Parallels of Morality: Wilde and Nietzsche's Challenge to Social Obligation

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Parallels of Morality: Wilde and Nietzsche’s Challenge to Social Obligation

An Undergraduate Honors Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfills of University Honors Program Requirements

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Abstract

This thesis explores Irish author Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in relation to a selection of texts by the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. To demonstrate the similarities between Wilde and Nietzsche’s challenges to European morality, this work considers these themes, which are present in the ideologies of both Wilde and Nietzsche: the body and sensual pleasure, social construction, and the hypocrisy of altruism. Both radical thinkers castigate Platonic notions of the body as ignoble and weak, and they mock European propriety’s shyness of the body. In addition, Wilde and Nietzsche offer similar criticisms of social laws, adopting a sort of deconstruction approach to philosophy before it was developed as a school of theory. They argue that morality and propriety are arbitrary, as they are unnaturally constructed by humans. Finally, Wilde and Nietzsche both highlight the hypocrisy of European morality, explaining that self-interest hides beneath the guise of altruistic acts. In examining the connections between Wilde and Nietzsche’s challenges to morality, this thesis illuminates the widespread anxieties felt throughout Europe during the late nineteenth century, as science and technology threatened traditional social and religious beliefs.
Introduction

In the year 1900, two of the most controversial thinkers of the nineteenth century suffered slow and quiet deaths. Their final days reflected their growing isolation and disfavor among the public. The first—Friedrich Nietzsche—sank into a comatose state following a bout of pneumonia and died on the 25th of August in a sick room near Weimar, Germany.\(^1\) Just months later, Oscar Wilde faded away in an upper room of the Hotel d’Alsace on the Left Bank of Paris. His last musings were a sign of the dismal circumstances surrounding his decline.\(^2\) Wilde, always an aesthete, declared to infrequent visitors, “My wallpaper and I are fighting a duel to the death. One or the other of us has to go.”\(^3\) Wilde and Nietzsche, both ostracized due to their radical beliefs and reclusive behavior, went silent as writers in the years leading to their deaths.

Though Nietzsche and Wilde lay on their deathbeds derelict and rejected as philosophers, their influence as great thinkers would soon be ascendant. Nietzsche and Wilde were born posthumously as the twentieth century began to embrace their bold ideas about morality. For example, Nietzsche’s arguments against the altruism of social obligation and moral code challenged the existence of a deity; however, these arguments became more palatable with the emerging scientific discoveries of the 1900’s. Likewise, following the trials in which he was accused and convicted of sodomy, Wilde’s death proclaimed him a homosexual martyr almost overnight.\(^4\) The arguments and insights of Nietzsche and Wilde bore new relevance to the consciousness of the twentieth century. Nietzsche’s upheaval of traditional religious ethics and Wilde’s challenge to Victorian sexual conservativeness were less offensive to the rapidly

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\(^3\) Allen, "Nietzsche and Wilde: An Ethics of Style," 386
transforming Europe of the 1900’s. As Europeans and Anglo-Americans felt more and more comfortable exploring their changing relationships with science, sexuality, and propriety, they looked to thinkers unconstrained by convention, such as Nietzsche and Wilde.

Nietzsche and Wilde were writing during the late 1800’s, after the Age of Enlightenment of the 1700’s. During the Enlightenment, rationalist principles were emphasized and encouraged as the foundation for the formation of government, laws, and religion. Philosophizing figures such as Thomas Paine, Voltaire, and Jean Jacques Rousseau questioned the authority of church and state, inspiring citizens to revolutions like the American Revolution in 1776 and the French Revolution in 1789. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, war and conflict were redrawing the boundary lines of Europe and overthrowing monarchies. The Industrial Revolution swept through Europe, bringing urbanization with it. Factory labor issues led to the formation of trade unions, social reforms, and discussions about equal rights and universal suffrage. At the same time, Romanticism flourished as a response to the rationalism of the Enlightenment and the dehumanizing effects of growing industry and business. Romanticism stressed emotions over reason and a direct and authentic experience with nature rather than one’s observations of it. The century also saw the publication of Charles Darwin’s *On the Origins of Species* in 1859, which challenged human superiority over non-human animals and traditional Judeo-Christian beliefs in a way science never had before.

Nietzsche and Wilde did not respond to such tumultuous and uncertain times with consoling voices. Instead, they responded as provocateurs, further questioning the moral institutions already under fire. Nietzsche and Wilde challenged the asceticism of Christianity as

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well as the artificial politeness and herd behavior enforced by European propriety. Nietzsche published now famous works such as *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883), *Beyond Good and Evil* (1887), *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887), and *The Twilight of Idols* (1888). Together, these works analyze the emptiness of human values and beliefs and the arbitrariness of societal power structures. Wilde published a number of essays relating to such topics but also found a strong political voice in fiction writing. His only novel and perhaps most famous work *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is full of messages about Wilde’s own ideas about morality in relation to religion and Victorian propriety. Overall, the novel espouses an awareness of the meaninglessness of social tradition. It encourages more free and independent living while also castigating pure, unchecked hedonism. Most poignantly, the male protagonists in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* reflect Wilde’s homosexuality and explore the liberation of seeking sensual pleasure in general.

The texts of Friedrich Nietzsche and Oscar Wilde are so poignant because they speak to the social concerns in Europe during the late 1800’s. The ideologies presented by the two provocateurs in their later writings overlap significantly in terms of style and content, as both deconstruct cultural systems that sought to denounce asceticism as a moral and religious practice. In their place, Nietzsche and Wilde elevated the self and beauty. The many similarities between the ideologies of Nietzsche and Wilde are no coincidence. It is possible that Nietzsche and Wilde were aware of one another’s work, but it seems more probable that their deeply-related views are simply a mark of widespread dissatisfaction felt throughout Europe. This dissatisfaction revolved around perplexing questions like *How does evolution fit into religion? Is God omnipotent? If humans are animals, do social institutions such as class and propriety matter?* Nietzsche and Wilde’s ideas about morality overlap because they are a response to these questions and anxieties.
that were experienced at large in Europe. These anxieties could only be expressed publicly by bold figures unafraid of the repercussions, figures such as Wilde and Nietzsche.

