HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

Oscar Wilde and Edgar Allan Poe

Comparison of The Picture of Dorian Gray *and "William Wilson"*

Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs

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Abstract

This essay compares and contrasts some relevant autobiographical aspects of Oscar Wilde and Edgar Allan Poe in order to demonstrate how and why Wilde's narrative style and thematic development in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is similar to that of Poe in "William Wilson." The first part of the essay briefly outlines how Wilde discovered Poe through the writings of Charles Baudelaire, and how Wilde subsequently identified with Poe's literary style and his controversial social position. Their narrative styles are then examined by application of narratological models to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and "William Wilson," revealing the motif of the double as a central component. What is established is Wilde's discovery in the work of Poe of means to create and enhance his style and argument on aesthetics in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

The second half of this essay is devoted to a close analysis of the protagonist of each story, which reveals how the respective stories embody the shape and direction of the author's arguments. As a result, the primary focus of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is revealed to be an examination of artistic and social complexities, rendering *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as both a theoretical and a fictional exploration of the inevitable separation between the artist, the subject, the audience, and the work of art. "William Wilson" is, on the other hand, directly engaged with the psychological effects of a split identity. Both Wilde and Poe were, in other words, interested in exploring the often ill-defined separation between art or fiction and reality. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and "William Wilson" reveal strong thematic and aesthetic similarities between the two authors; the inherent fragmentation of identity under the pressure of society is an overarching theme in both narratives.

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Introduction

There exists biographical evidence that explains Wilde's narrative mode in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by his fascination with the writings of Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849). It was in the works of Poe that Wilde found the roots of the Aesthetic movement (in which he himself thrived) through reading Baudelaire's translations and interpretation of Poe's work. Moreover there was a level of familiarity that Wilde found in the tragic life of Poe which he could identify with from his own position as a literary and political dissenter. Evidence of Poe as a major influence in Wilde's artistic development invites comparison between Wilde's renowned *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Poe's more obscure – though no less important – short story titled "William Wilson."

Wilde's interest in Poe's depiction of human perversity and the mysterious mirror image of oneself – or one's double – resulted in the complex argument of art influencing life (and vice versa) as well as the relationship between the artist, the subject and the audience, integrated into the magical portrait of Dorian Gray; Wilde's exploration of the psychological torment of Dorian, by projecting his sins onto a double, suggests Poe's doubling in "William Wilson". By utilizing narratological models on the structures of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and "William Wilson" and an exploration of Edgar Allan Poe's influence upon Oscar Wilde, along with a close analysis of their characters, this essay will compare and contrast the techniques and themes that define each story. By comparing and contrasting some relevant autobiographical aspects of Oscar Wilde and Edgar Allan Poe, along with an analysis of the structures and characters of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and "William Wilson," this essay will identify the shape and direction of the authors' arguments.

The Authors

Wilde's discovery of Poe through Baudelaire

An early observation that can be made upon having read both *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and "William Wilson" concerns the familiar elements that they both share, most recognizable being the similarity between the painting in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and the *Doppelgänger* in "William Wilson." Far from being a matter of coincidental similarity of interests, it is well known that Edgar Allan Poe's life and work served as one of Oscar Wilde's strongest inspirations, even though Wilde was not to discover Poe's work until his study of Baudelaire's writings. A sign of Wilde's high regard for Poe is apparent in writings such as in his defence of what was considered his indecent behaviour, relating to his activities with men such as Robert Clibborn and Frederick Atkins (both connected to his indecency trial); Oscar Wilde writes in *De Profundis*: "[to] entertain them was an astounding adventure. Dumas *pére*, Cellini, Goya, Edgar Allan Poe, or Baudelaire, would have done just the same" (Wilde 107). Perhaps the most telling sign of the influence that Wilde experienced in Poe's work stems from the former's own infatuation with the aforementioned Baudelaire, through whom he encountered Poe's writing. It is also evident by their writings that both Wilde and Baudelaire viewed the utilitarianism of the American middle-class and its rejection of the separateness or even superiority of art as a constant restraint on Poe's artistic profession. Baudelaire noted:

> In a country where the idea of utility […] dominates and takes precedence over everything; […] Edgar Poe, on the contrary, dividing the world of the mind into *pure Intellect, taste,* and *moral Sense,* applied criticism in accordance with the category to which the object of the analysis belonged. (Baudelaire 132-33)

