TITLE: PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY

AUTHOR: OSCAR WILDE

GENRE: Fiction

POSSIBLE THEMES AND CORRESPONDING OBJECTS: **The Purpose of Art: the conflict between "art for art's sake" (Aestheticism) and art as a tool for moral, religious, social, and/or historical education/improvement.**

Possible MIA objects by artists associated with the Aesthetic movement

1. Battledore, by Albert Moore (1868-70) (G357)

2. A Sea-Nymph, by Edward Burne-Jones (1881) (G351)

3. Jonathan's Token to David, by Frederic Leighton (1868) (G357)

4. The Seashore, by James McNeill Whistler (1883-85) (G351)

5. Any decorative objects associated with the Arts & Crafts movement (unfortunately, no works by William Morris are currently on view at the MIA, but images are available on ArtsConnectEd of his wallpaper designs, including one with peacock motifs like those used by Whistler [another famous Aesthete] in his Peacock Room, currently located at the Freer Gallery of Art.)

6. Veiled Lady, by Raffaelo Monti (1860) (G357) (illustrates Aestheticism movement's link to classical art)

Possible MIA objects illustrating moral, historical, religious, or social themes

1. Portrait of Sarah Allen, nee Sargent, by John Singleton Copley (1763) (G306). (This painting also provides a link to the Strapless tour, because Sarah Allen was John Singer Sargent's great-great aunt.)

2. The Poorly Defended Rose and The Letter, by Michel Garnier (1791) (G306) (moral theme)

3. Portrait of Mlle. Lange as Danae, by Anne-Louis Girodet (1799) (G306) (moral and myth themes)

4. Portrait of George Washington, by Thomas Sully (1820) (G333) (historic and classical themes)

5. Destruction of the Beast and the False Prophet, by Benjamin West (1804) (G321) (religion)

6. Peace Concluded, by Sir John Everett Millais (1856) (G357) (**note:** Millais' painting may be seen as a bridge between the two sides of this debate because of Millais' affiliation with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, a group associated with the Aesthetic Movement. However, I think Peace Concluded is also filled with social and historic content.)

To flesh out this theme, see the article by Patrick Duggan, below.

Another helpful website on the Aesthetic Movement can be found at www.vam.ac.uk, concerning a recent exhibit on this topic at the Victoria & Albert Museum, called "The Cult of Beauty: The Aesthetic Movement."

The Conflict Between Aestheticism and Morality in Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray, by Patrick Duggan [retrieved on 11/20/11 from http://www.bu.edu/writingprogram/journal/past-issues/issue-1/duggan/]

Oscar Wilde prefaces his novel, The Picture of Dorian Gray, with a reflection on art, the artist, and the utility of both. After careful scrutiny, he concludes: "All art is quite useless" (Wilde 4). In this one sentence, Wilde encapsulates the complete principles of the Aesthetic Movement popular in Victorian England. That is to say, real art takes no part in molding the social or moral identities of society, nor should it. Art should be beautiful and pleasure its observer, but to imply further-reaching influence would be a mistake. The explosion of aesthetic philosophy in fin-de-siècle English society, as exemplified by Oscar Wilde, was not confined to merely art, however. Rather, the proponents of this philosophy extended it to life itself. Here, aestheticism advocated whatever behavior was likely to maximize the beauty and happiness in one's life, in the tradition of hedonism. To the aesthete, the ideal life mimics art; it is beautiful, but quite useless beyond its beauty, concerned only with the individual living it. Influences on others, if existent, are trivial at best. Many have read The Picture of Dorian Gray as a novelized sponsor for just this sort of aesthetic lifestyle. However, this story of the rise and fall of Dorian Gray might instead represent an allegory about morality meant to critique, rather than endorse, the obeying of one's impulses as thoughtlessly and dutifully as aestheticism dictates.

