
From the Writer

“Dorian Gray the Escape Artist” is the culmination of my work in my WR100 seminar, Fantasy at the *Fin-de-Siècle*. The final assignment was to create a research paper based on an interesting problem or paradox I had found in Oscar Wilde’s book, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

For me, one of the book’s most fascinating elements was Dorian’s immature behavior; though he grows older, he never seems to “grow up.” At first, I investigated how my idea related to aestheticism and what Dorian’s immaturity showed about aestheticism; however, I could not find a solid way to prove my thesis. My greatest problem was being unsure of how writing a paper based on a research problem in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* constituted a researchable argument and not just a literary analysis.

Hoping to gain a different perspective on the assignment, I met with fellow classmates to talk out my problem. It turned out that they were having the same issue with their essays, and through discussing my paper with them, I realized that my topic was too narrow to be easily supported by sources; the idea of Dorian growing older without growing up was interesting but could not easily be supported with sources outside the novel itself.

With this in mind, I modified my thesis, claiming that though Dorian Gray demonstrates aesthetic behavior in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, his fascination with artistic things serves less to pursue aestheticism and more to evade his dark past. In this manner, I argued, Dorian could be considered more of an escapist than an aesthete. At last I had an argument that could easily be supported by sources on aestheticism (e.g. Talia Schaffer’s and Walter Houghton’s work); this made writing my first draft much easier than before and allowed me to focus on the essay’s flow and style.

Writing “Dorian Gray the Escape Artist” was no easy task, and I often felt discouraged. What helped me to continue writing was seeking feedback from my professor and classmates; nothing makes one’s “old material” fascinating again like a fresh perspective. The other thing that kept me going was my genuine interest in human behavior. Dorian’s story especially moved me because I could relate to and learn from his feelings about artistic beauty.

— Jesse R. Sherman

DORIAN GRAY THE ESCAPE ARTIST

In the closing years of the austere, morally structured Victorian period, the art-obsessed aesthetic movement began to take root in society. To the aesthetes, the ultimate virtue was artistic beauty, and they strove to instill it in every physical medium of their world, believing aestheticism to be “both a literary philosophy and a guide for everyday life” (Schaffer 7). The main proponent of this movement, Oscar Wilde, applied aestheticism fervently to his writing (Schaffer 7); this is perhaps most prevalent in his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The book is crafted with obvious appreciation for the aesthetic lifestyle; however, it is difficult to discern whether the main object of the story is the pursuit of unreal and artistic things or the evasion of reality. Wilde’s title character, Dorian, is a textbook aesthete, surrounding himself with fine jewels, clothing, and other beautiful things (131–38), and one would think that he is pursuing an artistic lifestyle; however, his deplorable private life suggests that his real aim in immersing himself in aestheticism is to distract himself from his past and evade his own depravity. In this way, Dorian may be considered less of an aesthete and more of an escapist.

It is impossible to discuss Oscar Wilde’s work without introducing the subject of aestheticism, as he is considered the figurative father of the aesthetic movement (Schaffer 7), and his *Picture of Dorian Gray* is simply ruled by the philosophy. Aestheticism itself is a deep appreciation for artistic beauty that reaches into all areas of life, including “architecture, dress, food, periodicals, [and] book bindings” (Schaffer 7). The aestheticism at the *fin de siècle* was modeled after the 1850s Pre-Raphaelite movement, which famously “produced allegorical, stylized, richly colored, sensuous

paintings and poems” (Schaffer 7). Wilde implants this artistic emphasis into *Dorian Gray* through his portrayal of Dorian, who collects “heavily-scented oils,” obscure instruments (132), jewels like “olive-green chrysoberol” and “flame-red cinnamon-stones” (133), and even luxurious fabrics (135). Wilde’s meticulous presentation of his characters also demonstrates his zeal for aestheticism. This is illustrated when he describes Dorian’s appearance:

He was bare-headed, and the leaves had tossed his rebellious curls and tangled all their gilded threads. There was a look of fear in his eyes, such as people have when they are suddenly awakened. His finely-chiseled nostrils quivered, and some hidden nerve shook the scarlet of his lips and left them trembling. (24)

This fastidious attention to detail extends to Wilde’s descriptions of the novel’s physical environment, especially when he depicts a “furry bee” at a flower in Basil’s garden as it “scramble[s] all over the oval stellated globe of tiny blossoms” (26). Passages like these evoke an aesthetic motif throughout *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

The Picture of Dorian Gray is, in essence, a book about how aestheticism affected people at the *fin de siècle*, and demonstrates how an aesthete might be lured into evasive patterns of behavior. Dorian exemplifies this by gathering artistic things to himself, mainly for the purpose of distraction; he thinks of his treasures as “modes by which he could escape . . . from the fear that seemed to him at times to be almost too great to be borne” (Wilde 138). Here, Dorian fears to face his role in the suicide of his former lover, Sibyl Vane (Wilde 99), and he clearly uses his aesthetic possessions to divert his attention from the situation. In a sense, he uses artistic things like a drug to “cure the soul by means of the senses, and the senses by means of the soul” (Wilde 182). It is interesting to note that, when pursuing solace from his guilt, he resorts to using actual drugs like opium (Wilde 181). In this part of the story, Dorian seems bent on finding psychological release, and he cares not for *how* his diversions work, just that they *do* work. His dependence on them indicates that he is less interested in making his life aesthetically pleasing and more concerned with distracting himself from personal guilt.

