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**Oscar Wilde's Fiction: Views on Life and Art**

**By**

**Robert C. Derosa**

**M.A. Thesis Essay**

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Oscar Wilde's stories - *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, "The Happy Prince," "The Nightingale and the Rose," "The Selfish Giant," and "The Devoted Friend" - all depict wealth, monetary and non-monetary, deterioration and, in Dorian Gray's case, self-destruction of the soul, making him cold and heartless. Wilde provides lessons and morals that reflect life in general; his characters are confronted with sadness and happiness. These emotions, at times, occur simultaneously. However, the sadness that is embedded in each of his stories seems to prevail, which, in most cases, leads to defeat and self-destruction. In all of his stories, Wilde, to some degree, shows us that a major distinction is drawn between life as it really is and life as a fantasy. Often, the connection between the two, reality and fantasy, is lost; when this occurs, only suffering begins to surface because that reality is simply ignored. It seems, however, that a strong love for someone does actually prevail; but, even in the end, that too is not sustained for one reason or another and ultimately causes utter destruction of someone's life.

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde begins his first chapter by saying that "[t]he dim roar of London was like the bourdon note of a distant organ"; this simile sets us up for anything but a "dim roar" (Wilde, *Gray* 5). This roar, as Wilde

puts it, is in the background throughout a good portion of his novel. The dimness of the city eventually explodes into something that is loud and catastrophic.

At the beginning of Wilde's "The Happy Prince," there is a beautiful, glittering statue. The impression is one of extreme wealth - "[h]e was gilded all over with thin leaves of fine gold, for eyes he had two bright sapphires, and a large red ruby glowed on his sword-hilt" (Wilde, "Happy" 9). He is the epitome of envy by all those who pass him, but his appearance is quite deceptive: his appearance is not all that it seems for the Happy Prince is anything but happy.

Wealth, of course, is something that does not always mean money in Wilde's stories, according to much of the dialogue. Wealth is important for independence and freedom, but in Dorian Gray's world, it is more about beauty: "[R]eal beauty ends where intellectual expression begins" (Wilde, *Gray* 7). The emphasis Wilde places on the wealth of beauty and expression is infinite. Non-monetary wealth is beyond expression and surpasses monetary wealth without question. Referring to Dorian's picture, Lord Henry duly emphasizes this thought: "He is some brainless, beautiful creature, who should be always here in winter when we have no flowers to look at, and always in summer when we want something to chill our intelligence" (Wilde, *Gray* 7). Lord

Henry's take is interesting because "*The Picture of Dorian Gray* has been seen as everything from an attack on late-Victorian hypocrisy to a story of the domination of an older man by a beautiful youth," which is how the portrait has affected him (Baker 350). Beauty, according to Lord Henry, is the epitome of wealth.

Basil, however, disputes what Lord Henry has to say on this subject. He mentions a "fatality about all physical and intellectual distinction" (Wilde, *Gray* 7). He contradicts Lord Henry and makes sense logically: "The ugly and the stupid have the best of it in the world. [. . .] If they know nothing of victory, they are at least spared the knowledge of defeat. [. . .] They live as we all should live, undisturbed, indifferent, and without disquiet. [. . .]" (Wilde, *Gray* 7-8). This idea seems to make the *Gray* story "about a confusion between life and art" (Gordon 356). The foreshadowing that is provided here is overpowering: "Your rank and wealth, Harry; my brains, such as they are - my art, whatever it may be worth; Dorian Gray's good looks - we shall suffer for what the gods have given us, suffer terribly" (Wilde, *Gray* 8). Basil's use of the word "suffer" ends up seeming like a gross understatement as we move into Wilde's thought-provoking tales.

Friendship, especially in "The Devoted Friend," is a theme that runs throughout practically all of Wilde's stories, and it is just that kind of relationship that brings meaning to something which does not have to do with money, even though these relationships end in various sorts self-destruction. In this fairy tale, the Water-rat, one of Wilde's perceptive animal characters, sums up the definition of a relationship: "Love is all very well in its way, but friendship is much higher. Indeed, I know nothing in the world that is either nobler or rarer than a devoted friendship" (Wilde, "Devoted" 41). "The Devoted Friend" is a fascinating tale because "[a]lthough the story ends without anyone flatly stating what the moral is, the story is full of morals in the guise of the Miller's aphorisms about what makes a good friend" (Ruggaber 146).

Undoubtedly, the soul plays an instrumental role in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. It seems to take on a purpose that supersedes the monetary wealth as well as the artistic wealth in the story. The soul in the story takes on a persona of its own and is one of the major driving forces of the overall plot. Basil is very cautious when he says, "The reason I will not exhibit this picture is that I am afraid that I have shown in it the 'secret of my soul'" (Wilde, *Gray* 9). The soul reveals all and determines the end result of someone's consequences. As one

critic states, the "body itself becomes a canvas upon which one's spiritual state is represented in the most public, obvious, and unavoidable ways, a fate Dorian is able to avoid as the hidden portrait 'bear[s] the burden of his shame'" (Heath 34).

Moreover, Basil makes reference to this "soul theory" when he speaks of Dorian Gray because "Basil Hallward represents conscience" (Baker 355): "I knew I had come face to face with some one whose mere personality was so fascinating that, if I allowed it to do so, it would absorb my whole nature, my whole soul, my very art itself" (Wilde, *Gray* 10). While Lord Henry selects his friends for their "good looks" (Wilde, *Gray* 12), which is a mistake because Lord Henry thinks that the "most important to him in judging a man is his appearance" (Marshall 166), Basil constantly peruses wealth through artwork: he mentions the "romantic spirit" and the "harmony of soul and body" (Wilde, *Gray* 14). All of which bring wealth to a completely different level. Of course, Lord Henry destroys Basil's thought by saying that the "worst of having a romance of any kind is that it leaves one so unromantic" (Wilde, *Gray* 17).