In the novel, Lord Henry Wotton trumpets the aesthetic philosophy with an elegance and bravado that persuade Dorian to trust in the principles he espouses; the reader is often similarly captivated. It would be a mistake, however, to interpret the novel as a patent recommendation of aestheticism. To the aesthete, there is no distinction between moral and immoral acts, only between those that increase or decrease one's happiness; yet, Dorian Gray refutes this idea, presenting a strong case for the inherent immorality of purely aesthetic lives. Dorian Gray personifies the aesthetic lifestyle in action, pursuing personal gratification with abandon. Yet, while he enjoys these indulgences, his behavior ultimately kills him and others, and he dies unhappier than ever. Rather than an advocate for pure aestheticism, then, Dorian Gray is a cautionary tale in which Wilde illustrates the dangers of the aesthetic philosophy when not practiced with prudence. Aestheticism, argues Wilde, too often aligns itself with immorality, resulting in a precarious philosophy that must be practiced deliberately.

Dorian Gray is often read as an explicit proclamation of the worthiness of living life in accordance with aesthetic values. This is due in part to the flourishing Aesthetic Movement of Victorian England at the time of the novel's publication, as well as Oscar Wilde's association with the movement itself (Becker 660). The Aesthetic Movement, which coincided with the Industrial Revolution at the end of the nineteenth century, emphasized the artistic aspect of a man's work in producing a variety of goods, from furniture to machines to literature (Becker 660). Oscar Wilde, however, proposed that the principles of

the Aesthetic Movement extend beyond the production of mere commodities. In Joseph Pearce's biography, The Unmasking of Oscar Wilde, Pearce recalls Wilde's own perspective on the popular movement. Speaking of aestheticism, Wilde is quoted:

It is indeed to become a part of the people's life . . . I mean a man who works with his hands; and not with his hands merely, but with his head and his heart. The evil that machinery is doing is not merely in the consequence of its work but in the fact that it makes men themselves machines also. Whereas, we wish them to be artists, that is to say men. (qtd. in Pearce 144)

In his exposition of aestheticism, Wilde applies the philosophy in a more universal sense, stressing the positive influences of aestheticism in one's life beyond mere craftsmanship. Just as the machines that mass-produce materials with the intervention of human thought are labeled "evil," Wilde similarly condemns men who act as metaphorical machines, programmed to behave in accordance with society's ideas of propriety rather than allowing themselves to act freely and achieve the greatest amount of happiness. Wilde's eloquent advocacy of an aesthetic lifestyle is paralleled in his depiction of Lord Henry in Dorian Gray. Lord Henry lectured to the impressionable Dorian, "We are punished for our refusals. Every impulse that we strive to strangle broods in the mind, and poisons us. . . . Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden itself" (Wilde 9). Wilde, through Lord Henry, laments the stifling nature of his contemporary Victorian society and how the supposed morality it boasts necessitates self-denial and rejection of life's most beautiful aspects. Lord Henry warns that without an enthusiastic embrace of aestheticism, one will perpetually anguish with the desire of precisely what he must deny himself, all for the sake of propriety. This philosophy espoused by Wilde and Lord Henry often leads, not surprisingly, to the conclusion that Dorian Gray is a declaration of Wilde's, promoting the adoption of purely aesthetic lives without qualification. This, however, is too shallow of an interpretation.

Opponents of a purely aesthetic lifestyle will certainly cite what they consider an inevitability: one's desires and impulses, though when acted upon result in a more pleasurable life, will at times be undeniably immoral. It is at these times that the virtues of the wholly aesthetic life become questionable. The ruination of Dorian Gray, the embodiment of unbridled aestheticism, illustrates the immorality of such a lifestyle and gravely demonstrates its consequences. Wilde uses Dorian Gray not as an advertisement for aestheticism, but rather, he uses Dorian's life to warn against aestheticism's hostility toward morality when uncontrolled. Wilde himself admits, in a letter to the St. James's Gazette, that Dorian Gray "is a story with a moral. And the moral is this: All excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its own punishment" (Wilde 248). Aestheticism does well to condemn the renunciation of desires, but it is an excessive obedience to these desires that is subversively dangerous. Therefore, in the practice of Wilde's aestheticism, forethought and constraint are necessities, yet too often lacking, and without them, one is doomed to suffer the same fate as Dorian Gray.

The character of Dorian Gray and the story of his profound degeneration provide a case study examining the viability of purely aesthetic lives. Dorian lives according to what Lord Henry professes without hesitation, and what Lord Henry inspires Dorian, through persuasive rhetoric, is an attitude indifferent to consequence and altogether amoral. As Wilde writes, Dorian's newfound position is "never to accept

any theory or system that would involve the sacrifice of any mode of passionate experience. Its aim, indeed was to be experience itself, and not the fruits of experience, sweet or bitter as they may be" (Wilde 125). Under Lord Henry's mentorship, Dorian, once the epitome of wide-eyed youth, behaves with no regard for the ramifications of his actions, diligently pursuing instant gratification without thought of its implications, whether they be "sweet or bitter."