To further investigate the central theological and social anxieties of the late nineteenth century, this thesis analyzes and compares the arguments that Oscar Wilde presents about morality in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* with a selection of Friedrich Nietzsche's arguments regarding morality. Wilde and Nietzsche both focus their moralities on the idea of social obligation. They argue that, while social order is necessary, denying the body as part of the self as well as human inclinations and basic desires in the name of social controls is illogical and anti-human, because social controls are meaninglessly constructed. Further critiquing the idea of social obligation, Wilde and Nietzsche both deconstruct Western ideologies about propriety in order to demonstrate the arbitrariness of certain traditional beliefs and assert the impossibility of an absolute worldview. Finally, Wilde and Nietzsche similarly demonstrate what they considered the hypocrisy of European conceptions of charity and acts of altruism, considering the will and religion in conjunction. Through these stark oppositions to the ideals of their time, Wilde and Nietzsche play with Western anxieties during the late nineteenth century, offering a new and radical perspective of social laws and obligations. Their alternative visions move for a world in which humans embrace their animal natures and physicality, acknowledge the construct of propriety, and subvert social obligation.
Nietzsche’s Background

Friedrich Nietzsche was born on the 15th of October in 1844 in the town of Röcken, Germany, the first child of Carl Ludwig and Franziska Nietzsche. Nietzsche's father Carl Ludwig took up the family profession by serving as a Lutheran pastor, and the family lived a devoutly religious life. Nietzsche was fond of poetry and music and was often referred to as “the little pastor.” He was expected to follow the long line of family clergymen before him, an irony realized later as Nietzsche’s writings became more and more atheistic.

Carl Ludwig died of a brain injury after a fall when Nietzsche was just five years old. Left without a father, Nietzsche grew up under a strong female influence, as he lived with his mother Franziska, his sister, grandmother, and two aunts. As the only male in the household, he was heavily sheltered and fussed over; the young Nietzsche did not mix well with other boys. At age fourteen, Nietzsche earned a scholarship to study at the renowned and strict Lutheran boarding school where he developed a love for classical studies. At age twenty he left Pforta and entered the University of Bonn to study theology and philosophy. His studies soon led him to question religion and thus his infamous atheism took its root. Nietzsche switched universities when his disillusionment with the common revelry and rowdiness of college students peaked. At Leipzig, Nietzsche studied philology and discovered The World as Will and Idea by German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. While Nietzsche later rejected parts of his fundamental pessimism, Schopenhauer’s atheism and view of the universe as purposeless and meaningless continued to influence Nietzsche.  

7 Lawrence Gane, Introducing Nietzsche (Thriplow, UK: Icon Books, 2005), 4
9 Lawrence Gane, Introducing Nietzsche (Thriplow, UK: Icon Books, 2005), 9
At age twenty-four, Nietzsche became a professor of philology at the University of Basel in Switzerland. After ten years of teaching, Nietzsche resigned his position. His books had been critically received. Fewer and fewer students were enrolling in his classes. His dissatisfaction with the world of academia grew, and his health declined, all contributing to his decision to leave the University of Basel in 1879. During the next decade of his life, Nietzsche wandered between European towns and cities, living as a recluse and producing some of his greatest works.

During the last year of Nietzsche’s lucidity (1888), he produced *Twilight of the Idols* and *The Anti-Christ*, the latter being a particularly strong attack against Christian ethics. At this time, Nietzsche’s philosophy began to gain traction as more and more scholars recognized and lectured on Nietzsche’s writings. Tearing history and humanity away from Christianity in his philosophy, Nietzsche embraced the role of an anti-Christ. In January of 1889, Nietzsche experienced a mental breakdown and never recovered his sanity; however, the legitimacy of his illness has been debated, as some of his close acquaintances suggested it was merely a ruse. Twelve years after his initial breakdown, Nietzsche died of pneumonia on the 25th of August. He was buried in the place of his birth, Röcken, Germany.

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**Wilde’s Background**

Born in Dublin on October 16, 1854, Oscar Wilde enjoyed a privileged childhood, as his parents were successful Irish intellectuals. Though the Great Famine began just a decade before

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Wilde’s birth, his family never suffered financially and continued to live in a wealthy neighborhood. Wilde’s father, Sir William Wilde, was a scholar of science, ancient archeology, and folklore, and his mother, Jane Elgee, was a gifted writer.\[12\] The Wildes were a well-respected, Catholic family who fostered a spirit of imagination and a propensity for social justice in their household. Sir William Wilde purchased a hospital and developed it as one of the leading ear and eye hospitals in the country. He later handed the St. Mark’s Hospital management over to a Board of Trustees for the specific care of the poor. Wilde’s mother Jane used the pseudonym “Speranza” to write for Ireland’s chief nationalist journal *The Nation.* Wilde’s parents were intelligent and socially aware, and he grew up with a sense of “political and social mischief-making.”\[13\]

Wilde attended Portora Royal School and eventually Trinity College in Dublin. At Trinity, he was highly respected by his professors and earned a demyship to study at Oxford. During his time at Oxford, Wilde continued to agonize over his religious imagination and attraction to both Catholicism and paganism. He also continued to write poetry and published his first collection of poems in 1881. The religious and sexual content of these poems provoked many readers, and Wilde’s adversaries took advantage of their first round of ammunition, criticizing Wilde as immoral. Nonetheless, the aphorism “There’s no such thing as bad publicity” rang true in Wilde’s life, and—despite critical voices—Wilde’s name gained popularity in various London circles.

