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Wilde and Wonderful: The Ultimate Aesthete's Redefinition of Individualism, as an Idealist, and then as an Outcast

Anna Brill
Claremont McKenna College

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“Art is the most intense mode of Individualism that the world has known. I am inclined to say that it is the only real mode of Individualism that the world has known” (“The Soul of Man Under Socialism”, p.12).

**Ernest**: But what are the two supreme and highest arts?

**Gilbert**: Life and Literature, life and the perfect expression of life. The principles of the former, as laid down by the Greeks, we may not realise in an age so marred by false ideals as our own. The principles of the latter, as they laid them down, are, in many cases, so subtle that we can hardly understand them (“The Critic as Artist”, p.112).

Before Oscar Wilde was imprisoned and cast out of English society for indecent behavior with men, he did not believe that one could express or develop one’s Individualism outside of Art. If one is not creating Art, criticizing it, or at least taking the time to behold a work of art and learn from it, one is not expressing oneself as an individual, and therefore might as well not have existed. In his worldview, Individualism was not possible if one was not wealthy, or willing to live as if one were; it is not possible if one was employed in “useful” work that contributed to everyday British society; and finally, it was not possible if one had committed oneself to a creed other than aestheticism or Thought. Thought is a creed of contemplation, which both Wilde and Emerson write about favorably over a life of what they consider to be empty action. Wilde borrows from the aesthete and critic Walter Pater, his mentor at Oxford, when he writes about

[A] new Hedonism that was to recreate life, and save it from that harsh, uncomely Puritanism that is having, in our own day, its curious revival. It was to have its service of the intellect, certainly; yet it was never to accept any theory or system that would involve the sacrifice of any mode of passionate experience. Its aim, indeed, was to be experience itself, and not
the fruits of experience, sweet or bitter as they might be (The Picture of Dorian Gray, 133-134).¹

Pater heavily influenced Wilde’s path at a relatively young age; Wilde was enthralled with Pater during his time at Oxford. The biographer Richard Ellmann notes in his Oscar Wilde history, “Pater’s essays remained ‘the golden book of spirit and sense, the holy writ of beauty’”, no matter his low opinion of others’ prose at that time in his studies (83). Both dedicated their lives to Beauty and avoided anything they perceived as vulgar. It is evident in Wilde’s essays and his novel, The Picture of Dorian Gray, that no one without a great deal of time and money to expend on the arts is “useless” enough to merit mention.

Central to this thesis is Wilde’s idea that Life is imitating and expressing Art. He believed for much of his life that Art based in reality should not enthrall anyone for long, if at all; in fact, he believed that when Life touches Art, Art is destroyed (“The Decay of Lying”, 6). The individual must express oneself through “lying,” or imagination. One expresses oneself through Beauty only, avoiding the pain, banality, and ugliness of reality: Beauty is not expressive, but impressive, and Beauty in Art changes what one sees everywhere else. The difference between looking and seeing is the difference between existing and living. In Dorian Gray, Wilde’s characters represent different facets of Art and Life. The way in which they interact and live their lives makes manifest many of the claims in Wilde’s essays. The relationships between the characters examine the relationship between Life and Art from many angles. Dorian’s connection to the portrait of which he is

¹ The footnote that editor Camille Cauti places after this sentence explains that Wilde lifts the phrase, “not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end” from Pater’s 1873 work Studies in the Histories of the Renaissance.
initially intensely jealous is just one of many dynamics in the novel: for example, Sibyl Vane, the young actress who knows nothing of life offstage, is Wilde’s application of the point he makes in his “The Decay of Lying” that Life is “the solvent that breaks up Art” (7).

When he was in prison, he wrote the essay “De Profundis”, a reflection on Individualism and, for once, how his life, viewpoints, and actions affected him as an individual. He wrote himself into his three main critical essays as well as his novel, but in those, he was speaking in the works as a character rather than as a man. “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” is the only one of those works in which he did not employ Platonic dialogues; as a more traditionally stylized critical essay, it does not reveal much about Wilde’s life outside of making and criticizing art. “De Profundis” is as much a confession as it is a reflection: once Wilde no longer had a place in English high society, he could only survive by changing his perception of Individualism. Imagination, a concept he praised endlessly in his 1891 works, was only one part of the form of expression he came to understand after his fall from grace: love. In prison, he realized the magnitude of what he overlooked by deliberately pursuing an exclusively pleasurable existence. In sorrow and humility, two states he had not considered positively until he was in prison, he found depth and beauty in genuine emotion: he writes that his ruin “came not from too great individualism of life, but from too little” (“De Profundis”, 18).

Once Wilde was in prison and cast out of British high society, only then did he examine the Individual as existing outside of expressing himself through Art: in Nature, for example, or as Christ did, through embracing even the “dumb” and
“inarticulate” (“De Profundis”, 12). Elegantly writing in favor of the “sterile emotions” and disconnect from reality that Art inspires in its incompleteness and pursuit of pleasure (“The Critic as Artist”, 168), Wilde did not sincerely examine this paradigm until jail, the ugliest of reality, forced him to see beauty in places he had not closely looked before.
CHAPTER I
WHY LIFE SHOULD NEVER TOUCH ART

“You have spoiled the romance of my life. [...] Without your art you are nothing” (Dorian to Sibyl Vane in The Picture of Dorian Gray, p.91).

Especially in his novel and his critical works from 1891, Wilde explicitly voices the belief that there is no form of expression of Individualism outside of creating, interpreting, or critiquing Art. For this to be true, Art must not come into contact with other, that is, most, walks of life; in other words, reality should not influence Art, and Art does not mirror reality. In his essay “The Decay of Lying”, Wilde’s character Vivian claims that two touches of Life destroy any work of Art (6). Life, Vivian says, is Art’s greatest and only pupil, and Life imitates Art, not the other way around (10). He explains his reasoning in this essay, but he also demonstrates it through interactions between Dorian Gray and Sibyl Vane in The Picture of Dorian Gray, Wilde’s only novel. Sibyl, an actress, is a teenage girl who has spent her entire life in the theater. She embodies Wilde’s ideal of living as Art: in his essay “The Critic as Artist”, Wilde writes, “Beauty has as many meanings as man has moods. Beauty is the symbol of symbols. Beauty reveals everything, because it expresses nothing. When it shows us itself, it shows us the whole fiery-coloured world” (145). Dorian falls in love with Sibyl because she is an actress: she is Beauty. She is Art.

Dorian explains his love to Lord Henry Wotton, his guiding light to aestheticism, saying, “One night she is Rosalind, and the next evening she is Imogen. [...] I have seen her in every age and in every costume. Ordinary women never appear to one’s imagination. They are limited to their century” (55). He loves her as a piece of art, and not as a human being. She is changeable and therefore enthralling. Dorian does
not want to know her as a person, despite claiming to love her: when her manager, Mr. Isaac, asks him to come backstage and meet her, and he exclaims, “I was furious with him, and told him that Juliet had been dead for hundreds of years, and that her body was lying in a marble tomb in Verona. [...] It was curious my not wanting to know her, wasn’t it?” (56, 57). As Lord Henry subsequently tells Dorian, it is not curious at all: he does not want to understand the mystery of her, and he does not want to place her with anyone else he has ever met. He belongs in his box in the audience, and she belongs onstage. He has just made the comment that no other woman sparks his imagination, and getting to know her would shatter the illusion that she is not just like anyone else.

Sibyl has an unconscious grace that makes her a genius as an actress. She is much like Dorian is before Lord Henry corrupts him: Lord Henry tells Dorian in their first full conversation, “The moment I met you I saw that you were quite unconscious of what you really are, of what you really might be. There was so much in you that charmed me that I felt that I must tell you something about yourself” (25). Before Dorian is conscious of the great power he wields in being uncommonly beautiful, and for far too long after he has started grievously injuring those with whom he keeps company, he is on everyone’s pedestal—particularly Basil’s. Basil tells Lord Henry that Dorian has opened his eyes to beauty: he says, “[W]hile I was painting [the portrait], Dorian Gray sat beside me. Some subtle influence passed from him to me, and for the first time in my life I saw in the plain woodland the wonder I had always looked for, and always missed” (12). Oscar Wilde comments on this very notion in “The Decay of Lying”: “Nature is no great mother who has
borne us. She is our creation. It is in our brain that she quickens to life. Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us. To look at a thing is very different from seeing a thing. One does not see anything until one sees its beauty” (12). Dorian helps Basil express himself as an artist on a higher level than he has before, and his beauty has opened Basil’s eyes to beauty elsewhere; Dorian, like Sibyl, is Art, until he is awakened and thus corrupted. One of the first comments Dorian makes after Lord Henry has awakened him is, “I am no more to you than a green bronze figure” (28). He now understands that Basil treats him like an object, like a work of art, and Lord Henry has already convinced him that he should be envious that the bronze statue’s beauty will last longer. Like Sibyl, his fall from unconscious grace seals his doom. Lord Henry touches him with the ugliest part of Life he can: the inevitability of aging out of beauty (25).

Dorian worships Sibyl in the way that Basil worships him (56): from afar, and without knowing her well, if at all. His infatuation with her inevitably leads to him making her aware of her genius. Dorian recounts his first conversation with Sibyl, in which he awakens her as he has been awakened: “Her eyes opened in exquisite wonder when I told her what I thought of her performance, and she seemed quite unconscious of her power” (57). She and Dorian are at their most exquisite just before they begin to fall to their respective demises. Dorian has elevated her to the status of a deity: Art, the same god that has made him immortal. In a lot of ways, they are very much alike, except that he has given away his soul, and she has never been in contact with reality. Sibyl does not know what life is like outside of her
stage life and her small family life. The only people outside of the theater that she interacts with are her manager, her brother, and her mother. He keeps his distance from her for as long as he can. Henry asks him, “When is she Sibyl Vane?” and when Dorian answers “Never,” Henry replies, “I congratulate you” (58-59). As long as Dorian does not interact with her except while she is on her pedestal, Dorian will love her, and she will continue to be a brilliant actress. The greatest harm Dorian can do to their relationship is to bring her out of the theater and into reality.

Sibyl does not have any experience offstage except with her family: there is her mother, who is still an actress but has seen too much of life (58), and there is her sixteen-year-old brother, James, a well-intentioned brute whose life experience has so embittered him that his world view does not affect her (67). His feelings towards her world, the stage, are hateful; Sibyl, knowing his deep affection for her, cannot be tainted with his perception of reality. The faceless cheering crowd adores her, but even they are tangential to her world. Beautiful Dorian Gray’s compliments and professed love are the first contact with Life she has ever experienced. She is a teenager and more naïve than most, and so she treats this romance like a fairy tale. She gives him the name Prince Charming (58) and never calls him anything else until she has fallen from his esteem: she glows when she sees him after her mediocre performance, happily declaring, “How badly I acted tonight, Dorian!” (89). Dorian, too, is carried away: he proposes to her (63). He kisses her, and this second touch of Life ruins her as an actress (92).

