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The Immortal Life and Immoral Values of Dorian Gray

A Study of Immortality and Immoral Behavior in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

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Abstract

This essay aims to examine how immortality and immoral behavior are represented in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde. The claim in this essay is that an immortal life is not a desirable life and that it traps you in a paradoxical existence that cannot be desirable. The method used in this essay is close reading of the narrative focusing on the protagonist Dorian Gray examined through two theories, 'The Makropulos case' and the subsequent analysis regarding *contingent* and *categorical desires* introduced by Bernard Williams as well as a theory focusing on *endless frustration* by Aaron Smuts that evolved through critiquing Williams' theory on contingent and categorical desires. By analyzing Dorian Gray's behavior and comparing his choices to the theories presented by Williams and Smuts the results are unanimous and support the claim that an immortal life is undesirable. Dorian Gray ended up confined to a life without meaning as he left everything that held meaning to him behind in his pursuit of pleasure and youth.

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1.Introduction

Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a novel that has spawned many controversies since its publication in 1891. The protagonist Dorian Gray becomes immortal after having his picture painted by a close friend. Not only is he frozen in time, he also starts exhibiting many immoral traits after acquiring immortality. Dorian is influenced to value youth, beauty and pleasure over everything else in the world and this is the conflict that drives the narrative forward. Because of the conflict between Dorian's newly acquired immortal soul and his previous characteristics, this essay aims to examine how Oscar Wilde introduces his readers to the paradoxical existence of eternal youth and immortality. In this essay Dorian Gray's immortality will be examined in juxtaposition with his increasingly immoral behavior. The claim is that even though immortality is something many people seek it traps you in a paradoxical existence that cannot be desirable.

The theoretical framework used to analyze the novel are two theories regarding immortality, one introduced in 1973 by Bernard Williams regarding contingent and categorical desires and the second one introduced in 2011 by Aaron Smuts regarding endless frustration. The method used to analyze the novel through these theories is the close reading of the narrative. The essay will start by introducing some information regarding immortality and some background information regarding the controversies surrounding the novel and how previous research has been conducted on the novel. Following the background, the theoretical framework and method will be introduced and explained in more detail. After this the main part of this essay is going to take place. To finish the essay a conclusion regarding the essay and its results will be drawn.

Immortality is a concept that has tempted many over the centuries and because of its popularity it has become a staple in our culture. There are many myths regarding immortality in present day society. Immortality is visible in everything from religion and the resurrection

of Jesus Christ, to tales relating to reincarnation in Buddhism or the myths regarding the Holy Grail and the fountain of youth. However, tales surrounding immortality date even further back in history to Greek mythology; The tales about Hercules, the son of a Greek god, or the history of Sisyphus who is punished and forced to roll a boulder up a hill for eternity. Even in modern popular culture, immortality is a concept that tempts both author and reader alike. Immortality is a popular concept in both classic literature like *Dracula* by Bram Stoker, to the very modern romanticized versions on vampirism like the *Twilight* series by Stephanie Meyer or *Interview with the Vampire* by Ann Rice. Not only is immortality a concept in tales regarding vampires, but it is also increasingly popular in superhero movies and magazines as well as other genres. We are constantly exposed to the concept of immortality in an often romanticized, and sexualized way. Even *The Picture of Dorian Gray* romanticizes and sexualizes the concept of living an immortal life even though Dorian's eternal existence ends in a very abrupt way. However interesting or attractive immortality may seem, the protagonist from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* bears witness that immortality is not as compelling as one might think.

2. Background

Both Oscar Wilde and the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* have been the focus of many literary studies in modern times mostly due to the controversy surrounding the homoerotic sub-plot, as well as the controversies surrounding the author himself. The first published edition of the novel was heavily edited by the publisher *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*, mainly because of the homoerotic themes between the character Dorian Gray and Basil Hallward. Wilde later toned down the homoerotic themes before the novel was published entirely in 1891 which ultimately led to the novel being accepted by the public (Wilde 215). However, there were still many controversies surrounding the novel, especially regarding the immoral behavior exhibited by Dorian in the novel.

Dorian Gray could be described as an *epicurean*, i.e. a person devoted to the pleasures of life. Because of Lord Henry's continuous influence and Dorian Gray's epiphany that beauty and pleasure are the only things that matter, the novel quickly takes on other immoral values that contrasts the homoerotic themes previously presented. Because of the controversies surrounding the novel, Wilde included a preface to his novel to silence the critics and explain that "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all" (Wilde 3). By examining Dorian Gray's immortality, the hope is to shine a light on the missing discussion regarding how Dorian's immortality fueled his immoral behavior and how his immortality consequently lead to his demise.

3. Theory

The focal point regarding most research previously conducted on Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* has been on the controversial topics mentioned in section two. Since we cannot disassociate the novel from the political and social contexts surrounding it, some of the controversies will be taken into consideration while discussing Dorian Gray's immoral behavior. In the following section, the main theoretical framework will be introduced.

