

Examiner's commentary

Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a popular one for Extended Essays, yet this essay manages to find a more original slant on the investigation, looking at "masks" and "souls". The topic is communicated clearly, and the purpose is explained. Research is appropriate and relevant and an appropriate range of sources have been selected. The application of source materials is also clearly relevant and appropriate, with direct references and quotations from both the novel and secondary sources to support the points made. Knowledge and understanding are evident. The analysis shows understanding, being focused on the research question. The discussion leads to a convincingly reasoned argument, which is well-structured in the three chapters. The progression of the character Dorian's degradation is well-illustrated with references to the novel and the use of language (terminology) is good. The conclusion, though a little long, is effectively supported by evidence and sums up the findings convincingly, drawing the argument together neatly. Critical thinking is clear and the presentation is very good, with all required elements present and in the correct format.

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INTERNATIONAL BACCALAUREATE

Extended Essay

Language Acquisition: English B

Category 3: Literature

A study of Victorian Times' morality in Oscar Wilde's
novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

How is "being and appearing" rendered in *The Picture of
Dorian Gray*?

Word count: 3997

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1) Introduction

The research paper aims to analyze the contrast between the characters' true "self" and the way they "appear" to be in the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Underlying this topic lies the fact that humans are constantly being challenged by their own selves. Millions of people devote time and space to figuring out what life really is about and, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the characters tend to do so in most of the novel. What they fancy, in some way, constructs the walls of their soul as it defines what they want themselves to pledge to. Sometimes, what they fancy is something they are not supposed to live because of society's pressure and expectations. On this premise, one's soul is fooled and influenced. This is what made people in Victorian times, the period in which the novel was written, complement their lives with another that actually belongs to them and represents them, one that might lead them to exploit all of their resources, but what might as well turn them into what they never thought they could be.

The selection of this book is owed to it being an allegory of perception and an essay in critical behavior. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a novel written by Oscar Wilde in which an artist, Basil Hallward, paints a portrait of the protagonist, Dorian Gray, whose behaviour is heavily influenced by Lord Henry. Because of this, Dorian becomes a pleasure-seeker, disregarding conventional morality. Whenever Dorian behaved in a sinful way, the image of him in the portrait changed, showing the effects of age, while his real body remained unchanged. The idea that he can hide behind the portrait and that whatever he does will have no impact on his public image, but rather on the hidden portrait sound very enticing to him. Consequently, he decides to view his sins as achievements and starts to fall all the way down to his demise.

Set in the 19th century, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is believed to mirror the Victorian Era. During Victorian times, the English population's lifestyle rested on a framework "determined by social life, and shaped by the traditional ways of living in the country" (Mitchell, 1996, p.18). On this basis, English life was based on an idealization of what the right thing to do was. In other words, people's routine had a strict moral code that restrained liberal behavior. It can be added that reputation became everybody's main priority, as Basil expresses in Chapter XII, "every gentleman is interested in his good name." Thus, it was a common practice in England to shield dark desires and dirty deeds, while presenting a respectable and acceptable "disguise" in public.

Since the day of its publication, the novel has triggered lots of academic research due to the broad and complex themes it covers, such as obsessions of society with youth and beauty, people's insecurity and the act of pleasure seeking, also known as hedonism, or the influence of aestheticism in art and life. Greg Buzwell, a curator of Contemporary Literary Archives at the British Library, wrote an article in which he examines the interplay between art and morality. In it, Buzwell tackles various subtitles, one of which was extremely helpful for this investigation, namely "The terrible pleasure of a double life," (Buzwell, 2014) which deals with the different facets Dorian's personality goes throughout the novel. Moreover, Nils Claesson, professor at the University of Regina (Canada) and famous poet, conducted a study on "Culture and Corruption: Parisian self-development versus Gothic degeneration in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*", which analyzes the topic of "self-development", one that is relevant to what this investigation aims to explore about Dorian's and the other characters' true nature .

In this research, in order to determine how “being and appearing” are rendered in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the true nature of characters will be labeled as “souls” and the way they portray themselves as “masks”.

2) Masks

Oscar Wilde has made an impact on most of the world with this book; but mainly in Great Britain, where he was believed to be a criminal for breaking public morals. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* could be paradoxically interpreted as a way of “unmasking” Wilde’s soul and life.