In 1882, Wilde toured the United States, visiting major cities across the country to give lectures. Wilde returned to Britain, having earned considerable wealth from his lecture series. He married Constance Lloyd in May of 1884, and they became the parents of two sons and a

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\[13\] Killeen, *Oscar Wilde*, 27
daughter. Constance and Wilde were a fashionable couple and fascinating dinner guests in many aristocratic households. Between 1879 and 1894, Wilde wrote nine dramas. The four comedies—*Lady Windermere’s Fan, A Woman of No Importance, An Ideal Husband,* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*—as well as the tragedy *Salomé* were particularly well received. Wilde’s popularity reached new heights in the 1890’s when his first and only novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was published. In 1894, Wilde wrote the canonical *The Importance of Being Earnest,* just as his esteemed if also criticized reputation began to unravel.

Wilde was homosexual before the word existed. He was known for his relationships with younger men, the most famous being Lord Alfred Douglas. Wilde met Douglas in 1891 and soon became infatuated. Their intimate relationship incited much gossip and enraged Douglas’s father the Marquess of Queensberry who launched a series of attacks against Wilde. Tension escalated when Wilde visited the club Albemarle and the doorman handed him a card that Queensberry had written. It read, “Oscar Wilde posing somdomite [sic].” The next day, Wilde—likely persuaded to recklessness by Douglas—requested a warrant for Queensberry’s arrest.

When Queensberry’s attorneys were able to justify his statement by producing evidence of Wilde’s homosexuality, Wilde’s lawyer advised him to drop the case. Soon after, Wilde was arrested for sodomy under the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 and ultimately convicted on May 25, 1895 for “acts of gross indecencies with other male persons.”14 After this, Wilde was largely condemned, his name was blacked out on billboards, and his plays were not performed on English stages for years. Wilde went to prison for two years and spent the remainder of his life in exile. He died from an infection of the inner ear in the Hotel d’Alsace in Paris after receiving the Last Rites of the Catholic Church on his deathbed.

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Dorian Gray Background

The first edition of The Picture of Dorian Gray was published in the July 1890 issue of Lippincott’s magazine five years prior to Oscar Wilde’s downfall. Wilde’s reminder in the novel that youth is but a moment and death and oblivion are written in everyone’s destiny found relevance in his own life, as Wilde’s reputation quickly suffered, and he died just years after its debut. Wilde’s telling of a story in which one’s fortune and happiness is violently upturned was in many ways prophetic of his own life and ostracism. In the novel, the young Dorian Gray is the muse of the artist Basil Hallward, who paints extraordinary portraits of Gray and his pure and innocent beauty. Through this friendship, Dorian Gray meets Lord Henry Wotton, a man whose clever and shocking cynicism fascinates and delights many, especially Dorian Gray. One day, the three men converse with one another as Hallward finishes his most extraordinary portrait of Dorian Gray. Lord Henry emphasizes the importance of pleasure and beauty over nineteenth-century morality, and, looking at his youth forever encapsulated in the portrait, Dorian Gray wishes that the picture of himself will age while he remains unchanged.

When Dorian ruthlessly discards Sybil Vane, a poor, young actress he has promised to marry, she kills herself, and Dorian discovers that the soft, serene smile of the portrait sinks into a scowl—his wish is fulfilled! As Lord Henry’s influence over Dorian Gray grows and Dorian continues to escape physical change, his sinful acts become worse and his sense of remorse dissolves. After committing the ultimate sin by stabbing Basil Hallward, Dorian Gray decides to use the murder weapon to destroy the portrait, which is now hideously marred by his evil deeds.

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15 Alex Ross, “Deceptive Picture: How Oscar Wilde painted over ‘Dorian Gray,’” The New Yorker, August 2011, 1
As he slashes the picture, Dorian Gray falls to the floor dead, wearing the wrinkles, stains, and devilish marks that had once belonged to the face in the painting.

When it was released, the novel was viewed as a castigation of British propriety and tradition. Its suggested eroticism between men and shameless depiction of British society’s hypocrisy spurred seething reviews. *The Daily Chronicle* of London called the story “unclean” and “heavy with the mephitic odors of moral and spiritual putrefaction.” A reporter for the Vermont *Middlebury Register* wrote, “A step farther than Mr. Wilde has gone would be sure to cause the arrest of the author and publisher and the suppression of the book.”17 A columnist for the London magazine *Punch* went so far as to describe *Dorian Gray* as full of “glittering conceits” and “unsavory suggestiveness,” ultimately declaring the book “Poisonous!”18 Such reviews signify that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was new and bold and unabashedly honest. Most of all, the deluge of rebuking reviews demonstrate that it was not a simple didactic tale but a philosophical challenge against the frameworks of religion and propriety in nineteenth-century Britain.

**Reading Wilde’s Morality in Dorian Gray**

The preface of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was added to a longer, revised version of the novel published in 1891. It includes many of the ideas Wilde explained to the press in defense of his work the year prior, acting as a sort of disclaimer for the story which follows. In the preface, Wilde famously warns his readers that art is not meant to convey moral meaning; rather, the aim

17 *Middlebury Register.*, July 25, 1890, 2
18 “Our Booking-Office,” *Punch*, July 19, 1890, 25
of the artist is merely to create something beautiful. Before readers flip to the first chapter of his novel, Wilde urges them to accept art as it appears. He warns, “Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril. Those who read the symbol do so at their peril.” Wilde is adamant that his novel does not reveal secret meaning in his own life or enforce a new morality. In the preface, Wilde also writes, “There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all.” Wilde claims that all art is useless as its sole purpose is to exhibit beauty, not condone or decry certain behaviors.