Without doubt, Wilde sympathised with Poe's evident difficulties in life as well as identifying with his ultimately tragic end. That Poe drew material from his personal experiences has been asserted before and since, and Baudelaire notably compares Poe's persona directly to his character William Wilson, stating, "[A]ll of Edgar Poe's stories are, so to speak, biographical. The man is to be found in the work ['William Wilson']" (Baudelaire 43). The short story was first published in *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine* in 1839 as "William Wilson: A Tale" and is the story of a man unashamed and unrepentant of his mischievous life and his prevailing tendency to exploit and cheat those around him. Throughout the story, Wilson is haunted by his double figure, who takes the form of an almost identical twin whom Wilson might or might not come to recognize as his moral self at the end of the tale. A reflection of Poe's struggles with what the society around him deemed appropriate, the narrative is fraught with uncertainties as even the narrator's true name is unknown since Wilson states that it is merely a pseudonym. While Poe uses settings that are noticeably from his early years in London, particularly in terms of Wilson's Catholic school and its schoolmaster, the story itself marks a certain landmark in Poe's writing career. Arthur H. Quinn, in his *Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography*, identifies "William Wilson" as "an example of Poe's progress as a writer of fiction," asserting that contrary to his earlier works, where the characters' mental and physical identities are maintained, "a battle between moral and physical identities is waged" where the moral side wins (Quinn 287).

Wilde himself very much accepted Poe's double life as Southern aristocrat and as tortured impoverished artist, stating this opinion in his *Letters*, that Poe was a "great poet whom America put to death on a clearly-proved charge of having written poems entirely composed of those three wonderful things Romance, Music, and

Sorrow" (Wilde 567). Wilde's blending of the poisonous and the perfect, his conception of decadence as the new renaissance, reveals a further element adopted from his reading of Poe. This infatuation with Poe's status as one of the great writers of all time is all the better underlined in another of Wilde's letters, where he writes to the editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, in response to their list of the "Best Hundred Books," expressing his amazement that Poe has been "passed over," querying whether such a "marvellous lord of rhythmic expression" did not deserve a position; in exchange he suggested that they "elbow out" Robert Southey (Wilde 318). It is clear that Oscar Wilde recognized the worth of Edgar Allan Poe and that he in some respect felt some accord between the moral views expressed by Poe and by himself. One can recognize a great number of similarities between their core concerns when comparing their works. The similarities become particularly distinctive in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Poe's "William Wilson," even though their method and aims might not always be aligned. Naming one field which seems to have been of great interest to them both would be the scientific discoveries of their times. This surge of scientific questioning of prescribed laws laid by a supposed higher power is perfectly summarised by Wilde in his *De Profundis*:

> And to me it is a joy to remember that if [Jesus Christ] is "of imagination all compact," the world itself is of the same substance. I said in *Dorian Gray* that the great sins of the world take place in the brain: but it is in the brain that everything takes place. We know now that we do not see with the eyes or hear with the ears. They are really channels for the transmission, adequate or inadequate, of sense impressions. It is in the brain that the poppy is red, that the apple is odorous, that the skylark sings. (Wilde 81)

In his own way, Poe famously presaged modern science with his "Eureka: A Prose Poem," in which he introduced his own concept of what would later be known as the Big Bang theory, theorising that the universe originated from a single "primordial Particle" (Poe 1277). Evidently, both authors were deeply invested in scientific discussion, in itself a subject fraught with controversy before its surge in the twentieth century. What this further underlines is exactly the attitude by which they approached relevant subjects, despite whatever stigma they reaped in the process.

Their Narrative Styles

The Picture of Dorian Gray starts with a rich, fully mimetic description of the atmosphere of a lazy summer day, with details such as how the "light summer wind stirred amidst the trees" and how "there came through the open door the heavy scent of the lilac or the more delicate perfume of the pink-flowering thorn" (Wilde 23). It sets the tone for the easy-going nature of the early section of the novel whilst simultaneously introducing two of the main characters, Lord Henry Wotton and Basil Hallward. The introduction ends, however, with what at first might seem a trivial point to construct a background for his character, "whose sudden disappearance some years ago caused, at the time, such public excitement, and gave rise to so many strange conjectures." "William Wilson," however, throws the reader directly at the consequences of an already completed series of events, by means of utilizing a proleptic technique followed by a framed narrative through which the protagonist himself attempts to guide the reader.

In contrast to the zero-focalisation of *The Picture of Dorian Gray's* omniscient and heterodiegetic narrator, which in fact falls in line with what Wayne C Booth, in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, refers to as "reflectors" that are the "third person centers of

consciousness" (Booth 153), Wilson's focalization and narration is external and homodiegetic, as it is Wilson himself who relays his story to the reader, in the nature of the self-conscious, dramatized and consequently unreliable narrator, whilst denying an unrestricted access to his inner thoughts. Poe's reader is only given this single perspective which highlights the character's own distorted psyche. Wilson maintains through the majority of the tale that his *Doppelgänger* pursuer possesses his own exact features, but apparently during Wilson's flight across Europe and beyond this pursuer has "so contrived it […] that I saw not, at any moment, the features of his face" (Poe 1577). Those moments during his narration are furthermore among the few hints of Wilson's slight awareness of his own mental disturbance. An interesting similarity between *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and "William Wilson" centres on this thread, except that Dorian Gray's direct contact with the source of his corruption has the opposite effect on him, in the sense that he only becomes even more corrupt. The intertextuality of the two stories is due to their use of the doubling motif, as Stegner observes in his work *Oscar Wilde's Gothic: The Presence of Edgar Allan Poe in* The Picture of Dorian Gray: "… Wilde adapted the doubling of Poe's William Wilson into his own novel to explore the psychological torment of Dorian Gray's sins transmitted onto a double, in this case a portrait" (Stegner 3).