Sally Mitchell explains in her book *Daily life in Victorian England* that the British lived under a term known as “Victorian Morality” which implied “hypocrisy, sexual repression and rigid social control” (Mitchell, 1996, p.259), meaning many of them would rather live two lives -(one being the mask)-than to live only as the public morals stated. For starters, Wilde’s line: “For he who lives more lives than one, more deaths than one must die” (Wilde, 1907, p.33) is clearly portrayed in the entire novel. In accordance with Victorian traditions, more lives than one makes reference to the idea of having a life in public, that is, one for pretense, and another in private, where a person’s real soul is set free. Thus, Wilde claims those people should have more deaths than one, and this is referred to in *Dorian Gray* because Dorian dies twice, the first time in Chapter XII, where his soul seemed to be dead after being submerged into so much poison, “He grew [...] more and more interested in the corruption of his own soul” “He would think of the ruin he had brought upon his soul” (Wilde, 2008, p.124), and at the very end of the novel, when his body actually dies “Lying on the floor was a dead man [...] with a knife on his heart” (Wilde, 2008, p.213). Dying twice could be interpreted as Wilde’s form of condemning a life of hypocrisy and deception because those who “hide” behind a mask will have double the suffering of those who do not.

Moreover, Wilde was introduced into the homosexual world in the 1890s (Wilde, 2008, p.xi), and became member of a “subculture” that was said to be clandestine,

since being gay was not morally correct during that time. In the novel, the audience is in every right to speculate that Basil Hallward was also gay, due to the way in which he describes how he feels about Dorian and the way in which he feels infatuated and dominated by him: "I knew I had come face to face with someone that [...] would absorb my whole nature, my whole soul, my very art itself. [...] I have always been my own master; had at least always been so, till I met Dorian Gray" (Wilde, 2008, p.10). However, this is never explicitly mentioned, maybe because Basil also wanted to keep this hidden under a mask.

In other words, based on his own experience, Wilde portrayed in his novel the idea that masks were needed if one had to comply with the requirements of social norms. In brief, just as Basil with Dorian's portrait, Oscar Wilde has poured himself into his masterpiece, his novel. Too much of his feelings and emotions, his life, as well as English "Victorian Morality" are rendered in the main characters, making the book an allegory of Victorian "masks". The main ways in which pretense is rendered in the novel is by endowing characters with double lives and by exploiting the concept of physiognomy.

a) Double life

In order to hide a portion of their real nature, their inner desires and their need to rebel against the strictness of rules, the characters Dorian, Basil and Henry Wotton, lead a double life, which is what Wilde first portrays as a form of mask.

The first character that exhibits this characteristic is Dorian Gray, as he goes into a deep and profound personal change through the entire novel, from one form of life to another. Wilde represented this process as a type of bridge, an aisle that connects Dorian's two opposite lives, one based on morality and the other being completely sinful. In order for the readers to visualize this transition, they must be able to recognize Dorian's masks. It could be argued that what separates the "two Dorians" is a thin line between innocence and corruption.

At the very beginning of the novel, he is believed to be completely innocent. Not only do we first take note of this through Basil, who describes him as the purest man, free from sin: "Unconsciously he defines for me the lines of a fresh school, a perfection of the spirit that is Greek. The harmony of soul and body- how much that is!" (Wilde, 2008, p.13), but also through Dorian's first reaction towards Lord Henry's assumptions of life and aesthetics. In Chapter II, after Lord Henry had discussed that "The only way to get rid of temptation is to yield to it. Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden to itself [...]" (Wilde, 2008, p.21), Dorian was left speechless when confronted with temptation, as if he had not thought that way before. Besides, as Wilde says, it is evident that he was innocuous since it is described how, for the first time, he felt that these emotions were influencing his soul (Wilde, 2008, p.21). This scene in Chapter II is what marks the beginning of Dorian's sinful, second life, for he realizes that his perfect behavior could be manipulated by something as simple as words: "Mere words. Was there anything so real as words?" (Wilde, 2008,

p.22). So he is aware of the fact that before these powerful words he had led a life compliant with social norms, but now he admits he feels tempted to take on a different life, “he feels free to ignore the pious morality that pervaded the Victorian Era” (Buzzwell, 2014) and cope with “disturbing private desires that [will] lurk behind [his] acceptable public face” (Buzzwell, 2014)

This scene is proof that Dorian’s soul has been corrupted; fakeness begins to be a term he is familiar with; more words come to conquer his soul. Wilde starts to build this bridge along with Dorian’s first sin: he starts to follow his pleasure-seeking desires and becomes vain. For example, he perceives the death of his former girlfriend as an artistic achievement, rather than as a tragedy, showing no sign of compassion at all. Perhaps, even, he showed vanity in that he thought he was capable of eliciting such feelings for him in a woman that would kill herself out of heartbreak. He realizes that his love for Sybil was shallow. The moment she commits suicide leads to the first change in the portrait.

