

# On the Split Personalities of the Main Characters in the Picture of Dorian Gray

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**Abstract:** The three male characters in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* represent three totally different personalities, corresponding the id, ego and superego in Freud's psychological theory. Dorian Gray, attracted by the voluptuous life of the upper society, pursues pleasure regardless of the limitation of social morality. He embodies the id which operates according to the pleasure principle; Lord Henry, the advocate of hedonism, is the incarnation of the ego which functions with the rational part of mind and operates according to the reality principle; Basil operates according to the moral principle, as the epitome of the superego which superintends and standardizes people's behavior. The thesis tends to analyze the split personalities of the three characters from the perspective of Freud's theory of psychoanalysis.

**Key words:** oscar Wilde, freud, ego, id, super-ego

## Introduction

Oscar Wilde is a controversial writer in the history of English literature. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was known as the 'immoral monster' in a long time because of the hint of homosexuality and immoral crimes, which are opposite to the rigorous and conservative social morality of the Victorian era. But today, the pluralistic social value system gives a proper evaluation to Oscar Wilde, which enables us to stand in the fair and objective aesthetic position to reread *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

During the 20th century, Sigmund Freud (1962) proposed that the human psyche could be divided into three parts: Id, ego and super-ego. He discussed this model in the 1920 essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, and fully elaborated upon it in *The Ego and the Id*.

There is a linkage between the main characters in the novel and the three terms of Freud's theory. By analyzing the personalities of the three main characters with the psychoanalysis, we can find that the novel is to some extent like a biography of Oscar Wilde, and the personalities of the three characters are actually the split of the author's own personality.

## The Psychological Foundation of Oscar Wilde's Aestheticism

Oscar Wilde is no doubt a versatile writer in English literature. He is well known for his aesthetic ideas and his aesthetic way of life. However, he is such a complicated writer that even after one hundred years since he died, Oscar Wilde still remains one of the most controversial writers in the literary circle. To know better about the factors that contributes to the split of Wilde's personality, I have to mention the life background of the author.

Oscar Wilde was an Irish poet, dramatist, novelist, essayist and critic. He was the chief advocate of the aesthetic movement which based on the principle of 'art for art's sake'. He was born on October

16, 1854 in Dublin. Oscar Wilde received his early education at the Trinity College, Dublin. As a teenager he was exposed to the brilliant talk of the brilliant literary talk of the day at his mother's Dublin salon. He entered Magdalen College, Oxford in 1874. During his college life, Oscar Wilde proved himself to be a splendid classicist under the influence of his two tutors, John Ruskin and Walter Pater. The latter was an important precursor of aestheticism in British. As a spokesman for aestheticism, he tried his hand at various literary activities: he published a book of poems, lectured in the United States and Canada on the new "English Renaissance in Art", and then returned to London where he worked prolifically as a journalist. Known for his biting wit, flamboyant dress and glittering conversation, Wilde became one of the best-known writers of his day.

When Wilde rose to the summit of his fame as a poet, critic, playwright and novelist in the late 19th century, he was charged of indecency in one of the most sensational court trails of the century. In 1891 Oscar met Lord Alfred Douglas, who immediately became an intimate friend to him; they made a noticeable appearance in front of the British upper-class with their intimate relationship and luxurious way of life. In 1895, Oscar found a card of Queensberry, father of Douglas, on which were written, 'To Oscar Wilde, posing Sodomite'. Wilde applied for evidence for Queensberry's arrest, for publishing a libel. On April 5, Queensberry was acquitted and Wilde was arrested. Afterwards he was convicted of indecency and was sentenced to two years' imprisonment with hard labor. He was released from prison on May 19. Financially bankrupted and spiritually depressed; Oscar Wilde went to Paris and spent the rest of his life there. He was converted to Roman Catholicism before his died of meningitis on November 30, 1900.

The contradiction of the ego, id and superego exists throughout Oscar's lifetime. On the one hand, it is his id that guides him to promote the slogan that art has nothing to do with morality. On the

other hand, his superego expresses his sincere care about the human morality. The death of Dorian and the eternal of the picture in the end demonstrates his hope that the superego can finally defeat the id.

### **Freud's Psychological Theory Reflected in the Picture of Dorian Gray**

#### **1. Three Elements of Personalities in Freudian Psychoanalytic Theory**

According to the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud's structural theory, the id, ego and superego are three divisions of personality.

