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The Uselessness of Art: Critique and Contradiction in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

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“All art is quite useless,” Oscar Wilde wrote in the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), strategically making the statement the last line one reads before diving into the text of his novel (Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 2). A self-proclaimed aesthete, Wilde argued that art is simply meant to be beautiful or to create a mood and that “[i]t is not meant to instruct, or to influence action in any way” (“Art is Useless Because,” 1). Wilde was known for his sarcastic wit, and when reading the book, the quote can likely be seen as just another one of his satirical gibes for *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is quite the opposite of socially useless. The novel is centered on an innocent young man, Dorian Gray, and his reputation as he is corrupted by hedonistic values and commits a series of immoral and hypocritical actions. The other focus of the novel is Dorian’s double: a magical painting of him that visibly changes as the protagonist remains physically unaltered. Throughout the book, the distinction between Dorian’s private and public lives becomes clearer, mirroring the lives of both fictional and real members of Victorian society’s upper crust including Wilde himself. By using the duality of Dorian and other characters in the book, Wilde’s fiction reflects fact, creates a parallel of his own society that blindly embraces hypocrisy, and, consequently, uses his novel as more than just an aesthetically pleasing work of art. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is Oscar Wilde’s critique of the hypocritical duality of upper-class Victorian society that creates an aesthetic paradox within itself.

In late Victorian-era London, image was everything. Looking decadent was the goal of the upper-class and was a distinctive quality valued in art, physical appearance, and literature (Goldfarb 369). A man’s reputation was based largely on his image in the eyes of society, a sentiment that was often mirrored in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The other quality that was equally important as image in regard to reputation was morality. The English Victorian era is infamous for its strict moral conservatism that stemmed from the state-sponsored Anglican Church. At the time *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was published, a moral reform was sweeping London, being led by radical municipal groups that had the power to legalize a handful of previously *de facto* moral regulations (Assael 744). Any minor breach of the Victorian moral code caused a scandal and ruined one’s reputation. In order to avoid disgrace, many upper-class Victorian citizens divorced their private lives from their public ones. Separating the contrasting ways in which they lived created a double identity for Victorians, a duality in which they could openly condemn those they saw as immoral on a Sunday morning and covertly

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loiter in the brothels, opium dens, and music halls just outside of town on Sunday night.

The public lives the Victorians were expected to live were ones of restraint and moderation. This was especially true in regard to the repression of one's sexuality, and a handful of laws and amendments were passed in order to uphold this moral standard. One of the legal actions that had the most impact on late Victorian society was the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885. The purpose of this act was adopted "for the Protection of Women and Girls, the suppression of brothels, and *other purposes*" (emphasis added). The majority of the Amendment Act's 16 sections were designed to limit access to any "carnal connexion" with women (Parliament 22); it notably raised the age of consent for girls from 12 to 16 and made restrictions against prostitution that preceded the profession's criminalization the following year (Lee). Section 11 of the act, however, stands out among these other amendments that focus on the protection of women, and its enactment greatly influenced Wilde and his writing. Known as the Labouchere Amendment, Section 11 of the Amendment Act outlawed any "outrages on decency," stating only that

Any male person who, in public or private, commits, or is a party to the commission of, or procures or attempts to procure the commission by any male person of, any act of gross indecency with another male person, shall be guilty of a misdemeanor, and being convicted thereof shall be liable at the discretion of the court to be imprisoned for any term not exceeding two years. (Parliament 68)

Prior to the passage of this act, a man who engaged in homosexual acts would have been charged with sodomy, which was punishable by death from the reign of Henry VIII up until only 24 years before the Labouchere Amendment. Due to the magnitude of this crime and the fact that the occurrence of the act would have had to be proven, it was difficult to convict anyone of sodomy; but the Victorians could not let anyone defile their moral code and get away with it that easily. The passage

of the Labouchere Amendment made it much simpler to punish those who were thought to be immoral by society's conservative standards—the vague language and nondescript term "gross indecency" allowed for even the suggestion of a homoerotic act to condemn a man. While homosexual behavior was frowned upon before, the 1885 act made just an implication of it a serious legal offence.

