

Dorian Gray and the Influence of Lord Henry: A Psychoanalytic Review of Mental Manipulation in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Kuncoro Aang Ifansyah, Zuhurul Anam
English Department/Faculty of Language and Arts
Universitas Negeri Semarang
Semarang, Indonesia
kuncoroaangifansyah@students.unnes.ac.id

Abstract

This study explores Lord Henry's profound influence on Dorian Gray in Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, emphasizing the dynamics of mental manipulation through a psychoanalytic lens. This research aims to analyze how Lord Henry's hedonistic philosophy reshapes Dorian's personality and moral outlook. Utilizing the psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud, especially the structural theory of the psyche—id, ego, and superego. This study employs text-based qualitative analysis, examining selected excerpts from the novel to uncover character motivations, internal conflicts, and symbolic representations of psychological processes. The results show that Lord Henry awakens and strengthens Dorian's id, driving him to pursue unrestrained pleasure, while the ego serves as a rationalization mechanism to justify his immoral actions. At the same time, Dorian's superego, which initially manifests as guilt and conscience, is increasingly weakened by Henry's persistent influence. This imbalance leads to internal conflict, paranoia, and ultimately self-destruction, reflecting the tragic consequences of uncontrolled external influences on the individual's psyche. The implications of this research emphasize the relevance of psychoanalytic criticism in literary studies, while also providing a critical reflection on the destructive power of hedonistic ideology and mental manipulation in shaping human behavior.

Keywords – Dorian Gray, Freud, Influence, Manipulation, Psychoanalysis

Introduction

Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (2006), we are introduced to Dorian Gray, a very handsome young man inspired by the hedonistic philosopher, Lord Henry Wotton. Dorian becomes obsessed with preserving beauty and boundless happiness. Dorian receives praise for his physical perfection from Basil and Henry. Feeling praise from Basil made her realize that she already had beauty perfection. Henry's praise led him to transform his soul with his portrait painted by Basil. His portrait was painted by the artist Basil Hallward and is a kind of reflection of his morals. Dorian expresses his desire to swap places with his portrait so that it will age, while he remains young and unshaken by the effects of time. This is the beginning of a story that shows fundamental moral and psychological

changes in Dorian's life. "is a story with a moral. And the moral is this: All excess, as well as all rejection, brings its own punishment" (Wilde, 1890).

The relationship between Dorian Gray and Lord Henry in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* offers a lot of content to be studied psychoanalytically. Lord Henry's manipulation of Dorian's psyche and subsequent impact on Dorian's moral degradation forms a compelling case in the realm of influence and psychological transformation. This analysis delves into the complex dynamics of their relationship, exploring the various ways in which Lord Henry's ideas shape Dorian's consciousness and ultimately lead to a tragic outcome in life. Lord Henry's impact on Dorian's psyche, as depicted in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian*

Gray, delves into the complexities of morality, identity, and the consequences of uncontrolled influence on a person's mental state. This research aims to reveal the intricacies of their relationship, highlighting the deep psychological implications in the narrative (Subertová, 2022).

Lord Henry's influence on Dorian Gray creates a significant psychological impact. By introducing hedonistic thinking, it seduces Dorian into pursuing unlimited satisfaction and ignoring moral concepts. This leads to a drastic change in Dorian's outlook on life and himself. His psychology is affected because he begins to view morality as an unnecessary burden, and his obsession with his own eternal physical image leads him to destruction. Dorian experiences an internal conflict between hedonistic desires and the remaining voice of morality. As a result, his inability to resolve this conflict creates psychological tension that triggers tragic decisions and a deep moral decline. Psychologically, Dorian experiences an inner conflict between the desire to pursue unlimited pleasure and awareness of the moral consequences. This creates an internal tension that permeates Dorian's mind, leading to feelings of guilt, paranoia, and ultimately self-destruction. By understanding these psychological dynamics, we can see how Lord Henry's influence shapes Dorian Gray's tragic mental journey (Wiyanto, 2020).

Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* delves into the psychological depths of its characters, particularly in exploring the impact of external influences on an individual's behavior. This can be analyzed through the lens of psychoanalytic theory, focusing on the ideas of Sigmund Freud. Lord Henry serves as a representation of Freudian concepts such as the id, which

represents primal desires and instincts. Lord Henry's persuasive and hedonistic philosophy becomes the driving force behind Dorian's moral decline, reflecting the influence of the id on a person's actions. Dorian Gray, in turn, embodies ego, attempting to balance the conflicting forces of his own moral compass and Lord Henry's corrupting influence. The portrait functions as a superego, reflecting the hidden consequences of Dorian's actions and acting as a moral compass that he consciously ignores. These interactions align with Freud's structural model of the psyche, providing a rich framework for understanding the character motivations and complex dynamics at play in the novel. Additionally, exploring the impact of societal norms and Victorian morality adds another layer to the psychoanalytic analysis, revealing how external factors contribute to the characters' psychological development.

Method

Research Design

This research employs a qualitative research design. Qualitative methods are suited to exploring complex phenomena, such as the psychological dynamics and mental manipulation depicted in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Through in-depth analysis, this research aims to reveal deep insights into character motivation and transformation, literary analysis, psychoanalytic approach, Character Study, comparative analysis of contextual considerations, case study approach. By employing a qualitative research design with a focus on literary analysis and psychoanalytic principles, this study aims to provide a rich and comprehensive understanding of the mental manipulation depicted in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Data Source

The result of this research is an explanation of the mentality experienced by the main character which is influenced by Lord Henry's manipulation as a result of explaining the coping mechanisms used by the main character described in the novel.

The Instruments

The instruments used to collect data in this research involve methods adapted to qualitative research and literature analysis. Textual Analysis is carefully reading and analyzing relevant passages from "The Picture of Dorian Gray" to extract information about the characters' thoughts, emotions, and interactions. Identify literary techniques, symbolism, and dialogue that contribute to the understanding of mental manipulation. After that, a description of the characters in Dorian Gray and Lord Henry, with a focus on their psychological traits, motivations, and behavior. Extraction of textual evidence to support character descriptions with application of the Psychoanalytic Framework Application of psychoanalytic principles to interpret character actions, desires, and internal conflicts. Then identify defense mechanisms and subconscious motivations in the narrative. Comparative Analysis and comparative analysis of characters' experiences of stages of psychosexual development and other relevant psychoanalytic concepts. Explore how characters' responses align with or deviate from psychoanalytic expectations. Lastly, the researcher's reflection by documenting reflective notes and observations made during the analysis process, capturing emerging insights, patterns and themes. These reflections contribute to the rich interpretation of this research.

Data Collection

The first step was reading the novel. The research involved carefully reading

Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* several times. This process aimed to gain a deep understanding of the novel and the specific issues that are the focus of this research. Through repeated readings, I aimed to explore the nuances of the text, identify relevant themes, and ensure a comprehensive understanding of the material before proceeding to the next research steps. The second step was data identification. After reading *The Picture of Dorian Gray* several times, I engaged in a process of detailed note-taking of key events and extracting relevant data from the novel. This process involved identifying and documenting quotations that showcase literary techniques, symbolism, and dialogue that reflect the psychological dynamics of the characters, words, phrases, clauses, and sentences deemed important to the research. By systematically recording this information, I aimed to collect a comprehensive data set that could be analyzed and interpreted at later stages of the research.

Data Analysis

In this research, researchers carried out analysis using descriptive, textual and interpretive techniques. The data analysis process involves applying certain approaches and theories to reveal answers to research problems.

This multifaceted analysis aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the data, drawing meaningful insights and interpretations from the information collected. The data was analyzed based on Freudian psychoanalytic theory and focused on the concept of attachment by describing which of the main characters' mental influences had an impact on their lives at the end of the story. Furthermore, the data was also analyzed by explaining a comprehensive narrative pattern that

explored psychoanalytic comments by the characters in the novel.

Finding and Discussion

The changes that Dorian Gray has

The psychological transformation of Dorian Gray begins when Lord Henry first meets and admires him. Henry's fascination with Dorian's beauty—his red lips, clear blue eyes, and golden hair—awakens in Dorian an awareness of his own physical perfection. This moment marks the beginning of Dorian's internal change: he becomes conscious of his beauty and begins to fear its loss. Henry's remark, "*You are too charming to go in for philanthropy, Mr. Gray—far too charming,*" subtly implants the idea that aesthetic pleasure is more valuable than moral virtue (Wilde, 1891/2006).