In “The Decay of Lying”, Wilde’s character Vivian claims, “What is interesting about people in good society [...] is the mask that each one of them wears, not the
reality that lies behind the mask. It is a humiliating confession, but we are all of us made out of the same stuff. [...] The more one analyses people, the more all reasons for analysis disappear. Sooner or later one comes to that dreadful universal thing called human nature” (4). Dorian loves her for being an actress because her art evades analysis. He sees marriage as a form of acquisition rather than a commitment to knowing, and thus loving, another person. When he sees her as a girl in love with him, he sees through the veil hiding her humanity. Human nature is not special, and knowing someone outside of her art only culminates in heartbreak and disappointment. Sibyl is only dear to Dorian when she is interpreting Shakespeare; she herself is, as he says, “[a] third-rate actress with a pretty face” (91). His proposal strips her talent from her because she has no desire to fake passion once she feels it genuinely for the first time; she does not even realize that she has been in “prison. You taught me what reality really is. Tonight, for the first time in my life, I saw through the hollowness, the sham […]. I became conscious that Romeo was hideous, and old, and painted, and that the moonlight in the orchard was false. […] I have grown sick of shadows” (90). Life has made it impossible for her to act ever again. Dorian, now fused inextricably with Basil’s portrait of him, wants no part of realism, and so Sibyl is repulsive to him. He has given his soul to a piece of art, and he has become infatuated with another; he cannot and will not comprehend that she would delight in abandoning Art for Life. Of course, she cannot live, now that she feels this way.

Now that Sibyl is rooted in reality and is ineffective as an artist, she is just another lovesick young woman in England. Dorian will forget her because she has
lost her genius and thus her individuality (91). Wilde sends her back to Art with her suicide (102). Dorian says to Henry, “This thing that has happened does not affect me as it should. It seems to me to be simply like a wonderful ending to a wonderful play. It has all the terrible beauty of a Greek tragedy” (104). Lord Henry claims that because the tragedy is so beautiful, it appeals to their dramatic instinct and so does not inspire true sorrow (105). Sibyl, unlike the women whose hearts Henry breaks, has the artistry to die of heartache (105). The way she dies is a form of artistic expression, and this is the only form of self-expression Henry and Dorian appreciate. She separates herself from Life with a sweepingly romantic gesture, one that Henry states would make him “fall in love with love” (105): her suicide is a declaration that she would rather die than live without the man she loves. Dorian brings Life to her, and it thoroughly destroys her.

Sibyl’s mother, one of the only people in Sibyl’s offstage life, is also an actress. She is a fascinating character because she has seen a lot of hardship in real life, and so she hides herself and Sibyl from the world with theater. Because the circumstances of her life have been so poor, she uses theater to make life more palatable. When her son James asks her if she and his father were married, she thinks, “The terrible moment, the moment that night and day, for weeks and months, she had dreaded, had come at last, and yet she felt no terror. Indeed, in some measure it was a disappointment to her. The vulgar directness of the question called for a direct answer. The situation had not been gradually led up to. It was crude. It reminded her of a bad rehearsal” (75). James is an earnest, rather awkward, angry teenager; he often disappoints her because he reminds her of the
vulgarity she has left outside of the stage door. Wilde’s character Gilbert expresses a sentiment similar to Mrs. Vane’s in his essay “The Critic as Artist”:

[The critic] will always be reminding us that great works of art are living things—are, in fact, the only things that live. [...] I am certain that, as civilisation progresses and we become more highly organised, the elect spirits of each age, the critical and cultured spirits, will grow less and less interested in actual life, and will seek to gain their impressions almost entirely from what Art has touched. For life is terribly deficient in form. Its catastrophes happen in the wrong way and to the wrong people. There is a grotesque horror about its comedies, and its tragedies seem to culminate in farce. One is always wounded when one approaches it. Things last either too long, or not long enough (158-159).

The reader does not know much about Gilbert, except that in the opening lines, Gilbert is at a piano, and Ernest, the other character, implies that Gilbert possesses an extensive collection of books (95); Gilbert’s life is not nearly as troubled as Mrs. Vane’s is. Gilbert, like Wilde, leads life as a character, speaking in paradoxes and avoiding the ugly realities of life outside of a concert hall or gallery. Mrs. Vane has encountered Life too often, and especially compared to Sibyl, is a mediocre actress. She does not come across as Wilde’s ideal of an individual; rather, she comes across as a poor, delusional woman who has seen too much of Life and who tries to turn her pathos into Art. As Gilbert expresses later in the dialogue, “Whatever actually occurs is spoiled for art. All bad poetry springs from genuine feeling” (201).

Basil Hallward, the artist whose painting launches Dorian into the supernatural, is not only another example of why Life should never touch Art, but also makes manifest the point in Wilde’s works that creation is the only form of self-expression, or at least the only sort about which Wilde cares. Lord Henry Wotton encompasses both points when he explains to Dorian,
Basil, my dear boy, puts everything that is charming in him into his work. The consequence is that he has nothing left for life but his prejudices, his principles, and his common sense. The only artists I have ever known who are personally delightful are bad artists. Good artists exist simply in what they make, and consequently are perfectly uninteresting in what they are. A great poet, a really great poet, is the most unpoetical of all creatures. But inferior poets are absolutely fascinating. The worse their rhymes are, the more picturesque they look. The mere fact of having published a book of second-rate sonnets makes a man quite irresistible. He lives the poetry that he cannot write. The others write the poetry that they dare not realize. (60)

This comment tells the reader as much about Henry as it does about Basil. Henry talks in paragraphs, usually, as in this case, about people as they represent aspects of his worldview. Principles and common sense are not appealing to one who shuns that which is not beautiful or pleasurable. Henry does not have a sentimental attachment to Basil, and actually finds him to be dull company when they are not watching a play or discussing Dorian Gray. Wotton does not express sorrow when discussing Basil’s death with Dorian, but rather, he comments that Basil’s work has declined in quality in the last ten years of his life; the death that he imagines for Basil is him falling into the Seine and drowning there, bloated and forgotten (219). Wotton and Wilde leave Basil to die unhappy, and they do it for the same reason: after Basil actualizes his ideal of Dorian in a portrait, he has nothing left to express that excites them.

Basil’s obsession with Dorian’s beauty is part of what elevates Dorian to immortal beauty; he is both Dorian’s creator and his slave. When Basil has finished the portrait, Dorian declares that he would give up his soul to always be young and beautiful (28), and that “[the painting] is part of myself. I feel that” (30). Critic Northrop Frye’s term for the highest mode in tragedies in literature is the mythical mode, in which the hero is a divinity, superior to men and the environment in which
he and other men exist (33). Dorian is obviously in the mythical mode, as he is the only immortal in what is otherwise a realistic enough depiction of high society in 19th century London. Although his portrait contains his soul, and thus has a hold on his sanity and his life, Dorian has a hold on its artist, and only his actions alter the painting. Basil Hallward and Sibyl Vane, while mortals, are also in the mythic mode in scenes of this novel: they take turns representing different aspects of Art. When Sibyl and Basil do not act as manifestations of Art, they are in what Frye terms the ironic mode. Irony in this context implies one’s isolation from society, but does not necessarily have to do with one’s character or actions. Sibyl and Basil are the novel’s *pharmakoi*, or scapegoats; Frye emphasizes that what befalls a novel’s *pharmakos* is “far greater” than anything that character deserves, as in a mountaineer’s shout resulting in an avalanche. (Frye, 40, 41-42). Sibyl, for example, is a naturally tragic figure because the realization that she is isolated from society crushes her. She does nothing morally wrong; she simply has a teenage infatuation.

A variation on Frye’s idea that “the god of one person is the *pharmakos* of another” (Frye, 43), Basil as Art has elevated Dorian to divinity because Basil’s every brushstroke in the portrait reveals his worship of Dorian as a god; he is Dorian’s god and *pharmakos*. He tells Dorian that he is “dominated, soul, brain, and power, by you. [...] I worshiped you. [...] every flake and film of color seemed to me to reveal my secret. I grew afraid that others would know of my idolatry. I felt, Dorian, that I had told too much, that I had put too much of myself into it” (*Dorian Gray*, 117, 118).

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2 Critic Northrop Frye writes in his 1957 essay “Anatomy of Criticism” about various modes in which characters exist throughout a work; looking through the lens of these modes is helpful in examining Dorian and his portrait’s relationship with other characters.
Wilde writes as Vivian in “The Decay of Lying” that “The only portraits in which one believes are portraits where there is very little of the sitter and a very great deal of the artist” (15), but perhaps Basil is right, and there is such a thing as putting too much of oneself into a portrait of someone else. Basil’s fate, being stabbed to death by the object of his idolatry, supports this idea.

Basil wishes his Art were his reality, and this dooms him. His objectification of and passion for Dorian ruin him, because it forces realism into his work. Basil confesses to Dorian, “One day—a fatal day, I sometimes think—I determined to paint a wonderful portrait of you as you actually are. [...] Whether it was the Realism of the method, or the mere wonder of your own personality, [...] I cannot tell. I felt, Dorian, that I told too much, that I put too much of myself into it” (118). It is no accident that the portrait of Dorian as himself is the one of which Dorian is envious and the one that corrupts him. His portrait’s attachment to his actions brings it into the realm of reality, which means it is completely corrupted Art. Vivian calls realism “a complete failure” (“Decay of Lying”, 7). The same is true of Dorian, as his soul is in the portrait; he is an unnatural being existing as a corrupted piece of art. He blames Basil, and rightly so, for treating him like just another beautiful thing, rather than a mortal being, with faults. When Dorian first sees the portrait and wishes to change place with it, he is delighted that Basil refers to it as “the real Dorian” (31): “Is it the real Dorian?” cried the original of the portrait, strolling across to him. ‘Am I really like that?’ ‘Yes, you are just like that.’ ‘How wonderful, Basil!’ ‘At least you are like it in appearance. But it will never alter,’ sighed Hallward. ‘That is something’” (32). It is rarely clearer than in this moment that Basil loves Dorian as Art more
than, or even rather than, as a person. He is upset at Henry for awakening Dorian to his beauty, because that means Dorian in the flesh is already irrevocably different from Basil’s portrait—his ideal—of him. Vivian explains why Basil’s idealization is unnatural both in Art and Life: “As long as a thing is useful or necessary to us, or affects us in any way, either for pain or for pleasure, or appeals strongly to our sympathies, or is a vital part of the environment in which we live, it is outside the proper sphere of art. To art’s subject-matter we should be more or less indifferent” (“Decay of Lying”, 6). By this definition, the portrait of Dorian Gray is outside of the proper sphere of art. It is fitting for an artist to put himself into his work, since this is how he expresses himself as an individual; the portrait, however, is the manifestation of an ideal in Life, and in painting it, Basil brings both Life to Art and art to life.

