Psychology in
*The Picture of Dorian Gray*

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Our Critical Assessments: Articles on Psychology in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

- “Oscar Wilde’s Refutation of ‘Depth’ in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*” by Anna Budziak
- “Hard Science, Soft Psychology, and Amorphous Art in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*” by Heather Seagroatt
“Contemporary scientific hypothesis informed Wilde’s artistic practice . . .”

“Harry and Dorian Gray methodically and scientifically observe Dorian’s psychological responses to aesthetic experience. By casting their scientific endeavours in the service of both science and art, Wilde uses psychology to exemplify the ways in which the materialism of the ‘hard’ sciences (which cannot measure or assess aesthetic response) threaten to efface the impact of the arts on the individual psyche” (Seagroatt 748).
Psychology, Science, & Philosophy in the Victorian Era?

WHO CONTRIBUTED TO THE RISE OF PSYCHOLOGY?

THOMAS BROWN (1773-1820)
CHARLES DARWIN (1809-1882)
ALEXANDER BAIN (1818-1903)
SIGMUND FREUD (1856-1939)
CARL JUNG (1875-1961)
What is Surface Depth Theory?

USED BY BEHAVIOURIST & MENTALIST PSYCHOLOGISTS IN THE VICTORIAN ERA

An *outward symptom* caused by an *inner problem*: “change from the depths of oneself upwards into the superficies of one’s social appearance.”
In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde complicates the linear relationship between surface and depth to expose the complexity of experience. Wilde accomplishes this feat through:

- **The Character of Dorian Gray**
- **The Painting of Dorian Gray**
- **The Language & Conversation About Dorian Gray**
The Politics of Experience
“Inner” and “Outer”

- Laing’s idea of “Experience” and “Behaviour”
- Laing’s blurring of the lines
- Introducing a more paradoxical way of thinking
Applied to Dorian’s Character

→ Who and what is Dorian?

Inner
(experience/deep)

Outer
(Superficial/behaviour)
Dealing With Binaries

- Injecting Laing’s theory
- Examining Dorian’s character

→ let’s make ourselves a paradox!

1. Dorian’s social setting
2. Dorian’s initial reaction
Where Do We Go Now?
Dorian’s character lacks the correlation between surface & depth, and is caught between the binary of this psychological theory. Gray’s character represented in the painting does not - and cannot - reflect and correlate with his inner depth. Wilde complicates this theory through the painting of Dorian Gray.

➔ “Dorian’s deep essence appears on the canvas’ surface. It was surface and depth - an exposure of the behaviors that his magically preserved countenance did not betray” (Seagroatt 751).

➔ “The juxtaposition of Dorian and his portrait powerfully render Wilde’s contention that change, continual change, is the only constant” (Seagroatt 752).
“As long as I live, the personality of Dorian Gray will dominate me. You can’t feel what I feel. You change too often” (19).

“[Dorian] had hung with his own hands that terrible portrait whose changing features showed him the little degradation of his life” (140).
“[Dorian Gray] would stand, with a mirror, in front of the portrait that Basil Hallward had painted of him, looking now at the evil and ageing face on the canvas, and now at the fair young face that laughed back at him from the polished glass. The very sharpness of the contrast used to quicken his sense of pleasure. He grew more and more enamoured of his own beauty, more and more interested in the corruption of his own soul”
By extending the surface/model to language, and exploring the ways in which Wilde complicates it, we can see how Dorian Gray’s experience is both defined and deconstructed through language.
Wilde, “Critic as Artist:” “Language is the parent, not the child, of thought [...] Men are the slaves of words.”

Wilde, Preface to *Dorian Gray*: “Thought and language are to the artist instruments of an art.”

Dorian: “Words! Mere words! How terrible they were! How clear, and vivid, and cruel! One could not escape from them”
“The heavy odor of incense seemed to cling about its pages and to trouble the brain. The mere cadence of the sentences, the subtle monotony of their music, so full as it was of complex refrains and movements elaborately repeated, produced in the mind of the lad, as he passed from chapter to chapter, a form of reverie.”
Paradox: a statement that, despite having apparently sound reasoning from true premises, leads to a self-contradictory or a logically unacceptable conclusion

Lord Henry: “Nothing can cure the soul but the senses, just as nothing can cure the senses but the soul” (32).
Wilde’s interest in the emerging discipline of Psychology is apparent in his novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Through the novel, Wilde challenges the linear relationship between surface and depth, and attempts to break the binary to expose the complex ways in which character can be experienced by self and by other. Through the superficial and internal elements of Dorian’s identity, the painting and perceptions of reality, and the separation of signified and signifier, mixed metaphors, and paradox, Wilde successfully challenges Surface Depth Theory, and complicates the ways in which Victorian Psychology addresses the perceptions of character.