One of the main tools used in the upcoming analysis regarding immortality and immorality is the curious 'Makropulos Case'. One of the earlier writings regarding the Makropulos case is an essay called "The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality" written by Bernard Williams in 1973. Williams was a British philosopher who worked at Cambridge University and studied primarily human moral. In addition to Williams's essay, Aaron Smuts' essay "Immortality and Significance" will be examined. Smuts is a professor at the Department of Philosophy at Rhode Island College and he works primarily with "the nature and importance of well-being" (Smuts). While Smuts does not entirely agree with Williams' arguments, they do come to the same conclusion regarding immortality, that it is not a desirable existence for a normal person. In this essay, these two

texts are the primary texts that are going to be used as a theoretical framework while analysing the immortal life of Dorian Gray.

The Makropulos case stems from a play by a Czech playwright named Karel Čapek and it deals with the life of an immortal woman called Elina Makropulos (Henceforth 'EM') who consumed an elixir of life and became immortal. Instead of living a long and prosperous life, EM's life changed after living frozen at the age of 42 for 300 years. EM became increasingly indifferent and bored with her never-ending life and consequently lost all of her desires and the motivation to live. This boredom and loss of motivation ultimately resulted in EM taking her own life by choosing not to sustain it with the elixir any longer and she perished at the age of 342 years old (Williams 82-83).

One of the main hypotheses that William argues for in his essay is that desire is what keeps people sane and encourages them to keep on living. The desires that are constructed to inspire us to live are *categorical desires* and can for example be watching your child grow old or finishing a long project that you have poured your heart into (86). *Contingent desires* on the other hand are things that we desire and need to stay alive. Eating, sleeping and having shelter are a few contingent desires. In addition to these desires, sex and drugs can also fall into this category since those desires do not inspire us to stay alive. As a result, contingent desires are fleeting desires that do not complement our lives in any meaningful way (88,89). Categorical desires on the other hand, are meaningful to our continued existence. According to Williams, if you do not possess any categorical desires you are staying alive just for the sake of living and that is, according to him, not a desirable state to live in.

The argument regarding categorical and contingent desires put forth by Williams, is a reflection on exactly what happened in the Makropulos case. As mentioned, EM lost all of her categorical desires, she became bored and indifferent with her existence and in the end, she was staying alive just for the sake of living. Williams explains that "Her problem lay in

having been at it for too long. Her trouble was it seems, boredom: a boredom connected with the fact that everything that could happen and make sense to one particular human being of 42 has already happened to her” (90). In addition to EM’s case Williams argues that if a normal person achieves immortality, their categorical desires will lose their meaning, or they are going to run out of categorical desires since everything that one can achieve has already been achieved. Williams also argues that after an eternity even our most pleasurable experiences will not give us any pleasure and they will become mere contingencies and consequently they become meaningless to us (96-100).

Another theory put forth by Williams in his essay are two criteria that need to be fulfilled to live a meaningful immortal life. These criteria are as follows: “it should clearly be *me* that lives for ever” (91) and “the state in which I survive should be one which, to me looking forward, will be adequately related, in the life it presents, to those aims which I now have in wanting to survive at all” (91). What Williams argues for here is that it is oneself who must live forever in one’s own body. This means that reincarnation, as some religions promote, does not count towards it being oneself that continues living but rather that another conscience continues to live. According to Williams these types of ‘immortal’ reincarnated lives cannot be discussed as immortal lives since it is not oneself that continues to live (92). Looking at other perspectives, some might be able to argue that it is the same soul that continues to live throughout reincarnation. The second criterion adds that the immortal person’s categorical desires need to be met for them to live a desirable life. While Williams acknowledges that categorical desires can evolve and be born again, he strongly opposes that one can keep feeding one’s categorical desires for all of eternity without either running out of things to desire or becoming increasingly bored with these desires, and thus resulting in a loss of meaning. If one’s categorical desires lose their meaning they change into contingent desires or disappear completely as they no longer hold any meaning to an immortal person (91-93).

Looking at Aaron Smuts' critique on Williams' theories regarding immortality, most of them originate from Williams' inability to define what he means when discussing immortality and the human mind. Williams assumes in his argumentation that the reader has a clear knowledge of how to define humanity and immortality. Smuts however, argues that this is not necessarily the case. While Williams assumes that living an eternal human life would be meaningless Smuts suggests that an immortal human being cannot live a human life since he is no longer human. Smuts explains that an immortal life is closer to the life of an omnipotent deity or a god (1). While Williams probably did not intend his work to be questioned by how to define a human life, he certainly did not intend to argue that the eternal life of a god or another larger than life deity is meaningless in his essay. Nevertheless, we have to assume that Williams' discussion refers to a 'normal' human without any godlike qualities similar to EM or Dorian Gray. Even though Smuts argues against Williams' definition of an immortal human, he adds in his own research that even the life of a God would lose its meaning after an eternity. This argument will be explained in further detail a few paragraphs down.