Once Basil has created the Art that elevates Dorian to the supernatural, the only way in which Basil functions in the mythical mode is through the painting, as Dorian’s conscience. Basil has put so much of himself into the portrait; both in the flesh and through the painting, he makes Dorian think about his actions. Immediately after Dorian’s rejection of Sibyl drives her to suicide, Basil acts as Dorian’s conscience through the painting, in the mythical mode, and then in the flesh, as the pharmakos. Sibyl’s death is the first time that the portrait reflects Dorian’s darkening soul. As Dorian gazes at the altered portrait, he thinks, “[I]t had made him conscious of how unjust, how cruel, he had been to Sibyl Vane. [...]T]he portrait that Basil Hallward had painted of him would be a guide to him through life, would be to him what holiness is to some, and conscience to others” (99). The
portrait is the only moral compass Dorian has throughout the novel to which he
gives any attention; Lord Henry's ideology refuses to acknowledge morality
seriously (104). This disdain for morals is constantly battling with the ugliness
Dorian sees in the portrait of his soul.

When Basil acts as a human manifestation of Dorian's conscience, he does so
with Dorian on a pedestal, and so he exists in the ironic mode as the *pharmakos.*
After Sibyl's death and Dorian's realization that the portrait will reflect his ugly
actions, Basil's alarm at the situation leaves Dorian looking "dreadfully bored"
(*Dorian Gray*, 111). When the portrait is behind a screen and Dorian does not have
to reflect on the state of his soul, Henry's dismissal of morals and remorse is
Dorian's default morality. He cannot listen to Basil seriously because Basil talks to
him as if he is still a boy: "'what do you want?' 'I want the Dorian Gray I used to
paint,' said the artist, sadly" (*Dorian Gray*, 112). Basil's tragic flaw is that despite all
the rumors he hears besmirching Dorian's character, he refuses to believe that
Dorian is beyond redemption. He confronts his muse, saying, "I do want to preach to
you. [...] Your name was implicated in the most terrible confession I ever read. I told
him that it was absurd—that I knew you thoroughly, and that you were incapable of
anything of the kind. [...] I wonder do I know you? Before I could answer that I
should have to see your soul" (*Dorian Gray*, 156). He says, "But only God can do
that" (*Dorian Gray*, 156), not realizing that Dorian can see his soul. An expression of
Basil's soul as an artist is already fused with Dorian's soul. Basil cannot be allowed
to survive this story because in this moment, he is simultaneously at his most
powerful and his most vulnerable, and he does not realize that he is either of these.
The last action Basil carries out as Dorian’s mortal moral compass is to beg Dorian to pray for redemption: redemption for Dorian’s pride and subsequent sins, and for Basil’s worship of him (Dorian Gray, 162). When Basil is not an artist, his idolatry and piety represent Wilde’s modern London society, which suppresses Individualism; I will discuss society, Nature, and their suppression of Individualism in my next chapter.

Lord Henry lives as Art, speaking to Dorian in a way only music has before their encounter (21); Basil is an artist, channeling all of his personality into his work; Sibyl is an actress, confined to Art with no knowledge of Life outside of the stage and her dressing-room; when Dorian tries to destroy the painting for being his conscience, he dies and the painting as it originally is remains (228-229). Without Wilde’s characters’ love and genius for art and thus their proclivity for self-expression, they are nothing.

Wilde’s characters, both in his essays and in his novel, either speak for him, or personify what he perceives to be the foolish arguments against his ideals. The former, those whom he uses as mouthpieces, avoid pain and vulgarity in their pursuit of pleasure, something Wilde does as well. Unlike his characters, which he stops using before they have time to age, or which he kills off before they can, Wilde eventually must face Life: aging, three trials, public humiliation, imprisonment, hard labor, illness, his mother’s death, and loneliness. Because he is not Art, he is not destroyed, and his essay “De Profundis” is a reflection on the dimension of Individualism he learns from living in the humblest and ugliest of circumstances.
CHAPTER II
NATURE, SOCIETY, AND SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN HOW THEY SUPPRESS INDIVIDUAL SELF-EXPRESSION

“Yes: the public is wonderfully tolerant. It forgives everything except genius” (“The Critic as Artist”, p.95).

“The State is to make what is useful. The individual is to make what is beautiful” (“The Soul of Man Under Socialism”, p.11).

We are dominated by the fanatic, whose worst vice is his sincerity. Anything approaching to the free play of the mind is practically unknown amongst us. People cry out against the sinner, yet it is not the sinful, but the stupid, who are our shame. There is no sin except stupidity (“The Critic as Artist”, p.214).

Just as Wilde believes that Life is subordinate to Art, he believes that Art affects Nature; as Life should not influence Art, nor should Nature. Wilde’s character Vivian in “The Decay of Lying” explains, “Nature is no great mother who has borne us. She is our creation. It is in our brain that she quickens to life. Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us. To look at a thing is very different from seeing a thing. One does not see anything until one sees its beauty” (“The Decay of Lying”, 12). I discussed in the last chapter Wilde’s opinion that Beauty does not express anything except for itself, and how it is impressive, rather than expressive. Vivian’s statement about Nature is a furthering of this. When one beholds a piece of Art, certain elements, different for every individual, make an impression on one, opening one’s eyes to these elements’ occurrences in reality. Art does not directly influence what occurs in Nature, but it influences the individual’s perception of Beauty in Nature; the more beauty one sees, the more an individual may express oneself, and the more pleasure one gains. The piece of art does not have to depict a natural

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3 See page 8.
scene: Dorian Gray opens Basil’s eyes to the beauty of the world and thus elevates him as an artist (12). Basil sees Dorian as a beautiful object, not a person, and so Dorian functions as Art even before his life and soul are fused with it. In Wilde’s world, nothing in Nature is beautiful or significant until Art makes one aware of its beauty, and so the man who takes the time to appreciate art will actualize himself by seeing what he finds to be beautiful in the world.

When one does not see beauty in the world or know where to find it, one is, as Vivian says, looking rather than seeing, and existing rather than living. To go through life as such is how Dorian is before Lord Henry intervenes. Henry cannot let Dorian continue to exist without knowing how extraordinarily beautiful he is, and the power that comes with youth and beauty. At the start of the novel, before Dorian voices the prayer to give up his soul for immortal beauty, Lord Henry acts as an aspect of Art, dangerous knowledge, to awaken Dorian to his beauty. Dorian Gray gains knowledge that makes it impossible for him to remain an innocent adolescent; he falls from grace into Frye’s mythical mode, simultaneously elevated to the supernatural and doomed to destroy himself. Before Basil has completed the portrait that will merge with Dorian, Lord Henry has already started to corrupt the boy: Henry’s words “had touched some secret chord that had never been touched before, but that he felt was now vibrating and throbbing to curious pulses. Music had stirred him like that. Music had troubled him many times. [...] Words!” (Wilde, 21) Dorian is still mortal in this scene, but already Lord Henry has roused him from unconscious boyhood; he has made Dorian think by speaking to his soul, something a book did to him once when he was Dorian’s age (22). Art in the form of Lord
Henry’s words, along with seeing the portrait for the first time, strike Dorian in a way that nothing else has. Without a doubt, Basil, who expresses Dorian’s beauty through his art, has told Dorian he is beautiful, but those words would never have touched him. Although several factors in Dorian’s elevation corrupt his soul, Henry opening Dorian’s eyes to his own beauty allows Dorian to cultivate himself through his deep love for the arts.

One should not look to Nature when one is pursuing a life of beauty, because Art is mankind’s improvement on Nature. There are a lot of beautiful things in Nature, but there are also many elements that are less appealing than what an individual can create in his mind. Vivian makes the point, “If Nature had been comfortable, mankind would never have invented architecture, and I prefer houses to the open air” (“The Decay of Lying”, 1). Houses separate, and more importantly, protect, people from Nature: unpleasant weather and wild animals, for example. Houses contain paintings, pianos, libraries, and places for people to experience and contemplate them. The ideal for Art is anything that one can imagine, and so what Nature has to offer is a mere benchmark. Nature is what one can see, and anything one sees in everyday life can be imagined with improvements. In Art, every sunset can be the most beautiful imaginable, and one can paint a fog without including the brown ugliness of London smog.

Houses also give people a sense of importance, a sense of purpose. In a house, one can surround oneself with what pleases one, and with what one has purchased with the money one has earned. Vivian’s other point against Nature is exactly that: “Egotism itself, which is so necessary to a proper sense of human
dignity, is entirely the result of indoor life. Out of doors one becomes abstract and impersonal. One’s individuality absolutely leaves one. And then Nature is so indifferent, so unappreciative” (”The Decay of Lying”, 1). Nature takes one’s individuality from one because death is a part of Nature, and death does not care how one has spent one’s life. In one’s house, surrounded by the fruits of one’s labors, one feels both significant and in control of one’s life. Nature is a reminder of what one cannot control, including the less attractive aspects of Nature. A woman such as Sibyl Vane’s mother cannot retreat from the ugliness of reality completely, since it has already touched and worn her down to her rather pitiful existence as an exhausted actress and a single mother; men such as Wilde and Lord Henry, however, have the luxury of shielding themselves from anything that they find unpleasant. Of course, even they have to acknowledge their and their friends’ mortality. Lord Henry tries to avoid confronting ugliness even more than Dorian. When Dorian brings up Basil’s death in conversation in Henry’s last appearance in the novel, Henry says, “If he is dead, I don’t want to think about him. Death is the only thing that ever terrifies me. I hate it. [...O]ne can survive everything nowadays except that. Death and vulgarity are the only two facts in the nineteenth century that one cannot explain away” (217). This is Lord Henry’s only sincere moment in the novel. In his last appearance, he speaks in earnest, about aging, and what scares him, at least. He is afraid because the only way he views reality is as ugliness, and this is one aspect of it that he cannot evade.