The id is fully unconscious, it consists of instincts and works according to the pleasure principle, which means it always looks for pleasure and avoids pain. The popular interpretation of the id is not that it convinces the mind to neglect the social criterion, but in itself just doesn't take the social criterion into account when thinking or acting. In Freud's words, the id is 'a chaos, a cauldron of seething excitement with no organization and no unified will, only an impulsion to obtain satisfaction for the instinctual needs, in accordance with the pleasure principle'. It is the primitive mind, containing all the basic needs and feelings, so that its main motive is self-survival and pursuing whatever necessary to achieve the goal. When the id is too strong, it makes one bound up in self-gratification and uncaring to others. We can immediately connect it with Dorian's experience. As an innocent young man at first and as a murderer in the end, the development of Dorian's consciousness well exemplified the features of the id.

The ego is mostly conscious; it forms as children experience the requirements and constraints of reality. It has various of meanings, it can mean someone's self-esteem, an inflated sense of self-value, or in philosophical terms, one's self. Freud associated the word with a set of psychological functions, such as judgment, reality-testing, control, tolerance, planning, defense, synthesis of information and memory. In Freud's theory, the ego mediates among the id, the superego and the outside world. It follows the reality principle and tries to bring the individual pleasure within the criterion of society. The reality principle weighs the costs and benefits of an action when one is to make a decision. The ego tries to meet the id's desires in a realistic and socially proper way. It shows the need for compromise and negotiation between the id and the superego, so its task is to make a balance between inner desires, morals and reality while satisfying the id and the superego. It is the rational self and mediates between the id and the superego; therefore it denies both instant and delaying of gratification. If the ego is personified, it will be like a servant of three masters, who are the id, the superego and the external world. It must do its best to meet all their demands, so that it is constantly confronted with the danger of causing discontent on two other sides. In the novel Henry is obviously fonder of staying with Dorian and meeting his pleasure, though he maintains the close friendship with Basil. When the ego is too strong, it makes one extremely rational and efficient, but cold, boring and distant.

The superego tends to in opposition to the desires of the id

because of their conflicting objectives. It acts as the conscious since it maintains our sense of morality and the prohibition of social taboos. It decides whether the id's behavior will abide by moral standards. Freud stated that 'the superego is the representative of all moral restrictions, the advocate of the impulse towards perfection, in short it is as much as we have been able to apprehend psychologically of what people call the higher things in human life.' It becomes an embodiment of parental and social values. The superego constantly struggle for perfection even though the perfection ideal is far from reality. It contains two parts: the ego ideal and conscious. The ego ideal is the rules and standards for good behavior, he conscience is the inner voice that tells us when we have done something wrong. Generally speaking, the ego ideal is what a child's parents approve of while the conscious is all the things that a child feels his parents will disapprove of. In the novel Basil blames Henry for his tempting Dorian to lead a depraved and immoral life, he supervises their actions and does his best to bring Dorian out of Henry's control, so the role that Basil plays just like the superego. When the superego is too strong, it makes one feel guilty all the time, which is the reason why Dorian feels regret and guilty when he finds his portrait becoming uglier after he has done those immoral things.

#### **2. The Relationship of the Id, Ego and Superego**

Freud had used an interesting metaphor to exemplify the relationship between the id and ego: the id was like a horse and the ego the rider. The horse provided the energy while the rider decided the direction towards which the horse went. However, the horse would sometimes make its own decision in unfavorable conditions, and then the two fought with each other until one of them gave in.

As we all know, the superego tends to stand in opposition to the desire of the id because of their conflicting objectives, and is aggressive towards the ego. It strives to make the ego acts within idealistic criterion rather than realistic principles. In other words, it acts to perfect and civilize our behavior. The ego, however, controls the id's drive for immediate satisfaction until an appropriate outlet can be found. It tries to make a balance between primitive desire and morality in order to satisfy both the id and the superego. Its main concern is about the individual's safety and allows some of the id's desire to be expressed, but only when the result of these actions are not beyond the borderline of social tolerance.

### **The Psychological Linkage of the Three characters**

Wilde has said that the main characters of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are the embodiment of himself: 'Basil Hallward is what I think I am, Lord Henry what the world thinks me, Dorian what I would like to be—in other ages, perhaps.' Therefore in a sense we can say that Dorian is the symbol of the id, Henry the ego and Basil the superego.