Another critique Smuts has on Williams' essay are the two criteria Williams introduced in his study. Smuts argues that Williams' second criterion regarding needing to meet the immortal person's desire is too harsh and that it leaves no room for an evolving personality. He also states that a human's personality is something that changes over time, and that categorical desires are therefore ever-changing and as a person evolves their desires change as well (2,3). Smuts adds that "The prospect of our future existence need not propel us forward a thousand years at a time; a day or two will suffice" (3). He continues: "Although over the course of infinite time we might have a gradually changing notion of who we are, we would become someone completely different from when we began" (3).

In addition to critiquing and evolving Williams' arguments regarding immortality, Smuts conducted his own research on "The Immortal", a story written in 1947 by Jorge Luis

Borges. The story is about a society of immortals and one man's quest to end his immortality after finding it to be a curse rather than a blessing. According to Smuts, the story focuses on the lives of the immortals which seems to have, in the words of Williams, lost all their categorical desires and are now suffering from apathy and boredom similarly to EM. Smuts argues that if one is given infinite time to accomplish something, it is very hard to keep the motivation for doing it since you can always postpone it to another day. Smuts also considers what Borges argues for in the story, that if given enough time everything will repeat itself sooner or later. After an eternity everything that can be done already has been done and everything that can be discovered already has been discovered (6-7).

In addition to the problem regarding losing one's motivation, even if one succeeds in keeping motivation alive, there might not be anyone that is still interested in you or your accomplishments after a few thousand years. Sooner or later, an immortal person is going to reach a point in time when it simply becomes too difficult to find new discoveries and thus the quests related to these discoveries are bound to fail. Smuts calls this problem *endless frustration* and argues that a life that contains only endless frustration would not be desirable and that "no sane person would willingly row in place indefinitely. But rowing in place indefinitely is precisely what immortals of fixed abilities would eventually find themselves doing" (7). Similarly, if there is nothing that is too hard for an immortal to do or discover, they are probably not human anymore as they have gained some god-like qualities over the course of their immortal life and they can therefore not be considered to be 'normal' humans anymore. However, Smuts adds that even if a person gains godlike qualities over their eternal life even performing miracles and destroying worlds would lose their meaning and they would still end up in the same paradoxical existence leading up to eternal frustration as their human counterparts (8). Because of the reasons mentioned, eternal life is a trap that is more of a curse rather than a blessing no matter how you look at it.

To summarize both Williams' and Smuts' standpoints on immortality, it is clear that even though they do not agree on the arguments, they still come to the same conclusion regarding immortality, namely that it is not desirable for ordinary people to become immortal. Even if immortality would be enjoyable for some time, maybe even a few thousand years or more. Sooner or later immortality would lose its grandeur and the immortal person would lose all motivation as well as all of their categorical desires, and end up in an existence filled with boredom and endless frustration.

There are many similarities between the more recent stories surrounding immortality and the quest for the Holy Grail. In *Eternal Chalice; The Enduring Legend of the Holy Grail* by Juliette Wood, the author explains how the myths surrounding immortality and the Holy Grail became a prominent feature in modern literature and popular culture as well as how the Holy Grail became one of the earliest stories discussing immortality in western society. For a long time, Christian scholars attributed the Holy Grail to be the chalice that Jesus Christ drank from at the last supper. It was also something that the Arthurian knights were searching for in the many epic tales of King Arthur and his knights. However, there is also evidence supporting the Holy Grail in Celtic lore before Christianity. The symbol of the Holy Grail can in addition to its interesting lore be compared to Dorian's portrait in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* since their function is to keep someone alive through almost anything. As Dorian's life depends on the picture's existence, should one eliminate the painting it would result in his eternal life ending. This is represented in the final chapter of the novel where Dorian stabs the Painting out of sheer frustration, thus his eternal life ending and him taking on all the characteristics his sins previously depicted on the portrait (Wilde 202).

A study regarding sexuality and Dorian Gray is "Silent Homosexuality in Oscar Wilde's *Teleny* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*" by Antonio Sanna. In this study the author examines how the laws during the late 19th

century affected the literary climate. Sanna argues that the climate for homosexuals in Victorian society was very hard and that homosexual behavior in literature was hidden for a long time in order to not offend the public. Nevertheless, literature dealing with homosexual and other 'forbidden' topics proved to be very successful even though most literary works that dealt with these topics did not explicitly state that they dealt with them (25). The focus of Sanna's study is on how silence or hiding from society can be a representation of homosexuality. Sanna's study describes how homosexuals had to hide away from society to avoid being scandalized and exposed by society. Sanna argues that the fact that homosexual men had to stay silent and hide away from society is one of the primary reasons that homosexuality took a new-found place in literature in the late Victorian era (23-24). In the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Dorian seems to be very concerned with his reputation and to stay out of trouble. Even the promiscuous Lord Henry Wotton is very much aware that it is very important to save face when it comes to one's reputation: "one should never make one's début with a scandal" (Wilde 90). Silence as representation of homosexuality can be argued to have an important place in the novel, especially when keeping the reactions to the novel's first publication in mind. However, everything that can be related to homosexuality in the novel is covered up, described as sins, secrets and is shown in an implicit manner, for example alluding that Dorian's reputation is about to fall because of his recent behavior (Sanna 33-34)