Art is not imitative of Nature, but rather, “our spirited protest, our gallant attempt to teach Nature her proper place” (”The Decay of Lying”, 1). Vivian, Lord
Henry, and even Dorian are examples of Wilde’s rejection of realism. Art expresses personality because it improves what is real, which is not to say that it bases itself in what is real. Vivian tells Cyril, “[I]f a novelist is base enough to go to life for her personages he should at least pretend that they are creations, and not boast of them as copies. The justification of a character in a novel is not that other persons are what they are, but that the author is what he is. Otherwise the novel is not a work of art” (4). Art that attempts to base itself in reality will, or should, fail. The fates of the characters in The Picture of Dorian Gray are telling of an attempt to keep Nature at bay. Dorian is most obviously an example of this, as he fixes himself in youth and beauty; he is a supernatural creature, and, with every corrupting act that mars the painting instead of his visage, increasingly unnatural. Because Lord Henry does not know Dorian’s terrible secrets, even he idealizes Dorian towards the end of the novel: he knows that he is only ten years older than Dorian, and while he is “wrinkled, worn, and yellow”, Dorian looks more beautiful than ever. He says, “Ah, Dorian, how happy you are! What an exquisite life you have had! [...] Nothing has been hidden from you. And it has all been to you no more than the sound of music. It has not marred you. You are still the same. [...] You are quite flawless now” (222). Henry has spent his life rejecting what is unpleasant or uninteresting, thriving in society by mocking it at dinner parties. He has separated himself as much as he has been able to from Nature and Life, but part of their vulgarity is their inevitability; the other part is that with enough time, they make him ugly. Sibyl, Dorian, Basil, and James all die young and violently; Lord Henry, the other main character in the novel, starts to age, and exits the novel without fanfare. No character in the novel dies of
old age, and no character that is not already old is permitted to grow old. The elderly are not nearly as interesting to chronicle, particularly when the novel is a work of art about choosing to live as Art rather than in the ugliness of Life and Nature.

In “The Decay of Lying”, Wilde writes about what should and should not inspire art, particularly poetry. He mentions Emerson and Wordsworth, both known for writing about their inspirations from spending extensive time outdoors. Wilde writes about Nature, “people only discover in her what they bring to her. She has no suggestions of her own. Wordsworth went to the lakes, but he was never a lake poet. He found in stones the sermons he had already hidden there. He went moralizing about the district, but his good work was produced when he returned, not to Nature but to poetry” (“The Decay of Lying”, 6). When Nature is beautiful, it is because a worthy imagination has projected meaning through beauty onto it. It does not inspire feelings that lead to poetry, but rather, may be one’s only opportunity in one’s day to contemplate what is already in one’s mind. Passions one has in everyday life make bad poetry; Gilbert in “The Critic as Artist” explains:

By its deliberate rejection of Nature as the ideal of beauty, as well as of the imitative method of the ordinary painter, decorative art not merely prepares the soul for the reception of true imaginative work, but develops in it that sense of form which is the basis of creative no less than of critical achievement. For the real artist is he who proceeds, not from feeling to form, but from form to thought and passion. He does not first conceive an idea, and then say to himself, ‘I will put my idea into a complex metre of fourteen lines,’ but, realising the beauty of the sonnet-scheme, he conceives certain modes of music and methods of rhyme, and the mere form suggests what is to fill it and make it intellectually and emotionally complete (200-201).

Real artists are actually inspired by form, and so they are not speaking with anyone’s voices except for their own. Decorative art is simply that: ornamental. It is
art for its own sake, something that cannot and does not exist in Nature. By beholding original art, the spectator is also developing his or her soul. Art from a true artist shows one what beauty means to one, and bears more beauty.

One of Wilde’s great problems with society is that he views it as rejecting genius and originality in Art. It does not accept novelty, and does not have a place for dreamers. Society in Wilde’s London has different values than he, for he favors contemplation over action:

Society, which is the beginning and basis of morals, exists simply for the concentration of human energy, and in order to ensure its own continuance and healthy stability it demands, and no doubt rightly demands, of each of its citizens that he should contribute some form of productive labour to the common weal, and toil and travail that the day’s work may be done. Society often forgives the criminal; it never forgives the dreamer (“The Critic as Artist”, 169).

One cannot find one’s individuality when one is working for society’s needs, because then, one is not conscious of one’s own. One’s needs are for self-cultivation and self-expression, which are overlooked and even discouraged. The poet Ralph Waldo Emerson writes similarly in his 1841 essay, “Self-Reliance”: “This one fact the world hates, that the soul becomes; for that for ever degrades the past, turns all riches to poverty, all reputation to a shame, confounds the saint with the rogue, shoves Jesus and Judas equally aside” (Emerson, 10). This essay, written by an American fifty years before Wilde writes his three main 1891 essays—“The Soul of Man Under Socialism”, “The Decay of Lying”, and “The Critic as Artist”—makes the same point as Wilde’s about society’s suppression of Individualism: that society frowns upon those who dedicate themselves to the development of their souls. Emerson is writing about a culture very similar to Wilde’s, since America does not have much of
an identity, and has not completely invented many of its societal norms. When Emerson says that the world hates that the soul *becomes*, and that it “for ever degrades the past”, he is pointing out the importance that the society he knows the most about—after all, he has not experienced every society in the world at his time—has placed for centuries on amassing material things, and maintaining or improving one’s social status. Emerson’s idea of society is “a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, so surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most respect is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion” (“Self-Reliance”, 3). He and Wilde have different views on religion and Nature, but they agree that society requires one to give up one’s culture, mind, and body to the needs of a heartless, capitalistic machine. Society’s biggest problem, in their eyes, is that it does not care for the individual, but cares instead for the economy’s well-being; it thus values producing, selling, and acquiring, and casts thinkers, dreamers, and artists into the categories of laziness and selfishness.

The essay “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” is Wilde’s ideal for society. It is written in his voice, as opposed to his other two essays, which are written in dialogue format; that he does not put the words in some invented character’s mouth gives them a relatively earnest quality. The paper is an argument against the way society is and has been run in England. Wilde does not support socialism in the way that others may define it; he does not support any authority that forces people to do what they would not choose to do otherwise. (“The Soul of Man Under Socialism”, 23). What Emerson calls conformity (3), Wilde calls selfishness: “A man is called
selfish if he lives in the manner that seems to him most suitable for the full realisation of his own personality; if, in fact, the primary aim of his life is self-development. [...] Selfishness is not living as one wishes to live, it is asking others to live as one wishes to live. And unselfishness is letting other people’s lives alone, not interfering with them” (“The Soul of Man Under Socialism”, 23). The essay is self-aware in its impracticality (22), but that is because the essay is an attack on practicality.

Practical values for one living in this capitalistic society include acquiring property; Wilde believes that this suppresses Individualism: “[Private property] has debarred one part of the community from being individual by starving them. It has debarred the other part of the community from being individual by putting them on the wrong road, and encumbering them. [...] Property is still the test of complete citizenship” (“The Soul of Man Under Socialism”, 5). Society places more value on what its citizens have than who its citizens are as individuals. He says as much: “For the recognition of private property has really harmed Individualism, and obscured it, by confusing a man with what he possesses. [...] It has made gain not growth its aim. [...] The important thing is to be. The true perfection of a man lies, not in what a man has, but in what a man is” (“The Soul of Man Under Socialism”, 5). He is blaming society for suppressing Individualism, but he would not stop there if he did not have faith in people. People sacrifice themselves because society as it is demands it. The root of his argument is that once private property is abolished and everyone has the time to be individuals, they will express their individuality through art, like poets have the luxury of doing in his time in England. He writes that
Individualism “knows that people are good when they are let alone. Man will develop Individualism out of himself. Man is now so developing Individualism. To ask whether Individualism is practical is like asking whether Evolution is practical. Evolution is the law of life, and there is no evolution except towards Individualism” (“The Soul of Man Under Socialism”, 23). It is society’s priorities that give him his low opinion of the public’s opinion; he thrives in London as a popular writer, but he has a multifaceted relationship with the English public.

Public opinion means little to Wilde because the public means so little to him. He does not think of them as significant because “To live is the rarest thing in the world. Most people exist, that is all. It is a question of whether we have ever seen the full expression of a personality, except on the imaginative plane of art. In action, we never have” (“The Soul of Man Under Socialism”, 6). He does not believe that much of the public has expressed themselves as individuals, and so they have not developed, let alone fully developed, personalities. Again, he does not believe his fellow citizens to be incapable of developing Individualism, but it is not possible in a society that values having and doing more than thinking and being. An individual should not be judged by his actions because he may have noble reasons behind them, whatever the outcome; this is part of Wilde’s objection to the way in which many people express their morality (“The Critic as Artist”, 214). Wilde’s ideal of the individual, therefore, does not let public opinion influence him. In “The Soul of Man Under Socialism”, he writes, “The things people say of a man do not alter a man. He is what he is. Public opinion is of no value whatsoever. [...] After all, even in prison, a man can be quite free. His soul can be free. His personality can be untroubled. He
can be at peace” (8). Whether or not Wilde thinks of himself as an individual—given his lifestyle, it is safe to assume that he does—it is doubtful that he writes these essays even entertaining the idea that the public may send him to prison someday. I will discuss this in Chapter 4, but for now, I will simply say that it troubles him very much when he is in prison.

The difference between living and existing is not action, but language. This is the point that Wilde makes across his essays and novel: that mankind has the beautiful gift of language, and that if one does not mold language and let it mold one into something beautiful, one is wasting it. He writes as Gilbert,

There is no mode of action, no form of emotion, that we do not share with the lower animals. It is only by language that we rise above them, or above each other—by language, which is the parent, and not the child, of thought. [...Action] is a thing incomplete in its essence, because limited by accident, and ignorant of its direction, being always at variance with its aim. Its basis is the lack of imagination. It is the last resource of those who know not how to dream (“The Critic as Artist”, 128).

He seeks to separate thought from intention; thought that does not lead to action is what makes a person an individual. Imagination and losing oneself in the beauty of language are the ideal. Ideas can be dangerous, as expressing them can be, but action is often to serve society, whose aims are vulgar and misguided. He argues that action rarely reveals character, and one is rarely acting on one’s own behalf. This is why he argues so strongly against people striving for usefulness. Gilbert in “The Critic as Artist” expresses the point the most effectively:

Thought is degraded by its constant association with practice. Who that moves in the stress and turmoil of actual existence, noisy politician, or brawling social reformer, or poor narrow-minded priest blinded by the sufferings of that unimportant section of the community among whom he has cast his lot, can seriously claim to be able to form a disinterested intellectual judgment about any one thing? Each of the professions means a prejudice.
The necessity for a career forces every one to take sides. We live in the age of the overworked, and the under-educated; the age in which people are so industrious that they become absolutely stupid. And, harsh though it may sound, I cannot help saying that such people deserve their doom. The sure way of knowing nothing about life is to try to make oneself useful (177).