#### **1. Dorian as the Embodiment of the Id**

Wilde says that, 'Dorian Gray is what I would like to be, an eternal youth, one who, at any price, connives to escape moral responsibility. He is the very image of the feckless Irish lad—living

only for the pleasures of the moment, will pay heavily for fecklessness in the end' the description of Wilde about Dorian is similar to the sense of the id. At the beginning of the novel Dorian is a handsome, innocent and gentle youth. Dorian loses his parents in a very young age and is brought up by his chill grandfather. For this reason Dorian learns to be always obedient. Although living in an environment without family member's love may not make Dorian have an inferiority feeling, he does never think highly of himself or realize his beauty. His consciousness of life is like a piece of white paper, ready to be drawn in different colors. It stimulates Henry's and Basil's strong desires to pour color on it. Basil shows Dorian his beauty by painting his portrait, while it's Henry's highly praise and warning that youth passes away like water which makes Dorian feel stunned. Henry describes Dorian as 'some brainless beautiful creature who should be always here in winter when we have no flowers to look at, and always here in summer when we want something to chill our intelligence'. Under the influence of Henry's fascinating words, Dorian happily realizes his beauty, but after a second he is more afraid of the fact that it's doomed to disappear. This thought overwhelms his mind and awakes his internal desire. The suddenly arisen self-protection makes Dorian wish himself to be forever young while the picture bears the passing age instead of him. He feels sad and even angry about the portrait.

For the sake of eternal youth Dorian even implores to sell his soul and make a trade with the devil. Since then Dorian becomes the Faustus longing for youth and begins his life with his soul departing from the body. As Dorian chooses Henry as the one whom he confides himself and gets ready to accept Henry's theory of hedonism, he falls in love with Sybil. The love drives Dorian to change, which makes him no longer the most faithful believer of Henry.

Dorian chooses the 'eternal youth, infinite passion, pleasures subtle and secret, wild joys and wilder sins', he deserts Sybil and is indifferent with her death, he kills Basil when Basil tries to save his soul, he murders Alan Campell and Sybil's brother though not explicitly mentioned in the novel. Dorian is hungry for sensuous delight and goes further on the way of degeneration. He achieves his goal, satisfies his desires, but also he paves the way to his final destruction. According to Freud's theory, the id is the source of all psychic energy and the primary component of personality. It strives for immediately enjoyment and follows the rules of pleasure by instinctive impulse. All the evidence of Dorian's behavior prove that the way Dorian pursues his desires accords with the feature of the id.

### **2. Henry as the Embodiment of the Ego**

As the mentor to guide Dorian towards the way to degeneration, Henry seems to be poisonous and dangerous. He releases the potential consciousness of Dorian and makes him gradually estrange with Basil. He installs his theories into Dorian's mind at all hazards and drives him to be a hedonist.

Henry's epigrams about life rebels the reason, the morality and the social standards. In his point of view, the only purpose of life is

to realize the instinctive demands and satisfy the inner desires. The instinctive demands should not be suppressed. Morality and reason are nothing but morbid and hypocritical ideas. He urges Dorian and other people to embrace the youth and beauty, follow their desire and never be bounded by the ethical burdens.

Henry ridicules the charity, ignores the tribulation and dislikes the social reality. What he promotes is selfishness that draws on advantages and avoids disadvantages. On the one hand, Henry defends the immoral instinctive desire with his epigrams in a jocular style. On the other hand, he gratifies his imagination in the multicolored fancy of words. He stands for the dangerous but necessary factor shadowed in the social morality. His words reveal the inner desire of everyone, though people who are familiar with Henry all consider him as a dangerous and evil man, they still are attracted by his wittiness involuntarily.

However, just like the ego is the inter-medium between the id and superego, Henry stands in to position between Dorian and Basil, neither like Dorian who indulges into the desire, nor like Basil who strictly obey the moral rules. His cynical views of the society are just attitudes and never turn into practice. Even his marriage that he ruthlessly despises all the time, he maintains it carefully until his wife elopes away with another man.

According to Freud's theories, the ego tries to satisfy the id's desires in a realistic and socially proper way; it ensures that the id's impulses obey the criterion of society. Henry teaches Dorian to pursue his desire also by the principle of reality, thus it is acceptable to think Henry represents the ego.