Similarly, in "The Nightingale and the Rose," the importance of the rose remains with the student and torments his soul. He sees that without it "she will not dance" with him

(Wilde, "Nightingale" 24). The insects in the garden, however, think that love is not based on a red rose and reply that it is "ridiculous" (Wilde, "Nightingale" 25). To them, this makes love phony. The Nightingale who knows the "mystery of Love" flies all over offering to sing for a red rose; but she fails (Wilde, "Nightingale" 25). She is determined to help the young student find a red rose. To do this, she must make a painful personal sacrifice: she "must build it out of music by moonlight, and stain it with [her] own heart's-blood" - pressing her "breast against a thorn" (Wilde, "Nightingale" 26). Clearly, [w]ith self-sacrifice at the heart of the story, the aesthete's allegory of the artist and society is clear: the rose is beautiful regardless of its 'use'" (Miller 30).

In his own philosophical way, Lord Henry has a different attitude toward the soul, even though the soul is obviously intangible and produces grief for many of Wilde's characters in the end of his stories. According to him, "to influence a person is to give him one's soul," and this makes that person untrue to himself (Wilde, *Gray* 21). Oddly enough, this makes good sense because if a person is not true to himself, he will deteriorate and self-destruct because he is not in true sync with himself and moves against his innate feelings - that is, following what stimulates and gives him pleasure. "This

unknowability of the consequences [Dorian's late-night prowls] of the quest for experience for its own sake--whether they are social destruction or amelioration--routinely forms the source of horror in various late-century representations of decadent subjectivity" (Ferguson 471).

Lord Henry also says that to "resist temptation" means that the "soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden itself, with desire for what its monstrous laws have made monstrous and unlawful" (Wilde, *Gray* 22-23). This notion can be applied to Dorian's relationship with Sibyl Vane: his temptation to explore the seedy world that leads him to Sibyl in the first place and, afterward, her dreadful downfall. Lord Henry seems to have summed it up: "to cure the soul by means of the senses, and the senses by means of the soul" (Wilde, *Gray* 25). His soul may be cured of one thing, but it surely suffers for another.

Interestingly enough, the novel depicts the self as a reflection of the soul. Lord Henry is notorious for highlighting this, and he does so in the most negative way when he speaks to Dorian: "Some day, when you are old and wrinkled and ugly, when thought has seared your forehead with its lines, and passion branded your lips with hideous fires, you will feel it terribly" (Wilde, *Gray* 26). This statement has nothing to do

with monetary wealth or with non-monetary wealth but rather with the beginning stages of deterioration and self-destruction of the soul. To grasp the full meaning of non-monetary wealth, Lord Henry has it partially correct: "Be always searching for new sensations. Be afraid of nothing . . ." because the "pulse of joy that beats in us at twenty, becomes sluggish" (Wilde, *Gray* 27). Dorian, too, reflects on his own non-monetary wealth: his beauty. He then realizes that the "life that was to make his soul would mar his body," and that "[h]e would become dreadful, hideous, and uncouth" (Wilde, *Gray* 30). To put things into perspective, "age is not only indicted a great evil, but Dorian's inability to dissociate outer physical age from inner corruption lead to his desperation and ultimately to his premature death" (Heath 35). The realization of this fact hits Dorian hard; and as he thinks of it, "a sharp pang of pain struck through him like a knife, and made each delicate fiber of his nature quiver," which is what he inevitably comes to experience at the end of the story when he slashes the picture of himself (Wilde, *Gray* 30). The mere thought of the deterioration here leads to his ultimate destruction. "But, because he understands that the painting 'reveal[s] to him his own soul,' he believes himself to be thoroughly corrupt. This preoccupation with the 'soul,' however, is always linked to

physical aging, consistently displayed in a hyperbolic fear and loathing of growing old" (Heath 34). Because of Dorian's obsession with aging, his devious behavior has corrupted his soul and caused the complete undoing of his privileged life.

Lord Henry's insatiable fascination with Dorian leads him to find out more information about Dorian's past. After Lord Henry's valuable discussion with Uncle George, Lord Henry is now provided with interesting information about Dorian's childhood years. The concept of the purest soul is elaborated upon and related to Dorian metaphorically: "Talking to him was like playing upon an exquisite violin. He answered to every touch and thrill of the bow . . ." (Wilde, *Gray* 41). Dorian Gray is seen as the perfect model to define such a concept. At this point, his soul is at its purest and most untainted; this particular part of the story makes Dorian out to be something that is unattainable by most people: ageless and almost invincible. Here, the story (it seems) "conform[s] to Victorian and Gothic literary conventions, and the literary-historical significance of the notions of decadence and dandyism" (Rashkin 68).

Even more so, Wilde's *Nightingale* shows us the true meaning of love; according to her, there is no other meaning: that "[d]eath is a great price to pay for a red rose"; yet she

justifies the price of love and makes sense (Wilde, "Nightingale" 27). She says that "[l]ove is better than Life, and what is the heart of a bird compared to the heart of a man" (Wilde, "Nightingale" 27). She sends an important message about love: "for Love is wiser than Philosophy" (Wilde, "Nightingale" 27). The soul has a lot to do with sacrifices and determination: "the Nightingale pressed close against the thorn, and louder and louder grew her song, for she sang of the birth of passion in the soul of a man and a maid" (Wilde, "Nightingale" 29). Here, the song itself "offers a wealth of possibility to a musical imagination" (Miller 30). She tortures herself to make that red rose for the student: "Bitter, bitter was the pain, and wilder and wilder grew her song, for she sang of the Love that is perfected by Death, of the love that dies not in the tomb" (Wilde, "Nightingale" 29). She finally makes the rose but has to pay for it with her life. "Throughout the Nightingale's death scene, the narrator returns to the fact that she is making a sacrifice for love, a sacrifice that no one asked her to make" (Ruggaber 147).

To see more clearly how Wilde shows us how non-monetary wealth overrides monetary wealth, he takes Dorian out of his natural daily realm to experience a feeling of elation that he has not ever experienced. After his intellectual conversations

and interactions with Lord Henry and Basil, Dorian Gray experiences a feeling that goes unmatched when he sees Sibyl Vane. His visiting Sibyl in one of seedy parts of city has an allurement to him: "[t]here is a fluid movement between public and private, and real and fantasy spaces; between self-created interiors and the labyrinthine, secret and hidden aspects of the metropolis" (Cook 38). By having this urge to see Sibyl Vane, Dorian sacrifices his reputation and even a piece of his soul by visiting this sordid part of city.

