

Henry Wotton's Corruption of Dorian Gray by Giving Him His Own Soul

Research Question: To what extent did Henry's revelation of an unbridled life provoke hedonism and aestheticism in Dorian in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde?

Course: English B

Category: 3

Word Count: 3876

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Introduction

A great part of the 19th century also known as the Victorian era was dominated by hedonism and aestheticism. Hedonism being “the ethical theory that pleasure, in the sense of the satisfaction of desires, is the highest good and proper aim of human life” (Encyclopedia of Philosophy), and Aestheticism being “the acceptance of artistic beauty and taste as a fundamental standard, ethical and other standards being secondary.” (Aestheticism). Aestheticism emerged in the late Victorian era in England. The movement was born as a reaction to the then Victorian moralities and hypocrisies. The aesthetic movement sought to inspire people to seek pleasure rather than morality, utility and an underlying moral message in art. The ideology held that art should be appreciated solely by its form and beauty (Shrestha).

Such surface level appreciation could be spotted in the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Considering that the aestheticism is all about surface level appreciation, it can be said that the novel gives insight into the real century around the time it was written.

In the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*; Basil Hallward is the artist who paints the portrait of Dorian Gray. He is absolutely charmed by both Dorian’s appearance and personality. Lord Henry Wotton, whom happens to be Basil Hallward’s close friend, meets Dorian Gray whilst visiting Basil’s studio. Henry quickly takes interest in Dorian because he is absolutely beautiful but also, he is youthful and unaware of the extent of his beauty. Henry sees the potential of what he can create.

Basil is skeptical about Henry meeting Dorian. As a friend of him, he knows Henry’s personality and he knows that he is not a good influence on anyone but especially would not be a good influence on Dorian. Basil knows that Dorian’s purity would be corrupted by Henry. Henry gets a chance to talk with Dorian regardless when Basil is drawing him. Henry casually starts

talking to Dorian about his philosophical opinions on hedonism and aestheticism. Dorian quickly becomes influenced by his words. Henry realizes his influence and strives to impact further. Just like that, Henry becomes involved in Dorian's life for good.

The Victorian era's societal movements made a widely influential impact on Wilde. Wilde and his works were associated with the term "Art for art's sake". The movement stated that art should have no other purpose or expression besides being art. That art exists for its own sake. The "Aesthetes" separated art from thoughts and feelings. Wilde on the other hand, expected art to reveal more than just itself. He searched to see human life on art, and for art to express ethical meanings. He exhibited this in his novel by making the portrait reflect Dorian's morality through the life that he was leading (Quintus).

The values of the 19th century era, particularly existent around the upper class which Henry and Dorian were a part of, is seen to be a paradigm for Henry's character. Dorian sells his soul for eternal beauty mainly influenced by Lord Henry Wotton, causing hedonism and aestheticism in his personality. For the time being of the Victorian era; art, beauty and aestheticism was overly valued, a hedonistic philosophy was internalized and the only way of truly experiencing it was possible through a person's youth by Henry Wotton.

Henry projected his own obsession with aestheticism and hedonism onto Dorian. Although Henry couldn't possibly foreknow the in-depth consequences of his actions in Dorian's life, he was fully conscious of each and every word he said and the power his tempting words hold with the indisputable intention of influencing Dorian. The open truth that Dorian would have ended up astonishingly different if hadn't he met Henry is quite obvious, yet the extent of it is unarticulated.

In this essay I will be looking at the issues with aestheticism and hedonism in the 19th century through different perspectives and analyzing Henry's influence on Dorian's personality, mindset, beliefs and life philosophy as well as the choices Dorian made in his life thoroughly.

Youth and Innocence

In the novel of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Dorian is presented as naive, pure and youthful. A moral figure who held such beauty on both the inside and outside, hence could never behold any dreadful trait that would oppose his appearance, which could have been agreed for the time period Dorian was first shown. Dorian's naiveness that comes from not being influenced by the external world yet, as he was only 20 of age at the beginning, made it easier for Henry to influence and impose his ideas on young Dorian. Henry has revealed to Dorian this way of living, an unbridled material life, with the central purpose of pursuing pleasure while regarding morality completely. When Dorian is first introduced in the book and Henry Wotton perceives him, he states; "There was something in his face that made one trust him at once. All the candor of youth was there, as well as all youth's passionate purity. One felt that he had kept himself unspotted from the world." (Wilde 16), implying that he is free from moral stain. Unfortunately, longevity was no such thing for his purity particularly engendered by Henry Wotton. Dorian goes from being free from moral stain to assimilating Henry Wotton's own morals.