Nonetheless, The Picture of Dorian Gray is full of moral, religious, and political commentary, and Wilde himself seems to convey a separate message about the connection between the artist and his or her work in the novel. When Basil Hallward, the man who paints the infamous picture of Dorian Gray, is asked why he will not display the magnificent portrait, he responds, “Every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion. It is not he who is revealed by the painter; it is rather the painter, who on the coloured canvas, reveals himself. The reason I will not exhibit this picture is that I am afraid that I have shown in it the secret of my own soul.” Basil is reflective of Oscar Wilde as an artist. In fact, in a 1894 letter to a man named Ralph Payne, Wilde writes, “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.” Basil Hallward incorporates his own soul in his best work, and surely Wilde—though he may refute it—did the same when he wrote this deeply intellectual story. Again, in the novel Wilde contradicts the message of his preface by recognizing that books

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20 Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray, 41
21 Wilde, 47
reveal the unacknowledged truths of the world. Wilde does this through the voice of Lord Henry, the chief influencer of Dorian Gray and the character through which Wilde most obviously relays his own views about Victorian morality. When Dorian Gray declares that Lord Henry’s book recommendation poisoned him, Lord Henry offers this Nietzschean response: “The books that the world calls immoral are books that show the world its own shame.”

While Wilde would argue that The Picture of Dorian Gray is not moral or immoral in itself, it is clear that he believed books hold truths within them and that Dorian Gray holds his truth, a truth that challenges the values of nineteenth-century Britain.

**Sensual Pleasure in Wilde and Nietzsche**

One of the truths that Wilde observes in the novel is history’s—and thereby Victorian Britain’s—obsession with suppressing sensual desires and pleasures. At the time Wilde was writing, women usually knew little about sex until their wedding nights when they were first introduced to the sexual expectations of their husbands. Those who visited the sea used bathing machines so as not to expose their bare bodies. Victorian piety demanded a shyness of the body. Wilde exposes the ridiculousness of this shyness in his novel. Referring to Platonic ideology and the inspiration in Dorian Gray’s physical beauty, Basil exclaims, “The harmony of the soul and body—how much that is! We in our madness have separated the two, and have invented a realism that is vulgar, an ideality that is void.”

To Wilde and his primary male characters, body and mind are united. The body is not a weak and imperfect vessel constraining human morality.

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23 Wilde, 246
24 Wilde, 52
and spiritual discovery as Plato and other classical Greeks would argue; rather, it is the tangible home of the soul through which the soul can and should experience both pleasure and pain.

Wilde’s challenge to Platonic notions of the body is bolstered by Friedrich Nietzsche’s own criticism of the separation of mind and body. Nietzsche directly attacks Plato’s ideas about the body, which chastise the body as having ignoble physical needs and weaknesses that prevent the mind from transcending the tangible world. Like Wilde, Nietzsche argues that such a denial and vilification of sensual impulses and pleasures shades the human experience in dishonesty. By not allowing the self to respond to stimuli and act out natural desires, one prevents him or herself from experiencing life as humans are designed to, whether intelligently or evolutionarily. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche writes:

> The charm of the Platonic way of thinking, which was a *noble* way of thinking, consisted precisely in *resistance* to obvious sense-evidence—perhaps among men who enjoyed even stronger and more demanding senses than our contemporaries, but who knew how to find a higher triumph in remaining masters of the senses—and this by means of pale, cold, gray concept nets which they threw over the motley whirl of the senses—the mob of the senses, as Plato said.25

Nietzsche views physical experience as valid evidence to philosophical understanding and the conceptualization of what it means to be human. He criticizes those who follow Plato’s ideology and work to control and resist their senses, as doing so excludes a vibrant and crucial element of just what people are seeking to understand—the human experience. Nietzsche warns people against discrediting the senses and their potential for insight and discovery.

Throughout *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde also criticizes the religious notion that sensual pleasure is sinful and ignoble, suggesting instead that it is natural and necessary. When he first meets Dorian Gray, Lord Henry argues that sensual desire should not be suppressed, because, instead of bolstering the sanctity of the soul, denying the body damages the soul

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because they are one. Lord Henry explains that men are afraid of themselves and acting on their instincts, saying, “Every impulse that we strive to strangle broods in the mind, and poisons us...The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it.” Wilde’s belief that sensual desire is natural is further apparent when he suggests that the mind is not superior to the body, but that the body can actually be more emotionally and intellectually sensitive than the soul. As the novel’s narrator, Wilde writes:

Soul and body, body and soul—how mysterious they were! There was animalism in the soul, and the body had its moments of spirituality. The senses could refine, and the intellect could degrade. Who could say where the fleshly impulse ceased, or the psychical impulse began? ...Was the soul a shadow seated in the house of sin? Or was the body really in the soul, as Giordano Bruno thought? The separation of spirit from matter was a mystery, and the union of spirit with matter was a mystery also.

In questioning whether the soul and body are at all separate, Wilde refers to his belief that the body is capable of its own spiritual experiences and expression, and he refutes the idea that the human body is solely animal while the human mind is divine and made of higher substances. Wilde believes that, like the body, the mind is also inclined to submit to animalistic impulses and the system of evolution proposed by Darwin.