In "The Happy Prince," the Swallow makes sacrifices as well. It is winter and cold; he needs to head off to Egypt where it is warm for him to survive, but he remains with the Prince out of obligation. He knows the importance of helping those who are less fortunate than they are. His soul is kind too, and he offers to return from Egypt with "two beautiful jewels" to replace those the Prince has given away to help others (Wilde, "Happy" 17). The Swallow is sincere and shows nothing but affection for the Prince; he wishes to show his gratitude for all the Prince has done: "The ruby shall be redder than a red rose, and the sapphire shall be as blue as the great sea" (Wilde, "Happy" 18). He wants to replace those great objects that the Prince has given up with objects that are twice

as nice and attractive. In essence, he wants to return the love that the Prince has shown by multiplying it.

Likewise, "The Nightingale and the Rose" shows that the student relies on one thing to make him happy: a red rose. The rose reinforces the fact that Wilde is trying prove his point about monetary versus non-monetary wealth: that non-monetary wealth - the rose itself - prevails. This hard-to-acquire rose will make him the happiest man on earth because he will be able to take his "love" to the dance. It is this beautiful, delicate piece of nature that is the key to his happiness; without it, he will be unhappy and his "heart will break" (Wilde, "Nightingale" 24). The Nightingale captures the meaning of true love and oversees his troubles: "It [love] is more precious than emeralds, and dearer than fine opals" (Wilde, "Nightingale" 24). (In the "Prince" story, however, the Prince's jewels are only used as a means to provide non-monetary wealth such as restoring health or providing safety to someone's life.) Wealth, which elevates the soul, is measured differently in this story. "Moving from spectatorship to identification and finally to self-abandonment and hurt, the Nightingale herself proves to be the true lover and artist" in this story (Goodenough 350-351). Love can only be experienced through an invisible chemistry; it can never be bought: "It may not be purchased of the merchants,

nor can it weighed out in the balance of gold" (Wilde, "Nightingale" 24).

By the same token, Sibyl Vane is the true definition of intangible wealth to Dorian. Her presence alone sends waves of emotions through his body and mind. He idolizes her; he wants to marry this unknown woman. We now return to the essence of "beauty": "but that beauty, mere beauty, could fill your eyes with tears" (Wilde, *Gray* 56). With all his materialistic wealth, Dorian feels this overwhelming sense of beauty much unlike the beauty he sees in those objects in his home - it is not just physical, either. It is a beauty of Sibyl's soul that penetrates his soul. Dorian describes her voice with passion: "it became a little louder, and sounded like a flute or a distant hautbois. [. . .] it had all the tremulous ecstasy that one hears just before dawn when the nightingales are singing" (Wilde, *Gray* 56). For Dorian, this is a piece of wealth that cannot be bought or sold. Both he and Sibyl, interestingly, are connected to musical instruments - which make very moving, unforgettable sounds: for him, "the exquisite violin" (Wilde, *Gray* 41); for her, "the flute" (Wilde, *Gray* 56). As Oscar Wilde himself says, "Music is the art which is most nigh to tears and memory." Although a positive connection is made between musical instruments and Dorian and Sibyl, the

outcome is actually "tears" and "memory" for both her and him - their deaths. His cruelty toward Sibyl, of course, only darkens his soul, which is ultimately one of the causes of his demise.

To continue with the theme of love in Wilde's fiction, a little Swallow in "The Happy Prince" sets us up for the true meaning of love; however, we come to see that we are misled on the subject of love. His love for a Reed is unrequited. Undeniably, the Swallow shows genuine love: "he flew round and round her, touching the water with his wings, and making silver ripples" (Wilde, "Happy" 10). This is a beautiful courtship, which is something that Wilde does often show in his stories: he starts out with a charming beginning, which then ends in deterioration and self-destruction. The other Swallows who see this courtship make a valid comment, which allows us to see the emphasis placed on money: "she has no money, and far too many relations" (Wilde, "Happy" 10). Although this is said to him, he still pursues the Reed until he realizes she is "coquette" (Wilde, "Happy" 11). He is forced to fly off and come upon a new relationship experience.

Even Lord Henry himself, the notorious cynic, sees a kind of wealth in Dorian Gray that cannot be touched - only felt. In the *Dorian Gray* story, "Lord Henry Wotton represents instinct" (Baker 355). Lord Henry analyzes Dorian in a very

soulful light, and he even elevates him to make him out to be something really spiritual, practically inhuman. His description is one that cannot be purchased; his whole being just seeps through his soul: "His nature had developed like a flower, had borne blossoms of scarlet flame. Out of its secret hiding place had crept his Soul, and Desire had come to meet it on the way" (Wilde, *Gray* 61). Lord Henry continues on with this flower-like description of Dorian - something most beautiful, most delicate, and most fragile. He captures his entire essence of being: "He was like one of those gracious figures in a pageant or a play, whose jokes seem to be remote from one, but whose sorrows stir one's sense of beauty, and whose wounds are like red roses" (Wilde, *Gray* 64). Lord Henry captures Dorian Gray completely, flawlessly - and makes it quite clear that Dorian is above reproach: "Soul and body, body and soul - how mysterious they were! There was an animalism in the soul, and the body had its moments of spirituality" (Wilde, *Gray* 64).

In addition to Dorian's own spirituality, Sibyl Vane has a personal connection not only with Dorian Gray but also with her only sibling, Jim; both connections are quite different. Similar to Dorian and Sibyl's relationship, this brother-sister relationship is rather sentimental but a bit odd too. Making trips to a seedy part of the city splits Dorian as a wealthy

gentleman and Dorian as symbol. The reader is able to see two different views of Dorian Gray. "Wilde's understanding of the city is clearly a dualistic one that simultaneously echoes and emphasizes the division between Dorian and the portrait" (Walker 92). In Wilde's short tales, we also see the depiction of relationship themes - but to a somewhat less possessive and obsessive extent.