Dorian's relationship with the actress Sibyl Vane plainly illustrates this marked change in personality. Dorian pursues Sibyl from first sights, intent on acquiring her before he ever attempts to truly know her. Indeed, Dorian's love for Sibyl is overtly superficial, as evidenced by Dorian's own description of his infatuation with Sibyl: "I loved you because you were marvelous, because you had genius and intellect, because you realized the dreams of great poets and gave shape and substance to the shadows of art" (Wilde 101). Dorian is not attracted to Sibyl's character of personality, but rather her acting talent and enthralling performances; this is what enchants the aesthetically inclined Dorian. When Sibyl leaves the stage, then, she no longer serves a purpose in Dorian's aesthetic life, and thus, Dorian abandons her unceremoniously. Dorian does not regret informing Sybil that, "Without your art, you are nothing" (Wilde 101). The tragedy of Sybil's later suicide, brought about by utter despair at her desertion, is lost on Dorian, who instead enjoys the dramatic intrigue of the occasion. For Dorian, whose uncontrolled aestheticism rejects the concept of morality, the immorality of his actions goes unrecognized. In fact, Dorian declares excitedly, "It seems to me to be simply like a wonderful ending to a wonderful play. It has all the terrible beauty of a Greek tragedy, a tragedy in which I took a great part, but by which I have not been wounded" (Wilde 114). Here, the adverse consequences of aestheticism surface in Dorian's life. In his pursuit of his own pleasures, a distinctly narcissistic attitude emerges, and the incompatibility of morality and unconditional aestheticism becomes all the more apparent.

The emergence of narcissism in Dorian and its correlation with his newly adopted aesthetic philosophy is integral to Wilde's novel as it emphasizes the frequent hostility between aestheticism and morality that Wilde cautions against. Dorian Gray exposes the immorality of self-absorption, as Dorian's portrait becomes more disfigured with each one of Dorian's selfish acts. This self-absorption, then, appears to be an inevitable consequence of aestheticism. Only a more deliberate practice of aestheticism may harness this egotism and avoid the immorality Dorian embodies. Interestingly, in his essay "Come See About Me: Enchantment of the Double in The Picture of Dorian Gray," Christopher Craft recognizes a mirroring of the Greek myth of Narcissus in the life of Dorian Gray. According to mythology, Narcissus, upon catching a glimpse of his reflection in a pool, becomes so enraptured by it that he stood and admired it endlessly, unmoving for the rest of his life. As Craft notes, this self-absorption "is a commitment that, like Dorian's, graduates fully until death" (Craft 113). Narcissus becomes so infatuated with himself that the rest of world effectively ceases to exist or affect him and, as Craft argues, "it is into precisely this silent delirium that Dorian unwittingly steps" when he allows Lord Henry's aesthetic philosophy to so dominate him (Craft 113). Dorian enjoys a life of eternal youth, with only his portrait aging in parallel with Dorian's immorality; so, as Dorian sinks into the depths of narcissism, he maintains his external beauty, and his portrait degenerates instead. Eventually, as in the myth of Narcissus, such egotism has its consequences. When Dorian, disgusted with the decrepit picture of the supposedly "real" him, destroys it in a fit of anger, Dorian too is destroyed. Wilde writes that after Dorian's death, "it was not till they had examined

the rings that they recognized who it was" (Wilde 220). In the end, as a testament to the purely aesthetic life, the only legacy Dorian leaves behind—everything that identifies him as who he was—is his superficial jewelry.