In addition to Sanna's study regarding homosexuality being hidden away from the public in both literature and real life, there is another relevant study regarding masculinity written by Kerry Powell called *Acting Wilde; Victorian Sexuality, Theatre, and Oscar Wilde*. This study examines the attitudes regarding homosexuality and non-confirmative masculine behavior in Victorian society. Powell writes about Wilde's own sexuality and the general attitudes regarding not conforming to gender stereotypes in Victorian England. The attitudes regarding sexuality and masculinity were not completely rigid and according to James Eli

Adams (cited in Powell's text) there were many kinds of acceptable masculine behavior in Victorian society (5). There are more supporters of this claim, and one of the supporters is Herbert Sussman (cited in Powell) who argues that Victorian masculinity was "varied and multiform" (5). Powell also argues that because Oscar Wilde himself never conformed to any gender stereotypes at all in his public or private life, it is possible to see this fact reflected in his writing since he was not afraid to stand out or to step on someone's toes.

Comparing the studies by Powell and Sanna, there seem to be two contrasting ideas regarding how accepted non-confirmative masculine behavior was in Victorian society. On the one hand, there is Powell who expresses that there were many different types of acceptable masculine behavior and on the other hand there is Sanna who expresses that there was a stigma regarding showing non-confirmative masculine behavior. However, these two ideas do not have to contradict each other. They can form an understanding of a society where people can accept different types of masculine behavior but still will not accept men behaving in a non-confirmative, or immoral, way in public. These two authors show that there were several different attitudes surrounding masculinity but that homosexuals had to hide behind silence, secrecy and sin to stay as a part of Victorian society, similar to how Dorian hides away from the accusing eyes of the public in the novel.

4. Method

The main method in this essay is going to be close reading of the narrative, focusing especially on the development of the character Dorian Gray. Close reading as a method will throw light on Dorian Gray's immortal life, his personality, and decision-making and how his immoral behavior came to change his life forever. To analyze the findings Bernard Williams' and Aaron Smuts' theories regarding immortality are going to be used as the theoretical framework. The analysis of Dorian Gray's development is going to focus primarily on categorical and contingent desires as well as the concept of endless frustration and how these

concepts interact with his immortality. For reasons of space, this analysis is mainly going to focus on these aspects. Analyzing other aspects could be beneficial, but since this is a very short text adding other aspects could render the analysis shallow.

The following analysis is going to be divided into three main parts since three different parts of the novel can easily be identified. The three parts of the novel are: Dorian before he acquired immortality up until he finds out about his newly acquired immortality and the second part is the development of Dorian Gray as a character where he slowly sinks further and further into his new identity and becomes increasingly vain and interested in the pleasures of life. The third and final stage of the essay will analyze the peak of his new identity where he can no longer be compared to the character he was at the beginning of the novel. Finally, a conclusion regarding Dorian's immortality and immoral behavior will end this essay and a closing statement regarding the theoretical approaches will be made.

5. Analysis

In this chapter the main analysis of the essay is going to take place. The focus is on the main character of the novel, the rich, well behaved but vain man Dorian Gray. As stated in section one, the aim of this essay is to analyze Dorian's immortal life and examine the paradox that is living an immortal life while giving in to your contingent desires and leaving your categorical desires behind. The focus during the analysis of the text is mainly going to be Williams' and Smuts' theories. However, the essay will start by taking a closer look at Basil Hallward and Lord Henry Wotton's influence on Dorian's change in behavior.

Before Lord Henry's and Dorian's first meeting at Basil Hallward's residence, Basil paints a picture regarding how often Lord Henry manipulates and influences others. Since Dorian is a quite young man he can easily be manipulated and corrupted by Lord Henry's charm. Basil explains that Lord Henry is quite manipulative and influential and begs Lord Henry to stay away from Dorian "Don't spoil him. Don't try to influence him. Your influence

would be bad” (Wilde 17). However, as evidenced in the chapter following this quote, Lord Henry does not heed Basil’s warning because he is too intrigued by Dorian’s exceptional beauty and charm. Similarly, the more Dorian listens to Henry and his opinions the more intriguing Lord Henry becomes. Basil does his best to shield Dorian from Lord Henry’s manipulating behavior and explains that he should not believe in anything that Lord Henry says since he has a very bad influence. “[D]on’t move around too much or pay attention to what Lord Henry says. He has a very bad influence over all his friends, with the single exception of myself” (Wilde 19). Although Dorian is explicitly warned, he does not take Basil’s warning to heart which consequently leads to Dorian falling straight for Lord Henry’s convincing speech about appreciating youth and beauty in addition to following new sensations and the pleasures of life as seen in the following quote.