Gilbert is referring to the religious, if not also the poor, when he employs the phrase, “the unimportant section of the community”. The poor are too concerned with making a living and thinking about all the money they do not have, and those in politics, public service, or the religious world are too committed to other people’s needs and belief systems to formulate an intelligent thought. People cannot take the time to step back and evaluate how they are spending their lives; they do not see that divisions in religion, economic status, and social status make the world an ugly place.

For Wilde to write in the preface of The Picture of Dorian Gray, “All art is quite useless” (2) is, therefore, one of the most positive statements about art that one can make. If what is useful stops people from ensuring that they live their lives at least partially for the sake of happiness and beauty, then what is useless allows people to pursue fulfillment. Society makes its citizens live for productivity, but Wilde argues that a better society would make its citizens’ happiness a higher priority, along with their cultivation and education. He calls the society in which he lives “selfish” because it “deifies self-sacrifice” by valuing what is practical for society over “the fine intellectual virtues” that better the individual; “For the development of the race depends on the development of the individual, and where self-culture has ceased to be the ideal, the intellectual standard is instantly lowered, and, often, ultimately lost” (“The Critic as Artist”, 179). He portrays society as a
being, and an authoritative one, who has tricked and forced people into service with its long-established ideals. Those who stand apart as individuals, artists and writers, fight to keep the public’s intelligence afloat by challenging and inspiring them. Wilde writes, “As a certain advance has been made in the drama within the last ten or fifteen years, it is important to point out that this advance is entirely due to a few individual artists refusing to accept the popular want of taste as their standard, and refusing to regard Art as a mere matter of demand and supply” (“The Soul of Man Under Socialism”, 18). Art advances because artists do not give themselves up to any authority; they write what they need to write, and rather than change for the public’s preferences, they change the public’s preferences.

In “The Soul of Man Under Socialism”, he says the essay is “quite unpractical, and goes against human nature. This is why it is worth carrying out, and that is why one proposes it.” (22). Its uselessness gives it importance, not least because it stands out vividly against the society in which it is published. It challenges people to contemplate for a moment if they are dedicating their minds and bodies to anything that makes their lives special, or even pleasurable. It is not a practical essay because it proposes no authority except individual autonomy, and its author is only trying to convert those who read it—it does not waste time trying to communicate with the general public, given the aforementioned views it expresses on public opinion.

Another aspect of society’s suppression of Individualism is the social norms that develop into morality. In “The Critic as Artist,” Wilde writes, “What is termed Sin is an essential element of progress. Without it the world would stagnate, or grow old, or become colourless. By its curiosity Sin increases the experience of the
race. Through its intensified assertion of individualism, it saves us from monotony of type. In its rejection of the current notions about morality, it is one with the higher ethics” (130). Sinning is an objection against the collective morality. Committing an act society deems a sin does not make one a bad person, depending on the sin. Adhering to morals keeps people in predictable patterns, and discourages the risks that artists and writers tend to take.

Morality is not just unintelligent and vulgar because it assumes that there is always a connection between one’s intentions and one’s actions, but also because it is flexible, depending on whom society is judging. Dorian Gray is a prime example of society’s flexible moral judgment: no matter what atrocities rumors tell of him committing, no matter how many people fall from grace in his company, society does not completely believe the rumors. People talk and stare, but “Of such insolences and attempted slights [Dorian], of course, took no notice, and in the opinion of most people his frank, debonair manner, his charming, boyish smile, and the infinite grace of that wonderful youth that seemed never to leave him, were in themselves a sufficient answer to the calumnies [...] that were circulated about him” (145). The voice of the novel, a detached but well-informed and opinionated narrator, explains that no matter how many lives Dorian allegedly ruins, he is too fascinating to condemn: “Yet these whispered scandals only increased in the eyes of many his strange and dangerous charm. His great wealth was a certain element of security. Society, civilized society at least, is never very ready to believe anything to the detriment of those who are both rich and fascinating. It feels instinctively that manners are of more importance than morals, and, in its opinion, the highest
respectability is of much less value than the possession of a good chef” (146).

Dorian is an individual, pursuing beauty and pleasure, but he is also corrupt.

Wilde’s portrayal of society in his novel points out that Dorian’s wealth, his private property, divides him from others who have committed criminal acts. Morality, then, has no substance, and is all the more tedious when one foists it onto another person.

Basil, whose art is the most, if only, fascinating part of him, is thus exceedingly dull when he preaches to Dorian. He tells Dorian what the public has been saying about him, and that “I don’t believe these rumors at all—at least, I can’t believe them when I see you. Sin is a thing that writes itself across a man’s face. It cannot be concealed. [...] But you, Dorian, with your pure, bright, innocent face, and your marvelous, untroubled youth—I can’t believe anything against you” (153-154). When he is not expressing himself in his art, he is acting as everything that is wrong with society’s morality. He claims righteousness, but he seems to believe that only aging, unattractive people can sin. His moralizing, along with his idolatry, makes him a fool. He invokes God, saying that only God can see the state of Dorian’s soul, and Dorian tells him, “I shall show you my soul. You shall see the thing that you fancy only God can see” (157). Basil has painted the portrait of Dorian in worship, and treats Dorian as if his appearance reflects the state of his soul. He cannot imagine how Dorian’s appearance and soul are connected. Ironically, he idealizes Dorian for his looks, and because of his looks, refuses to accept malicious rumors about him as truthful; meanwhile, his worship and idolatry of Dorian make him both Dorian’s creator and Dorian’s slave. He is the human form of Dorian’s conscience—
the other part being the portrait—and he is not hard to kill. Once Basil is gone, his words haunt Dorian in harmless spurts of guilt for several seconds, and then he goes back to being irrelevant; such is the case when Dorian finds an old acquaintance, ruined, in an opium den: “His meeting with Adrian Singleton had strangely moved him, and he wondered if the ruin of the young life was really to be laid at his door, as Basil Hallward had said to him with such infamy of insult. He bit his lip, and for a few seconds his eyes grew sad. Yet, after all, what did it matter to him? One’s days were too brief to take the burden of another’s errors on one’s shoulders. Each man lived his own life, and paid his own price for living it” (194).

Both in his novel and his essays, Wilde deprecates conscience, which he thinks leads only to ugliness, and hinders Individualism. When Lord Henry is in a discussion about Dorian helping the poor in Whitechapel, he says, “I cannot sympathize with [suffering]. It is too ugly, too horrible, too distressing. There is something terribly morbid in the modern sympathy with pain. One should sympathize with the color, the beauty, the joy of life” (43). Sympathizing with suffering is not only devoting one’s energy to others’ pain, but also taking oneself away from joy. Wilde touches upon the point again in “The Soul of Man”: “Up to the present man has hardly cultivated sympathy at all. He has merely sympathy with pain, and sympathy with pain is not the highest form of sympathy. [...] It requires a very fine nature, the nature of a true Individualist, to sympathise with a friend’s success” (24). Individualism comes from happiness, with oneself, one’s accomplishments, and one’s company. The true individual is secure and happy with oneself; this is why when one expresses oneself, the expression is
beautiful. One’s conscience is also a reminder of what one may have done wrong, and Wilde does not think that an individual should regret one’s own actions: “The mere existence of conscience, that faculty of which people prate so much nowadays, and are so ignorantly proud, is a sign of our imperfect development. It must be merged in instinct before we become fine. Self-denial is simply a method by which man arrests his progress, and self-sacrifice a survival of the mutilation of the savage, part of that old worship of pain which is so terrible a factor in the history of the world” (“The Critic as Artist”, 130-131). Self-denial is letting one’s conscience rein oneself in through some misguided sense of collective morality, and self-sacrifice is Wilde’s term for both one’s unfulfilling job and for doing charity work; I will discuss his feelings on charity and Individualism in the next chapter.

The worship of pain, he says, only gives a limited form of Individualism, the one connected with his perception of Christ. He believes that “the Individualism of the future will develop itself” through joy, but that society developed from Christ’s ideals must first be reconstructed: “Christ made no attempt to reconstruct society, and consequently the Individualism that he preached to man could be realised only through pain or in solitude. The ideals that we owe to Christ are the ideals of the man who abandons society entirely, or of the man who resists society absolutely. But man is naturally social” (“The Soul of Man Under Socialism”, 24). In Wilde’s ideal society, one does not have to stand against the public to cultivate and express oneself. From this quotation, it would seem that Wilde views Christ as an individual who has expressed himself, but that his medium is pain. Wilde does not view Christ
as a figure that teaches self-acceptance, or self-love; I will explore in my final chapter how his view on Christ in this light changes.

When Wilde is writing, both society and Nature suppress and take away Individualism; both do through pain and vulgarity, society through stupidity, and Nature through its vastness. He is a successful writer in his time and in his society, but that is because he, like those he writes about, stands against society. He fascinates because he lives a life in pursuit of pleasure and elegance. In his ideal version of socialism, so may others:

Socialism itself will be of value simply because it will lead to Individualism. [...] At present, in consequence of the existence of private property, a great many people are enabled to develop a certain very limited amount of Individualism. They are either under no necessity to work for their living, or are enabled to choose the sphere of activity that is really congenial to them, and gives them pleasure. These are the poets, the philosophers, [...] the real men, the men who have realized themselves (“The Soul of Man Under Socialism”, 2).
CHAPTER III
CONSCIENCE, THE POOR, AND THE ART OF CRITICISM, AS THEY RELATE TO
INVIDIDUALISM

“A man who would not be discontented with such surroundings and such a
low mode of life would be a perfect brute. [...] Sometimes the poor are
praised for being thrifty. But to recommend thrift to the poor is both
grotesque and insulting. It is like advising a man who is starving to eat less”
(“The Soul of Man Under Socialism”, 3).

“The critic is he who can translate into another manner or a new material his
impression of beautiful things. [...] Those who find ugly meanings in beautiful
things are corrupt without being charming. This is a fault” (Preface, The
Picture of Dorian Gray, 1).

As I have established in the last chapter, it is not the fact of, but the
implications of, being poor that keep the poor from individuality. The poor are as
much human beings as the rich are, but they must work for their living, and so they
do not have the time to realize themselves. Wilde believes that they could express
themselves as individuals, had they the time and energy to do so; therefore, I do not
believe that I am taking a great liberty in interpreting his phrase, “the lower orders”
as undereducated, rather than as exclusively working class. Henry tells Dorian,
“Crime belongs exclusively to the lower orders. I don’t blame them in the smallest
degree. I should fancy that crime was to them what art is to us, simply a method of
procuring extraordinary sensations” (219). He does not pretend that art as a
profession is lucrative, and while the lower orders do not have time to find
inspiration in art, they do have time to commit crimes that come with excitement
and much-needed provisions. Wilde does not have a problem with this at all, given
his stance on morality; in fact, while crime will probably not take the poor out of
poverty, it is the closest many of the poor will come to expressing their

4 See pages 29-30.
personalities: “A poor man who is ungrateful, unthrifty, discontented, and rebellious, is probably a real personality, and has much in him. [...] As for the virtuous poor, one can pity them, of course, but one cannot possibly admire them” (The Soul of Man Under Socialism, 3).