Anything that Henry stated would go straight into Dorian's head which ultimately made Henry the greatest influence in Dorian's life, personality and mindset. Afterwards, whilst describing Dorian, Henry says "He is some brainless, beautiful creature." (Wilde 6). By uniting the words brainless and beauty together in order to describe him, Henry exhibits his true internal perception of him and his own aesthete personality by appreciating Dorian on a surface level and

perhaps finding him easy to manipulate. Moreover, the words 'beautiful creature' shows that Dorian is not perceived as a human being but a symbol of beauty instead.

Not being seen as a human being is connected to Dorian not having much of a personal philosophy due to his youth therefore being easy to influence, "Talking to him was like playing upon an exquisite violin. He answered to every touch and thrill of the bow..." (Wilde 31). The quote gives insight into Henry's true perception of his influence on Dorian's character. He enjoys influencing him. He thinks of it as an "exquisite" thing. He also knows how impactful his every word is by stating that Dorian answered to *every touch and thrill of the bow* as a metaphor for him being influenced by every Word Henry said to him. Lord Henry strives to dominate his mind until he becomes a reflection of Henry.

Henry's manipulative behavior is exhibited countless times throughout the book and acknowledged by his close friend Basil, who is the painter of the portrait of Dorian. Although Basil warned Dorian about Henry by saying "He has a very bad influence over all his friends, with the single exception of myself." (Wilde 17), Henry influencing Dorian was inevitable. Henry has extremely distinctive ideas on society and morality which firmly lean towards hedonism and aestheticism. Such mind that is "unspotted from the world" (Wilde 16), was bound to be influenced by either one of the two most influenced people by the Victorian era and the London upper class society, especially since Henry and Basil were the only intimate friends Dorian had.

Soon after their first encounter, Lord Henry expresses his opinions on influencing one another, claiming that no influence is good and explains how it is immoral by taking away the person's chance of being their true self. Henry proceeds to say that to influence a person would be giving them his own soul. "Because to influence a person is to give him one's own soul. He does not think his natural thoughts, or burn with his natural passions. His virtues are not real to him.

His sins, if there are such things as sins, are borrowed. He becomes an echo of someone else's music, an actor of a part that has not been written for him." (Wilde 18). This quote quite literally demonstrates and foreshadows that any immoral act or ideology, which Dorian had exhibited in the novel, actually belonged to Henry. Henry had projected his own soul onto Dorian and corrupted his true self (Liebman).

As the novel progressed Dorian was thinking Henry's thoughts and burning with Henry's passions. Henry's passions being aestheticism and hedonism, we can have an insight into what kind of influence Henry would have on Dorian.

Victorian Upper Class

Henry's influence upon Dorian is altogether resultant of Victorian English society as his ideologies closely mirrored the time period. Henry emphasizes on whatever backs up his hedonistic life ambition like the obsession with aestheticism whilst discarding anything that clashed against his ideologies like moral concerns.

One of the major issues to be talked about which Oscar Wilde presented in the book is the unpleasant parts of the English Victorian Society. Under the facade, the society had been driving people to perform immoral acts while remaining presentable, and leading a double life, such as Dorian being exceedingly sublime on the facade whilst his portrait turned hideous with the sins of his soul (*British Library*). Lord Henry reflects on the ideas Victorian upper class had carried by stating: "The true mystery of the world is the visible not the invisible" (Wilde 24). Victorian society had distinct views on beauty, for instance they believed that a person's beauty showed their morality moreover valued aesthetics over morality, thus praised youth as an equivalent to beauty upmost. "All art is quite useless." (Wilde 4). In this one sentence, Wilde

sums up the Aesthetic Movement popular in Victorian England. That is, art does not and should not play a role in shaping the social or moral identities of society. In the tradition of hedonism, aestheticism advocated any behavior that would maximize beauty and happiness in one's life (*Baixardoc.*)

The ideal life for aesthete is the one that imitates art. Though the idea is alluring, it provides no real value for the society (The Conflict). When Dorian sees the portrait, he acknowledges his beauty truly for the first time as well as the fact that it is not eternal.

Lord Henry's sayings about youth has gotten into Dorian's head already. Rather than simply admiring the portrait, Dorian quickly becomes conscious of aging thereby losing his beauty. "Lord Henry Wotton is perfectly right. Youth is the only thing worth having. When I find that I am growing old, I shall kill myself." (Wilde 24). Henry led Dorian into thinking that when he aged, he would not be valuable anymore. This statement is supported by Dorian's conversation with Basil; "How long will you like me? Till I have my first wrinkle, I suppose." (Wilde 24), followed by the quote "I know, now, that when one loses one's good looks, whatever they may be, one loses everything." (Wilde 24).