This issue is an example of Dorian’s mask and intent to have a double life since it mirrors what was said in Chapter XII “We are in the native land of the hypocrite” (Wilde, 2008, p.144). Dorian had said he was in love with Sybil since she was not only the most talented actress that “realized the dreams of great poets and gave shape and substance to the shadows of art” (Wilde, 2008, p.85), but also, the most suitable woman for an English man “I loved you because [...] you had genius and intellect” (Wilde, 2008, p.85). During Victorian Times, it was important for a man to have a marvellous woman by his side. When Dorian realized Sybil was not fulfilling her role in his public mask since she was “shallow and stupid [...] a third-rate actress with a pretty face” (Wilde, 2008, p85), he made it clear that [she] “have disappointed me” (Wilde, 2008, p.86).

The line between innocence and corruption will get not only thinner, but also sicker as Dorian commits more sins. All along till the very end of the novel, he goes through this passageway, ending up killing his dearest friend as well as killing himself.

The fact that Dorian ended up killing Basil is crucial in understanding that Dorian's second life was extremely strong. He was not used to living under such corrupted influence; it all became too much for him. This caused him to kill his dearest friend, who had made him recognize his perfection and, tacitly, "taught [him] how to be vain of [his] good looks" (Wilde, 2008, p.150). Dorian blames Basil for this, for being "the friend who had painted the fatal portrait to which all his misery had been due" (Wilde, 2008, p.152). Not only does this show how heavy Dorian's second life was for him, but also how extreme it was. After having killed Basil, Dorian did not even feel sorry, which exemplifies that the vanity he had "been developing" had become flesh.

b) Beauty

Wilde presents another relation between being and appearing (masks and souls) by portraying a correlation between the characters' personality and their physical beauty. The characters' physical appearance is correlated to a particular mask. And since Wilde belonged to the aesthetic movement, concerned with beauty, it would have been understandable if he endowed physically attractive characters with intelligence and goodness. The act of assuming that the qualities of someone's mind and personality are "produced" by the state of their countenance is known as physiognomy. (Holcroft, 1878, p.31)

Wilde manages to challenge this in two ways: first, in the case of Dorian, it becomes evident that the first physical impression we have of him does not match at all the identity discovered at the end of the novel. When we meet Dorian as the archetype of male youth and beauty, through Basil's words: "He has a simple and beautiful nature." (Wilde, 2008, p.16), "There was something in the purity of his face that rebuked them" (Wilde, 2008, p.124), we think this mirrors his personality and picture him as gentle and sweet. As the novel progresses, he transforms into something monster-like that ends up killing not only his best friend but also himself, just because of desires to maintain his charm and perfection, to maintain his appearance. Thus, in order to preserve beauty, he sacrifices the good in him, and rebels against morality, since "it is through disobedience that progress has been made, disobedience and rebellion" (Clausson, 2003, p.354) .

Those finely shaped fingers could never have clutched a knife for sin, nor those smiling lips have cried out on God and goodness. He himself could not help wondering at the calm of his demeanour, and for a moment felt keenly the terrible pleasure of a double life. (Wilde, 2008, p.167).

The physical description and the first impression of Dorian do not match the personality of the character at the end of the novel. This could stand for the idea that the most hideous sins can hide behind immense beauty, so it is difficult to spot evil behavior when it is masked by beauty.

Secondly, in Basil, the mismatch between beauty and intelligence is exploited again. At the very beginning of the novel, Lord Henry claims that whenever there is beauty, there is a lack of intelligence and intuition; and therefore, when someone's intellectual behavior is high, then this person will lack beauty. "Real beauty ends where an intellectual expression begins. Intellect [...] destroys the harmony of any face" (Wilde, 2008, p.6). Wilde has, satirically, created Basil in a form of anti-beauty creature, and is actually one of the most intelligent and intellectual characters in the story. We see this when Lord Henry tells him that "you are not in the least like him" (Wilde, 2008, p.7), comparing Basil's beauty with Dorian's: while Dorian is perfectly beautiful, he is not, and so Basil is completely mentally capable, smart and rational. This idea is held throughout all of the novel. Basil has the faculty of perceiving things that go unnoticed to others, such as Lord Henry's assumptions and influence; Dorian was at first sight damaged by Henry's thoughts and beliefs of life, which is why he ended up turning into a pleasure-seeker, while Basil, having been friends with Lord Henry for a long time, never surrendered to the strength of his influence. With this, we can interpret that Wilde wants to prove the deceptive nature of appearances. Basil is the voice of conscience in the story, but he does not necessarily look nice. Therefore, through Basil's character, Wilde comments on the tragedy of Victorian morality, in which good people are misjudged because they do not "look" good.

