

Murder and mental  
breakdown in "the  
tell-tale heart" and the  
picture of dorian gr...



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Dr. James Knoll, a forensic psychiatrist, says, " The paranoia exists on a spectrum of severity. ... Many perpetrators are in the middle, gray zone where psychiatrists will disagree about the relative contributions of moral failure versus mental affliction." Dr. Knoll mentions that, in murderers, the line that defines their motives tends to be rather grey. Both Dorian Gray of the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and the narrator in " *The Tell-Tale Heart*" harbor serious psychological, eventually leading them to murder; the motives behind their actions have similar roots: insanity. Dorian Gray and the *Tell-Tale Heart* narrator both have paranoia and progressively become mentally worse over time, showing the grey area of moral versus mental issues.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* paints a very vivid succession of events that shows a young man's complete transformation from innocence to corruption. Dorian Gray's journey towards depravity is clearly outlined in the novel: starting with his initial contact with the real world and ending with him having murdered a friend and then killing himself (Wilde 21, 229). Dorian is not born with a damaged soul, in fact, he creates it himself, " 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 28)" He is haunted by this realization but is not actually affected by it until he jilts Sibyl Vane and gains a hideous wrinkle on his portrait (Wilde 96). After this, his descent from purity to tainted to utter corruption gains momentum. In fact, at one point he " grew more and more enamored of his own beauty, more and more interested in the corruption of his own soul" (Wilde 191). This culminates

with Dorian stabbing himself at the end of the novel (Wilde 229). For his part, the narrator in "The Tell-Tale Heart" does not start off wholly deranged in the beginning of his story; the old man's cataracted eye freaked him out (Poe 64). However, the way he went about trying to rid his mind of the "Evil Eye" was entirely mad. His progression towards insanity is much faster than Dorian Gray's, but, as this is a short story, the progression makes sense. At first, he is simply disturbed by the eye, however, entering the old man's room at midnight to shine a light on the offending eye for a whole week is simply strange (Poe 65). Finally, he spends the whole night entering the old man's room, he wakes the old man and suffocates, kills, and dismembers him; he does not neglect the appendages, as they are stuffed neatly under the floorboards (Poe 66). When he is "confronted" by the police, he believes in his deranged mind that they are mocking him and therefore confesses to the murder, attempting to salvage his demented pride he holds from his perfect plan (Poe 67). This shows just how far gone the narrator is in terms of his mental health, although he claims in the first sentence that he is perfectly fine (Poe 64). Both Dorian Gray and the narrator have a wild but defined progression from mental clarity to mental sickness.

As Dorian Gray commits more and more awful deeds for the sick amusement of visually tainting his soul, he becomes more and more paranoid that someone will find his portrait, in all its old, wrinkly, ugly glory. It starts with Basil's first visit to Dorian after Sibyl Vane's suicide, when he asks Dorian why he has covered the portrait and why he will not let him, the artist, see it (Wilde 115). Dorian is terrified that Basil will find the wrinkle on his otherwise perfect face and something unsavory will happen. As he perpetrates more

questionable acts, he becomes both more enamored with his tainted soul as well as protective of it, going as far as to lock it in his old schoolroom and even leaves abruptly in the middle of parties to dash home and make sure nobody has found his disgusting secret (Wilde 125; 144-145). He accumulates an innumerable amount of riches and luxurious things to pass his time, yet he is still afraid that, "What if it should be stolen? The mere thought made him cold with horror. Surely the world would know his secret then. Perhaps the world already suspected it" (Wilde 145). This is a very narcissistic view on his problem, considering the unlikeliness of the event. When Basil comes to talk to him about Dorian's public image and the validity of rumors, Dorian finally relents in showing the artist the portrait and, taking command from the portrait itself, he stabs his friend in the neck (Wilde 153; 160; 162). To add on to this monstrosity, Dorian, instead of turning himself in or doing something of a moral nature, he blackmails an old friend into dissolving Basil's body in acid (Wilde 172-178). He tells Alan Campbell that, "You are the only one who is able to save me. I am forced to bring you into this matter" (Wilde 172). Alan, in a burst of bluntness, says, "Your life? Good heavens! What a life that is! You have gone from corruption to corruption, and now you have culminated in crime" (Wilde 176). Dorian's morality at the end of the novel has disintegrated into mere shreds of humanity, showing this is a moral issue.

The narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" truly believes he is not mad and that his actions are completely normal and justified (Poe 64). His paranoia starts in the form of his plan: he is so terrified of the eye that he is willing to murder the old man just to get rid of it instead of leaving that situation like a

normal person. He checks on the eye every night for a week like clockwork, showing more of his true colors (Poe 65). His paranoia increases when he chills in the old man's room for a solid hour after he wakes him, just to make sure he does not detect his presence until finally the narrator attacks the old man with fury and kills him because he can hear his heartbeat (Poe 66). In order to cover up his crime, he stuffs the old man's body parts under the floor with a calm disposition, harking to his deranged mental state, which has psychopathic tendencies (Poe 66). When talking to the police officers, the narrator is in obvious distress, but, at first, hides it well. However, after what he has done has been left to stew for awhile in his brain, he becomes more and more anxious, thinking that the police know exactly what he did but are just smiling and nodding to mock him (Poe 67). Finally, as he reaches his mental break, he loudly confesses to the crime he committed, partly due to the fact that he believes the old man's heart is still beating under the floorboards and the police can hear it too (Poe 67). This shows how paranoia and mental illness affects the main character's decisions and therefore the outcome of the story.

The Picture of Dorian Gray and "The Tell-Tale Heart" are revealing literary examples of the grey area of morality and mental issues in terms of paranoia and mental degradation. The two main characters, having murdered one person each, definitely have things in common concerning their motives, but the line for motives is fuzzy at best. Dr. James Knoll says that the line between moral and mental is hard to determine when it comes to a murderer's motives, but there is a level of paranoia in any case.