Henry values Dorian highly by his physical appearance and this behavior of aestheticism results in Dorian feeling that his beauty and his youth are the only things that are of any value about himself. His obsession with youth quickly becomes projected onto Dorian as he wishes to keep his youth forever along with the things youth offered to him, as well as symbolized. As a result, Dorian turns his fears towards the portrait.

"I shall grow old, and horrible, and dreadful. But this picture will remain always young. It will never be older than this particular day of June. . . . If it were only the other way! 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 24).

The fact that Dorian goes as far as to say that he would sell his soul to always stay young shows provoked aestheticism by Henry. Soon after meeting Henry, Dorian becomes so fearful of aging that he is jealous of the fact that his own portrait will remain forever beautiful whereas he will not. “I am jealous of everything whose beauty does not die.” (Wilde 25).

Dorian’s wish comes true thereafter and his life turns into a series of sinful events, where he slowly starts to display narcissistic traits. Instead of fearing that his portrait on the canvas will deteriorate, Dorian derives a pleasure from knowing the painting will deteriorate with each crime he commits whereas he will not. The portrait’s is not a curse but a blessing to him, at least for a while. Dorian lives the long desired unbridled life with no consequences as he pursues pleasure, indulges in his senses, and lets corruption consume his life (Bisht).

Lord Henry’s words are clashing with the reality of things as he once said “Nothing can cure the soul but the senses, just as nothing can cure the senses but the soul.” (Wilde 20), but the more Dorian indulged in his senses, the more his soul grew uglier, reflected on the portrait.

The Death of Sibyl Vane

Sibyl Vane is Dorian Gray’s first and last romantic love. Sibyl holds great significance by leading a turning point in Dorian’s fate. The portrait altered for the first time right after Dorian broke up with Sibyl mercilessly, reflecting Dorian’s first moral corruption and the loss of innocence, “The expression looked different. One would have said that there was a touch of cruelty in the mouth.” (Wilde 26).

Dorian describes the relationship as the greatest romance of his life. Lord Henry replies with “You should say the first romance of your life. You will always be loved, and you will always be in love with love.” (Wilde 41). Dorian’s feelings were not validated but instead trivialized through the implication that love is merely an experience.

Dorian fell out of love with Sibyl after she lost her ability to act on stage, exhibiting a rather aesthetical approach. He becomes less bothered with the feelings of others whilst growing more obsessed with self-indulgence. For a person like Sibyl who comes from the lower class, she lost her passion for acting because she realized how shallow it was after she experienced real love for Dorian. “I knew nothing but shadows, and I thought them real. You came-oh, my beautiful love! -and you freed my soul from prison. You taught me what reality really is. To-night, for the first time in my life, I saw through the hollowness, the sham, the silliness of the empty pageant in which I had always played.” (Wilde 70).

Dorian was the viewer of art and not the doer. Just like he was the viewer of Sibyl’s plays whereas Sibyl was the actor. He could not see through the hollowness in them since he was not looking for a deep meaning in the first place, just like a true aesthete should do.

The fact that Dorian fell out of love with Sibyl after she claimed to see the reality shows the disconnection between aestheticism and real life hence how the London upper class lives in a completely different sense of reality than the other classes. Henry actually proves this by saying “The moment she touched actual life, she marred it, and it marred her, and so she passed away.” (Wilde 84).

When Sibyl no longer served an artistic role in Dorian’s life, she also no longer meant anything. The expectance for lovers to serve an artistic role was reinforced by Henry through his saying towards woman; “They are charmingly artificial, but they have no sense of art.” (Wilde 82). Henry

using “woman having no sense of art” as an excuse to devalue woman as well as romantic bonds shows aestheticism being the top priority in everything and exhibits an excessively shallow attitude. If we look back at the definition of aestheticism, we see that it is explained as “ethical and other standards being secondary.” (Aestheticism).

Soon after, Sibyl committed suicide because of the rejection she faced. Dorian is devastated with guilt. Henry on the other hand, is trying to erase any humanly emotion Dorian felt. Henry speaks of Sibyl’s death like a part of a play, simply done to amuse them instead of the real tragic event that it is (*The Vernacular*); “To you at least she was always a dream, a phantom that flitted through Shakespeare’s plays and left them lovelier for its presence, a reed through which Shakespeare’s music sounded richer and more full of joy.” (Wilde 84).

The conversation ends the way Henry guided. Dorian, who once felt guilt, is now rather relieved through viewing Sibyl’s death as an artistic expression of love. "You have explained me to myself, Harry," he murmured with something of a sigh of relief. "I felt all that you have said, but somehow I was afraid of it, and I could not express it to myself. How well you know me!" (Wilde 84). The quote implies that Henry did not cause Dorian to think a certain way but instead encouraged him to do so. Though, is this what Dorian believe because he does not realize the extent of Henry’s influence on himself is a crucial question.