### **3. Basil as the Embodiment of the Superego**

Basil is a painter with good sense, honesty and kindness. He strictly obeys the social rules and always behaves correctly and cautiously. According to Freud's theory, the superego is an embodiment of parental and social values; it is the highest aspect of personality and places restrictions on the id and ego. At the very beginning, Basil warns Dorian not to listen to Henry's words, for he will make bad effects on all his friends. Just like the superego fights with the ego, there is always conflict between Henry and Basil. Henry can't bear the conservation and dull of Basil, Basil dislikes the acerbity in Henry's words. Basil doesn't agree with Henry's hedonism and egoism and tries to persuade him with the moral views and social concepts. He reminds Henry kindly that if one lives only for himself, he will pay a heavy price sooner or later. Though Basil knows exactly what person Henry is, he strangely maintains the friendship with Henry. The relationship between Henry and Basil can be taken as the compromise between the ego and the superego. The sharpest conflict is not between the ego and the superego, but between the superego and the id. Basil feels frustrated and depressed as Dorian indulges in a hedonist life and gradually drifts away from him. He seeks to protect Dorian, continuously defend Dorian even after their relationship has clearly dissolved. On Dorian's falling in love with Sybil, Basil at first take a opposite situation for the reason of social reality, while after he realizes it is true love he turns to bless

their love and advise Dorian to maintain it as possible as he can. After he hears the news of Sybil's death, he thinks that Dorian will be deeply sad and do something reasonable such as console Sybil's mother so he rushes to comfort Dorian, only to find that Dorian goes on his depraved life just like nothing has happened. Conscience, morality and principles lead the predominant position in his mind, Basil stands for the conscience in the story, actually in the novel he is the only voice of morality. In the quarrel between Dorian and Basil, Basil makes compromises again and again, he doesn't have the heart to blame Dorian too hard.

Basil is the only person who can save Dorian's soul, while Dorian refuses the only way of salvation. In the battle superego and id, superego is doomed to lose. Finally, the conflict between Dorian and Basil develops to its climax and Basil is killed by Dorian, which suggests that the superego is totally defeated by the id.

#### 4. Interaction of the Split Personalities of the Characters

Wilde once said he would like to be the person like Dorian Gray. It's true that the character contains the qualities that Wilde was always longing for, such as the beauty, the youth, and the keen desire for freedom. It was because of his beauty that made him achieve the summit of career, while it was also because of that he went to the bottom of his life. Dorian Gray can be taken as the symbol of Wilde's id, which operates according to the pleasure principle and is the source of instinctive desires. The id will do anything to eradicate the obstacle in the way of pursuing pleasure.

However, no one will infinitely indulge the id, thus comes the superego that stands in opposition to the desire of id and works to suppress all unacceptable urges of the id. The superego acts to perfect and civilize our behavior. It holds all our internalized moral standards that we acquire from the society. Basil acts as Wilde's superego, he tried to prevent Dorian from degrading but in vain. He was even killed by Dorian in the end. It seems that the conflict between the id and the superego is too sharp that neither of the two will make compromise. Therefore it needs the ego to mediate.

The ego has to mediate between the demands of the id and the superego. It operates according to the reality principle. Its task is to find a balance between the primitive drives, morals and reality while satisfying both the id and the superego. Lord Henry is the one who connects Dorian and Basil. Dorian believes in nobody but Henry, and Basil has hardly any friend but him. Freud stated that a person with good ego strength was able to relieve these pressures, while those with too much or too little ego strength becoming either too unyielding or too disrupting. Henry was not a person with strong personality, he was weak and contradictory, so he could do nothing

good to the relationship between Dorian and Basil.

To sum up, Wilde is by no means as immoral as people in his time thought to be. On contrary, the paradox of his words and acts, the struggle between his id and superego, and his compromise all reflect his moral part.

#### Conclusion

As a staunch promoter of the aesthetic movement during the late nineteenth century, Oscar Wilde expresses his aesthetic thoughts and theories in his works by a variety of writing techniques, such as epigrams, amusing irony, cynical charm and so on. Especially in his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Wilde merges himself and his aesthetic ideas with the three characters involved in the novel, which makes the novel somewhat like the biography of himself.

Dorian is the prototype of beauty, he pursued an exquisite life and sensuous gratification regardless of the social discipline. He went along his degraded way of pursuing pleasure until he killed himself, thus symbolized the id of Wilde to fulfill his aesthetic dreams. Basil was actually the only voice of morality in the novel; he stood for the conscience and thus symbolized the superego of the author. Although leading a kind of controversial style of life and was criticized by society of his age, Wilde insisted that aesthetic goodness was much higher than the tangible sensual world. Henry despised the social criterion and was scornful of things that were appreciated at that time. Although he seemed to be rebellious in his speech, his behaviors were extraordinarily normal and obedient in his real life, which made Henry symbolize the ego of Wilde. He tried to mediate between Dorian and Basil but didn't help. The three characters interacted and struggled with each other just like the reflection of Wilde's controversial personality.

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