Although the task to help the mother and her boy is the Prince's doing in "The Happy Prince," the Swallow feels elevated during his journey to the poor house. He has taken a ruby out of the Prince's sword and will give it to the mother. "The swallow's journey enacts what nineteenth-century writers and campaigners from the late 1840s onwards, and with renewed determination in the 1880s saw and showed to others: the unequal ownership and distribution of wealth" (Youngs 172). The strength of non-monetary wealth is so strong in this scene that it fills the air: the Swallow sees the "white marble angels" and hears two lovers talk about the "wonderful stars" (Wilde, "Happy" 14). The angels and the stars offer beauty to the Swallow; they affect his soul and move him on. By contrast, he comes upon another scene that bothers him: he "saw the two old Jews bargaining with each other, and weighing out money in copper scales" (Wilde, "Happy" 14). The effect of this scene is

hard on him because he has the poor, ill boy on his mind while the two old men focus on money.

With a bit of strangeness to it, the relationship between Sibyl and her brother is tight, more so on his part than on hers. "Wilde parallels Dorian's story with the story of the Vane siblings, Sibyl and James, who both encounter Dorian and are eventually destroyed by his influence in their lives" (Scheible 139). Again, a sense of a spiritual connection is seen between the two characters. To Jim, this relationship means more than wealth itself. It can be felt through Wilde's words: "her fingers strayed through his hair, he softened, and kissed her with real affection" (Wilde, *Gray* 77). Their feelings are so genuine that they are palpable. Jim seems to endure any hardship or unpleasantness in the story because his love for Sibyl sustains him. Even in the most unpleasant environment, Jim seems not to care for he knows Sibyl is around. This is quite clear to the reader: "[He] sat down to his meagre meal. The flies buzzed around the table, and crawled over the stained cloth" (Wilde, *Gray* 78). The image of the "stained cloth" makes us wonder whether Sibyl's own life has become stained through her association with Dorian Gray.

As the Swallow and the Prince's relationship grows, so does the Prince's kindness. He helps a little girl out to avoid a

beating from her father by giving her his other eye. This act of generosity only intensifies the relationship between the Prince and the Swallow because now the Prince is blind, and the Swallow cannot possibly leave his vulnerable friend alone to fend for himself - something Sibyl's brother feels when he must leave her. Their love is unconditional; they share the same feelings for the "suffering of men and women" (Wilde, "Happy" 19). The "beggars" and the "starving children" affect them both (Wilde, "Happy" 19). The Prince's soul is too good to describe and goes unmatched. He insists that the Swallow remove the "fine gold" in which he is covered and give it to the "poor" (Wilde, "Happy" 19).

On a different note, when Basil has a conversation with Lord Henry about Dorian's planned marriage to Sibyl, a hint of the monetary wealth begins to seep out and set a different tone: "But think of Dorian's birth, and position, and wealth. It would be absurd for him to marry so much beneath him" (Wilde, *Gray* 81). It is quite obvious what is important to Basil right here, and this attitude speaks clearly to the theme of wealth for the sake of wealth.

As the Swallow ventures off, he encounters the Happy Prince, who is full of tears but helps him to understand the value of life and of human compassion. The Prince reflects on

the past to understand the present: "When I was alive and had a human heart, I did not know what tears were, for I lived in the Palace of Sans-Sauci, where sorrow is not allowed to enter" (Wilde, "Happy" 12). The Prince has suffered for his past behavior and is now repenting - a kind of repenting that is not really seen in *Dorian Gray*.

Additionally, one critic says that the "Prince" story "is a semi-autobiographical account of the the author's 'change of heart,' resulting in his sudden contempt for 'hedonism and aestheticism'" (Jones 884). When the Prince was alive, he never looked beyond his own existence and environment. He says, "Round the garden ran a very lofty wall, but I never cared to ask what lay beyond it, everything about me was so beautiful" (Wilde, "Happy" 12). "[T]his rests on the discovery of poverty and gains its effects from the juxtaposition of wealth and deprivation (Youngs 171). The Prince's self-reflection is full of regret and remorse. "[I]t seems reasonable to think that the preoccupation with social justice that manifests in 'The Happy Prince'" makes perfect sense (Cavendish-Jones (934). He now realizes that he has not contributed to his city or society one bit: "And now that I am dead they have set me up here so high that I can see all the ugliness and all the misery of my city, and though my heart is

made of lead yet I cannot choose but weep" (Wilde, "Happy" 12). Although the story reflects sadness and suffering, it "avoid[s] the vivid cruelty and violence that are present in [Wilde's] 'Pomegranates'" (Ruggaber 147).

Both Lord Henry and Dorian, of course, have different opinions when it comes to pleasure. Dorian experiences his pleasure through another person: Sibyl. He connects her soul to a particular kind of wealth by saying, "I want to place her on a pedestal of gold, and to see the world worship the woman who is mine" (Wilde, *Gray* 85). Lord Henry, naturally, says something that is selfish: "To be good is to be in harmony with one's self" (Wilde, *Gray* 85); but Dorian sees it differently: "if one lives merely for one's self, Harry, one pays a terrible price for doing so" (Wilde, *Gray* 86). Lord Henry reverts back to money and things: "Beautiful sins, like beautiful things, are the privilege of the rich" (Wilde, *Gray* 86). At this point in the novel, Dorian is quite conscious of people and of their behavior; he expresses the opposite of what Lord Henry seems to think. Dorian has stated that "pleasure is to adore some one" (Wilde, *Gray* 86). Indeed, he feels that way about Sibyl and even elaborates on it: "women give to men the very gold of their lives" (Wilde, *Gray* 87). Dorian has used the word "gold" twice now in reference to a higher pleasure, a higher meaning.

Now that he is planted on top of a tall column, the Prince sees beautiful qualities in people and wishes to redeem himself for what he had lacked while he was alive. He begins to do this by helping a woman who is "thin and worn" and has "coarse, red hands, all pricked by the needle, for she is a seamstress" (Wilde, "Happy" 13). She is quite poor, and it disturbs the Prince that she "is embroidering passion-flowers on a satin gown for the loveliest of the Queen's maids-of-honor" because next to her lies her little boy who is ill (Wilde, "Happy" 13). His drive to help the woman who cannot afford to buy oranges for the boy who is requesting them is full of determination. He relies heavily on the Swallow to fulfill a task that he himself cannot do because his "feet are fastened to [a] pedestal" (Wilde, "Happy" 13).