After the Labouchere Amendment was passed, homosexual men had to take even more caution when hiding their private lives from the public eye. Before its 1890 publication, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* had to be abridged to eliminate its relatively direct implications of male relationships and thus protect Wilde from the court. Despite his heavy editing and apparent conformation to the new laws, Wilde still made a point of including a great amount of homosexual subtext within his novel, though in a covert way that bent the rules he pretended to abide by. Much like the traditional upper-class Victorian, there were two sides to Wilde, and while he mocked the Victorians that participated in dualistic behaviors, he was also a part of the subculture that he mocked and too lived a paradoxical life:

He loved talking, drinking, eating, sexual indulgence, all to apparent excess; but one must take always into account his superabundant energy and the great natural zest he brought to life. He sought to break down the inhibitions which restrain men's enjoyment of the natural pleasures. Escaping from the strict moral prison of his age, he naturally reacted excessively, but underlying all this was that respect for natural urges and instincts which he showed so often in his writings...[Wilde] went to extremes that would not have been necessary for a man who lived in free surroundings and who therefore had no need to break violently away from convention (Woodcock 215).

It is clear that, even though Wilde often rejected the hypocrisy of his society, he was very much a product of it. Though he recognized the cultural importance of the legal and moral regulations, Wilde felt the need to rebel against them

because they were limiting what he believed to be reasonable and natural. His unconventional and “immoral” behavior—for which he was persecuted towards the end of his life when he was convicted under the very Labouchere Act he mocked through the subtext of his novel—was just one way he spoke out against social conventions. The other, subtler, yet possibly more impactful way he spoke out was through his writing, particularly in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Critiquing the hypocrisy of the double life, Wilde questions the moral foundations of Victorian duality. Towards the beginning of the novel, after an acquaintance’s flattery causes him to value his age and appearance, Dorian wishes that a beautiful picture that had just been painted of him in his youth would grow old and turn ugly so that he could stay young and beautiful for eternity. Dorian gets his wish and as his soul becomes tarnished from his cruel actions so does the picture. Wilde writes the two Dorian—the painting and the person—to symbolically represent the duality and hypocrisy of Victorian society. In some parts of the novel, morality holds the same importance as it does to the Victorians. After Dorian commits his first intentional murder and his last shred of innocence is lost, he blackmails his formerly intimate friend, Alan Campbell, to dispose of the body. Though the details of the information Dorian uses to blackmail Alan are undisclosed in the text, the reader’s knowledge of their past—including the fact that the men’s intimacy lasted for eighteen months and that Alan had an “indefinable attraction” to Dorian—implies that their relationship was sexual, therefore “morally indecent” and even illegal under contemporary law (Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 219). Though Dorian for the most part disregarded his society’s morality by this point in the narrative, Alan did not; rather, it was said that “[h]e felt as if an iron ring was being slowly tightened round his forehead, and as if the disgrace with which he was threatened had already come upon him” (Wilde 227). Because Alan obeys the customs and laws of Victorian society and values its idea of decency so much, the dishonor he fears if the structured and rigid “iron ring” that was society

found out about his relationship with Dorian is worse than having to dispose of a body. Alan is a prime example of a victim of Victorian society and its hypocrisy; he has been conditioned to believe that his relationship with Dorian was immoral and fears its capacity to tarnish his reputation, thus choosing to commit the less socially condemning criminal act over the other. Unable to accept himself, Alan later commits suicide. No one but Dorian knew about their relationship: “his suicide had been his own act,” Dorian thought. “He had chosen to do it” since he couldn’t escape the burden of thinking of morality so highly (Wilde 244).

