

Joseph Conrad's
"Heart of Darkness"
and Oscar Wilde's "The
Picture of Dorian
Gray..."



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Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" and Oscar Wilde's "The Picture of Dorian Gray" Essay Sample

Often an author uses a character to represent the ideals of a society through their work of literature. However, in both Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the authors also use their characters to represent the corruption within the ideals of both colonialism and Victorian hedonism. In *Heart of Darkness*, Kurtz is the ideal colonialist; he gives the impression of maintaining honorable intentions while also being "of value" to the Belgian trading company by bringing in the most ivory. Kurtz has the good intentions of colonizing the Congolese natives, but he is ultimately corrupted by power and greed. Dorian Gray, the main character of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, is the perfect hedonist; he pursues all of his pleasures, yet he is seemingly unaffected by any consequence. In the public eye, he is a beautiful young man, outwardly happy and satisfied with his life. Yet, Dorian, like Kurtz, has a rotten soul that has taken all of the consequences of his actions. Both of these men reflect how a society can appear to have beneficial ideals from the outside, but in reality be corrupted by the seduction of power and greed.

Charles Marlow, the narrator of *Heart of Darkness*, sets forth from Belgium with the idea that he is taking part in a colonialist mission to bring culture to the Congolese natives. Yet, as he journeys into the Congo, the "pilgrims" make it clear that they have no intention of colonizing the natives. Instead, Marlow witnesses these "flabby devils" taking advantage of their influence over the natives and plundering the Congo of its resources, namely ivory. As

Marlow travels up the Congo River, he learns more about the "exceptional" Kurtz and the realities of colonialism.

"Hadn't I been told in all the tones of jealousy and admiration that he had collected, bartered, swindled, or stolen more ivory than all the other agents together? That was not the point. The point was in his being a gifted creature, and that of all his gifts the one that stood out pre-eminently, that carried with it a sense of real presence, was his ability to talk, his words—the gift of expression, the bewildering, the illuminating, the most exalted and the most contemptible, the pulsating stream of light, or the deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness." (Joseph Conrad, Part II, page 43) Like colonialism, Kurtz is intriguing; his voice and way of talking draws people in and gives him the ability to influence people. He is asked, by the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs, to write a report about his experiences among the natives, which is written with "eloquence". The other colonialists scorn him when he chooses to maintain the ideals of colonialism over succumbing to the greed for ivory.

"Each station should be like a beacon on the road towards better things, a center for trade of course, but also for humanizing, improving, instructing." (Conrad, II, 29) In one respect, Kurtz differs from colonialism; he does not lose his morals because of greed, but power. As he is given more power, his façade of goodness begins to crumble as he is seduced by his influence over the natives, as well as the "pilgrims".

"He had the power to charm or frighten rudimentary souls into an aggravated witch dance in his honor; he could also fill small souls of the

pilgrims with bitter misgivings..." (Conrad, II, 46) It is this power which is the ultimate destruction of Kurtz. Though he develops greed for the ivory, the power and influence become more important to him. With an English mother and French father, it is said that "[a]ll Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz" (Conrad, II, 45). This implies that he was bred in a colonialist society, and therefore made the perfect "poster-child" for colonialism. In *Heart of Darkness*, Brussels is that epicenter for the Belgian trading company. The city gives Marlow an overall image of a "whited sepulcher". Through this description, both the realities of colonialism, and Kurtz, are represented, so although they may seem glorious on the outside, this is just an idealization of their good qualities. In reality, colonialism and Kurtz are both rotten to the core.

Dorian Gray is introduced as a beautiful young man, "unspotted from the world", and completely naïve to his astonishing attractiveness. As a young man, his youth is first captured by an artist, Basil Hallward, however, when Basil introduces Dorian to hedonist, Lord Henry Wotton, Dorian finds himself intrigued by the ideals of Victorian hedonism. Once the portrait is finished, Dorian is completely aware of his beauty and, with the help of Lord Henry, comes to the realization that his beauty will not last forever. He then makes the disastrous mistake of wishing for eternal youth; he does not realize the consequences of his wish until he commits a terrible act of cruelty and remains physically unaffected by it. It is at this defining moment, that Dorian recognizes the full extent of his wish: he can escape punishment from any act and is physically invincible. From this point, Dorian continues with a hedonistic lifestyle, not caring about his actions and how they affect others.

A hedonist is defined by their characteristics of living life in the pursuit of pleasure and self-gratification while also being indifferent to the consequences of such a lifestyle. Thus Dorian Gray makes the perfect hedonist; he does not have to care about the consequences of his actions and will remain young and "unspotted" indefinitely. But, as his cruel reputation slowly seeps out throughout society, his beauty acts as a mask for his festering soul.

"Even those who had heard the most evil things against him- and from time to time strange rumours about his mod of life crept through London and became the chatter of the clubs- could not believe anything to his dishonour when they saw him." (Oscar Wilde, Chapter 11, 141) Though Dorian remains beautiful outwardly, the evidence of his appalling vices is reflected in the features of the once beautiful portrait. Since he has access to his soul's portrait, he knows that, in reality, his vile acts are not going unnoticed. At certain points, Dorian attempts to change his character by leaving his hedonistic lifestyle and living morally. However, through this inner conflict of moral versus pleasure, ultimately his sporadic desires for morality are overshadowed by the temptation of hedonism.

"Innocent blood had been split. What could atone for that? Ah! for that there was no atonement; but though forgiveness was impossible, forgetfulness was possible still, and he was determined to forget, to stamp the thing out, to crush it as one would crush the adder that had stung one" (Wilde, 8, 197) After a certain point, Dorian becomes numb to his own corruption and attempts to ignore the changes that his portrait is going through. By trying to overlook all of his terrible deeds, Dorian Gray represents the faults
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and façade of hedonism. Though, when the ideals of hedonism are presented, they sound pleasant, they are ultimately destructive to the soul. Whether one wants to have morals or not, it is human instinct to conform to the expectations of society because it is only through the example of society that one can form personal morals. On the outside, hedonism sounds like a pleasurable alternative to reality. However, when the ideals of hedonism change into pure selfishness and cruelty, the lifestyle becomes more self-destructive than self-indulgent.

Both Dorian Gray and Kurtz represent a characteristic that is innately present in all humans, whether one admits it or not; the inner-conflict of wanting to indulge in vices while also wanting to be accepted in society. Sometimes a society or an idea will present itself and give the illusion that one can be morally accepted into society while succumbing to different vices. Both Belgian colonialism and Victorian hedonism gave this impression to its followers by seeming to have each side. With Belgian colonialism, the “pilgrims” were praised in Europe because they were bringing “culture” to “savages”. Victorian hedonism gave its followers the idea that they could indulge in all of life’s pleasures, and not have to suffer the consequences. In both cases, the reality is extremely contrary to the façade. Though the corruption of both societies is meant to be interpreted by the reader, it is implied through both Kurtz and Dorian Gray. Each character is ultimately seduced by power and the ability to escape the consequences of their actions, despite their initial good intentions. In the end, both characters and societies are exposed as inwardly despoiled by corruption, protected only by a thin mask of morality.

References:

Wilde, Oscar. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. 1891. Ward, Lock, and Company.

Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*. 1902.