In "The Devoted Friend," Wilde shows us that no matter how wonderful a devoted friendships is, it can, however, be one-sided and, in the end, lead to self-destruction. Hans is a prime example of just that. Flowers remain as an important symbol in this story as Hans keeps a lovely garden full of them. Nature, here, provides beauty to the soul and encourages kindness: "one flower taking another flower's place, so that there were always beautiful things to look at, and pleasant odours to smell" (Wilde, "Devoted" 42). Hans's garden itself

and the beautiful flowers in it are energy and motivation for him, making him want to do acts of kindness for others.

Of course, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the physical beauty is what appeals to Dorian. It is the artwork itself that penetrates his spirits and lives in him. Regarding Sibyl, he sees the beauty in something very fine: "Her body swayed, while she danced, as a plant sways in the water. The curves of her throat were the curves of a white lily. Her hands seemed to be made of cool ivory" (Wilde, *Gray* 91). After this vivid description, "[t]he question involved is a crucial one for both psychology and literature: does the destructive imagination, which seeks to examine the nature of beauty by isolating its component parts, create a state of chaos where where beauty can never exist?" (Gordon. 360). Having a destructive imagination himself, Dorian does just that because he attaches these soft plants to her features, which emphasize her spirit and bring out her softness and kindness. He produces this god-like image of her as if she were this moving spirit that cannot be touched. Her soul and spirit mean everything to him and have a profound effect on him. Her image is striking: "She looked charming when she came out of the moonlight" (Wilde, *Gray* 91). The moonlight is a reflection of her total being and cannot be

replaced by anything tangible - one of Wilde's main emphases in his stories.

This overwhelming feeling is not only seen in *Dorian Gray* but also in the "Happy Prince." Once a good deed has been done by the Swallow, the feeling is overwhelming on both ends. The Swallow flies over the boy, "fanning the boy's forehead with his wings" (Wilde, "Happy" 14). The Swallow himself wants to help the boy - the Prince gives a Ruby; he gives his wings to make that help possible. After the Swallow is finished, he experiences an overwhelming sensation himself. He says, "It's curious, but I feel quite warm now, although it is so cold" (Wilde, "Happy" 15). Because of his unconditional compassion, he now is relieved from an unwanted, harmful feeling: coldness. This feeling also produces a stamina in him that sustains his energy so that he can continue to make these charitable trips.

After reflecting on the garden's bleak condition, the Giant is given an opportunity to revitalize his garden into spring beauty. The children reappear and so does spring: "the birds were flying about and twittering with delight, and the flowers were looking up through the green grass and laughing" (Wilde, "Selfish" 36). The scene makes the Giant happy and gives him a fresh perspective on life. He, however, sees a little boy

"crying bitterly," which affects his emotions (Wilde, "Selfish" 36). The Giant does not realize it yet, but this little boy is a reflection of his own future and plays an important part in his life. The children bring life back into the garden and into the Giant's life; after his first appearance, the little boy never returns. This saddens the Giant because the boy has made a personal impression on him - and not to see him again makes the Giant long for him.

Before the actual rejuvenation of the Giant's garden, Wilde, nevertheless, gives us a look at pure selfishness, and clearly shows us how, over time, this selfish behavior overtakes the Giant's life, which brings out rapid deterioration all around him. However, the little boy in the garden appears like a "christlike" figure "who emanate[s] new life; [he] function[s] in the narrative like Jungian archetypes to 'pave the way for future change in personality'" (Goodenough 350). Nature brings happiness to the children who sit in the Giant's garden: "the birds sat on the trees and sang so sweetly" (Wilde, "Selfish" 33). The idea that nature offers something gratifying is embedded in this story. It is an absorbed wealth that exists without money.

As we see deterioration unfold in the "Giant" story, we see it unfold twice as fast in the *Gray* novel. Dorian's feelings

for Sibyl begin to alter, and deterioration begins to settle in right after Lord Henry says that Sibyl "plays Juliet like a wooden doll" (Wilde, Gray 93). Once Sibyl tells Dorian why her acting, which he cherishes so much, has changed, his own world changes. She says, "I might mimic a passion that I do not feel, but I cannot mimic one that burns me like fire" (Wilde, Gray 95). This devastates Dorian and makes his passion for her quickly decline: "He flung himself down on the sofa, and turned away his face" (Wilde, Gray 95). The news is so disturbing to him that he is destroyed by it. "You have killed my love," he muttered (Wilde, Gray 95). "When Sibyl claims to have found her soul by falling in love with Dorian, she loses all ability to represent, rendering herself valueless in his eyes" (Humphreys 525).

Ironically, Sibyl's openness is just one turning point in Dorian's life: it rapidly begins to deteriorate on all levels. His love has been killed as well his passion for life. The feeling is so strong that "a shudder ran through him" (Wilde, Gray 95). Until now, it has always been about that unique feeling - the intangible. He presently feels defeated, emotionless, and collapsed: "You used to stir my imagination. Now you don't even stir my curiosity. You simply produce no effect" (Wilde, Gray 96). These turbulent feelings take a toll

on both of them, ultimately resulting in ruins. The cruelty with which Dorian treats Sibyl is unbearable and ultimately self-destructive: "Without your art you are nothing" (Wilde, *Gray* 96). This is said with such venom that it burns a hole through Dorian's soul.

Naturally, in "The Devoted Friend," Wilde wants us to question what Han's friend, the Miller, in the story suggests about friendship - and about relationships in general. "The relationship between Hugh the Miller and little Hans in 'The Devoted Friend' comprises Hugh's exploitation and Han's sacrifice of his material possessions, two tropes which recall happier Andersen and Grimm stories in which such sacrifice ultimately is rewarded with good fortune and exploitation is punished, often by death" (Marsh 74). The Miller seems to be saying that it is about the "unselfishness of friendship" (Wilde, "Devoted" 43). This is not what we see in the Miller - his friendship is surely one-sided and greedy. When he realizes that Hans is in trouble, his reply is not one of a devoted friend: "for when people are in trouble they should be left alone and not be bothered by visitors" (Wilde, "Devoted" 43). It seems that the Miller does not want to help his so-called friend; he certainly wants to take from him. At some point in the spring, the Miller will visit Hans and expect

a "large basket of primroses" from Hans, which will make Hans very happy to give to Miller (Wilde, "Devoted" 43).