Given that Peter Barry's basic definition of mimesis in *Beginning Theory* is that of a "'slow telling,' […] creating the illusion that we are 'seeing' and 'hearing' things for ourselves [but of diegesis as] more 'rapid' or 'panoramic' or 'summarising' way" (Barry 223), the basic narrative of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* could be said to be characterised by mimesis, considering the long stretches of slow mimetic sections, and not merely the difference in length. As Dorian Gray continues his descent, however, the narrative illustrating his experience becomes increasingly jarring in terms of the rapid

shifts back and forth from mimesis to diegesis, as well as the rather more Gothic atmosphere in contrast to the relatively light and easy tone of the first chapters. Such a narration happens just as Dorian has abandoned Sibyl and heads outside:

> Where he went to he hardly knew. He remembered wandering through dimly-lit streets, past gaunt black-shadowed archways and evil-looking houses. Women with hoarse voices and harsh laughter had called after him. Drunkards had reeled by cursing, and chattering to themselves like monstrous apes. He had seen grotesque children huddled upon doorsteps, and heard shrieks and oaths from gloomy courts. (Wilde 117)

Dorian's state of mind becomes increasingly frail and disturbed, and of great effect are these prolonged segments of that are progressively mimetic, often dictated by the state of a given character's mind, which the detached narrator seamlessly delves into. In contrast the account in "William Wilson" is heavily dependent on the nature of a dramatized, involved narrator, as well as the proleptic structure of the framed narrative, which accelerates the urgency in the story's language, making it characterised by a diegetic approach – which in turn fuels the erratic and unnerving atmosphere characterised by Poe's literary style. To clarify, analepsis is the narration of a story-event at a point in the text after later events have been told (b, c, → a = analeptic). Prolepsis is the opposite (c, a, b → c = proleptic), for example: the opening of "William Wilson," being positioned chronologically after all the events of the story have concluded, would be proleptic as a whole.

In line with the narrative grammar concept of deep and surface structures, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and "William Wilson" both have aspects which on the surface are different, but underneath carry the same meaning. As noted by Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, the surface structures are in effect the abstract organization of observable

sentences, in line with narrative theorists' observation that a nigh-infinite variety of stories may be (and in some sense already have been) generated from a limited number of basic structures (Rimmon-Kenan 10). The Lévi-Strauss model of deep narrative structure serves to identify that underlying every myth there is a four-term homology, which correlates one pair of opposed mythemes with another. This creates the formula A:B::C:D (A is to B what C is to D) (11). Therefore, identifying similar motifs and further deep structures that drive both stories is achievable by reading beyond narrative choice of words or characters' speech.

An obvious relation between *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and "William Wilson" is of the double motif, and the control that each character's double exerts over the other, most readily observable once they actually hear them speak. In "William Wilson" this recurs throughout the recount of his mental disturbance, as Wilson identifies his double as having a weakness "in the faucial or guttural organs which precluded him from raising his voice at any time *above a very low whisper*" (Poe 1570) which allows the double a presence. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, on the other hand, it is only when Dorian Gray decides to murder Basil Hallward that the painting seems to reach out to him:

> Dorian Gray glanced at the picture, and suddenly an uncontrollable feeling of hatred for Basil Hallward came over him, as though it had been suggested to him by the image on the canvas *whispered* into his ear by those grinning lips. (Wilde 191-192, my emphasis)

In "William Wilson" the motif is less literal – as indicated above regarding Wilson's fluctuated perception of the double's existence – whereas in *Dorian Gray* the painting's change is clear and visible to characters besides Gray himself. Nevertheless, it is the control that each double has on Wilson and Gray that remains an essential

thread in both stories; in terms of Lévi-Strauss' model, the *Doppelgänger* (A) is to Wilson (B) what the picture (C) is to Gray (D). As Rimmon-Kenan notes, however, deep structures are not themselves narrative, as they are simply "'designed to account for the initial articulations of meaning within a semantic micro-universe' (Greimas 1970, p. 161. Culler's translation 1975 p. 92)" (Rimmon-Kenan 11).

The Characters

Comparison of the authors and their narrative techniques reveals some fundamental similarities; what has been further established is the central theme – what specifically they explored in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and "William Wilson" – and the methods by which each achieved particular effects. An in-depth analysis of the protagonist of each story separately, will reveal the distinctive emphasis of each, while simultaneously underlining the aspects that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and "William Wilson" share.