Lord Henry's subsequent statement, "*That is one of the great secrets of life—to cure the soul by means of the senses, and the senses by means of the soul,*" further deepens his influence. This phrase encapsulates his hedonistic philosophy—that physical pleasure can heal mental suffering. Dorian begins to internalize this belief, perceiving pleasure as the ultimate escape from pain and responsibility. Henry's declaration that "*Beauty is a form of Genius—higher, indeed, than Genius itself*" reinforces Dorian's conviction that beauty surpasses intellect or morality, elevating it to an almost divine status.

Henry's warning that youth and beauty are fleeting—"*When your youth goes, your beauty will go with it*"—intensifies Dorian's anxiety. This moment catalyzes Dorian's desperate desire to preserve his appearance forever, leading to his fateful wish that the portrait should age instead of him. This wish signifies the beginning of his moral and psychological downfall. From that

point, Dorian's perception of life is filtered through Lord Henry's lens of hedonism and aestheticism. As Morais (2024) notes, Henry's philosophy serves as the trigger that transforms Dorian from an innocent admirer of art into a victim of his own vanity and sensory obsession.

The conversation between Lord Henry and Lord Fermor about Dorian's lineage also plays a crucial role. By emphasizing the tragic beauty of Dorian's mother, Henry constructs a romantic narrative around Dorian's life, reinforcing the idea that beauty and tragedy are intertwined. Consequently, Dorian becomes a living embodiment of Henry's aesthetic ideals—a person destined for both admiration and ruin (Li, 2017).

Dorian's growing attachment to Henry is evident when he neglects Basil's invitation in favor of spending time with Henry. His statement, "*No one talks so wonderfully as you do,*" illustrates Dorian's psychological dependence. Symbolically, his decision to follow Henry represents his departure from moral influence (Basil) and his submission to hedonistic philosophy (Henry). Through Henry's seductive eloquence, Dorian learns to view life as a spectacle—something to be observed and enjoyed, not ethically engaged with. This aligns with Subertová's (2022) view that Dorian's transformation symbolizes the Victorian conflict between self-indulgence and moral restraint.

Psychoanalytic Interpretation of Dorian's Transformation

From a Freudian perspective, Dorian's transformation reflects the conflict and imbalance among the three structures of the psyche: the id, ego, and superego (Freud, 1923/2005).

At the outset, Dorian's **id**—the source of instinctual desires—is weak. However, under Lord Henry's guidance, it becomes dominant. Henry's philosophy of unrestrained pleasure awakens Dorian's suppressed desires, leading him to pursue gratification without moral restraint. His indulgence in luxury and moral decay illustrate the id's triumph over reason. As Thurschwell (2009) explains, the id represents instinctual drives that, if unchecked, can override conscience and rationality.

The **ego**, which mediates between desire and reality, adapts to justify Dorian's immoral actions. The magical portrait functions as a psychological defense mechanism: it bears the burden of Dorian's guilt and decay, allowing his ego to rationalize wrongdoing without visible consequences. This externalization mirrors what Pérez López (2020) identifies as a Freudian displacement of guilt—where repressed anxiety is projected onto an external object, in this case, the portrait.

The **superego**, representing morality and conscience, initially manifests when Dorian feels remorse after hurting Sibyl Vane. Yet, Lord Henry's continuous rationalizations weaken this moral voice. Henry convinces Dorian that guilt is an artificial construct of society, not an intrinsic truth. As the superego deteriorates, Dorian loses his moral compass, becoming increasingly paranoid and self-destructive. This process aligns with Naratri's (2016) observation that Dorian's psychological decline follows the systematic erosion of moral awareness through external manipulation.

The pivotal statement, "*I would give my soul for that*," encapsulates the total collapse of Dorian's moral structure. In psychoanalytic terms, this moment

signifies the submission of the ego and superego to the id. Dorian's soul—his moral and spiritual identity—is sacrificed for eternal youth, symbolizing the dominance of desire over conscience. The result is a fractured psyche, consumed by hedonism and haunted by the repressed image of his decaying soul (Baker, 1969).

Overall, Lord Henry functions as both the manipulator and symbolic representation of Dorian's id. Through persuasive rhetoric and seductive ideas, he externalizes Dorian's latent desires, reshaping him into a vessel of aesthetic indulgence. The portrait, acting as the superego, records the consequences of Dorian's repressed guilt and sin. Dorian's final downfall—marked by guilt, paranoia, and eventual self-destruction—illustrates the psychological collapse that occurs when pleasure completely overpowers morality.