After his cruel ordeal with Sibyl Vane in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Dorian begins to take notice of a change that is occurring in his own life. He sees a change in the portrait that Basil has done for him; this change reflects a slow deterioration not only in the portrait but also in his own personal life: "[c]ontinual exercise of negative qualities--as in the case of a figure like Dorian Gray--could result in negative changes to the face. In these formations, phrenology could be a helpful tool to man, meant not to limit his potential, but to reveal the truth of the soul through readable bodily signs" (Marshall 163).

Between Dorian's wish to remain young forever and his cruel actions upon others, the gods have begun to take revenge upon him. This transformation is occurring before his own very eyes: "The expression looked different. One would have said that there was a touch of cruelty in the mouth. It was certainly strange" (Wilde, *Gray* 99). Indeed, it is strange but understandably so. Dorian's bad thoughts and behavior are now being reflected in his picture - something he will watch with his own eyes and something by which he will be seriously affected. Viewing this horrible change is an awful experience

for Dorian: "The quivering, ardent sunlight showed showed him the lines of cruelty round the mouth as clearly as if he had been looking into a mirror after he had done some dreadful thing" (Wilde, *Gray* 99). His vicious attack on Sibyl Vane is the result of this gruesome change; but, somehow, Wilde always reminds us that the beauty which surrounds us has nothing to do with personal wealth or gain: "The birds that were singing in the dew-drenched garden seemed to be telling the flowers about her" (Wilde, *Gray* 101). Beauty also plays an important role in Dorian's life: "It is the supernatural power of his magical portrait that allows him to preserve his beautiful face and spotless reputation" (Marshall 168).

Unfortunately, Dorian's life begins to deteriorate after the physical features of the picture begin to occur. "The exchange between Dorian Gray and his portrait in Wilde's novel makes the verbal representation of visual art both a medium for the the exchange of influence between characters and a substitute for character itself" (Humphreys 524). His wish to keep young and his selfish behavior start the process. He asks, "Was there some subtle affinity between the chemical atoms, that shaped themselves into form and colour on the canvas, and the soul that was within him?" (Wilde, *Gray* 104). His soul has become infected, diseased. Dorian realizes that his life has

begun to change, and that it will never be the same: "But here was a visible sign of degradation of 'sin.' Here was an ever-present sign of the ruin men brought upon their souls" (Wilde, *Gray* 105). He now has to deal with his "conscience" (Wilde, *Gray* 106). To do this will destroy him only further.

Nevertheless, nature continues to provide Dorian with comfort after he discovers that Sibyl is dead: "Yet the roses are not less lovely for all that. The birds sing just as happily in my garden" (Wilde, *Gray* 108). Still, he is able to make the connection between Sibyl's death and his actions: "The vicious cruelty that marred the fine lines of the mouth had, no doubt, appeared at the very moment the girl had drunk the poison" (Wilde, *Gray* 114).

Passing along non-monetary wealth, however, still continues with the Happy Prince. He uses flowers to show how beauty and love are important to one's existence; he uses both effectively, in general; but, here, the flowers show a disintegration in a man's life. The Prince sees a young man and "by his side there is a bunch of withered violets" (Wilde, "Happy" 16). He is "hungry" and "cold" and unable to finish writing a play "(Wilde, "Happy" 16). The Prince, however, eliminates all this by offering a sapphire from one of his eyes; he is willing to disassemble his body to help others and make their lives better.

This gesture only tightens the Prince's belief that the soul is to be relied upon to assist others - no matter what one has to give up. He simply wants to produce non-monetary wealth such as joy.

Oddly enough, "The Happy Prince" presents us with a similar time-destruction theme as we see in Wilde's other stories. To see time move on, is to see both the Happy Prince and the Swallow disintegrate. Those for whom they have made sacrifices, in this case, have taken a toll on them. The Prince now looks "dull and grey"; he has been stripped of his ornamental wealth to bring happiness to the less fortunate (Wilde, "Happy" 20). The Swallow's act of kindness brings him closer to death for he grows "colder and colder" (Wilde, "Happy" 20). The last surge of love between them - a kiss - results in the Swallow's death, dropping "down dead at his [the Prince's] feet" (Wilde, "Happy" 20). The result of his death breaks the Prince's heart, and he too dies: "the leaden heart had snapped right in two" (Wilde, "Happy" 21). This is no coincidence for they have finished their task. In this case, "Wilde rewards his characters' good deeds and burgeoning moral sensibilities with peremptory death" (Jones 887).

In the complex plot of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the non-monetary wealth triggers destruction. It puts the wheels into

motion and results in disaster. The thought itself is harmful as well as the perpetual conversation about it. Basil sums it up:

Dorian, from the moment I met you. your personality had the most extraordinary influence over me. I was dominated, soul, brain, and power by you. You became to me the visible incarnation of that unseen ideal whose memory haunts us artists like an exquisite dream. I worshiped you. I grew jealous of every one to whom you spoke. I wanted to have you all to myself.

(Wilde, *Gray* 124)

Subconsciously, Dorian has internalized Basil's feelings since the beginning of their relationship, which has, ultimately, ended badly.

Gray reflects on beauty and all that Basil has said to him. He is, now, quite conscious of its effects. He grows "more and more enamoured of his own beauty, more and more interested in the corruption of his own soul" (Wilde, *Gray* 139). He is, however, in tune of what he is occurring: he does "examine with minute care, and sometimes with a monstrous and terrible delight, the hideous lines that seared the wrinkling forehead or crawled around the heavy sensual mouth, wondering sometimes which were the more horrible, the signs of sin or the signs of

age" (Wilde, *Gray* 139). At this point, Dorian is truly aware of the catastrophic results of this thinking. One of the "central themes" in the story is [t]hat one is damned for selling one's soul to the devil" regardless of the reason (Oates 420). He is also aware that "the senses, no less than the soul, have their spiritual mysteries to reveal," which is an undertaking for Dorian (Wilde, *Gray* 145). Over time, little hints begin to reveal themselves and produce a thought or two that make his awareness very acute. Although his portrait shows "foulness" and "ugliness," Dorian's own soul bears the weight of his deeds - not the portrait itself (Wilde, *Gray* 152).