With society the way it is in Wilde’s time, the poor must live outside of the ideologies and moralities of society if they are to retain their humanity. If they do not disobey, then they are as important as the average insect: “The man who is poor is in himself absolutely of no importance. He is merely the infinitesimal atom of a force that, so far from regarding him, crushes him: indeed, prefers him crushed, as in that case he is far more obedient” (The Soul of Man Under Socialism, 3). In several respects, it is foolish for one to follow the rules of a society in which one suffers and is disdained so. Wilde has both pity and contempt for the virtuous poor; he does not feel much differently for the people who decide to donate their time and energy to charity work.

Wilde and his characters that speak for him do not take time to “sympathize with suffering” (The Picture of Dorian Gray, 43).5 To associate with the poor is self-sacrifice, since the poor “are compelled to do the work of beasts of burden, [...] and amongst them there is no grace of manner, or charm of speech, or civilization, or culture, or refinement in pleasure, or joy of life” (“The Soul of Man Under Socialism”, 2-3). To surround oneself with the virtuous poor is a waste of energy because they have already doomed themselves to be crushed by the society to whose rules they

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5 Discussed previously on page 36.
are acquiescing. Wilde believes that charity work ultimately hurts, not helps, the poor and charitable:

The majority of people spoil their lives by an unhealthy and exaggerated altruism. [...] They find themselves surrounded by hideous poverty, by hideous ugliness, by hideous starvation. It is inevitable that they should be strongly moved by all this. The emotions of man are stirred more quickly than man's intelligence. [...] They set themselves to the task of remedying the evils that they see. But their remedies do not cure the disease: they merely prolong it. Indeed, their remedies are part of the disease. They try to solve the problem of poverty, for instance, by keeping the poor alive; or, in the case of a very advanced school, by amusing the poor ("The Soul of Man Under Socialism", 1).

Charity work helps the poor in the short run, but it prolongs the existence of poverty in society. Solving the problem of poverty involves eradicating it, not helping a few families with a few hours of charity. Unless society is reconstructed, there will always be a working class and poor beyond that. It is not just the corruption of Dorian’s soul that keeps him from even mentioning doing charity work after Basil finishes the portrait; it is also Lord Henry Wotton's influence. Henry does not believe in helping anyone but oneself, and does not believe in sympathizing with anything except for joy (43). Emerson, in the essay “Self-Reliance”, agrees that every man belongs to himself: ““Do not tell me, as a good man did today, of my obligation to put all poor men in good situations. Are they my poor? I tell thee, thou foolish philanthropist, that I grudge the dollar, the dime, the cent, I give to such men as do not belong to me and to whom I do not belong” (Emerson, 4). Emerson believes that people give out of conscience, and once they have made some pretense at virtue, they feel better about themselves. There is a difference between being a good person and doing a good deed.
Only through Art will one express oneself, and only then will one find peace. Giving to the poor may give one peace for a short while, but one will not rest easy until one has put oneself into a work of art. Wilde and Emerson both agree on this point: Wilde says, “The self-conscious aim of Life is to find expression, and Art offers it certain beautiful forms through which it may realize that energy” (“The Decay of Lying”, 17). Art is the way in which Life finds expression; Emerson’s phrasing of the point is, “We but half express ourselves, and are ashamed of that divine idea which each of us represents. [...] A man is relieved and gay when he has put his heart into his work and done his best; but what he has said or done otherwise, shall give him no peace” (Emerson, 2). Every person has something important to express, and if it is not expressed in Art, the idea dies, and the person might as well have not existed. Art is where people put the best of themselves, and where they are the most beautiful. Perhaps this is what Henry means when he tells Dorian, “Art has a soul, and man has not” (221).

People’s actions do not matter, and society’s norms allow, or even force, many to suffer, and so morality should have no bearing on creative works. What one puts into one’s art transcends the workings of modern society. Gilbert in “The Critic as Artist” explains, “Art is out of the reach of morals, for her eyes are fixed upon things beautiful and immortal and ever-changing. To morals belong the lower and less intellectual spheres” (192). Morals fix ideas and people into patterns that are difficult to break; this is why the reconstruction of society of which Wilde writes in “The Soul of Man” is entirely unrealistic. It is also why Wilde’s opinion of the general public is so low. The public’s criticism of art tends to involve its
transgressions against morality, and so their criticism is unintelligent and irrelevant. He writes in the preface of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all" (1). A well-written critique does not concern itself with morals, in accordance with the object of its criticism, and so has the potential for beauty as well; a poorly written critique teaches its reader nothing, and is vulgar and forgettable. Basil flippantly remarks to Henry, "I believe some picture of mine had made a great success at the time—at least, had been chattered about in the penny newspapers, which is the nineteenth century standard of immortality" (9). He, the creator of the painting, barely remembers the painting, and that the public seems to have loved it is why: the public does not say anything that he feels is pertinent to him or his work. The nineteenth century standard of immortality is low and has nothing to do with an artist’s expression of individuality.

Good criticism has nothing to do with public opinion; Wilde has an exceedingly low opinion of the latter, and an exceedingly high opinion of the former. A work of well-written criticism is relevant on its own, and lends the piece it is criticizing another dimension of relevance. Just as Wilde speaks ill of low-quality criticism, he disdains artists who reject criticism of their work: "I am aware that there are many honest workers in painting as well as in literature who object to criticism entirely. They are quite right. Their work stands in no intellectual relation to their age. It brings us no new element of pleasure. It suggests no fresh departure of thought, or passion, or beauty. It should not be spoken of. It should be left to the oblivion that it deserves" ("The Critic as Artist", 127). When artists reject criticism,
they are suggesting that their works do not inspire further beautiful creations, or
should not inspire them. They have created something, and are insecure about their
art, and probably themselves as individuals. There is no room for self-denial in
Wilde’s ideal of the creative Individualist. Just as a spectator of a piece of art sees
something beautiful there and then sees it in the real world, beauty begets more
beauty when a worthy critic decides to analyze a work of art.

Wilde believes that criticism is a work of art on its own, and as legitimate a
mode of personal expression as writing a novel or painting a picture. Gilbert argues
in “The Critic as Artist” that criticism is no more imitation than is the original work:
“Criticism is no more to be judged by any low standard of imitation or resemblance
than is the work of poet or sculptor. The critic occupies the same relation to the
work of art that he criticises as the artist does to the visible world of form and
colour, or the unseen world of passion and of thought” (137). Art inspires art, opens
one’s eyes to beauty outside of Art, and invites critics, not to simply praise or berate
a work, but to connect a work to the age and to the beauty within the critic. Gilbert
goes on to inform Ernest that “[Criticism] is the only civilised form of autobiography,
as it deals not with the events, but with the thoughts of one’s life; not with life’s
physical accidents of deed or circumstance, but with the spiritual moods and
imaginative passions of the mind. I am always amused by the silly vanity of those
writers and artists of our day who seem to imagine that the primary function of the
critic is to chatter about their second-rate work” (140). Relatively few people living
in the time of a given critic care about a critic’s everyday life; people read critiques
to learn about Art. A well-written critique employs beautiful language and reflects
well on the work that it is reviewing, even if the work is not life-changing in quality.

One does not have time to experience every work of art, and in fact, because
there are countless, in many ways, a good critique is a purer form of expression than
art. Wilde believes that great artists such as Homer and Shakespeare used not life,
but myth and ancient legends as subject matter, and “so the critic deals with
materials that others have, as it were, purified for him, and to which imaginative
form and colour have been already added. Nay, more, I would say that the highest
Criticism, being the purest form of personal impression, is in its way more creative
than creation [...]. That is what the highest criticism really is, the record of one's
own soul” (“The Critic as Artist”, 139). Criticism looks at Art as impressive, and is a
projection of one's unique being onto the piece being examined. It is beautiful
because, such as it is, it can only come from a specific person. Wilde writes,
“Criticism’s most perfect form, which is in its essence purely subjective, and seeks to
reveal its own secret and not the secret of another. For the highest Criticism deals
with art not as expressive but as impressive purely” (“The Critic as Artist”, 141). For
the artist, Art is a form of expression, but the critic does not investigate or speculate
about artistic intention; as a critic, one must concern oneself only with one’s
subjective experience in beholding a piece of Art. The critic beholding a piece of art
from another age makes it relevant to the critic’s age:

And so the picture becomes more wonderful to us than it really is, and
reveals to us a secret of which, in truth, it knows nothing, and the music of
the mystical prose is as sweet in our ears as was that flute-player’s music
that lent to the lips of La Gioconda those subtle and poisonous curves. Do
you ask me what Lionardo would have said had any one told him of this
picture that ‘all the thoughts and experience of the world had etched and
moulded therein that which they had of power to refine and make expressive
the outward form, the animalism of Greece, the lust of Rome, the reverie of
the Middle Age with its spiritual ambition and imaginative loves, the return
of the Pagan world, the sins of the Borgias? He would probably have
answered that he had contemplated none of these things, but had concerned
himself simply with certain arrangements of lines and masses, and with new
and curious colour-harmonies of blue and green. And it is for this very
reason that the criticism which I have quoted is criticism of the highest kind
(“The Critic as Artist”, 143).

Criticism of the highest kind, subjective criticism, brings the beauty that comes from
impressions from a fresh pair of eyes. In Wilde’s example, in which the critic is from
another culture and another time than the artist’s, the artist and critic’s different
experiences and knowledge bases mean that the critic’s perspective gives the work
more significance than it was possible for the work to have at the time of its
creation. The critic is the artist now, and an actress such as Sibyl Vane as much a
critic as Wilde is. Dorian, as well as much of the London public, falls under Sibyl’s
spell because she makes Shakespeare vivid and relevant to him. The way in which
she interprets and projects it shows her great personality, and, as Gilbert phrases it,
treats the work of art simply as a starting-point for a new creation. It does
not confine itself—let us at least suppose so for the moment—to discovering
the real intention of the artist and accepting that as final. And in this it is
right, for the meaning of any beautiful created thing is, at least, as much in
the soul of him who looks at it, as it was in his soul who wrought it. Nay, it is
rather the beholder who lends to the beautiful thing its myriad meanings,
and makes it marvellous for us, and sets it in some new relation to the age, so
that it becomes a vital portion of our lives (“The Critic as Artist”, 143-144).