3) Souls

Each character has a soul that defines what they truly are. Due to the setting in which the novel takes place, this inner self has been obliged to live under some form of disguise. It is interesting to analyse how Wilde plays with the idea and definition of what the soul is, what it means to each of the characters, and the importance they give to it.

It has been previously analyzed how Dorian, goes through a type of “bridge” that has been created by the author. The purpose of this passageway is to evince the transition involving innocence and corruption that somehow connects the two-faced Dorian. Dorian was first believed to be innocent, guilt-free and with an excellent and pure nature. In Chapter II, as soon as he meets Lord Henry, he is influenced by all of his ideas about life. “Something has changed you completely” [...] “You were the most unspoiled creature in the whole world [...] It is all Henry’s influence, I see that” (Wilde, 2008, p.105) Through this scene, Wilde is rendering one of the many ideas of what the soul consists of, which is; “to influence a person is to give him one’s soul” (Wilde, 2008, p.20). Wilde wants to show that the soul can experience changes, it can be manipulated and influenced. On this basis, it could be argued that Dorian’s soul has not always been corrupted, since it was first influenced by Lord Henry’s. His desires of becoming a pleasure-seeker developed throughout time.

However, it feels logical to believe that, if a soul’s main desires are to become poisoned and corrupted, then it means it may have always been that way. The quote “Out of its secret hiding-place had crept his Soul, and Desire had come to meet it on the way”, (Wilde, 2008, p.54), confirms that the soul holds desires, and so maybe, the transition from innocence to corruption might have been due to Dorian’s soul’s need of reinforcing its need of becoming corrupted, possibly in order to break with the

obliged morality he lived with during Victorian Times. Although Dorian's pure soul is constantly described, at the end of the novel Wilde mentions that "In hypocrisy he had worn the mask of goodness. For curiosity's sake he had tried the denial of self. He recognized that now". (Wilde, 2008, p.212). This means that, even when he appeared to be "good" and pure, his soul was the one wearing the mask.

This leads us to analyse that, since the soul can be manipulated, alternatively it could also be controlled, protected or conserved. Wilde manages to put into words that once one becomes dominant of one's emotions, of one's soul, we can live the way we have always wanted to and use the soul and emotions as a favor. "A man who is master of himself can end a sorrow as easily as he can invent a pleasure." (Wilde, 2008, p.105). This is Lord Henry's soul. He is a person that influences others and portrays himself as a "know-it-all"; Lord Henry's soul was so corrupted that was able to corrupt Dorian's with words, or something so insignificant as a Yellow Book. Lord Henry might have tried to pull others down with him, so that he was not the only one that felt the need to break the imposed morality. It is even mentioned that he experimented on Dorian, maybe so that he could try and "modify" him,

It was clear to him that the experimental method was the only method by which one could arrive at any scientific analysis of the passions; and certainly Dorian Gray was a subject made to his hands, and seemed to promise rich and fruitful results. (Wilde, 2008, p.58)

He managed to protect the essence of his soul, conserve it. The fact that Dorian ended up being a murderer shows the strength of Henry's influence.

This idea can be contrasted with Basil, who kept the essence of his soul intact. It can be analyzed that his soul never changed. For example, he never became tainted by Henry's manipulations. Basil can be seen protecting his soul. Wilde reveals that the

soul can be “captured” by something material. This is conveyed in the portrait of the novel. When Basil paints the picture of Dorian, he is told that it was his masterpiece. However, he denies it and refuses to expose his work of art. The reason to his decision, was that if he exposed the picture, he would be exposing his soul, the secret that he was holding onto. He says “I will not bare my soul to their shallow prying eyes” [...] “There is too much of myself in the thing, Harry”. (Wilde, 2008, p.14).

The conclusion that can be made of this is that, Basil's soul is so sacred for him that it has to be kept private. His soul holds the secrets of his life and tells his story (Wilde, 2008, p89). Considering Basil was gay in times when this was perceived as immoral, it makes sense that Basil wants to keep his soul safe, because he does not want to be exposed.

4) Conclusion

After analysing the novel, the duality between souls and masks is linked to what the society of that time, Victorian Times, wanted and needed. The need for masks would not have existed if it were not for the rigid social control that forced society to be one way in particular. Due to this, public masks were drawn upon.