Of course, Wilde does not denounce natural desires—whether of the body or mind—as impure. When Dorian Gray tells Lord Henry that he regrets all the theories Lord Henry has taught him about pleasure, Lord Henry responds, “Pleasure is the only thing worth having a theory about...But I am afraid I cannot claim my theory as my own. It belongs to Nature, not to me. Pleasure is Nature’s test, her sign of approval. When we are happy we are always good, but when we are good we are not always happy.” Wilde is adamant that rejecting physical pleasure to conform to the Victorian tradition of piety does not foster true happiness. In fact, he argues

27 Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 96-97
28 Wilde, 114-115
that the central reason history has villainized the body and sensual pleasure stems from the fear that humans are not so separate from animals. Wilde writes:

> The worship of the senses had often, and with much justice, been decried, men feeling a natural instinct of terror about passions and sensations that seem stronger than themselves, and that they are conscious of sharing with the less highly organized forms of existence. But it appeared to Dorian Gray that the true nature of the senses had never been understood, and that they had remained savage and animal merely because the world had sought to starve them into submission or to kill them by pain…²⁹

Here, Wilde implies that the negative associations applied to the body and its acts are arbitrary and merely the product of the structures underlying Victorian morality. Through attempting to distance the body from the soul, the world has beaten it further and further into a villainous role. In order to break down the binary opposition between body and mind, Wilde—through his reflective character Lord Henry—proposes a revolutionary ideology:

> Yes: there was to be, as Lord Henry had prophesied, a new Hedonism that was to re-create life, and to save it from that harsh, uncomely puritanism...Its aim, indeed, was to be experience itself, and not the fruits of experience, sweet or bitter as they might be. Of the asceticism that deadens the senses, as of the vulgar profligacy that dulls them, it was to know nothing. But it was to teach man to concentrate himself upon the moments of a life that is itself but a moment.³⁰

Wilde, who pursued sensual experiences in his own life by frequently visiting clubs and having affairs with other men, challenges the worth of ascetic lifestyles. He moves for a way of experiencing life in its entirety, surrendering to physical wants and needs, indulging curiosities, and accepting a variety of both bodily and emotional pains and pleasures. Though Wilde advocates for physical experience and the body, he also demonstrates that sensual pleasure should not be the only aim of life. Wilde’s character Dorian Gray is too present in the tangible world and, as his valuation of sensual pleasure grows, Dorian’s misery does as well. As revealed

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²⁹ Wilde, 164
³⁰ Wilde, 164
by Wilde’s harsh punishment of Dorian Gray and his insatiable desire for physical experience, Wilde believes that—while the tangible world is important and beautiful—an all-out reversal of the ascetic lifestyle and a denial of the intangible world of emotions and intellect is not the answer. He disapproves of either extreme—a complete denial of the body or unyielding hedonism. Nevertheless, through The Picture of Dorian Gray, Wilde reveals the truth he has observed about society. This truth is that British culture enforces a two-dimensional, colorless way of living, one that oppresses the full range of human sensation by discrediting and vilifying the natural impulses of the mind and body in particular.

Nietzsche advocates for the body in a more explicitly radical way. In Thus Spoke Zarathustra, he argues that the body is not separate from the soul but that they together form one vessel, each contributing to the self equally. He writes, “Behind your thoughts and feelings, my brother, there stands a mighty commander, an unknown wise man—he is called Self. He lives in your body, he is your body. There is more reason in your body than in your best wisdom.”

Nietzsche not only argues that the body and soul are one and the same, but that the human body is more reasonable than the mind. Unlike the mind, the body cannot be tainted by influence or persuasion in the way the mind can. When it is hot, the body responds by sweating, whether one wants to perspire or not. Nietzsche argues that manmade morality has conditioned people to disregard their bodily instinct and renounce physical pleasure. Nietzsche writes, “during the moral epoch of mankind, one sacrificed to one’s god one’s own strongest instincts, one’s ‘nature’: this festive joy lights up the cruel eyes of the ascetic, the ‘anti-natural’ enthusiast.”

Nietzsche spurns the ascetic who falls prey to this constructed way of regulating the experiences of the body. He celebrates the body’s natural state and the oneness of the body and soul.

31 Friedrich Nietzsche, Thus Spake Zarathustra, trans. Alexander Tille (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1908), 38
In stating that the body and soul are united, Nietzsche is also arguing that the will is controlled by both spiritual and physical desires and inclinations. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche explains, “we are at the same time the commanding and the obeying parties, and as the obeying party we know the sensations of constraint, impulsion, pressure resistance, and motion, which usually begin immediately after the act of will.”33 He is adamant that whatever humans will spiritually is usually met by a contradicting will produced by the body or the mind. These two wills are not, however, separate, making humans both the commanding and the obeying; humans are simultaneously in control of their own actions and not in control of them. Because there is no split between soul and body, the soul’s will cannot transcend the body. To deny the will of the body, then, is a mistake. Nietzsche writes, “We who are different, we immoralists...have opened our hearts to all kinds of understanding, comprehending, approving. We do not readily deny; we seek our honour in being affirmative.”34 Nietzsche himself ironically attained little physical pleasure, as he never married, was often sick, and ended his days in a sort of bodily paralysis. Still, Nietzsche—and his fellow immoralists—seek to affirm the pleasures and inclinations of the physical world, because it is all that exists. To them, rejecting the senses means losing an essential mode of understanding and experiencing the Self.

**Propriety and Social Construction**

While Wilde criticizes customary views about physical pleasure, he challenges the entire structure of moral tradition in the novel as well. A man ahead of his time, Wilde adopts deconstruction as a philosophy in his work forty years before the French philosopher Jacques

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33 Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 26
Derrida developed the school of theory. To Wilde, moral tradition is merely a social construct with no logical or natural foundation; British propriety could be deconstructed to reveal nothing but a system which favors those in positions of power while oppressing the weak. In *Dorian Gray*, Lord Henry recognizes the meaninglessness of certain social institutions and unrelentingly attacks them. Speaking to Basil in the opening chapter of the novel, Lord Henry states, “Being natural is simply a pose, and the most irritating pose I know.”\(^35\) There is no natural human position, because almost all “normal” human behavior is learned.