In searching for the source of aesthetic evasion in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, one must consider the novel's environment, turn-of-the-century Victorian culture. Walter Houghton explains how the pre-existing Victorian society was awash in hypocrisy, and how the Victorians were particularly evasive. Houghton says that they "shut their eyes to whatever was ugly or unpleasant and pretended it didn't exist," and presumed "that the happy view of things was the whole truth" (148). Though aestheticism encouraged an artistic lifestyle (Schaffer 7), turning away from Victorian "dogmatism, their appeal to force, [and] their straight-laced morality" (Houghton 146), Wilde shows that his title character's actions were inspired by the hypocrisy in Victorian society and, more specifically, Victorian-style evasion. Wilde employs this kind of evasion when Dorian's friend Basil visits him and tells Dorian of the terrible rumors he has heard about Dorian's private life; Dorian simply replies that "[they] are in the native land of the hypocrite" (Wilde 149). The function of Dorian's quote is threefold: it draws attention to the hypocrisy in Victorian society, shows how Dorian evades his own immoral actions by giving an excuse for his bad publicity, and demonstrates how Dorian distracts himself from reality by making an artistic quip about the situation. As Houghton would say, Dorian is using his "happy view of things" (148) to place the blame on someone else, while embroidering his speech to distract himself from the truth.

Another instance of this Victorian-style evasion is when Dorian murders Basil, and Dorian "felt the secret of the whole thing was to not realize the situation" (Wilde 157). Following this mentality, Dorian goes out to a dinner party the night after he disposes of Basil's body (Wilde 173). In distinct Victorian fashion, Dorian puts the "ugly" and "unpleasant" (Houghton 148) business of Basil's murder out of his mind, carrying on as if the murder never happened. The Victorian-style evasion seen throughout *The Picture of Dorian Gray* demonstrates how aesthetic-era gentlemen like Dorian kept alive their predecessor's hypocritical behavior and offers inspiration for Dorian's escapist attitude.

While Dorian's environment appears to inspire his evasive actions, it does not fully account for his status as more of an escapist than an aesthete. Walter Pater, considered the "leading philosopher of aestheticism" (Elfenbein 272), helps readers to define Dorian's standing by suggesting

ideas about how a true aesthete should live. In his essay “Conclusion’ to the Renaissance,” Pater claims “the service of philosophy, of speculative culture, towards the human spirit, is to rouse, to startle it to a life of constant and eager observation” (274). Here, he emphasizes a core concept of aestheticism: its inspiring and thought-provoking nature. Pater highlights this idea in the central argument of his essay as well:

Not to discriminate every moment some passionate attitude in those about us, and in the very brilliancy of their gifts some tragic dividing of forces on their ways, is, on this short day of frost and sun, to sleep before evening. (275)

In other words, failing to recognize and appreciate vital moments in one’s existence leads to a wasted life; Pater’s “short day of frost and sun” refers to the brief, fragile lives of humans, and his “sleep before evening” symbolizes the neglect of precious moments in an already short life. This concept illustrates an ideal of aestheticism: the observation and appreciation of life as it is happening.

Against Pater’s ideal of aestheticism, one can see how Dorian Gray is not a true aesthete. As previously demonstrated, Dorian collects aesthetic things for himself and uses them as “modes by which he could escape” the memory of his grim past (Wilde 138). His fear, more than his appreciation for beauty seems to motivate him to own his treasures, and this applies to the novel Lord Henry gives Dorian immediately after Sibyl Vane’s suicide. Dorian finds the book such an excellent diversion that he does not hesitate to buy nine first-edition copies of it, and he even has the books “bound in different colours, so that they might suit his various moods and the changing fancies of a nature over which he seemed . . . to have almost entirely lost control” (Wilde 126). Dorian’s books may be pleasing to the aesthetic eye, but they mainly cater to his barely controllable “moods” (Wilde 126), which suggests that he is really using them to medicate a psychological problem. In truth, Dorian is under such fear from his past that he cannot fulfill Pater’s ideal and appreciate his artistic possessions “with constant and eager observation” (274). In this sense, Dorian’s collection of aesthetic material is an addiction, giving him temporary escapes from reality; under the stress of fear, Dorian cannot fully appreciate his surroundings, and as Pater would put it, he goes to “sleep before evening” (275).

Based on what is known about *fin de siècle* culture, it seems that Dorian Gray is more of an escapist than an aesthete. Oscar Wilde's character does enjoy owning aesthetic material, but he amasses it to himself less for artistic purposes and more to help him forget about his own depraved activities. Dorian's turn-of-the-century environment offers inspiration for his escapist attitude, as his actions closely adhere to the hypocritical Victorian concept of evasion. When compared to Walter Pater's aesthetic sentiments, Dorian's actions are also proven to not measure up to aestheticism's ideal of observant appreciation. It soon becomes clear that Dorian is not a true aesthete, and that he is actually using aestheticism as a way to dismiss his dark past. Wilde's chosen behavior for Dorian suggests that some people during the aesthetic movement were using art not purely for enjoyment, but to elude their problems. As the figurative father of the aesthetic movement, Wilde presents *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as his manifesto for aestheticism, outlining the movement's philosophy; however, he also constructs the novel as a cautionary tale, demonstrating the consequences of aestheticism's misuse through his title character. Dorian's demise qualifies as Wilde's warning to those who try to make use of art, which, in his eyes, "is quite useless" (4).

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