Dorian Gray: Establishing the Legitimacy of Art

Clearly, Wilde is primarily preoccupied by what he saw as being the nature of his contemporary society and its perceptions of what should be seen as genuine, and Wilde's realisation of what that authenticity actually signifies. More to the point, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* could readily be deemed as Wilde's personal introspection and perhaps as his attempt to explain himself to his audience at large. The last point gains particular weight in a letter which he wrote on 12 February, 1894, to a dedicated admirer of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, one Ralph Payne, to whom he relates: "I am so glad you like the strange coloured book of mine: it contains much of me in it. Basil Howard is what I think I am; Lord Henry what the world thinks of me; Dorian what I would like to be – in other ages, perhaps" (Wilde 352).

Towards the end of Chapter 1 of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde introduces his ideas on of how art can influence life. On one level, Wilde develops this theme through his depiction of the relationship between the portrait and its sitter, painter and admirer. While Lord Henry is fascinated by Dorian Gray upon observing Basil's overt fascination of the young man, he is also strangely attracted to Basil's

artistic depiction of Dorian Gray's aesthetic beauty. In effect, Henry grows infatuated with the aesthetic representation of Dorian; consequently, the portrait itself has asserted an influence and control over Henry. In Basil's view, Henry desires the "harmony of body and soul" of the picture, to which Lord Henry exclaims, "Basil, this is extraordinary! I must see Dorian Gray" (Wilde 33). What is made observable is one level of interpretation for Wilde's theory of art and its power to influence Nature, not only by the portrait's effect on Henry, but also by the way it literally turns Dorian into a work of art.

As Basil states about Henry's character, an allegory of "what the world thinks of [Wilde]," in perhaps a naïve belief given Henry's subsequent ostensible role as the devil's advocate: "You never say a moral thing, and you never do a wrong thing. Your cynicism is simply a pose" (26). Given Wilde's often-made criticisms of Victorian England's hypocritical disposition, Henry's extravagantly cynical character may well be an act; however, it is an act on which he seems to thrive: "'I make a great difference between people. I choose my friends for their good looks, my acquaintances for their good characters, and my enemies for their good intellects. A man cannot be too careful in the choice of his enemies'" (30).

The reader is provided with a further example of Lord Henry's habit of making paradoxical speeches about whatever topic being discussed. What starts off as a praise of Basil's latest painting becomes a comment on the size of the Academy as being "too vulgar," so that there "have been either so many people that I have not been able to see the pictures, which was dreadful, or so many pictures that I have not been able to see the people, which is worse" (24). Oscar Wilde, like many other authors, had a habit of using a character as the mouthpiece for his own personality and opinions – as mentioned above – and Henry certainly serves the function of an implied author, along

with Basil and Dorian, and becomes awfully apt at making quotable observations about Victorian art and life, in keeping with the story's theme of duelling ideas on morals and the real (and particularly considering Dorian and his Picture). The fact that the Academy's size seems to either consume the art or the people that it contains is comparable to Dorian's vain wish of preserving his youth and beauty before gradually losing sight of the distinction between reality (and real values) and art. This discussion, while exemplifying another level of Wilde's development of Poe's doubling motif, may well be related to one aspect of the story's social commentary – that in order to fit in, one must put on an act, a face, which naturally is a false representation of one's true self. As Henry puts it, "You seem to forget that I am married, and the one charm of marriage is that it makes a life of deception absolutely necessary for both parties. […] We tell each other the most absurd stories with the most serious faces" (26).

Contrary to Henry's skilful adaption to society's demands (and delusions) Basil Hallward seems to represent an altogether more fragile character (yet another aspect of Wilde himself), sensitive to excessive public attention. As a result he has acquired a reputation for disappearing without notice: "I have grown to love secrecy. […] When I leave town now I never tell my people where I am going" (26). Eventually he is murdered by Dorian and therefore disappears indefinitely; soon after he is forgotten by the society that once gossiped so much about his activities, which is no doubt a comment on people's relatively short attention span. Basil expresses a fear of inscribing too much of his own self upon a painting in the belief that he would risk revealing himself to a public should his masterpiece go on display: "'[E]very portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. […] It is not [the sitter] who is revealed by the painter; it is rather the painter who […] 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" (27). Basil's dilemma is his obsession with Dorian Gray's physical beauty, which drives his artistic creativity. In his early discussions with Henry, Basil claims that in Dorian he has encountered "someone whose mere personality was so fascinating that, if I allowed it to do so, it would absorb my whole nature," after which he further asserts his need to be his own "master," confessing to Henry that he had only felt himself independent before encountering Dorian. Despite his reliance on Dorian, he tragically seems aware of the danger involved as he conveys one of Wilde's uses of foreshadowing: "Something seemed to tell me that I was on the verge of a terrible crisis in my life" (28).

Further to Basil's confessions, there are hints that Dorian has had some mysterious supernatural effect on him, in a way that could suggest Dorian's soul (or physical Hellenic looks) are powerful enough to be passed onto Basil: "Some subtle influence passed from him to me […]" (33). Dorian Gray has become integral to Basil's ability to express his art; he repeatedly mentions how greatly Dorian has affected his ability to create:

> He is all my art to me now […]. It is not merely that I paint from him, draw from him, sketch from him. […] But he is much more to me than just a model or a sitter. […] His personality has suggested to me an entirely new manner in art, an entirely new mode of style. I see things differently, I think of them differently. I can now re-create life in a way that was hidden from me before. (32).

