

Lord Henry's experiment: a life without restraint



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In the novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde, an experienced and insightful man shares a compelling life philosophy with a younger, less refined man. This transmission of ideas opens the interpretation of how art and society influence identity in ways that don't at first seem innate. While the artist, Basil, transforms Dorian Gray into a work of art, his acquaintance, Lord Henry, speaks to Dorian of the wonders and the tragedies of the human condition. Though Dorian is the subject of Basil's art, Henry recognizes him as pure, and takes the chance to make Dorian a subject of his own. Basil's purpose is to create a masterpiece that captures an abstract sense of beauty, but do Henry's assertions have an end in mind as well? He tells Dorian of the deep misery that men feel from having denied themselves joy in life, that the chance to act upon innate urges only exists in youth, and that Dorian will be separated from his charm sooner than he realizes. Hearing of youth's brevity bewilders Dorian and instills in him an urgency to work against his inevitable demise. In his diminished state, Dorian is impressionable, and it so happens that his impromptu teacher, Lord Henry, is well prepared to discuss the methods of leading a fruitful existence.

Henry proclaims that "the aim of life is self-development", which calls for one to "give form to every feeling, expression to every thought, [and] reality to every dream" (Wilde 74). He informs Dorian that this ideal is rarely achieved, however, because "the two things that govern [man]", the terrors of society and God, prevent individuals from ever actualizing their true nature (74). Here, it appears Henry is conveying that "the two things that govern man" are derived from fear and self-denial, meaning this form of "govern[ing]" preys on weakness and to obey it is a mistake. Because of this

insight, “ the sense of [Dorian's] beauty [comes] on him like a revelation”, and “ life suddenly becomes fiery colored to him” (81, 75). Henry harnesses Dorian's deep seeded fear of losing his youth, and appeals to his dismay with a solution, a manner of living that makes the most of man's brief boyish charm. Rather than being skeptical, Dorian is captivated by the prospect of his beauty granting him favor in life. Whether this impact on Dorian's ideology was intended or not is unclear, but a deeper reading into this section offers interpretations of Lord Henry's influence that illuminate his aims.

On the surface, this section seems to be not much more than a knowledgeable, affluent man sharing his life's philosophy with a younger, less refined subject. When looked at as a defining moment in Dorian's life trajectory however, it is possible to read this scene as the beginning of Lord Henry's experiment with Dorian. Henry tells him of the things that “ govern” man, and presumes that these forces are otherwise unwanted and serve as little more than inhibitors of pleasure. The Oxford English Dictionary has two definitions of “ govern” that seem to suit Lord Henry's use of it in his lecture to Dorian, and they are as follows: “ 2. a: to direct and control the actions and affairs of people; to rule by exercise of authority” and “ 5. a: to act as the dominant or principle influence on a person; to direct or guide behavior” (OED). These definitions agree with those that I have in mind for this word and fit Henry's message, so when it appeared in the novel it didn't seem out of place or deserving of further attention. As the novel progresses and Dorian's unrestrained behavior becomes a detriment to his soul's health, I became more suspicious of Henry and his initial motives. With this new

direction, I decided to look back to Henry's lecture and the OED to see if any alternative definitions could shed light on the purpose of Henry's words.

What I found was a second definition that complicated my understanding of what it means to be "govern[ed]". Another meaning of "govern" is "1. a: to oversee or have responsibility for (esp. a child); to keep safe, protect" (OED).

While Henry asserts that governance is synonymous with oppression, and Dorian eagerly welcomes this as irrefutable fact, this secondary definition demonstrates that an opposing view is available. Instead of "the terror of society...and the terror of God" keeping man scared and meek, they are the forces that shelter man from the dangers of a life without limitation, and perhaps even direct him into more altruistically fulfilling endeavors (74).

Mankind's struggle with morality is as old as time, yet this struggle is made manageable by our desire to respect and serve the order of society at large. Being the well-educated man he is, Henry arguably knows the beneficial aspects of "the things that govern man", yet he chooses to present this phenomenon to Dorian only as something he should counteract at all costs. Such a clear bias in Henry's allegedly factual lesson perpetuates the notion that he had ulterior motives when addressing Dorian.

Following this line of inquiry, I chose to look for other instances that capture Lord Henry's awareness of his practices in manipulation. Once Dorian is reintroduced into the world, inspired to experience all of its pleasures, Henry is keen to observe how his antics will change. Henry feels that he has granted Dorian a rare opportunity by informing him of youth's value, since "ordinary people [must] wait till life has disclosed to them its secrets", but, for Dorian, "the mysteries of life [are] revealed before the veil [is] drawn away"

(101). Revealing the mysteries of life, Henry says, is “ sometimes...the effect of art”, so by prematurely revealing the secrets of life to Dorian, Lord Henry assumes the role of a piece of “ art” in Dorian’s life (101). By appealing to Dorian’s sense of passion and intellect, Henry persuades Dorian of a life outlook that he treasures as if it had always existed within him, much as a piece of art might do to a receptive viewer. Art is an integral part of this novel, as Dorian is bonded with the qualities of a work of art, Basil possesses great artistic ability, and Lord Henry is a consumer of life’s splendor, so any time a character defines or references art, it offers insight into how they view it and its effects. Once again turning to the Oxford English Dictionary, I find meanings of the word “ art” that make Henry’s usage of it stand out. The main definition, “ 1. skill in doing something, esp. as the result of knowledge or practice” applies to Basil’s painting aptitude, and is familiar to how I understand art in my life (OED). Another definition in the OED is one I am not accustomed to, though it certainly enhanced my understanding of how Henry perceives art and what he believes its purpose is. This alternative meaning of art is: “ 11. a: Cunning, trickery; action which seeks to attain its ends by artificial, indirect, or covert means” (OED). Upon seeing this, I am further convinced of Henry’s deliberate tampering with Dorian’s mind. Henry cherishes the profound effect that he has on Dorian as if it were an art, it is an ability he has to appeal to others and implant principles of his own choosing into their identity.

Though Dorian believes that his mentor Lord Henry provides insight that allows him to access all of life’s pleasure, a close reading suggests that Henry’s efforts are part of a private experiment all along. Henry implants a

crucial assumption into the young man's mind almost immediately after meeting him, leading Dorian to regard anything that threatens to "govern" him as extensively controlling and deplorable. With help from the Oxford English Dictionary however, we find that a more commonly intended meaning of "govern" possesses positive connotations of protection and safety. Should Henry have familiarized Dorian with the latter definition instead, perhaps the lad would have obeyed the forces that indirectly govern man, and spared his soul. Similar to a singular artwork's effect over its beholder, Lord Henry augments Dorian's principles in a subtle way that makes Dorian believe Henry is only helping him to uncover beliefs he had all along. With the OED to provide insight, when Lord Henry compares his influence over Dorian to the influence that art has over man, art can be understood as a manipulating process that achieves its aims under concealed methods. He prematurely familiarizes Dorian with life's great tragedy so that he might be the first to offer the troubled youth a remedy, covertly serving Henry's ultimate desire to observe the results of a human living life unbound by the standards of man. Lord Henry shows that Basil is not the only talented artist in the novel, as the influential way he has over others is truly an art of its own.