Shakespeare’s plays are beautiful, but Sibyl brings her own genius to them. She is
lovely and naïve and believes in fairytale love. When she loses her talent because
she has experienced romance in real life (88), she shows that it is her former talent,
not simply the beauty of Shakespeare’s script, that makes her audiences fall in love
with her; likewise, she demonstrates a mediocre interpretation of the work, and the shadow it can cast on something beautiful.

Sibyl has great personality before she meets Dorian. She has so little exposure to the outside world that her imagination and her acting are most of what develop her. Her imagination of the outside world shows how little of it she has seen. She spins tales for James, her younger brother, who is about to sail to Australia, that involve him finding the biggest gold nugget ever discovered, and then marrying a beautiful heiress (69-70). The world and human nature do not make it backstage to her, which is why she is so innocent and charming. She is the ideal actress; Gilbert explains, “[I]t is only by intensifying his own personality that the critic can interpret the personality and work of others, and the more strongly this personality enters into the interpretation the more real the interpretation becomes, the more satisfying, the more convincing, and the more true. [...] If you wish to understand others you must intensify your own individualism” (“The Critic as Artist”, 156).

Shut away except for performances, Sibyl’s only adventures are into other characters, and so she enters interpretations enthusiastically. Until she falls in love with Dorian Gray, Sibyl Vane’s interpretations are as real to her as they are to her audience. Wilde discusses Shakespearean actors in “The Critic as Artist”, reaffirming both the importance of the critic's personality development and the subjectivity of interpretation: “People sometimes say that actors give us their own Hamlets, and not Shakespeare’s; and this [...] is a fallacy. [...] In point of fact, there is no such thing as Shakespeare's Hamlet. If Hamlet has something of the definiteness
of a work of art, he has also all the obscurity that belongs to life. There are as many Hamlets as there are melancholies” (“The Critic as Artist”, 157-158). A character in a play is subject to interpretation as a work of art. One cannot enjoy a play if one does not enjoy the way in which a major character such as Hamlet or Juliet is interpreted. Sibyl is the only reason people come to performances in that theater: when Dorian recounts his first experience in the theater to Lord Henry, he says that the orchestra is “dreadful”, Romeo has “a figure like a beer barrel”, and both Mercutio and the scenery are “grotesque” (The Picture of Dorian Gray, 54). The innocence and imagination that Sibyl brings to romantic female roles is genuine, and the audience believes her. They love her, not because she is Shakespeare’s Juliet, but because there is no such thing as Shakespeare’s Juliet, and her Juliet is lovely and inspiring.

Wilde writes a similar sentiment about Beauty earlier in the essay: “Beauty has as many meanings as man has moods. Beauty is the symbol of symbols. Beauty reveals everything, because it expresses nothing.” (“The Critic as Artist”, 145). In interpreting a character, one is employing immense creativity and personality, just as when one is interpreting beauty; no two people will interpret it the same way, and countless interpretations are valuable of their own merit. The impression Beauty has on an individual enhances it and the individual’s beauty. On its own, it is not relevant to the age. A piano piece that no one plays might as well not exist.

High criticism is an expression of one’s soul, and public opinion is society’s attempt to suppress such expression. Wilde detests the public’s criticism because he detests authority: “There are three kinds of despots. There is the despot who
tyrannises over the body. There is the despot who tyrannises over the soul. There is the despot who tyrannises over the soul and body alike. The first is called the Prince. The second is called the Pope. The third is called the People” (“The Soul of Man Under Socialism”, 21). The Prince tells his people that society is going to benefit him, and that they are going to benefit society; he makes people give up their bodies from a young age to do productive work. The Pope commits people to certain thoughts and behaviors, including moral behavior and the obedience that comes with it; the poor’s resignation to the poverty and the public’s resignation to the existence thereof mean that the condition of the poor will most likely not improve. Wilde spent much of his time at Trinity College and at Oxford University struggling between Catholicism, Protestantism, and Aestheticism; his father let him leave Ireland to attend Oxford because he thought that Oxford would keep his son from Catholicism (Richard Ellmann, Oscar Wilde, 34). Young Oscar Wilde visited a Catholic priest and made an appointment to return the following Thursday for confession; he sent the priest lilies instead, politely rejecting any creed over his development as an intellectual and eccentric (Ellmann, 94). He refused to commit his soul to anything except for Beauty, which entails change. The People perpetuate stupidity by letting the Prince and the Pope govern them. Artists such as Wilde do not listen to public opinion, because if they did, they would never produce anything original. The way to produce original work is to look to other art for inspiration and to oneself for beauty. What one produces when one puts oneself onto paper, onto canvas, onstage, or in music is the most important legacy one leaves in one’s
lifetime, and it should be more representative of one’s culture than it is; a culture is a collection of its members’ contributions.

The main characters in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are manifestations of many of the concepts Wilde expounds upon in his critical essays; Life touching and destroying Art, what it means to be outside the proper sphere of Art, the ugliness of reality, the banality and hypocrisy of moralizing people, the danger of putting someone on a pedestal, and the many ways in which conscience means self-denial, among other things. The novel is a work of art as well as a critique. Camille Cauti, Ph.D., notes in the Barnes & Noble Classics introduction to the novel that in the first of three trials that would result in Wilde’s imprisonment, the Marquess of Queensberry’s attorney submitted *Dorian Gray* as a piece of evidence; he was seeking to prove that Wilde was a “posing sodomite” who was corrupting Queensberry’s son, Lord Alfred Douglas (xxxi). Wilde writes about how Nature is uncomfortable and takes away one’s Individualism, and he is at his most popular in society as he writes about how it suppresses Individualism. Ultimately, in his lifetime, his writing is a self-fulfilling prophecy for his life: he wrote that the Individual must reject society and its morals, and then society cast him out for his.
CHAPTER IV
WILDE, THE INDIVIDUAL, FORCED FROM LIVING AS ART INTO LIVING AS AN OUTCAST—WILDE’S PARADIGM SHIFT IN PRISON

“Prison has completely changed me. I counted on it for that” (Wilde to a friend in July 1897, Richard Ellmann’s Oscar Wilde, p.541).

“I wrote when I did not know life, now that I know the meaning of life, I have no more to write. [...] I have found my soul. I was happy in prison because I found my soul” (Wilde to Anna de Brémont, Paris 1900, Ellmann, p.578).

“The only thing that one really knows about human nature is that it changes” (“The Soul of Man Under Socialism”, p.22).

Wilde’s mouthpieces in his essays and his novel—that is, primarily, Lord Henry Wotton, Vivian, and Gilbert—speak in paradoxes, and contradict themselves and each other in the points that they make. One may think of this as a fault detracting from the effectiveness of his argument, but paradoxes and contradictions actually further his argument. Wilde, even before prison, contradicts points he has argued for in each of his works: early in 1895, the year Wilde would be arrested and convicted for indecent behavior with young men, he and his lover, Lord Alfred Douglas, went to Algiers together. When a friend expressed astonishment at seeing Wilde there, Wilde replied, “I am running away from art. I want to worship only the sun. Have you noticed how the sun despises all thought, makes it retreat, take refuge in the shadows. [...] Today all thought is pushed back to Norway and Russia, where the sun never comes. The sun is jealous of art” (Ellmann, 429). The idea of nature being jealous of art supports, not contradicts, ideas Wilde has put forth in the past, but the idea of Wilde running away from art certainly is. Running away from art in search of the sun, given what Wilde writes about it in “The Decay of Lying” (1), is seemingly the equivalent of running away from his Individualism. Inconsistency,
However, is a topic Wilde has addressed in at least two of his essays; inconsistency in one’s actions and choices indicates that one is growing and changing, and this is beautiful. Vivian tells Ernest of the Individual,

> He will realise himself in many forms, and by a thousand different ways, and will ever be curious of new sensations and fresh points of view. Through constant change, and through constant change alone, he will find his true unity. He will not consent to be the slave of his own opinions. For what is mind but motion in the intellectual sphere? The essence of thought, as the essence of life, is growth. You must not be frightened by words, Ernest. What people call insincerity is simply a method by which we can multiply our personalities (“The Critic as Artist”, 191).

And so even though Wilde has written that Nature takes one’s Individualism from one, he followed his inclinations and spent some time away from English high society; the same society that ultimately could not tolerate his and Douglas’ relationship. In “The Decay of Lying”, Vivian speaks favorably of following one’s inclinations, saying, “Who wants to be consistent? The dullard and the doctrinaire, the tedious people who carry out their principles to the bitter end of action, [...] Like Emerson, I write over the door of my library the word ‘Whim’” (“The Decay of Lying”, 1). Inconsistency is another way of intensifying one’s personality, since it is a method of escape from commitment to any creed. Wilde’s style of speaking in paradoxes when expressing his ideology leaves room for inconsistency; thus, expressing himself in paradoxes is another way in which he lives as Art and Beauty. Just like Beauty, paradoxes express nothing, and to understand a paradox, one must project oneself onto it. Paradoxes and exposure to new impressions force the individual to be constantly reflecting on them, and this leads the individual to places, intellectual and artistic, that society has not explored. Perhaps this is why Emerson writes in “Self-Reliance”, the same essay in which he says he would write Whim over
his door (4), he writes, “With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. [...] Speak what you think now in hard words, and tomorrow speak what tomorrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict every thing you said today. [...] Is it so bad, then, to be misunderstood?” (Emerson, 6). A great soul, a great individual, follows one’s inclinations and finds novelty; this is why a great individual is generally misunderstood.

One creed Wilde has refused to give up is that of new Hedonism, which he refers to in *Dorian Gray.* His pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain and vulgarity are the only consistencies in his life before his imprisonment. His ideology makes it inevitable that he will have to explore the realm of pain and sorrow at some point in his life, and his works prefigure this. It is not inevitable that he will end up in prison, but one can only intensify one’s personality and live whimsically so long before one must explore the other side of pleasure. Wilde was certainly considering this idea when he was writing in 1891. Dorian suffers from life-weariness, partially because he is consistently battling to suppress his conscience and partially because he has pursued a life of pleasure exclusively: Henry’s cousin asks Dorian, “And does [Henry’s] philosophy make you happy?” “I have never searched for happiness. Who wants happiness? I have searched for pleasure.” “And found it, Mr. Gray?” “Often. Too often” (202). Dorian is stunted in so many ways, and that is because he will never grow old and ugly, and because he avoids confronting unpleasantness. Henry, Wilde’s mouthpiece, cheerfully expresses his envy and admiration of Dorian (223), but Henry does not know what Dorian has

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6 See the Introduction of this thesis; Wilde first started exploring this creed at Oxford, thanks to his encounters and friendship with Walter Pater.
given up to stay young and beautiful. In the moments before he stabs the portrait, Dorian is thinking, “His beauty had been to him but a mask, his youth but a mockery. What was youth at best? A green, an unripe time—a time of shallow moods and sickly thoughts. Why had he worn its livery? Youth had spoiled him” (*Dorian Gray*, 226). Wilde is thinking this way four years before he goes to jail—that aging brings depth and intensity to personality, and that choosing beauty for its own sake is shallow. If Wilde is Henry, then Dorian is Douglas—Douglas was twenty-seven when Wilde was put in jail (Ellmann, 485).