The last sentence is particularly worthy of consideration, as Basil will shortly thereafter paint a portrait of Dorian alive enough to completely capture his physical qualities. In that very moment, Henry's corruptive monologue about age and decay has dramatically changed Dorian's nature: "But you never sat better. You were

perfectly still. And I have caught the effect I wanted […]. I don't know what Harry has been saying to you, but he has certainly made you have the most wonderful expression" (43). Dorian later displays this apparently inherent ability to further influence people, albeit in a corrupted manner, reflecting his later condition.

Basil appears to remain morally honest throughout the story, although his own hamartia is his clear dependence on Dorian for inspiration. For more personal reasons, perhaps, he repeatedly displays symptoms of withdrawal once Henry begins manipulating Dorian. At the end of chapter six during his ride home from Henry, "A strange sense of loss came over him. He felt that Dorian Gray would never again be to him all that he had been in the past. […] His eyes darkened, and the crowded, flaring streets became blurred to his eyes" (108). Basil is a successful artist and participant in London Society; therefore his peripeteia would undoubtedly have to be his tragic murder as he makes a final desperate attempt to reclaim himself from Dorian's dominance, possibly whilst redeeming Dorian himself from his moral corruption. In the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde writes, "To reveal art and to conceal the artist is art's aim" (21), but in the novel the deadly portrait is revealed as an independent and autonomous object of art only when both its maker and its model are departed. The violence that divides art from the artist points to a tension and aggression in their relationship; "Art's aim" sounds like an embedded representation that credits art with conniving against the artist, conceivably to the point of murder.

Dorian Gray's hamartia is revealed almost instantly upon his encounter with Henry, who has an immediate effect on Dorian's morality, and it is captured by Basil's portrait. Dorian's peripeteia is his succumbing to Henry's corruptive influence, and himself becoming fully corrupt and obsessed with the seedy elements of London night-life; all his focus is spent on external qualities and immediate self-gratification,

as during his infatuation with Sibyl Vane: “You have killed my love. You used to stir my imagination. Now you don’t even stir my curiosity” (115). He cannot distinguish between his obsession with her stage performance and the fact that he is incapable of returning her love (which is real), shunning her and in effect killing her.

Sibyl is a particularly tragic character in that, before falling in love with Dorian Gray, she was a star actress who lived on – and for – the stage and its characters, itself an artificial world. She is ready to forgo everything worthwhile in her life for Dorian – her own hamartia – but is bluntly shunned by Dorian, who loved her only for her stage presence, as a piece of art. His involvement with Sybil could be seen as a display of a parasitic or leeching trait of Dorian’s, as if his dominant influence consumed her abilities. However, by falling in love with Dorian, Sibyl in fact realises the uselessness of making that which is not seem real, and casts aside her dependence on the fictional: “Tonight, I saw through the hollowness […] of the empty pageant in which I had always played. […] You had made me understand what love really is” (114-115). Dorian seems either unwilling or incapable of accepting Sibyl’s argument, he being preoccupied by artistic perfection above reality – having himself become its very embodiment. While Dorian does not exhibit regret over his mistreatment of Sibyl, he later attempts to resist the temptations illustrated by the painting’s corruption, and decides he “would not see Lord Henry any more – would not, at any rate, listen to those subtle poisonous theories that […] stirred within him the passion for impossible things” (121). His resolve is, however, quickly destroyed when he learns of Sibyl’s fate from Lord Henry and in a reflection further illustrates his detachment from reality: “How extraordinary dramatic life is! If I had read all this in a book, Harry, I think I would have wept over it. Somehow, not that it has happened actually, and to me, it seems far too wonderful for tears” (128).

Wilde did not only depict these paradoxes of art and life in his books. He once stated that he put his genius into his life and only his talent into his work; the drama of his trials, incarceration and premature death has many elements of its own story, to the point that one might expect the events to have been scripted. Wilde describes the conflict between the volatile nature of the psychological and the relative immutability of the physical in a passage in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*:

> [Dorian] used to wonder at the shallow psychology of those who conceive the Ego in a man as a thing simple, permanent, reliable and of one essence. To him, man was a being with myriad lives and myriad sensations, a complex multiform creature that bore within itself strange legacies of thought and passion, and whose very flesh was tainted with monstrous maladies of the dead. (175)

The Picture of Dorian Gray dramatises the perils involved in the pursuit of an ideal self to the exclusion of all the complexities and partitions of a living consciousness; in a way relatable to the central theme in "William Wilson," it shows what happens when a fiction of a self turns against the real body. In it, Wilde makes troublesome his own notion of cultivating one's personality through art by dramatizing its morally dangerous and socially irresponsible side.