Wilde renders the relation between souls and masks in an extremely complex way; characters are divided into three categories: the first one, in which the soul and the public mask coincide, that is, what they are and how they appear to be coincide. An example of this is Basil: he maintains his principles and does not allow his inner self to become poisoned, even by Lord Henry, to whose influence he was exposed the most. In the second group, characters are not what they seem to be, and, therefore, their soul and mask do not coincide, such as in Dorian. He was first known for being the archetype of male perfection. However, his inner self was guided into the path of corruption and became a pleasure seeker. The third group is made up by the characters who want to force others to be like themselves by guiding them into the corrupted path, while still pretending and wearing a mask. This is the case of Lord Henry Wotton.

It seems as if Wilde has worked with a term known dualism: he portrays two sides of each character. Those two sides coincide in Basil, he manages to live in accordance with the required morality of the time. When souls and masks do not coincide, when souls are “unmasked” through the process described as a “passage”, such as in Dorian, it seems to be because characters react against the strictness of rules and deem it impossible to live by rules oppressing to the soul. In the case of Lord Henry, he unveils those sections of Victorian society that advocate for the liberation of one’s soul regardless of social condemnation.

All in all, the novel reflects the conflicting nature of being and appearing in Victorian Times and how much strain people's lives sustained. Wilde has revealed a transcending idea that can also be seen today. The social norms by which we are governed interfere with everybody's way of life and true personality. He has passed on his experience in which social norms provide an order to society, and that order seems to be jeopardizing people's true nature.

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Extended essay - Reflections on planning and progress form

Candidate: This form is to be completed by the candidate during the course and completion of their EE. This document records reflections on your planning and progress, and the nature of your discussions with your supervisor. You must undertake three formal reflection sessions with your supervisor: The first formal reflection session should focus on your initial ideas and how you plan to undertake your research; the interim reflection session is once a significant amount of your research has been completed, and the final session will be in the form of a viva voce once you have completed and handed in your EE. This document acts as a record in supporting the authenticity of your work. The three reflections combined must amount to no more than 500 words.

The completion of this form is a mandatory requirement of the EE. It must be submitted together with the completed EE for assessment under Criterion E. As per the 'Protocols for completing and submitting the Reflections on planning and progress form' section of the EE guide, a mark of 0 will be awarded by the examiner for criterion E if the RPPF is blank or the comments are written in a language other than that of the accompanying essay.

Supervisor: You must have three reflection sessions with each candidate, one early on in the process, an interim meeting and then the final viva voce. Other check-in sessions are permitted but do not need to be recorded on this sheet. After each reflection session candidates must record their reflections and as the supervisor you must sign and date this form.

First reflection session

Candidate comments:

As for the initial stage of the process, the choice of the topic has been a natural one since I had a personal interest in the book already. As regards the research question, I embraced the challenge of finding an angle from which to study the novel that is creative enough. At the beginning, I was worried about not finding enough bibliography to support my analysis, but I found a decent amount of it. It has been tough for me to organize my ideas into a tentative structure. In spite of that, not only my tutor but some extra research have helped me keep focused and open-minded in the choice of my ideas.

Date:

Interim reflection

Candidate comments:

During this second stage of the process, I can tell I'm pretty happy with the chosen topic. Even though I had to modify it, which was a disappointment since I had to accept having made a mistake, I realized that, for the sake of the focus of the investigation, it was a great thing to do. I have also faced the challenge of prioritizing ideas. I believed that every idea was worth an explanation when, actually, there were lots of ideas worth doing away with, and deciding was complicated. I consider that my progress so far has been a "non-stop" one; I take good advantage of my free time, so whenever I have one, I write. I have discovered that I encounter the need for new bibliography while I'm writing. It is an exploration. Besides, I do put a lot of emphasis in the research because I like what I'm supposed to investigate about, such as Victorian Life or Wilde's life.

Date: 06/12/19

Final reflection - Viva voce

Candidate comments:

During the last stage of the process I realized this investigation has helped me learn and understand plenty of things. Firstly, I learnt about Wilde's life, Victorian Times, and the relationship between both, which made me develop empathy not only with the author, but also with the people who lived in the period, Victorian Times was really harsh. I also learnt about my own thinking process. The main obstacle I had was organizing my ideas, reaching coherence. Thanks to my tutor's help, I realized that my writing was not concrete, and that my ideas were getting mixed up, so I prioritized information and worked on that missing link between conclusion and coherence. I admit that rewriting parts of the essay three times was frustrating, but I could not be happier with the result. I have always loved the book, and I think I have done something pretty good out of it. Regarding time management, this process was a non-stop one, I devoted at least an hour a day, every day. Lastly, as regards bibliography, I learnt that all sources are based on another source, and that one is the one that counts; I learnt to make deeper research in order to find the original source. Above all, this process has taught me patience, sacrifice and commitment.

Date: 08/08/19