Now wherever you go, you charm the world. Will it always be so? ... When your youth goes, your beauty will go with it, ... Live! Live the wonderful life that is in you! Let nothing be lost upon you. Be always searching for new sensations. Be afraid of nothing. ... Youth! Youth! There is nothing in the world but youth! (Wilde 23-24)

Hearing Lord Henry talk about his exceptional beauty and youth plants a seed in Dorian’s mind which grows and blooms when Dorian later realizes his own beauty while examining the portrait of himself for the first time. Because of Lord Henry’s convincing manners and his continuous influence, Dorian makes a wish to stay forever young:

How sad it is! I shall grow old, and horrible, and dreadful. But this picture will remain always young. It will never be older than this particular day of June... If it were only the other way! If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old! For that – for that – I would give everything! Yes, there is

nothing in the whole world I would not give! I would give my soul for that! (Wilde 27)

This wish will come true for Dorian and his desire to stay forever young combined with Lord Henry's influence is going to fuel Dorian's immoral behavior during the upcoming narrative.

Observing Dorian's reactions to Lord Henry's statement from a theoretical standpoint it is apparent that staying and looking young is becoming increasingly important to Dorian. While he has not yet realized his immortality, he is very excited about the prospect of staying young forever and to avoid living the 'dreadful life' that Lord Henry is associating with growing old. Lord Henry's influence on Dorian is quite apparent as soon as they are introduced to each other. They are equally as interested in each other as they are in themselves. However, the change in Dorian's behavior that we observe in the upcoming narrative cannot be attributed solely to one person. Even if it is certain that Lord Henry influences Dorian to some extent there are of course several other influences regarding his change in behavior. This particular argument will be discussed in further detail later in the text.

As stated earlier in the text, Dorian could be described as an epicurean, a person devoted to the pleasures of life. This description can also be attributed to Lord Henry. Lord Henry tells Dorian to "[b]e always searching for new sensations" (Wilde 24) which in addition to Dorian's newfound appreciation for beauty and youth shown here can be what pushed Dorian towards becoming the person he evolves into during the second part of the novel. Having this kind of relationship to life focused on staying satisfied in the moment, will not leave you with a fulfilled life. According to both Williams and Smuts something more is needed to stay satisfied living an immortal life than just fleeting, contingent desires. In the following section, it will be examined how Dorian moves towards living a life based primarily

on satisfying his contingent desires and how he leaves the one person that could save him from himself behind.

During the first few chapters Dorian becomes increasingly involved in his portrait and in Lord Henry's friendship, and they are constantly seen in each other's company. The next big change in Dorian's personality that can be observed is when he gets involved with, and engaged to, the beautiful actress Sibyl Vane. While Lord Henry is still trying to influence Dorian into not getting involved with Sibyl, there is still a part of Dorian that believes in love and is searching for more than just simple pleasures. Despite Lord Henry's warnings regarding getting tied down at a young age, Dorian is in love and becomes engaged to Sybil Vane. One could argue that Sibyl's influence on Dorian is the last saving grace on his own moral. Nevertheless, all is shattered not too long after their first meeting because of Lord Henry's continued influence on Dorian. A single bad performance from Sybil was enough for Dorian to completely turn away from her even though he had promised her a life together. Dorian was previously described as a person who would never hurt anyone, in the words of Basil Hallward "He would never bring misery upon anyone. His nature is too fine for that" (Wilde 72). After his dismissal, he is transforming into an entirely different person that can only be described as cold and uncaring. Dorian leaves Sybil Vane with the following words "You are shallow and stupid. My God! How mad I was to love you! You are nothing to me now. ... I wish I had never laid eyes upon you! You have spoilt the romance of my life" (Wilde 81).

Dorian's harsh dismissal of Sybil Vane after her one bad performance drove her to commit suicide. Initially Dorian shows some regret and guilt regarding his dismissal and the consequent suicide of Sybil Vane and he considers taking her back after seeing the repercussions of his behavior in the picture (Wilde 84-85). "How unjust, how cruel, he had been to Sybil Vane. It was not too late to make reparation for that. She could still be his wife"

(Wilde 88). Dorian even confesses to Lord Henry that he is feeling guilty about his dismissal “I was brutal Harry – perfectly brutal” (Wilde 89). Even though Dorian is regretful at first, his regret is quickly replaced by feelings of disgust and indifference. From this point onwards, the transformation of the new character of Dorian Gray is completed and it becomes clear that Dorian possesses neither desires nor plans regarding the future except nurturing his immortal life and enjoying it to the fullest. Dorian becomes increasingly impulsive and starts acting out his innermost desires just as Lord Henry wanted him to do. During the same night as he found out about Sybil’s suicide he follows Lord Henry to the clubs to seek other pleasures and Sybil is soon repressed from his mind.

At this stage in the novel, Dorian is completely aware of his newly acquired immortality. After the incident with Sybil Vane he observes a difference in the picture and draws the conclusion that the wish he made in Basil’s studio has come true. Dorian’s reaction is first and foremost shock that he is now, to his own knowledge, immortal and frozen in time. Dorian is quick to change his attitude and becomes fascinated with his predicament and loves that every sin he is going to commit from this point onwards will scar the face of his painting instead of his own. The picture, which represents his immortality, can be attributed to have the same function as the Holy Grail, the fountain of youth or the elixir of life that lets ‘EM’ live an eternal life in The Makropulos Case. Without the picture, Dorian would have nothing to stabilize his immortal soul. However obsessed Dorian is with his portrait he soon starts to loath it with a passion since he can see the implications of his actions and the state of his soul in the picture (Wilde 110). On the other hand, Dorian has a belief that the sins visible on his picture might pass away some day and that he might be able to find solace in his sins “There was no reason that the future should be so full of shame. Some love might come across his life, and purify him, ... Perhaps some day the cruel look would have passed away from the scarlet sensitive mouth, and he might show the world Basil Hallward’s masterpiece.” (Wilde