For all the discussion surrounding his villainous behaviour, Dorian is nonetheless remarkably passive in his actions, particularly when compared with Wilson's dynamic scheming and activities. For example, in the scene at the opium den, where a Soho prostitute eventually refers to Dorian as "the devil's bargain," he rejects both offers of sex and pleas for compassion before making his exit from the establishment. When he ultimately does take action, it is when he sordidly murders his best friend, Basil. As much as Dorian detests the "crude violence of disordered life" he

is almost equally attracted to it – actively spurred on by Henry. By changing places with the portrait of himself, Dorian simultaneously assumes the portrait's role of the "gracious shape of art," assuming the arrested depiction of a man, and the appearance of actual life. In its own way, that pictorial image of a charming young man becomes the literary stereotype of a Prince Charming – albeit in almost a satirically corrupt and exaggerated fashion – that assumes the identity of an individual. The initial desire of Dorian is to achieve the immortality and immutability of a work of art. His ultimate hamartia is that he succeeds.

Dorian is immediately attracted to the painting because of its representation of his ideal self: a Dorian Gray unshackled by the restraints of the material body and of the instability of the human consciousness. The novel diminishes the disparity between a painting and a literary text by concentrating on the clash between the material and ideal selves of the artist, the subject and the audience, and can therefore be interpreted as an allegory of artistic creativity. This clash is dramatically magnified in the last scene of the story, in which Dorian attempts to free himself from his portrait's corruption by stabbing it. For his efforts he manages to regain his natural self, with all its marks of his frivolous life: "Lying on the floor was a dead man, in evening dress, with a knife in his heart. He was withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage" (264). In exchange, the painting has regained its flawless qualities as Dorian's ideal self smiles down at his corpse. This invulnerability of art seems to represent the characteristics of a literary text rather than that of a painting, the advantage of the literature being the comparable ease by which it can be reproduced and therefore kept immortal, so to speak. A representation such as a painting might be destroyed and its splendour erased, but the existence of written art is guaranteed in every new printing. In effect, it is possible to interpret Dorian's painting as Oscar Wilde's argument for the immortality

of discourse, capable of staying independent from the corruption of the material world surrounding it. His designation of the three distinct subject positions of the artist, subject and audience, represented by Basil, Dorian and Henry further indicates both the fragmentation of identity inherent in the artistic process and the omnipresent illusion of unity that detracts from an artwork's impact. While the portrait is painted by Basil and modelled by Dorian, it is Henry's observation of the process and his words that produce the "wonderful expression" that allows Basil to complete the painting (43). All three subject positions contribute to the completed artwork: Basil supplies the colours on the canvas; Dorian lends it his beauty; Henry interprets and thus completes the process. Their subsequent clash over the ownership of the painting reflects the problems in establishing its subjectivity.

William Wilson: Morals and Their Consequences

As with *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* Poe's "William Wilson" engages with the subject of fragmented identities and the pressures of society. However, while *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is focused on objects such as the relationship between the artist, the subject and the audience, "William Wilson" is more concerned with the psychological: the engagement of morals in terms of human nature and the expectations of what should be considered morally good or evil. If it were not for Wilson's dynamic psychological instability and his hallucinations involving that which he believes to be his nemesis, the story of "William Wilson" could easily be read as an unremarkable adventure focused on a villain's exploits and subsequent flight from the constant harassments of the hero who works against him. Poe's masterful employment of the first person narrative of a monomaniac undermines any guarantee that the dramatized narrator could be trustworthy, effectively undercutting any perceived information and

amplifying the emotional horror of the story, which culminates in Wilson's physical and psychological self-destruction.

The essence of William Wilson's mental state can be explained by a definition by Bruce Fink in his *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis*: "Hallucination is a typical form of primary-process 'thinking,' and plays a role in daydreaming, fantasizing, and dreaming. Thus, it is present in all of the structural categories: neurosis, perversion, and psychosis" (83). Specifically, what Wilson believes to be his *Doppelgänger* could be understood in terms of the "voice of the punishing super-ego," the visual and auditory hallucinations of an obsessional neurotic (85). In extreme cases it lends itself a puzzlingly physical presence:

> As I put my foot over the threshold I became aware of the figure of a youth about my own height […]. Immediately upon my entering he strode hurriedly up to me, and seizing me by the arm with a gesture of petulant impatience, whispered the words "William Wilson!" in my ear. (Poe 1573)

William Wilson sees, touches, and hears his double. Comparable to the relationship between Dorian and the painting in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the suppressed portion of Wilson's self is projected into a physical form – a character in its own right – and only defeated by spending the life of the complete person. To Wilson, the certainty of his double's existence is only given more credence as the narrative progresses, to the point when during their final encounter the double "spoke no longer in a whisper." Wilson even confides that "I could have fancied that I myself was speaking while he said: 'You have conquered, and I yield'" (1579). The certainty as to whether Wilson actually succeeds in killing his super-ego becomes ambiguous at best. The voice that condemns Wilson is unmistakably that of his own, which could suggest

that his double's persona – Wilson's morally good side – has defeated the depraved half of his psyche and in a sense masquerades as the instinct-driven Wilson. Consequently, it would be the double that does the telling of his autobiography. Again however, the nature of the narrative allows the reader a limited scope to properly discern what transpires chronologically between the climax and the beginning of the story, providing numerous possible answers of varying degrees of plausibility.

