years, the first little bit of self-sacrifice [he has] ever

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known, is really a sort of sin” (232). No matter how justified Dorian claims his actions are, they still result in Hetty being conclusively heartbroken. Because of these dead-set ideals, Gray is in a moral middle ground.

Just like Dorian, Lord Henry Wotton’s name also has quite a bit of meaning behind it. Henry is an English name with Germanic roots, translating to “home ruler”. Just like the translation implies, Lord Henry could definitely be characterized as a ruler. Not only is he a literal nobleman, but it can also be argued that his demanding presence also begins to command Gray’s mind as well, due to the fact that “there [is] something terribly enthralling in the exercise of influence” (42). As if caught under a spell, Gray becomes completely entranced by Lord Henry’s unique and unusual ideas. It is because of Lord Henry that Gray begins to follow the long, twisting trail of corruption: Lord Henry puts vain ideas in Gray’s head; Lord Henry introduces Gray to the slums of the city; Lord Henry tries to push Gray to his limits. This mental decay creates inner turmoil within Dorian. It is Lord Henry’s overpowering influence that sparks the dark fire of ideas of vanity and aestheticism within the youth. Wilde describes “He would seek to dominate him—had already, indeed, half done so. He would make that wonderful spirit his own” (43). If Gray’s mind is the home, then Wotton’s influence is the ruler, building and sculpting it as he sees fit.

Unlike Lord Henry, Sibyl Vane is the image of naiveté and simplicity, just as her name suggests. The forename Sibyl has Greek origins, meaning “prophetess”. Just like a prophetess, Sibyl’s character goes on to predict a number of things in the novel. One way in which Sibyl’s character forecasts the future is the way in which women react to Dorian’s presence. Sibyl
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becomes obsessed with everything about Gray, despite not even knowing his real man or, regretfully, his real personality. She claims that “ he is like what Love himself should be” (69). Like a plague, everything about Dorian begins to consume her, both in body and spirit. Sibyl’s obsession with the man even goes so far on as to ruin her acting career—one of the only things that really captivated Dorian in the first place. Vane goes on to profess that Gray “ is more to [her] than all art can ever be” as she blindly throws herself at his feet, only to be utterly destroyed when Gray rejects her (97). However, Sibyl is not the only character that becomes entirely dominated by Gray; she serves as the first piece, the model in what would turn out to be a long line of captivated—and distraught—women, such as Hetty. Similarly, another way in which Sibyl serves as a prophetess is that the relationship between her and Dorian serves as the beginning of a pattern in the way that Dorian’s relationships will turn out. With the relationships, the two characters start off as lovestruck, completely absorbed in one another. It is not a true bond, however, as “ Dorian is not attracted to Sibyl’s character or personality, but rather her acting talent and enthralling performances” (Duggan). When Dorian is first with Vane, he goes on to tell Lord Henry “ I love her, and I must make her love me” (62). This “ honeymoon” period only lasts for a short period, however, as Gray quickly loses interest in Sibyl the minute the minute her magic wears off, tossing her aside like a piece of trash. Following this rejection, Vane quickly takes it to heart by ending her own life. There is a pattern with Gray’s relationship: devotion, disinterest, denial. This was the case with Sibyl Vane and Hetty and many more temporary lovers. Because of these repeating parts, it is no wonder that Dorian’s first lover in the novel is named the prophetess.

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While Sibyl's forename applies primarily to herself, her surname Vane—or vain—appears to apply to her family as a whole. This is especially the case with her mother. Mrs. Vane is a self-loving, egocentric character chiefly concerned with her own well being rather than that of her children. Despite the fact that she is “ a faded, tired woman... and looks as if she [has] seen her better days” (61). Mrs. Vane still shows an excessively high opinion of her abilities. Indebted to a local theatre owner, she has relegated both herself and her younger daughter over to the company. An indication of Mrs. Vane's vanity can be witnessed when she is refusing to turn Sibyl over to Dorian, despite her protests of how ecstatic he makes her, until she learns that “ the young man might be rich” and that only then “ marriage should be thought of” (69). It is a wonder that the older woman does not seem to pass these traits of sheer melodramaticism and vanity onto her two children.

Names serve as more than just ways to identify a character; they can create a history, a personality, and even a future—all wrapped up into a string of vowels and consonants. Just like appearance and dialogue, a name can serve as an important characterization tool when creating individuals. Many names in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* do just that: they add a certain level of depth beyond the typical aspects. The roots and meanings behind designations are always fascinating things to look into, as is the case with Dorian Gray. The forename Dorian is of Greek origin and serves to link him with the acclaimed, aesthetically-drawn culture. The surname of Gray is used to represent the moral gray area that he occupies, never quite grasping the severity of his actions. With Lord Henry Wotton, the name Henry translates to “ home ruler”, something that applies both to his position as a nobleman as well as

how he dominates the space that is Dorian's mind with his singular ways of thinking. The Vane family creates a wide array of characterization within the novel. With Sibyl Vane, her name translates out to be prophetess, or one who can predict the future. Not only does she serve as the model of how women react around Dorian, but Sibyl also serves as the model of how relationships with Gray will run their course. Sybil's mother, Mrs. Vane, is characterized by her last name quite literally, indicating her vanity and self-regard when it comes to both the theatre and her two children. Combined with many other elements, the careful thought process of choosing names can aid the reader in analysing characters, a tactic that was employed in the novel. It is obvious that Wilde understands the importance behind such an overlooked idea as each character's personality and background is carefully sculpted like a piece of clay. It is just as American author Logan Pearsall Smith once wrote: " Our names are labels, plainly printed on the bottled essence of our past behavior".