Similar to Alan, Dorian’s hatred for his own actions brings his downfall. Both characters participate in activities that the Victorians viewed as immoral and, though neither actively tries to change his ways throughout the majority of the novel, it is clear that the two still paradoxically feel the need to uphold the Victorian system of beliefs that greatly impacts their final actions. In the closing chapter, Dorian swears he will give up his life of debauchery to better fit in with society and vows that he is “going to be good,” promising to never harm anyone else ever again (Wilde 242). But at the end of the novel, Dorian sees all of his immoral deeds reflected in the painting and feels guilty about his wrongdoing and paranoid that he would lose his popular reputation if someone were to discover what he has done;

He went in quietly, locking the door behind him, as was his custom, and dragged the purple hanging from the portrait. A cry of pain and indignation broke from him. He could see no change, unless that in the eyes there was a look of cunning, and in the mouth the curved wrinkle of the hypocrite. The thing was still loathsome,—more loathsome, if possible, than before,—and the scarlet dew that spotted the hand seemed brighter, and more like blood newly spilt. (Wilde 245)

Dorian understands the importance of morality in his culture, and Wilde illustrates that burden with his aesthetic language and selective word choice. Dorian’s guilt is displayed by his “cry of

pain and indignation” as he is shocked to see that the differences in the painting still remained, even after he had done one good deed. Dorian is also aware that by covering up his impure morals he is a “hypocrite,” and feels guilty about the concealment because he is not conforming to the morals of society. Still, he locks the door behind him so no one can find out his secrets. The “look of cunning” reveals the vanity of his attempt to “do good”: it was only for personal gain and the preservation of his reputation. The language regarding Dorian’s reaction also shows his paranoia that his misdeeds will be discovered, as evidenced by the fact that Dorian “could see no change” in the painting since he last saw it. Even though he cannot see any physical differences, Dorian imagines a list of things he thinks could have changed based on how he had been acting, over-analyzing the picture for any detail of his cruelty that could be detected by others. Upon seeing all of the horrifying things he has done on the canvas, he desires to rid himself of the memories, the guilt, and the proof forever. He slashes into his enchanted portrait with a knife and kills himself in the process.

Both the incident involving Alan and Dorian’s reviewing of his painting reveal the harmful and hypocritical nature of the morals enforced by Victorian society. Although Wilde does show the hypocrisy of Victorian morality through examples of those who find it important, he also directly mocks this morality in the form of the cynical and quick-witted Lord Henry Wotton. Lord Henry comments on the pointlessness of both morality and immorality through a series of aphorisms that sound very much like Wilde’s own sayings. In general, Lord Henry believes that people have morals only because most fear society and its ability to tarnish reputations. He sees any type of morality as a trivial and overrated product of his society. Like Lord Henry, many young, wealthy, hedonistic men—also known as dandies—who showed no fear of society often acted in a way that suggested they paid no attention to morality or immorality, and thus could not be defined as moral or immoral.

Through having Lord Henry play the devil’s advocate and mock morality without condoning immorality, Wilde suggests that there is a third,

more sensible option regarding morals: amorality. While morality is having morals that are good and being immoral means that one’s morals are bad, amorality is an indifference towards and lack of any morals whatsoever. Amorality is fully represented by Lord Henry, who does partake in both publicly acceptable and unacceptable activities like other dandies and upper-class characters in the novel, but he doesn’t criticize his lifestyle in view of the public or find a problem with his and his companions’ duality. Lord Henry is able to get away with this practice of amorality because of the way that English society was structured to defend and venerate the upper class and their actions, notably in the Victorian Era. Dandies could get away with more and were less likely to be punished for their nonconformity to social law because of their power and influence. Lord Henry didn’t have much to lose by practicing amorality: at worst, he would have just been seen as eccentric and *avant garde* much like Wilde was when he said in the preface to his widely acclaimed novel that “there is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book” (Wilde 1). Lord Henry has no values, so the duality that he possesses through amorality, unlike those who claim to be moral or immoral, is ignored by his peers and serves as a further critique of the hypocrisy of upper-class Victorian society.

To contrast Lord Henry’s blatant representation of amorality, Wilde uses Dorian Gray as a character who represents the grey area between morality and immorality. Like Lord Henry, Dorian is wealthy and could have gotten away with several of his actions. Many of Dorian’s crimes, however, were more severe than Lord Henry’s, and Dorian actually sought to maintain an upstanding image. Because of his popularity, contradictory rumors about Dorian’s kindness or cruelty circulate throughout society in the book as his levels of guilt fluctuate to their extremities. His contradictory image is represented by the two Dorians: as the man remains beautiful, the truth about him is shown only through the piece of art. Dorian the person is the ideal image of the public man in Victorian society; his eternally youthful body is the pretty lie that covers the ugly truth of his soul, which is revealed by the painting. Dorian knows that if

anyone saw the picture or found out about his private life his reputation would be ruined so he keeps the painting under close surveillance and hides it in his attic where no one can see it. All of his immoral actions are done behind closed doors, similarly to how the picture is hidden.