There is an argument, then, made by Wilde for a new aestheticism, approached with more constraint than Dorian employs. This argument is based not only in the moral obligation of the individual, but with the betterment of all of society in mind. Matthew Arnold, in his essay "Culture and Anarchy," provides reasoning against the ethos of Lord Henry's aestheticism and an unconditional application of it. Arnold focuses on its detrimental effects on society and the possibility for societal improvement when aesthetic tendencies are properly controlled. There appears to be agreement, then, between Wilde and Arnold; Wilde' novel provides a failed example of the purely aesthetic life, and when scaled to a larger society, a similar result is understandably expected. As Arnold views his contemporary society, it is arranged hierarchically, dividing the aristocrats, the middle-class, and the working-class, all of which, Arnold laments, are inclined to live hedonistically, pursuing pleasure and only what is comfortable and easy. Dorian Gray embodies just his defect in Arnold's society. Arnold argues, however, that "there are born a certain number of natures with a curiosity about their best self with a bend for seeing things as they are . . . for simply concerning themselves with reason and the will of God, and doing their best to make these prevail;—for the pursuit, in a word, of perfection" (Arnold 277). Arnold is optimistic that some may pursue beyond the immediately pleasurable and act to perfect themselves both morally and intellectually. This pursuit of perfection, however, is likely an arduous and uncomfortable task, and is therefore incompatible with pure aestheticism. Some concessions must be made for the absolute aesthete, then, for such transcendence occur.

Dorian Gray, for much of Wilde's novel, fails to embody Arnold's ideal, as in his hedonistic life he is seen "creeping at dawn out of dreadful houses and slinking in disguise in the foulest dens in London," despite being once too honorable for such debauchery (Wilde 118). Dorian exemplifies a regression in social intellect from his beginnings rather than the kind of transcendence hoped for by Arnold. Dorian displays no such pursuit of intellectual perfection as he is slowly corrupted and in turn corrupts others, luring them with him into the slums and opium dens of London. Arnold refers to those able to transcend social classes in society as "aliens," hinting at their rarity to the point of foreignness and to their almost mythical quality (277). The mere existence of these aliens, however, provides hope that the utter hedonists of society may learn to harness their damaging tendencies, and in doing so, better the intellectual and moral state of humankind.

Wilde, too, recognizes this ability to control the hedonistic temptations associated with aestheticism, as demonstrated by the last stages of Dorian's life. Mitsuharu Matsuoka, in his essay "Aestheticism and Social Anxiety in The Picture of Dorian Gray," notes that, as Dorian's death approaches, "Dorian ultimately reacts against his lifestyle, choking on his New Hedonism," at which point "a great sense of doom hangs over Dorian" (Matsuoka 78). Indeed, Dorian appears to realize the consequences of his unbridled aestheticism; however, he is much too far gone to salvage. Dorian reveals his epiphany to Lord Henry: "The soul is a terrible reality. It can be bought, and sold, and bartered away. It can be poisoned or made perfect. There is a soul in each one of us. I know it" (Wilde 211). Unfortunately for Dorian, this realization comes too late to save his soul from its degradation, long-nurtured by a purely aesthetic life,

and he is destroyed. The realization itself, however, is indicative of Wilde's argument woven throughout Dorian Gray. Despite Wilde's publicly advocating the principles of aestheticism, Dorian's demise illustrates Wilde's recognition that aestheticism needs to be properly controlled. While the pursuit of beauty and happiness in life is always Wilde's ideal, he also implies that the consequences of one's actions must be thought out and the impact of one's decisions, beyond oneself, must also be carefully considered before acting on any impulse.

The Aesthetic Movement in fin-de-siècle England, as interpreted by Oscar Wilde, revolved around the ideal that the utility of one's actions should be to create the maximal amount of beauty and pleasure in one's life, and nothing more. Wilde's Dorian Gray appears, at first glance, to promote this philosophy unequivocally. Indeed, a lifestyle based on this aestheticism is espoused in Wilde's opening preface as well as throughout Lord Henry's professorial lectures. Upon closer inspection, however, Wilde's novel is not as wholly embracing of aestheticism as this implies. Wilde realized and depicted in the life of Dorian Gray, a need for a more controlled and deliberate approach to aestheticism, without which morality will inevitably be elusive. The adoption of unrestrained aestheticism, as exhibited by Dorian, results in a lack of remorse, self-absorption, and intellectual regression. For the sake of preserving morality, a concept proven incompatible with pure aestheticism, more deliberation is necessary from the aesthete in deciding upon action. If, in the pursuit of one's desires and of the beautiful aspects of life, the condition of others' or of one's own intellect is jeopardized, the enjoyment garnered must sometimes be sacrificed for the greater good. As Wilde makes clear, it is only through a more restrained philosophy that aestheticism and morality may eventually align.

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