112) Nonetheless, Dorian realizes that even if the sin written across the picture's face would disappear, the signs of his age would not "Hour by hour and week by week, the thing upon the canvas was growing old. It might escape the hideousness of sin, but the hideousness of age was in store for it ... The picture would have to be concealed" (Wilde 112-113). As he stores the picture away he no longer has any means to observe the repercussions of his sins. Because of this reason Dorian is no longer motivated to keep himself from committing more sins. He starts to engage in new behaviors and even his acquaintances in the heart of London start to question if the rumored sins could be associated to the charming Dorian Gray. Lord Henry explained to us earlier in the novel that "one should never make one's *début* with a scandal" (Wilde 90). Even though Lord Henry's opinion regarding the rumors that surround Dorian's behavior is clear, Dorian is now the focal point of the gossip in the higher standing socialites of London.

Dorian's (now very public) display of immoral behavior could be a representation of some of the homoerotic themes in the novel. As explained by Antonio Sanna in section three, homosexuality in literature was often hidden away behind sins and silence, often in alleyways and far from the gazing eyes of the public (23-24). Dorian's sins have at this point become the talk of many people in London as the picture keeps showing the increasing signs of sin on its face. However, as these sins are not explicitly stated to involve homosexual behavior, one could interpret some of Dorian's endeavors out of town to allude to this even if not explicitly stated. For example, it is said that "he had been seen brawling with foreign sailors in a low den in the distant parts of Whitechapel" (Wilde 129). Sanna explains that this is a part of London that is often associated with criminality and argues that this could easily be interpreted as "an allusion to the encounters between homosexual men" (29). In addition to Sanna's interpretation of homosexual behavior, Kerry Powell also argues that homosexual behavior was accepted to a certain extent as long as one did not show it in public (5). This

argument supports the claim that Dorian Gray's possible homosexual endeavors are hidden away from the public. This argument could also prove that Oscar Wilde is choosing to hide the homosexual themes implicitly in the novel since he was forced to censor the first version of the novel.

Before introducing a more in-depth discussion surrounding Dorian's contingent and categorical desires and what they mean for his immortality, a closer look at the two criteria introduced by Bernard Williams must be provided. The two criteria are as follows; "it should clearly be *me* that lives for ever" (91) and "the state in which I survive should be one which, to me looking forward, will be adequately related, in the life it presents, to those aims which I now have in wanting to survive at all" (91). If these criteria are not fulfilled, one cannot live a meaningful immortal life without falling victim to boredom, apathy and a feeling of living a meaningless life, according to Williams. The first criterion is easily identified and attributed to Dorian Gray. It is clearly the same person in the same body as before he acquired immortality, even though Dorian has had a major change in his personality. However, the second criterion has to do with Dorian's categorical desires. If Dorian's life is going to contain meaning, he must retain some categorical desires that keep him motivated to live. In the following section Dorian's motivation and his desires and whether or not his immortal life supports the second criterion is going to be discussed.

Analyzing Williams second criterion it is clear that Dorian's thirst for pleasures and parties can no longer be quenched, in other words, the contingent desires take a hold of Dorian and do not let go. Any interest or intellectual development that keeps Dorian locked into a reality that features more than just contingent desires are quickly thrown aside to make room for other sensations. In the novel, the narrator describes it in the following way: "no theory of life seemed to him to be of any importance compared with life itself. He felt keenly conscious of how barren all intellectual speculation is when separated from action and

experiment” (Wilde 122). Even though Dorian keeps some interests like studying religion, making perfumes, obsessing over music, collecting gemstones and jewels or looking at embroideries or tapestries (Wilde 121-126), one thing his life is lacking is something that keeps his attention over longer periods of time, rather than just his obsession with his youth, beauty and his portrait. Everything that keeps Dorian interested in living his life at this stage are contingent desires. As far as the reader can tell he has no desires except these fleeting short-term desires.

In addition to this Dorian is no longer interested in a life together with someone else like he was once interested in Sybil Vane. He is no longer nurturing his relationship with Basil Hallward, one of his closest friends at the beginning of the novel, either. According to Williams, Dorian’s life is now dangerously close to containing no meaning. Dorian’s immortality has made him choose to pursue contingent desires rather than nurturing and feeding the categorical desires that, according to Williams, are critical for nurturing a will to live (86). One could argue that seeking pleasures and being at the center of social situations and pursuing relationships with other people could be categorical desires. However, in Dorian’s case this is simply not true. It is clear that Dorian does not care about these relationships in a long-term perspective. After engaging in these relationships, he tosses them aside without a second thought even though he is hurting himself and the people that he uses. Also, in accordance with Smuts, Dorian is very close to achieving what he describes as endless frustration (7). Since the desires that Dorian has at this point in the novel are all contingent desires, Dorian had already achieved them several times over. In addition to this, Dorian does not seem to want to expand his desires either. Instead, he is quite satisfied living this life even though he becomes increasingly paranoid and less and less like his former self. By having this information and looking back at Williams’ criteria regarding immortality, it is safe to say that Dorian does not live up to the second criterion of needing categorical desires