Wilde repeatedly points out the hollowness of the social law his contemporaries cling to so dearly. Lord Henry muses, “But then in the Church they don’t think. A bishop keeps on saying at the age of eighty what he was told to say when he was a boy of eighteen”\(^36\) Here, Wilde challenges religious doctrine in particular, suggesting that Christians blindly adhere to constructed beliefs and traditions. Though religion may be valuable, its observance is not authentic or “natural.” Wilde further expresses his belief that what is considered right and proper in nineteenth-century Britain has no logical moral root but is instead built on a series of unstable foundations. Lord Henry declares that social standards have “made” certain behavior acceptable and other behavior unpardonable. Speaking about temptation, Lord Henry says, “Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it had forbidden to itself, with desire for what its monstrous laws have made monstrous and unlawful.”\(^37\) To Wilde, what is natural and good is unknowable and certainly cannot be defined by constructed ideologies.

Nietzsche is also a proud skeptic of cultural systems. His language is *Beyond Good and Evil* is potently similar to the language Derrida used to describe his philosophical approach,

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\(^36\) Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 45
\(^37\) Wilde, 59
demonstrating Nietzsche’s revolutionary beliefs about the human construction of moral values. Like Derrida, Nietzsche emphasizes the power of signs and symbols in producing social structures. Referring to moral code specifically, Nietzsche writes, “Morality is merely sign language, merely symptomatology: you must already know what is going on in order to profit by it.”\footnote{Friedrich Nietzsche, \textit{Twilight of the Idols}, trans. Duncan Large (New York: Oxford Press, 1998), 33} Morality is a conglomeration of interacting signs which signify certain social laws, some written and some unwritten. One must be familiar with the signs signifying certain moralities and know the cultural “language” in order to survive. One must be able to manipulate that language in order to thrive.

Nietzsche points out that people do not explicitly acknowledge this uniquely human language; rather, they act as though it is natural. He writes, “It is \textit{we} alone who have devised cause, sequence, for-each-other, relativity, constraint, number, law, freedom, motive, and purpose; and when we project and mix this symbol world into things as if it existed ‘in itself,’ we act once more as we have always acted—\textit{mythologically}.”\footnote{Friedrich Nietzsche, \textit{Beyond Good and Evil}, trans. Walter Kauffmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 29} In referring to human behavior as \textit{mythological}, Nietzsche argues that mythology—the traditional stories, cults, and values developed by and passed from one generation of humans to the next—inform the way people behave and the way people decide how they should behave. Nietzsche is also arguing that the ideographs (such as \textit{freedom}, \textit{motive}, and \textit{purpose}) which people give agency are merely symbols. Underneath these symbols are simply more symbols. People act as though there is constant meaning behind ideas like \textit{freedom} and that these meanings stand alone, untethered to human existence. Nietzsche argues the exact opposite. This world of symbols does not exist “in itself” but that it is designed and erected by human beings. As Wilde does, Nietzsche sees
through the web of symbols layered upon symbols and recognizes the immense role of human
mythology in arbitrarily constructing human behavior.

_The Picture of Dorian Gray_ also identifies the hypocrisy of this constructed propriety. As
Dorian acts more and more selfishly, disregarding the emotions and well being of others, his
reputation does not suffer. Dorian’s impeccable looks, graceful decorum, enviable wealth, and
charming attitude save him from being declared morally corrupt. Wilde writes:

> Whispered scandals only increased, in the eyes of many, his strange and dangerous
> charm. His great wealth was a certain element of security. Society, civilized society at
> least, is never very ready to believe anything to the detriment of those who are both rich
> and fascinating. It feels instinctively that manners are of more importance than morals,
> and, in its opinion, the highest respectability is of much less value than the possession of
> a good chief. \(^{40}\)

Here, Wilde mocks the insincerity of his class and culture by revealing that—though religious
and moral piety is often cast as paramount—Dorian Gray’s manners, aristocratic privileges, and
looks afford him the approval of his peers despite his personal blasphemy and selfish character.
It is Dorian Gray’s surface level—his class and connections—which artificially position him in a
place of respect. Lord Henry addresses the hypocrisy of propriety and morality further when he
attends a house party hosted by the Duchess of Monmouth and argues against the Duchess’s
claim that her fellow countrymen are practical. Lord Henry declares, “They are more cunning
than practical. When they make up their ledger, they balance stupidity by wealth, and vice by
hypocrisy.” \(^{41}\) Lord Henry—a proud skeptic—condemns his peers and their shallow system of
values.

Later, as Dorian Gray agonizes over intermittent feelings of guilt after murdering Basil
Hallward, he reflects that he will likely walk away from his evil deed unpunished. Wilde writes,

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\(^{41}\) Wilde, _The Picture of Dorian Gray_, 225
“In the common world of fact the wicked were not punished, nor the good rewarded. Success was given to the strong, failure thrust upon the weak.” Wilde does not ignore the benefit of a world which checks the power of those who act unfairly toward the weak and innocent. In fact, Wilde was a proponent of social justice, a value instilled in him by his parents. Nonetheless, Wilde believes Victorian morality is constructed and fallible, and, in the end, engineered social laws override all ethics, resulting in a hypocritical system in which the oppressors remain unscathed by their failure to heed the very principles they preach.

Nietzsche resists this hypocritical cycle in *Beyond Good and Evil*, arguing that human inclination toward tradition and the strict observance of accepted behavior results in a society of automatons. Specifically, Nietzsche explains that all philosophers seek the ultimate Truth, a conceptualization of life that is applicable to the “everyman.” Rejecting this mindset, Nietzsche declares that there is no overarching Truth. Nietzsche writes:

> Morality is merely an interpretation of certain phenomena, more precisely a *mis*interpretation. Moral judgement pertains, like religious judgement, to a level of ignorance on which the very concept of the real, the distinction between the real and the imaginary, is still lacking: so that ‘truth’, on such a level, designates nothing but what we nowadays call ‘illusions.’ In this respect, moral judgement should never be taken literally: as such it is only ever an absurdity.