When Basil confronts Dorian about moving on from Sibyl’s death too easily as Dorian and Henry went to the opera right after, Dorian replies with, “It is only shallow people who require years to get rid of an emotion. A man who is master of himself can end a sorrow as easily as he can invent a pleasure. I don't want to be at the mercy of my emotions. I want to use them, to enjoy them, and to dominate them.”. He shows that he is now looking forward to invent pleasures from

each event and thinks that emotions should serve pleasure only. The line shows provoked Hedonism by Henry.

Henry's Vision

Lord Henry overly idolizes hedonistic ideologies and glamorizes the hedonistic way of living. While hedonism is not inherently bad, he relies too much on the momentary pleasure furthermore disregards the consequences. He doesn't feel any remorse for others' sufferings if the actions that caused them were in alignment with his hedonistic philosophies. He embraces the "Ends justify the means" way of thinking. Yet he doesn't have what it takes to fully embrace the hedonistic and aesthetical way of living life that he is so desperately obsessed with. Henry neither has the beauty nor the youth. Thus, the only way for him to truly reach this life is through Dorian Gray. He says to Dorian "a new hedonism – that is what our century wants. You might be its visible symbol. with your personality there's nothing you could not do.". Dorian can embody true hedonism moreover be a symbol for it hence make Lord Henry's visions manifest into the physical realm rather than a concept.

One of the main reasons Dorian was influenced by Henry and not Basil is that Henry had been an entrance to all the experiences Dorian was so eager to live. More precisely, Henry was so eager to live therefore he enforced it on Dorian.

When Basil said "You never say a moral thing, and you never do a wrong thing" (Wilde 6) to Henry, the quote was showing that Henry was all words and no action from the very beginning. He never followed through on his words nor acted on it, but rather influenced Dorian to do so. To fulfill the one last desire that is left for him to experience, intellectual curiosity. Henry attained his desire for intellectual curiosity through manipulating Dorian to bring the visible symbol of

hedonism into life. "You would sacrifice anybody, Harry, for the sake of an epigram." (Wilde 161), Dorian declares, whom is the main person he had sacrificed. This conversation takes place after Dorian kills Basil. He continues to talk about how he has become too concentrated on himself and lost his passion and desire for love (Liebman).

Although Henry's philosophies influenced Dorian more than any other factor, it was the yellow book that brought out the worst in him. Henry's poisonous influence is symbolized by the poisonous yellow book. The book was left where Dorian could find it. It wasn't specifically given to Dorian by Henry but rather placed where Dorian would find it and read it by his own decision. The delivering is moderately similar to how Henry delivered his philosophies throughout the novel. He doesn't word his philosophies for Dorian to assimilate in an upfront manner, but rather leaves it in the open in a way that he knows he is influencing him beyond doubt.

"The book was given to Dorian as one of Henry's intellectual experiments with influence. The book served as a guide book to Dorian with the hedonistic and decadent messages it delivers. Dorian dedicated his entire life to pursuing its principles. The book illustrates Henry's philosophical ideas and the unbridled life he provokes (Shmoop).

In conclusion, Dorian was able to fulfill the desires of both Henry and Basil. Dorian was the epitome of the visualization Henry had for youth and beauty. He was also the epitome of purity which Basil held in high regard. Dorian had been a fragment of art both for Henry and Basil. Whereas Basil would look for deep meanings in art, Henry specifically would not.

Conclusion

Henry Wotton influenced Dorian Gray into selfishness and self-indulgence. Henry's words on hedonism and aestheticism corrupted Dorian with the revelation of an unbridled life. Which

ultimately led to his downfall. With everything Dorian held he could have led a much brighter life but the desire to have everything all at once caused him to self-destruct. Even-though Henry revealed this life to Dorian, Henry only awakened what already lied within Dorian. Dorian was spoiled and shallow already. Henry led Dorian greatly for his own expense but if it wasn't for Henry, I believe that especially in the century he lived in, Dorian would corrupt his own self somehow. Dorian was the perfect epitome of shallowness which the century represented. Perhaps Dorian would find a way to corrupt his own self, perhaps Dorian would embrace hedonism and aestheticism even without Henry in the picture. After all Dorian most probably was to be involved with upper class London society sooner or later but everything being put aside, Dorian selling his soul to remain young forever is one thing Henry is solely responsible for. At the time being, Henry was the only factor that made Dorian want to sell his soul for eternal beauty. The rest of the events in the novel occurred thereafter. Henry was the leading factor in every downfall that took place in Dorian's life. That being the case, Henry is the provoker of hedonism and aestheticism along with the sins that Dorian committed in the novel of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

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