to live a decent immortal life. In addition to Dorian's immoral behavior affecting his desires to keep his motivation alive his problems are also of a moral order since he can no longer stand who he has become. Dorian realizes how his behavior has affected not only himself but everyone around him and how his immoral behavior has lead him to do things that he would never have done if not for the apparent change in moral behavior exhibited throughout the novel. The picture has become something else than what he predicted when he made his wish in Basil's studio. It has become the thing that haunts and torments him, it has become the representation of his broken and immoral soul that keeps him locked into a miserable existence.

The beginning of the end for Dorian Gray starts after a visit from his once best friend Basil Hallward. According to Basil, Dorian's reputation around London is declining quickly. Basil tells Dorian that "the most dreadful things are being said against you in London" (Wilde 136). Almost everyone knows about how Dorian corrupts and uses people in his surroundings. Several influential people are turning away from Dorian because of his immoral behavior and how he uses and influences others. Basil tells Dorian that "they say that you corrupt everyone with whom you become intimate" (Wilde 138). Basil still thinks that Dorian is the same person he was several years ago when they met for the first time, except for the influence that Lord Henry still holds over Dorian. The attempts to make Dorian change his ways backlashes quickly, and Dorian finds himself telling Basil all about the picture's influence "I shall show you my soul. You shall see the thing that you fancy only God can see" (Wilde 139). Basil is of course horrified at seeing the corruption of Dorian's soul and how his immoral behavior has changed the once pure and innocent man. Dorian does not want to take all the credit for his corruption and the decline into the monster that he has become, as he blames Basil for what he has become.

you met me, flattered me and taught me to be vain of my good looks. One day you introduced me to a friend of yours, who explained to me the wonders of youth, and you finished a portrait of me that revealed to be the wonder of beauty. In a mad moment, that even now I don't know whether I regret or not, I made a wish, perhaps you would call it a prayer (Wilde 142).

This quote proves Basil and Henry's involvement in corrupting Dorian's soul. Even though this is the case, Basil still believes that there is hope in saving Dorian's corrupted soul.

However, he is sorely mistaken as a furious Dorian stabs him to death in front of the painting.

After seeing the full extent of how corrupted Dorian's soul is one would expect that there is no saving his soul. However, there is one thing that starts to influence Dorian to change his ways, and that is Sybil Vane. Dorian is reminded of his sins after meeting Sybil's brother outside of an opium den in the slums of London. Despite James's plans to take revenge on Dorian, his immortality keeps him from getting killed by James Vane. While James points a revolver to Dorian's head Dorian begs him "set me under the lamp and look at my face!" (Wilde 173). Due to Dorian's request, James sees a young man who could not possibly have been engaged to Sybil eighteen years ago, and is therefore tricked to let Dorian go. Even though James lets Dorian go, a woman explains that "They say he has sold himself to the devil for a pretty face. It's nigh on eighteen years since I met him. He hasn't changed much since then" (Wilde 175). Due of this revelation, James Vane is determined to chase down Dorian to get revenge.

After the encounter with James Vane, Dorian becomes increasingly paranoid, and is because of their encounter terrified of dying. He has, for the first time, been forced to meet some of his sins head on. Consequently, Dorian starts to contemplate the consequences of his actions. He reflects on the murder of Basil Hallward, his dismissal of Sybil Vane and Henry's continuous influence on him. Consequently, Dorian knows that his behavior has become a

problem and that he needs to change his ways. Wishing only for pleasure and contingent desires has put him on a path that he regrets following. “‘I wish I could love,’ cried Dorian ... ‘But I seem to have lost the passion and forgotten the desire. I am too much concentrated on myself. My own personality has become a burden to me. I want to escape, to go away, to forget’” (Wilde 186). This is a realization that his choices in life have become burdening for him. He no longer sees a point in living because the consequences of his action are starting to catch up with him.

Because of these reasons Dorian stays somewhat motivated to change his ways since he has realized that he cannot live the life that he praised for his entire grown up life. “I have done too many dreadful things in my life. I am not going to do any more. I began my good actions yesterday ... I am going to alter. I think I have altered” (Wilde 190). Dorian is determined not to corrupt anyone anymore as he thinks back on Sybil Vane as well as the corruption of countless others that he left heartbroken or dead behind him. “Was it true that one could never change? ... He knew that he had tarnished himself, filled his mind with corruption and given horror to his fancy; that he had been an evil influence on others, and had experienced a terrible joy in doing so” (Wilde 199). This confession regarding his sins is what drives him to try to mend the broken relationships of the people that he wronged during his life: “Better for him that each sin of his life had brought its sure, swift penalty along with it. There was purification in punishment” (Wilde 199). Dorian has made a decision regarding what road to take because he is thinking clearly for the first time in a long time. Maybe this is the first time he is feeling regret since his harsh dismissal of Sybil Vane eighteen years ago.