Nietzsche thus disavows the existence of a clear distinction between what is fact and fiction, between what is certain and what is invented. Though the constructed world might suggest the existence of common experience and inherent moral values, all existence is subjective. When people place trust in certain “truths,” they are organizing their lives by “illusions,” by values that may be unmasked to reveal absurd gaps in logic. Rather than bemoaning this conclusion, Nietzsche highlights its validity. He writes, “One must shed the bad taste of wanting to agree...”

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42 Wilde, 229
with many. ‘Good’ is no longer good when one’s neighbor mouths it. And how should there be a ‘common good’! The term contradicts itself: whatever can be common always has little value.”

According to Nietzsche, the most widespread morals and popular ideologies are the least valuable because they are the most invented and internalized cultural ideals.

The automaton cultures created by these illusions of truth prevent humanity from achieving progress, according to Nietzsche. In seeking the ideal of peace designed in association with moral law, cultures encourage complacency. Nietzsche refers to the main advocates of such utopia-hungry cultures as “levelers.” They limit the advancement of individuals by striving for “the universal green-pasture happiness of the herd, with security, lack of danger, comfort, and an easier life for everyone.”

Nietzsche argues that—while preaching this “green pasture” ideology—state organizations protected themselves from the individual by demonizing the tendencies such as free-spiritedness, wildness, and independence. Nietzsche explains that any traits or personalities which might elevate the individual above the group were denigrated as evil phenomena. He refers to this resulting conscience as “bad conscience.” Nietzsche writes, “I look on bad conscience as a serious illness to which man was forced to succumb by the pressure of the most fundamental of all changes which he experienced,—that change whereby he finally found himself imprisoned within the confines of society and peace.”

Because the state powers favor altruism over selfishness, the individual is never able to forthrightly advance his or her needs or desires above those of the community. Of course, the state does not control all individuals equally, punishing the “undesirables” while letting those it favors go unchecked. Thereby, the individual is unfairly barred from progress under common, constructed “bad conscience.”

45 Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, 54
Altruism, the Will, and Religion

When he wrote *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and criticized the arbitrariness of Victorian morality, Wilde must have imagined this rebuttal: *if morality is engineered, what is its underlying structure?* To this, he would likely have answered “self-interest.” When Basil tells Lord Henry that he is much better than he pretends to be, Lord Henry responds with another tirade about the emptiness of morality. He states:

The reason we all like to think so well of others is that we are all afraid of ourselves. The basis of optimism is sheer terror. We think that we are generous because we credit our neighbour with the possession of those virtues that are likely to be a benefit to us. We praise the banker that we may overdraw our account, and find good qualities in the highwayman in the hope that he may spare our pockets.47

Lord Henry argues that selfishness motivates all apparent acts of altruism. In order to survive—and obtain material objects and self-gratification beyond this—people act kindly and generously toward those who hold power and influence, another example of the hypocrisy of Victorian life.

Lord Henry disdains people who demonstrate false selflessness through good works and inauthentic words and says so on several occasions. When Lord Henry’s uncle George tells Lord Henry that he is tired of financially supporting his wife’s philanthropic endeavors, Lord Henry suggests that she will not understand his uncle’s position. He explains, “Philanthropic people lose all sense of humanity. It is their distinguishing characteristic.”48 Lord Henry is certain that doing good works does not spring from one’s sense of humanity but from one’s need to flaunt his or her own moral status. In following the prescribed mode of selflessness, people conform to behavior that is not genuine or original. Though they may properly adhere to cultural language,

48 Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 75
they are merely molds. Lord Henry calls unselfish people “colourless” and declares that they “lack individuality.”49 Through the mouthpiece of Lord Henry, Wilde expresses his own disapproval of disingenuous moral sentiments. Wilde values social justice and empathetic action, but he cannot ignore the hypocrisy and selfishness underlying the widespread fervor of the aristocracy to prove their moral superiority by aiding the deserving poor and afflicted.

Though usually a proponent of egoism, Nietzsche criticizes the sort of selfishness which cowardly hides behind the decadent disguise of European morality. Similar to Wilde, Nietzsche illuminates the component of social elevation prompting good deeds. Speaking about the “quiet” issue of European altruism, Nietzsche argues, “With regard to our problem, which can justifiably be called a quiet problem and which fastidiously addresses itself to only a few ears, it is of no little interest to discover that, in these words and roots which denote ‘good,’ we can often detect the main nuance which made the noble feel they were men of higher rank.”50 Nietzsche does not believe selflessness is genuine. To him, altruism exists in the real world as it is depicted in The Picture of Dorian Gray. It is an elaborate act, silently and feebly promoting the self while also conforming to constructed social laws.

Implying that selflessness is motivated by fear in addition to selfishness, Wilde further discredits moral action. Instead of acting under the influence of natural instinct, people conform to the obligations and “normal” practices dictated by the rules of cultural propriety. They do this because they fear being relegated as outcasts. Lord Henry states his ideas about the connection between moral action and fear clearly to Basil in the first chapter of the novel. He says, “Conscience and cowardice are really the same things, Basil. Conscience is the trade name of the

49 Wilde, 111
The laws of society replace the laws of nature, and all citizens—even members of the aristocracy—meticulously follow them, fearing they might forfeit their social status if they do not ignore their natural inclinations in favor of propriety.