This psychoanalytic reading reveals that Wilde's novel is not only a moral allegory but also a psychological case study of manipulation and internal disintegration. It demonstrates how external influence, when internalized uncritically, can dismantle one's moral identity and lead to self-annihilation. As Candraningrum (2020) emphasizes, the novel serves as a warning against the destructive potential of hedonistic ideology, illustrating the fragile balance between human desire, morality, and self-awareness.

Conclusions

This study concludes that Lord Henry's influence on Dorian Gray represents a deep and destructive form of psychological manipulation that gradually dismantles Dorian's moral identity. Initially portrayed as an innocent and idealistic young man,

Dorian becomes increasingly consumed by Lord Henry's hedonistic philosophy, which awakens his unconscious desires and reshapes his moral perception. Through Freud's structural theory of the psyche—id, ego, and superego—it is evident that Lord Henry's ideas strengthen Dorian's id, weaken his superego, and force his ego to rationalize immoral behavior. This imbalance between desire and conscience results in a severe psychological conflict that manifests in guilt, paranoia, and eventual self-destruction. The portrait, functioning as the externalized superego, reflects the moral degradation Dorian refuses to acknowledge, symbolizing how repression and denial lead to inner disintegration.

The findings highlight that Dorian's tragedy is not merely personal weakness but a psychological outcome of external domination over one's moral consciousness. Lord Henry embodies the seductive voice of temptation, while Dorian becomes both victim and accomplice in his downfall. Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* thus transcends moral allegory, emerging as a psychoanalytic study of the dangers of unchecked desire and the fragility of the human psyche under manipulative influence. In line with Subertová (2022) and Pérez López (2020), Dorian's destruction reflects the inevitable collapse of selfhood when aesthetic pleasure and vanity overpower conscience and ethical awareness. Beyond its literary scope, the novel remains a timeless warning about the peril of surrendering one's moral integrity to external influences in pursuit of beauty and pleasure.

References

Baker, H. A. (1969). A tragedy of the artist: the picture of Dorian Gray.

Nineteenth-Century Fiction, 24(3), 349-355.

Candraningrum, P. D. (2020). *Hedonism In Oscar Wilde's Novel The Picture Of Dorian Gray (1891): A Marxist Approach* (Doctoral dissertation, Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta).

Freud, S. (2005). *A general introduction to psychoanalysis*. Boni and Liveright.

Freud, S., & Chase, H. W. (1925). The origin and development of psychoanalysis. In *Sigmund Freud's lectures at Clark University, 1910, Clark University, Worcester, MA, US; These five lectures were delivered by Freud at Clark University. The lectures were translated from the German by Harry W. Chase and revised by Freud..* Modern Library.

Li, H. (2017). Vision and self-consciousness in The Picture of Dorian Gray. *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature/Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée*, 44(3), 565-578.

Morais, N. (2024). Character and Change in The Picture of Dorian Gray.

Naratri, A. R. (2016). Psychological Conflict of Dorian Gray in the Novel Entitled the Picture of Dorian Gray by Oscar Wilde (Doctoral dissertation, Diponegoro University).

Pérez López, N. (2020). A Glance at a Twisted Mind: A Psychoanalytic Approach to Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray.

Sigmund, F. (1920). A general introduction to psychoanalysis. *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 52(6), 548-549.

Sigmund, F. (1920). A general introduction to psychoanalysis. *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 52(6), 548-549.

Subertová, Linda. (2022). *The 19th-Century Narcissus: A Psychoanalytic*

- Study of Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray.*
<https://is.muni.cz>.
- Sulistiyan, Reny D. (2012). Hedonist's Hidden Fear in Oscar Wilde's Novel "the Picture of Dorian Gray."
<http://journal.unnes.ac.id/sju/index.php/rainbow>.
- Thurschwell, P. (2009). Sigmund Freud. Routledge.
- Wilde, Oscar. (1891). *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Media. Seven print: March 2023.
- Wilde, Oscar. (2006). *The picture of dorian gray*. OUP Oxford.
- Wiyanto. (2020). Hedonism in Oscar Wilde's Novel *the Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891)