As the story progresses, Dorian's soul becomes more and more important to him. Showing the portrait to Basil, finally, so that he can see Dorian's soul is a way for Dorian to cleanse it. Dorian seems not to realize that neither he nor Basil can see his soul - "only God can do that" (Wilde, *Gray* 165). He wants to place the burden onto Basil by showing him the portrait he has painted of him: "that the man who had painted the portrait that was the organ of his shame was to be 'burdened' for the rest of his life with the hideous memory of what he had done" (Wilde, *Gray* 165). The picture "represents that authentic, Aries between private and public, internal and external, identity and disidentity" (Walker 106). Dorian needs

to lift the weight off his own shoulders to alleviate some of his pain and agony.

In "The Devoted Friend," we also see this selfish act of trying to blame someone else. The Miller's decision not to invite Hans to his home is purely selfish and soulless. He does not want to give up anything of himself unless he benefits from it. He is quite transparent about this: "if little Hans came up here, and saw our warm fire, and our good supper, and our great cask of red wine, he might get envious, and envy is a most terrible thing, and would spoil anyone's nature" (Wilde, "Devoted" 44). This is an attitude that will destroy a relationship because there is absolutely no reciprocity - not to mention its focus on materialism. It is solely based on what Hans can do for the Miller.

During the winter, for example, Hans suffers financially through a tough winter and needs to sell some of his personal objects to make ends meet; the Miller is indifferent toward this hardship. His so-called generosity is warped: he is willing to give Hans his wheelbarrow, which is "not in very good repair" (Wilde, "Devoted" 47). The Miller is a complete user and takes advantage of kind-hearted Hans. He believes that one good gesture needs to be returned, but it is always in his

favor: "true friendship never notices things like that," according to the Miller (Wilde, "Devoted" 47).

After the two deaths occur in "The Happy Prince," the mayor of the town shows nothing but greed and selfishness - a theme with which we are now all too familiar. The Prince and the Shallow have given up their souls to help the needy; the mayor now looks upon the Prince as "shabby" and "a little better than a beggar" (Wilde, "Happy" 21). Because the Prince is "no longer beautiful he is no longer useful," according to the mayor (Wilde, "Happy" 21). This attitude is one of self-importance and greed. Although the bird and the Prince have been cast aside because they have deteriorated and destroyed themselves for wealth beyond the typical meaning of wealth (money), their souls go on forever: the "broken lead heart will not melt in the furnace" (Wilde, "Happy" 22). Wilde shows us that the good soul is rewarded infinitely: "the Prince and the bird are rewarded with God's love for their sacrificial charity" (Youngs 174).

Without question, in "The Selfish Giant," the Giant's selfishness creates an unpleasantness in his life once he scares the children away and makes this remark: "My own garden is my own garden, and I want nobody to play in but myself" (Wilde, "Selfish" 34). He is selfish and wants to keep that beauty all to himself; but the Giant becomes really disappointed because

his actions are being retaliated against by the gods: "Then the Spring came, and all over the country there were little blossoms and little birds. Only in the garden of the Selfish Giant was still winter" (Wilde, "Selfish" 34). He sees that his lovely garden never returns to spring. "The apt motif of the garden is used [. . .] to encapsulate the ambivalence of Wilde's tales, simultaneously pure and innocent but also depicting the violence of man's control over nature and the artificiality of beauty" (Talairach-Vielmas 392). His cold heart has produced this negative effect.

According to Dorian, though, the portrait resembles the "face of [his] soul; he cannot bear to see it" (Wilde, *Gray* 169). Dorian succumbs to a madness while being in the room both with Basil and the portrait. It is too much for him to bear, and he feels compelled to lash out at the creator of his portrait by digging "the knife into the great vein that is behind the ear, crushing the man's head down on the table, and stabbing again and again" (Wilde, *Gray* 171). This violent act of stabbing is the only way that Dorian thinks he can wipe out anything within him which is devious. "The woodwork creaked, and seemed to cry out as if in pain"; but it was Dorian himself crying out (Wilde, *Gray* 172).

After Basil is murdered, Dorian has to endure much mental strain. He is no longer the same Dorian. He is now reflecting on his actions: "Dorian Gray watched with 'listless' eyes the sordid shame of the great city, and now and then he repeated to himself the words that Lord Henry [. . .], 'To cure the soul by means of the senses, and the senses by means of the soul'" (Wilde, *Gray* 199). Dorian must reckon not only with himself but also with his soul. This is a hard task for him because he must watch his portrait alter as he does this. He knows that "innocent blood had been spilt" and that "forgiveness" is not easy (Wilde, *Gray* 200). As a punishment, he sees "the eyes of Basil Hallward looking at him" as a reminder of his evil deed - cold-blooded murder (Wilde, *Gray* 203). The deed is so heinous that he is unable "to escape from himself," which makes life intolerable for him (Wilde, *Gray* 203).

Dorian, unquestionably, has lost self-control. He has made self-enriching decisions about his life, including murdering Basil. Now, he has "paid his own price for living it" (Wilde, *Gray* 205). He has shown that he has "fearful impulses": knifing Basil to death is just one prime example of this (Wilde, *Gray* 205). Dorian's soul has been blackened; he feels this strongly because he has lost control of his life and of himself:

There are moments, psychologists tell us, when the passion for sin, or for what the world calls sin, so dominates a nature, that every fibre of the body, as every cell of the brain, seems to be instinct with fearful impulses. Men and women at such moments lost the freedom of their will. They move to their terrible end as automations move. Choice is taken from them, and conscience is either killed, or, if it lives at all, lives but to give rebellion its fascination, and disobedience its charm.

(Wilde, *Gray* 205)

This is exactly what has happened to Dorian - his nature is being dominated by his sin, and he has no more freedom and choice, judging by the way he lurks around day by day.

Plainly, Dorian's emotions are beginning to affect his soul violently. His soul has begun to self-destruct, and it is evident. A "dull sound of a heavy fall" awakens Dorian to his demise, which is long overdue (Wilde, *Gray* 215). The writing is on the wall; Dorian senses this very strongly. Obviously, "Dorian pays the price for his self-indulgence and recklessness as his assault on the painting brings about his own destruction" (Gillespie 22). During one of his conversations with Lord Henry, he acknowledges his tragic ending after speaking about

the accidental shooting of Sibyl's brother: "I feel as if something horrible were going to happen to some of us" (Wilde, *Gray* 220). He also adds, "To myself, perhaps" (Wilde, *Gray* 220). He feels and actually knows that his demise is not too far off.