Trying to find solace will undoubtedly be a difficult quest, but Dorian is determined to search for answers. It is possible that a change of heart is enough to restore him to his former glory. The picture that keeps Dorian stable and is the link to his immortality, is also what Dorian hopes will show his change of heart. However, Dorian is sorely mistaken. Instead of

finding the painting restored to its former glory after confessing his sins, he finds the picture looking just as repulsive as before. In a swift moment he stabs the painting hoping that “as it has killed the painter, so it would kill the painter’s work, and all that that meant. It would kill the past and when that was dead he would be free” (Wilde 202). Dorian’s hope is that he would be free from his immoral soul and the suffering that he brought upon himself and the people surrounding him. However, this will not be the case for him. Ultimately, Dorian is freed from immortality, and subsequently also from suffering, when he stabs the picture. The price on the other hand, might have been higher than what he was willing to pay as he ages and dies, transforming into the hideous reflection of the painting. As he stabs the painting, representing his soul and his immortal life, he stabs himself in the heart. Without the picture to stabilize his immortal soul he dies, old and horrible; the two things he never wanted for himself.

Even though Dorian was punished for his actions, there are many different repercussions following his immortality and his eternal youth. During the beginning of the novel Dorian’s wish is to stop aging and stay young forever. However, he never thought about how the wish would impact his life. Dorian loses any desires that he held before he became immortal and started living a life dedicated to pleasures and excess. Looking at immortality as a concept before considering Dorian’s immortality, the general consensus was that living an immortal life is living an undesirable life. Even if one is able to stay true to oneself, when you age, the people around you will grow old and die, and even if you are able to keep your desires alive and develop your wants and needs sometime in the future you will run out of things to do. Aaron Smuts even argues that endless frustration will affect you even if it takes a million years (7). Dorian had not yet done everything in his life, so he was not yet exposed to endless frustration. However, Dorian’s behavior had put him in a situation where his reputation was destroyed, he killed the two people that cared about him and the only desires

he had left in his life were feeding the desires he still had for pleasure. Immortality for Dorian became synonymous with immorality and because of his change in personality he could no longer stand the person he had become. Even when Dorian tried to blame his immoral behavior on others he spiraled out of control. Oscar Wilde highlighted what immortality could do to someone even in a hypothetical situation and Dorian found out the hard way that immortality is a curse rather than a blessing, similar to the immortals discussed in Smuts text regarding immortality. By comparing Dorian's life to Williams' and Smuts' theories one can assume that immortality is admittedly not a desirable state for anyone fictional or real. Dorian had problems with his desires but, above all, his immoral behavior was the thing that led him to live in a miserable existence devoid of meaning and joy.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay has been concerned with the theme of immortality in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and has focused on the change that Dorian went through and the conflicting feelings and behavior he depicted in the novel. This essay has also provided a discussion regarding whether immortality is desirable and how living an eternal life can affect a person in a negative manner.

Dorian as a research subject has provided a good basis for developing arguments regarding immortality, especially while comparing it to Williams' and Smuts' theories. In the Makropulos case EM suffers from apathy and boredom after living a long immortal life and takes her own life. While Dorian does not suffer in the exact same sense as EM did in the Makropulos case, he suffers mainly from conflicting feelings regarding his own immoral behavior. Both EM and Dorian are stuck in an existence that they cannot escape. As EM clings to life with an elixir of life, Dorian clings to life because of his portrait. Dorian's sole purpose in life was to live life to its fullest and take full advantage of the pleasures that life provides: sex, alcohol, drugs and companionship. However, as he did not have to suffer any

consequences for his actions as the picture takes the suffering instead of himself, he is completely omitted from any moral implications regarding his behavior.

What can be concluded from this essay is that immortality is a trap that lures us in with promises of eternal youth and life devoid of death. Moreover, there are certainly many drawbacks from acquiring immortality. Every theoretical point and the analysis of the text has come to the same conclusion; if not given a way to escape immortality one would be stuck in an infinite loop of recurring events and one would either suffer from endless frustration or lose the motivation to live because of continuously running out of categorical desires to keep you motivated. In the case of Dorian Gray it is clear that he is starting to suffer from loss of motivation and apathy regarding his immortal life. However, the primary reason for him ending his immortal life is actually his own immoral behavior catching up to him. Dorian is no longer being able to recognize himself in the person that he has become. In addition to this, he is starting to feel the implications of his immoral behavior. Because of these reasons, immortality for Dorian Gray lost its grandeur and he decided to find a way to find solace for his soul.

It is of course possible to argue that there are also positive aspects to immortality. However, in this study of this particular case, Dorian's immortal existence does not provide him with any meaning and he would possibly have been better off and lived a longer and more meaningful life without his immortality. Immortality and immoral behavior are complex issues and this essay offers only one out of many possible perspectives. To further extend this kind of research one would have to compare the lives of several other cases of immortality and provide more insight to the theory.

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