Dorian is repulsed by his immorality because he knows that his actions have not only defied Victorian morality but also have violated any basic human moral code. He rarely looks at the picture so that he isn't reminded of the judgement he could receive from others and the guilt that consumes him. Dorian avoids the picture for years on end in order to continue with his treacherous activities after pushing down his guilt and locking it away in an attic. The picture of Dorian Gray is not a portrait in so far as it does not depict Dorian for who he actually is; instead, the picture splits Dorian into two parts that represent both beauty and ugliness, leading the reader to question who the real Dorian truly is.

While the picture of Dorian Gray is a representation of the private lives of the Victorians, that is not its sole purpose in the text. The painting is an actual work of art, the most prominent one in the novel, hence the title of the book. If a reader looked at the piece of art the way that Wilde suggested it should be viewed in the preface, the reader would notice that something was peculiar. Wilde suggests that art is only meant to be beautiful and has no practical use, though neither characteristic is representative of the painting of Dorian. Though the painting starts out as a portrait of a beautiful young man, by the end of the novel, the picture has become warped and hideous. Despite its atrocities, the artwork still maintains its purpose and is a part of a critique of Victorian social values. If the central symbol of the novel is ugly and useful, and Wilde says that all art should be beautiful and useless, his own writing disproves his argument.

Though the artistic qualities Dorian's painting contradict what Wilde focused on in the preface to the novel, that does not necessarily mean his claim regarding the uselessness of art is entirely false. To comprehend his argument, one must consider *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

as a work of art as a whole and understand its relation to Oscar Wilde's Victorian society. In regard to the novel itself, the first part of Wilde's argument on the beauty of art is true. The aesthetically embellished language such as that mentioned above and the moving plotline in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* display how the art of literature can be beautiful. But like the painting of Dorian, Wilde also uses the novel to comment on and critique hypocrisy. The idea that Wilde's argument can be both right and wrong brings up a few important questions: did Wilde know that he was contradicting himself, and if so, is his view on art just another illustration of the duality of Victorian society? Wilde heavily implies in the preface that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is useless and beautiful, but also gives enough evidence in the text to conclude that the picture of Dorian Gray is useful and ugly. By including these two ideas in his book, Wilde creates an aesthetic paradox within the novel through which he is contradicting and confirming his own claims about art and its purpose.

Out of all the uncertainties this paradox creates, one thing the reader can be sure of is that this paradox is a representation of the complex and multifaceted lives of upper-class Victorians. The intricacy of the entire novel and the contradictions in Wilde's commentary challenge the typical view of Victorian society by breaking down binaries and showing *The Picture of Dorian Gray's* readers that nothing is ever entirely moral or immoral, beautiful or ugly, or good or evil. As Dorian said in the climax of the novel: "Each of us has heaven and hell in him," (Wilde 150). Wilde shows that the demise of Dorian was the demise of the Victorians; because of their inability to move past dichotomous thinking, duality and hypocrisy corrupted both the individual and society as a whole. However, the way Wilde represents these Victorians is not completely obvious and that is because Wilde represented them artistically through his novel. Due to the moral reforms, Wilde could not have mocked society openly without paying a heavy price. Still, the beauty of art often enhances its didactic purpose. This is clearly seen in the way Wilde warps his own world into the fictional world of Dorian Gray. He uses the artistic

qualities of the novel to mask his underlying criticism of society, so that the reader will not directly notice his bold criticism but will still hear his ideas, which are so closely woven into the story itself. By transforming fact into fiction, Wilde can critique his sanctimonious society and get away with it, claiming that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is nothing but a story and therefore finding a use for his art.

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