More important than the possible extrapolations of what really happens during and after the climax would be the proper identification of the narrator and protagonist, William Wilson. Poe disperses a number of hints about his identity, as by the tone of his narration. First and foremost is Wilson's dynamic moral nature – irrespective of whether they are "good" or "evil" morals – characterised by the condemnations that he levels on himself for his wrongdoings that far exceed their actual seriousness. That Wilson has committed any "unpardonable crime," beyond his cheating at cards and general debauchery, like his excessive drinking and manipulation of others, lends a great disproportion between the relatively bland stature of Wilson's crimes and the extreme baseness with which they are characterised in the super-ego's judgement. The two most severe tangible crimes detailed are that of slack moral sense rather than crimes suitably punished by death. One of those crimes, or lapse in moral judgement, is that of a would-be adultery with "the young, the gay, the beautiful wife of the aged and doting Di Broglio." Wilson does give the opportunity a serious thought, though naturally he is stopped by his super-ego before actually perpetrating it, even when it would have been with a woman of a similarly casual approach to morality: "With a too unscrupulous confidence she had previously communicated to me the secret of the costume in which she would be habitated […]" (1578). His other crime of an admittedly greater severity is the cheating at cards that would have brought financial

ruin to one "young *parvenu* nobleman, Glendinning – rich, said report, as Herodes Atticus – his riches, too, as easily acquired" (1574). Again, the act is immoral but not one befitting an ultimate punishment. William Wilson could at most be characterised as a squanderer, a gambler and an abuser of liquor and other "perhaps more dangerous seductions" (1573).

The narrative point of view, despite its limitations, does offer some crucial indications to Wilson's psychotic state by his absolute conviction about the reality of his double's existence. One might interpret Wilson's super-ego as characteristic of an overly-repressive father system, or the effects thereof, in terms of the mechanism defined with the theory of Lacanian Psychoanalysis by Dylan Evans in *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*: "*an element* is rejected outside the symbolic order just as if it had never existed" (Evans 65, original emphasis). The "element" is the Name-of-the-Father:

> [It] is the Name-of-the-Father (a fundamental signifier) that is the object of foreclosure. […] When the Name-of-the-Father is foreclosed for a particular subject, it leaves a hole in the symbolic order which can never be filled; the subject can then be said to have a psychotic structure. (65)

Because the Name-of-the-Father has been expelled from Wilson's unconscious, rather than having been buried there, the specified foreclosure has to be viewed separate from a repression due, in fact, to Wilson's lack of clear parental influence in his upbringing. While he himself explains that he had inherited his family's "imaginative and easily excitable temperament," he quickly derides his family's "ill-directed efforts" to educate him, which "resulted in complete failure" (Poe 1566). He establishes that he quickly rose to become the law of the family household (making

his manipulative abilities seem powerful, as much as they are deplorable) and could do anything that he wanted. When he later attended school, he developed a form of alienation in order to handle the outside world, giving form to his moral double, the punishing super-ego that counterbalances his selfish nature. However, as much as Wilson laments his past actions and asserts that he "might, today, have been a better, and thus a happier man, had I more seldom rejected the counsels embodied in those meaning whispers which I then too cordially hated […]" (1571), one is obligated to investigate more closely the supposed moral high ground enjoyed by his double. Wilson might be a villain but so, really, is his double; therefore the ethical distinctions made in the story become misleading as no concrete psychic wholeness can rise from the complete tyranny that Wilson's double asserts over him – in spite of it being a taste of his own medicine. His super-ego has a real stake in seeming a benevolent and virtuous giver of decent advice, working to save Wilson from his depravity. Wilson's self-inflicting punishment might stem from a sense of remorse or guilt over his actions and a wish to attain the sympathy of his "fellow men"; however, the heavily didactic tone of his own storytelling is more characteristic of his super-ego's voice: effective in its callousness due to being masked by its repentant confessions. Evidence for the argument that Wilson's super-ego actually tells the story is not only revealed by his apparently regretful dialogue but also by the inconsistency he displays when describing Dr. Bransby's school, the "old and irregular" house surrounded by "a high and solid brick wall […]. This prison-like rampart formed the limit of our domain […]. At an angle of the ponderous wall frowned a more ponderous gate. It was riveted and studded with iron bolts, and surmounted with jagged iron spikes" (1567). In Wilson's description of his own character as "self-willed, addicted to the wildest caprices, and a prey to the most ungovernable passions" (1566), the pleasure which he

claims to have experienced in the confinement at such a dismal place headed by the harsh father-figure of Dr. Bransby seems rather jarring: “The apparently dismal monotony of a school was replete with more intense excitement than my riper youth has derived from luxury, or my full manhood from crime” (1568). This joyous description corresponds accurately with the characteristics of the super ego – or double – whose narration would lead the reader to believe that the wild and dynamic Wilson was happy in that place; in effect suggesting that he not only needed but thrived under control.