Wilde again portrays moral action as a fear-induced attempt to override the laws of nature and the will when Lord Henry questions Dorian Gray’s self-proclaimed altruism. At the end of the novel, Dorian Gray—believing himself free of the ghosts of his past with Sybil Vane—initiates a new romance with a peasant girl named Hetty. He tells Lord Henry that he had planned to meet Hetty one morning and elope but never showed, telling himself that he was selflessly saving Hetty’s innocence by breaking her heart and leaving her without prospect. In response to Dorian’s supposed act of charity, Lord Henry tells him, “Good resolutions are useless attempts to interfere with scientific laws. Their origin is pure vanity. Their result is absolutely nil. They give us, now and then, some of those luxurious sterile emotions that have a certain charm for the weak.” Lord Henry believes that good resolutions are futile. Dorian might tell himself that he is acting out of the goodness of his heart and transcending his own animal desire to be with Hetty. In reality, his will is still being controlled by nature, as he is relinquishing his love for Hetty because he does not wish to fulfill his promise to her and fancies the idea of considering himself kind and generous.

Eventually, Dorian Gray recognizes his own cowardice and selfishness in rejecting Hetty. Wilde writes, “Through vanity he had spared her. In hypocrisy he had worn the mask of goodness. For curiosity’s sake he had tried the denial of self. He recognized that now.” Wilde critiques Dorian’s disingenuous goodness—which is clearly a privilege reserved for the

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52 Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray, 135
53 Wilde, 250
aristocracy, one that Hetty would not have the power to practice—as vain and hypocritical.

Wilde views Dorian’s self-denial and Victorian altruism in general as a social performance in which the aristocracy zealously play beneficent roles, acting as though they are making great sacrifices for the poor and powerless and then quietly returning home to their real lives of lavishness and excess.

A self-proclaimed anti-Christ, Nietzsche blasphemously draws these same arguments against authentic altruism toward religion, arguing that a healthy, unafraid life ends when one becomes a “god-fearing” disciple. Nietzsche writes:

All naturalism in morality, i.e. every healthy morality, is governed by a vital instinct...Anti-natural morality, i.e. almost every morality which has hitherto been taught, revered, and preached, turns on the contrary precisely against the vital instincts—it is at times secret, at times loud and brazen in condemning theses instincts. In saying ‘God looks at the heart’ it says no to the lowest and highest of life’s desires, and takes God to be an enemy of life...The saint, in whom God is well pleased, is the ideal castrato...Life ends where the ‘kingdom of God’ begins.54

The castrato (a male singer castrated during childhood in order to retain a soprano voice) is the religious zealot who sacrifices life experiences in order to demonstrate religious and moral piety. Like a castrato, the devout Christian gives up a key part of the self in order to conform to what is regarded as pure and beautiful. The devout Christian sacrifices much while performing good deeds—not out of genuine desire—but out of the pressure of the Church and the assurance of an afterlife in heaven.

Conclusion

While Wilde and Nietzsche may have espoused ideologies markedly different from those of their contemporaries, the two revolutionaries shared with each other one overarching perspective—that the power of social obligation and conformation should be challenged. Wilde and Nietzsche’s thoughts about the self and sensual desire, the arbitrariness of European propriety, and the hypocrisy of altruism are particularly akin. The two both criticize Platonic notions of the body, arguing that the senses and the physical nature of the body should not be demonized; rather, sensual pleasure and pain are a necessary facet of the human experience. In addition, Wilde and Nietzsche both deconstruct European propriety, illuminating the manmade structures underlying social laws and obligations. Finally, pointing out the hypocrisy of nineteenth-century altruism, Wilde and Nietzsche argue that ideals of generosity and good will are motivated by self-interest.

Wilde and Nietzsche both reject social obligation and European morality in their writing, but the events which led up to their twin deaths tell a separate story. As Wilde lay in bed at the Hotel d’Alsace in Paris, he received the Last Rites of the Catholic Church from Cuthbert Dunne, an Irish priest of the Passionate Fathers. Though his philosophical attitude often implied the absence of a God and blatantly mocked ascetic, religious ethics, Wilde sought the Church during his final moments of consciousness. Likewise, just before his mental breakdown in January of 1889, Nietzsche ignored his own criticism of aiding the weak. When a coachman in the Piazza Carlo Alberto in Turin began whipping his horse in frustration, Nietzsche flung himself in front of the horse. He embraced the animal, wept, and fainted. Nietzsche never recovered his sanity.
These events ironically suggest that Wilde and Nietzsche were unable to live outside of the morality they castigated. Both radicals unabashedly confronted tradition, but in their final years they were humbled. They turned to hope. Wilde wished for an afterlife and for a god, embracing the Catholic Church. Nietzsche hoped for kindness and fairness, as he threw himself in front of the abused horse. Unlike their challenges to social obligation and morality, Wilde and Nietzsche’s hope suggests they believed that life has purpose and meaning. Their actions imply a feeling of belonging to a community and a moral responsibility. Wilde and Nietzsche’s actions toward the end of their lives contradict their kindred criticisms of morality.

The hope of Wilde and Nietzsche calls into question just how deeply their cynical ideologies ran. Did they truly desire existence unshaped by religion and social obligation or were their shocking arguments merely a way of coping with their rapidly changing world and the conceptual difficulties science presented to Christianity? Wilde explained it best when, days before his death, he told his close friend Robbie, “When we are dead and buried in our porphyry tombs, and the trumpet of the Last Judgment is sounded, I shall turn and whisper to you, ‘Robbie, Robbie, let us pretend we do not hear it.’”55 Perhaps the final thread tying Wilde and Nietzsche together is that they both “pretended not to hear it.” They pretended to not desire community, altruism, and the hope central to Christianity. They built their own conceptions of the world, ones that were less vulnerable to the threat of evolution, new technologies, and shifting borders. These new conceptions denied propriety. Wilde and Nietzsche realized that tradition was already collapsing slowly, so they tore it down themselves. They pretended to be

above social obligation. Perhaps though, as they approached the ends of their lives, Wilde and Nietzsche remembered they had been pretending all along.

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