Appropriately, Dorian makes reference to the play *Hamlet*. Interestingly, Dorian himself is similar to Hamlet: "Like a painting of a sorrow, / A face without a heart" (Wilde, *Gray* 232). These two lines are Dorian: sorrowful and heartless. He has selfishly destroyed multiple lives, including the life of James Vane. Soul redemption is not an option for him. To Lord Henry, he says: "The soul is a terrible reality. It can be bought, and sold, and bartered away. It can be poisoned, or made perfect" (Wilde, *Gray* 233). Dorian's soul has been poisoned because of his own doing.

Along the same lines, the Miller soaks his relationship with Hans for all that it is worth in "Devoted Friend." Without actually saying it, the Miller puts a price on his friendship with Hans. He does not do what he preaches: "but I should have thought that friendship, true friendship, was quite free from selfishness of any kind" (Wilde, "Devoted" 48). He is cruel and demanding. After Hans says he is unable to run an errand, the Miller says to Hans that "considering I am going to give you my

wheelbarrow, it is rather unfriendly of you to refuse" (Wilde, "Devoted" 49). The Miller is about himself and his broken-down wheelbarrow that he has offered to give Hans. He is relentless in his demands of Hans. He calls him "lazy," "idle," and "sluggish" (Wilde, "Devoted" 49).

At the end of the *Gray* story, Dorian faces a hard reality and finds it unendurable. His soul feels this effect: "[h]e loathed his own beauty, and flinging the mirror on the floor crushed it into silver splinters beneath his heel. It was his beauty that had ruined him, his beauty and the youth that he had prayed for" (Wilde, *Gray* 238). His being vain and his acting selfishly have caused him not to be himself - his true self has been covered up just like the "purple satin coverlet heavily embroidered with gold satin" that drapes over his portrait (Wilde, *Gray* 129). He says that "[h]is beauty had been to him but a mask"; it is this mask that has prevented him from living a happy, fulfilling life (Wilde, *Gray* 238).

Undeniably, even when it comes to the Giant, the gods work in mysterious ways. He wakes up only to see that the "Spring [was] asleep and that the flowers were resting" (Wilde, "Selfish" 38). Being "asleep" and "resting" are very soon going to approach the Giant - his time is near. The little boy reappears in spirit-form to come for Giant, and his message is

both sentimental and moving as if to reward the Giant for opening up his garden to the children and bringing warmth and love to them: "You let me once play in your garden, to-day you shall come with me to my garden, which is Paradise" (Wilde, "Selfish" 39). "When the Giant sees the child whose love has inspired him to become unselfish, the child reveals 'the wounds of Love' in his palms and feet and invites the Giant to play with him in Paradise" (Wood 166). After that, the Giant is found "lying dead under the tree, all covered with white blossoms" (Wilde, "Selfish" 39). His soul has been redeemed: he has been forgiven, rewarded, and given eternal beauty by which to be surrounded - those "white blossoms." It is clear that the "tale depicts Christ as a child whose innocence is captivating even to gruff old giants and whose stigmata reflects not man's insensitivity or even Christ's suffering but rather Christ's capacity for love (Quintus 519).

As Wilde subtly shows us in his stories, does monetary wealth still override non-monetary wealth in "The Nightingale and the Rose"? Wilde puts this realistically and cruelly. After all this agony of retrieving a red rose, the student receives an unforgettable jolt: when he approaches the girl with the red rose, she says, "I am afraid it will not go with my dress, and, besides, the Chamberlain's nephew has sent me some

real jewels, and everyone knows that jewels cost far more than flowers" (Wilde, "Nightingale" 31). The soul, here, is destroyed; the great theory of love is now non-existent. "What a silly thing love is," says the girl to the student (Wilde, "Nightingale" 31). In his mind, love has now become tangible - a thing of monetary value.

Returning to nature in many of his stories, Wilde reminds us of its beauty in "The Devoted Friend," especially the beauty of flowers. Subconsciously, Hans's flowers are more important to him than the Miller is: "he was afraid his flowers would think he had forgotten them" (Wilde, "Devoted" 52). This love for his flowers is important to Hans because nature brings more joy and happiness to him than people do. However, he, at this point, continues to think that the Miller is his "best friend" (Wilde, "Devoted" 52). On a rough journey to fetch a doctor for the Miller's son, Hans "was drowned" (Wilde, "Devoted" 54). He has needlessly destroyed himself for the Miller's sake, who is only concerned about the future of his wheelbarrow.

To be tortured mentally and physically is unbearable to Dorian Gray. As soon as he sees the portrait, which is a true reflection of himself, there is "a cry of pain" that comes from him (Wilde, *Gray* 239). He sees a "look of cunning, and in the

mouth the curved wrinkle of a hypocrite"; hypocrisy has been part of his life for a great while. He wishes to rid himself of all the evilness that he feels inside him, so that he is "[n]o longer forced to bear the physical markings of his own compromised soul" (Ferguson 471). He takes the same knife that killed Basil and stabs the painting, hoping to kill "this monstrous soul-life" (Wilde, *Gray* 241). The stabbing of the portrait, nonetheless, has nothing to do with Basil and everything to do with Dorian. Basil was not the evil person; Dorian was. "{W]hen Dorian plunges the knife into the painting in the final passage of the novel a personal transgressive odyssey is brought abruptly to an end: the formal divisions between inside and out, the public and the private are reestablished" (Cook 39). After Dorian stabs his portrait with the knife, this "transgressive odyssey" seems to be exactly what has happened to Dorian: it is his own epiphany when his body and soul become reunited again.

In all of Oscar Wilde's stories, we see this interwoven theme of deterioration and self-destruction of the soul for multiple reasons. Usually, the characters' self-destruction has nothing to do with selfishness but rather to help others. For example, Hans, the Happy Prince, and the Nightingale prove this point. They all put others ahead of themselves. Dorian Gray

and the selfish Giant are examples, for the most part, of self-destruction based on personal greed and evil. These motives apply to the selfish Giant to a lesser extent, however. What seems fascinating, though, is that no matter what the motives are these characters all wind up dead. Dorian's death is the most tragic, considering that he was the most devious and evil of the bunch.

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