Through the device of misleading the reader into believing that the immoral Wilson is the narrator, Poe not only allows an oppressive super-ego to work unchecked, but also points the reader to what could be seen as another of the story’s main concerns, which is ethical. On the one hand, Poe depicts Wilson’s self-destruction because of his inability to absorb his conscience. On the other, he points up a moral about the implication of the reader, who can readily be led to perceive evil in the instinctual license but not in the destructiveness of excessive containment of the instincts, by a fierce super-ego. What Poe could essentially be suggesting is the possibility of the conscience being criminal as well. “Conscience grim” (1566) could easily be implicated in driving Wilson to his self-destructive acts, which suggests that both aspects of his psyche are potential “murderers”; one of the story’s main themes is thus the effects of excessive morality against instinctual license.

The climax of the story makes it easy to believe that Wilson perceives his double as being exactly identical in every way, as he describes it when he sees “mine own image” in “a larger mirror” and “I could have fancied that I myself was speaking while he [went on to condemn Wilson]” (1578-79). It is logical to deduce that the two halves of Wilson are identical because each represents one half of a whole personality.

However, to go back to the nature of his mental state, the construct of the super-ego has a tendency to falter at dispersed intervals. One such is described in this passage: "It was about the same period [...], that, in an altercation of violence with him, in which he was more than usually thrown off his guard, and spoke and acted with an openness of *demeanour rather foreign to his nature* […]" (1572, emphasis added). In spite of such episodes, Wilson tends to write these glimpses out of his psyche as not only delusions but realities independent of himself; further to the point, he perceives a connection with his double which runs deeper than he had earlier presumed:

> I discovered, or fancied I discovered, in his accent, his air, and general appearance, a some thing which first startled, and then deeply interested me, by bringing to mind dim visions of my earliest infancy; wild, confused and thronging memories of a time when memory herself was yet unborn. I cannot better describe the sensation which oppressed me than by saying that I could with difficulty shake off the belief of my having been acquainted with the being who stood before me, at some epoch very long ago; some point of the past even infinitely remote. (1572)

To recall Wilson's earlier claims of correlation between himself, "self-willed, addicted to the wildest caprices" (1566) and his super-ego, the voice of ruthless and overpowering morality: both identities stem from that same early childhood source, materialising in innate narcissism that drives both his instinct-driven life (characterised by Wilson's many vices) and his overbearing conscience which drives his ruthless and persistent self-condemnations that drive him to self-destruction.

Conclusion

A comparative reading of both Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Poe's "William Wilson" reveals strong thematic and aesthetic similarities between the two authors; it further highlights the fact that both Wilde and Poe were interested in exploring the often ill-defined separation between art or fiction and reality. What has been established is that Wilde discovered in Poe's work the means to create and enhance his character of Dorian Gray. Poe's exploration of the concept of perversity in humans and his doubling motif in "William Wilson" has many similarities to Dorian Gray's corruption and eventual downfall. In the process, Wilde joined Poe's investigation of the enjoyment and pain resulting from leading a double life. Oscar Wilde explores the facets of morality in a somewhat different manner to Poe, when he connects it overtly with discussions about artistic and social complexities, rendering *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as both a theoretical and fictional exploration of the inevitable separation between the artist, the subject, the audience, and the work of art, and the simultaneous impossibility of their complete separation.

Both authors were accused of writing immoral works, and it is particularly in Poe's work where the audience is lured into the story by a three-fold invitation to satisfaction: the socially acceptable joy in witnessing retribution for illicit behaviour; the concealed indulgence in sadistic identification with a merciless super-ego; and in the pleasure of identifying with vice. It is clear that the main protagonist in both stories suffers from extraordinary circumstances and state of mind. In the case of Dorian Gray, he suffers from the obsessed pursuit of the standard of aesthetic beauty set by art as well as his losing himself to narcissistic and hedonistic lifestyles that slowly but surely bring about his own self-destruction. On a different level, William Wilson remains in differing states of awareness of the conflict within his own mental

condition, without knowing why or how he destroys himself through the mischievous and relentless pursuit of his morality-driven double.

In their studied approach to the debatable value of good morals, Wilde and Poe both made calculated efforts to undermine the contemporary conventions that enjoyed prevalence throughout the nineteenth century. However, despite their success of establishing themselves as mainstream writers and commentators, they nonetheless suffered from society's fickle attention and contemporary prejudices: Wilde was famously disgraced, imprisoned and died shortly thereafter; and Poe died of an as yet unexplained condition, in depths of poverty.

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