Wilde also indicated that he was thinking about society’s morality in terms of incarceration before his arrest. In an earlier version of *The Importance of being Earnest*, the play was four acts, and Algernon is taken to “Holloway Prison, (as Wilde himself was to be taken), not for homosexuality, but for running up food bills at the Savoy” (Ellmann, 422). Wilde makes light of society’s values, true to form, but it is clear that he was thinking about what society would and would not tolerate. He told his friend Robert Ross that the philosophy of his play *The Importance of Being Earnest* was “That we should treat all trivial things very seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality” (Ellmann, 422). The possibility of prison was lurking somewhere in Wilde’s consciousness, and the idea was close enough to life that this scene is not in the well-known play. The play premiered on February 14, 1895, the same year as Wilde’s life completely changed (Ellmann, 430). Wilde could see, as much as anyone can see one’s own path, where his quest for individuality was taking him.

Wilde wrote when he was in Reading Prison:
I don’t regret for a single moment having lived for pleasure. I did it to the full, as one should do everything that one does. There was no pleasure I did not experience. I threw the pearl of my soul into a cup of wine. I went down the primrose path to the sound of flutes. I lived on honeycomb. But to have continued the same life would have been wrong because it would have been limiting. I had to pass on. The other half of the garden had its secrets for me also. Of course all this is foreshadowed and prefigured in my books. Some of it is in THE HAPPY PRINCE, some of it in THE YOUNG KING, notably in the passage where the bishop says to the kneeling boy, ‘Is not He who made misery wiser than thou art?’ a phrase which when I wrote it seemed to me little more than a phrase; a great deal of it is hidden away in the note of doom that like a purple thread runs through the texture of DORIAN GRAY; in THE CRITIC AS ARTIST it is set forth in many colours; in THE SOUL OF MAN it is written down, and in letters too easy to read; it is one of the refrains whose recurring MOTIFS make SALOME so like a piece of music and bind it together as a ballad; in the prose poem of the man who from the bronze of the image of the 'Pleasure that liveth for a moment' has to make the image of the 'Sorrow that abideth for ever' it is incarnate. It could not have been otherwise. At every single moment of one's life one is what one is going to be no less than what one has been. Art is a symbol, because man is a symbol (“De Profundis”, 9).

He knew that he had to “pass on” to a more well-rounded approach to living; his life was one of extremes, possibly because he did not do so. The last sentence in the above passage is a romantic sentiment, but in his case, it is apt. Life is untidy and unpredictable, but many great individuals find themselves in prison because ideas are dangerous (“The Critic as Artist”, 215). He also stood against society for so long; Queensberry, Douglas’ father, both represented what Wilde stood against, and the society that attacked Wilde’s morals.

Society put Wilde’s morals on trial, emphasizing the paradox that Wilde the Individual could not live within or without society. Just before Ellmann chronicles Wilde’s fall from the graces of high society, he says, “Wilde had always held that the true ‘beasts’ were not those who expressed their desires, but those who tried to suppress other people’s. The society whose hypocrisies he had anatomized now
turned them against him. Victorianism was ready to pounce” (Ellmann, 431). Wilde joined the ranks of men such as Socrates and Christ, as symbols for the archetype of Man versus Society. He maintained his principles, such as they were, given his disparagement of the concept, throughout his trial: when the prosecutor, Edward Carson, suggested that *Dorian Gray* was “perverted,” Wilde replied, “That could only be to brutes and illiterates. The views of Philistines on art are incalculably stupid” (Ellmann, 449). When he was defending himself against personal attack, he acted as a strong individual, confident in how he had expressed himself for years in his works.

The court, however, was not attacking Wilde’s works; rather, they were attempting to use works such as *Dorian Gray* to attack Wilde’s actions, which they saw as an expression of his morals. They concerned themselves with his sexual partners, preferences, and what they perceived to be his corruption of younger men. They questioned hotel maids, male prostitutes, and any “witnesses” to homosexual acts. Men had attempted to blackmail Wilde with love letters from him to Douglas that they had acquired, and some of these men testified, as well. Sir John Bridge, the magistrate at Holloway Prison, had the power to grant leniency to Wilde during his stay, and he listened to testimony at Wilde’s hearings; “The more Sir John Bridge heard of this testimony, the more he bristled, and when asked again for bail he said that ‘no worse crime than this’ existed, and bail could not be allowed.” (Ellmann, 460). Wilde defended himself eloquently. On April 26, the first day of Wilde’s first trial as a defendant, the prosecutor, Lockwood, trying to besmirch Wilde’s character
through poetry, asked about a line in one of Douglas’ poems, the “Love that dare not speak its name.” Wilde, to great applause from the court, replied:

The ‘Love that dare not speak its name’ in this century is such a great affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan, such as Plato made the very basis of his philosophy, and such as you find in the sonnets of Michelangelo and Shakespeare. It is that deep, spiritual affection that is as pure as it is perfect. It dictates and pervades great works of art like those of Shakespeare and Michelangelo, and those two letters of mine, such as they are. It is in this century misunderstood, so much misunderstood that it may be described as the ‘Love that dare not speak its name,’ and on account of it I am placed where I am now. It is beautiful, it is fine, it is the noblest form of affection. There is nothing unnatural about it. It is intellectual, and it repeatedly exists between an elder and a younger man, where the elder has intellect, and the younger man has all the joy, hope and glamour of life before him. That it should be so the world does not understand. The world mocks at it and sometimes puts one in the pillory for it (Ellmann, 463).

Lockwood could not get Wilde convicted as long as he attacked Wilde’s expressions of love rather than the homosexual acts themselves. As long as Wilde could speak about the purity and beauty of romance, society could not defeat him. He was still very popular as an artist, and he had long ago separated society and Beauty; those who loved Beauty loved him. When Wilde was in Reading and pleading for early release in a letter, he wrote that he “had been suffering from sexual madness, but hoped that this might be considered a disease for cure rather than a crime for punishment” (Ellmann, 503). Society briefly convinced him that homosexuality was a disease, and made him question himself; in this way, society did briefly suppress his individuality.

It is difficult to state with confidence that Wilde sacrificed himself so that Douglas would not suffer persecution. Wilde did not win the libel case against Queensberry, which is the main reason he quickly fell from prosecutor to defendant.
Douglas pressured Wilde consistently to continue prosecuting his father. Ellmann writes, “Although Frank Harris and other friends urged Wilde to drop the case, Wilde was constantly being urged by Douglas not to play the coward. ‘I can’t, I can’t,’ he told Harris, ‘you only distress me by predicting disaster.’ […] That he accepted the idea of being a martyr may be true, but must be reconciled with his obvious preference for not being one. He was rushed along, by solicitor, lover, barrister, into a situation from which there could be no retreat except voluntary exile, something he detested” (444). By prosecuting Queensberry, Wilde was defending both himself and Douglas from society’s attacks on homosexuality. After Queensberry publicly tried to defend himself from Wilde by calling him a “posing sodomite”, Wilde was arrested; the courts seemed to think it was for the public good to prove that Wilde was one. Queensberry took great pains to separate the public’s conception of his son from theirs of Wilde.

Douglas had a grudge against his father, Queensberry did not accept Douglas’ lifestyle, and Wilde was caught between them. After the first trial, Wilde wrote to the editor of the Evening News, “It would have been impossible for me to have proved my case without putting Lord Alfred Douglas in the witness-box against his father. Lord Alfred Douglas was extremely anxious to go into the box, but I would not let him do so. Rather than put him in so painful a position I determined to retire from the case, and to bear on my own shoulders whatever ignominy and shame might result from my prosecuting Lord Queensberry” (Ellmann, 455). It seems likely that Wilde saved Douglas from sharing his fate, and that Wilde acted to do so. It is impossible to determine if Wilde would have saved himself by letting Douglas
testify against his father, but he was willing to sacrifice his only chance at winning the libel suit. He knew what the implications of his losing the suit were, as he makes clear in his letter to the editor. He was giving up one aspect of his concept of Individualism, his idea of and feelings about self-denial, in favor of another: defending someone he loved. Ellmann writes, “Wilde’s fictitious heroes generally manage to break the law without having serious brushes with the police. […] Wilde had some feeling that he had allowed himself (in spite of his strictures on self-sacrifice) to be punished in place of Lord Alfred Douglas, and certainly he had taken the blame for several of Douglas’ erotic encounters” (Ellmann, 481). He took responsibility—and blame—for his and Douglas’ actions, so that only one of them would suffer.

In suffering after his arrest and conviction, Wilde learned a great deal about a realm he had been deliberately avoiding for much of his life: he wrote often about how suffering and sympathizing with suffering suppresses Individualism. In this break from his past, he gained a new perspective on pity and its relationship to expressing oneself as an individual. In Dorian Gray, Wilde’s feelings on pity are best summarized with Dorian’s thought, “One’s days were too brief to take the burden of another’s errors on one’s shoulders. Each man lived his own life, and paid his own price for living it” (194). Every individual takes responsibility for one’s own actions, and purposely blinds oneself to others’ suffering; the Wilde writing this passage does not have any idea what it feels like to suffer alone and without sympathy. In “The Soul of Man Under Socialism”, he writes, “The things people say of a man do not alter a man. He is what he is. Public opinion is of no value whatsoever. […] After
all, even in prison, a man can be quite free. His soul can be free. His personality can be untroubled. He can be at peace” (8). The individual should not care what the public says about one, since he is in prison for standing against something in which the public blindly believes.

Individualism does not entail only sympathizing with suffering, but it also does not entail having friends who leave one as soon as one is suffering. With one small gesture, Robert Ross showed a disgraced Wilde the value of both actions and of pity: Wilde writes,

When I was brought down from my prison to the Court of Bankruptcy, between two policemen, - waited in the long dreary corridor that, before the whole crowd, whom an action so sweet and simple hushed into silence, he might gravely raise his hat to me, as, handcuffed and with bowed head, I passed him by. Men have gone to heaven for smaller things than that. It was in this spirit, and with this mode of love, that the saints knelt down to wash the feet of the poor, or stooped to kiss the leper on the cheek. I have never said one single word to him about what he did. I do not know to the present moment whether he is aware that I was even conscious of his action. It is not a thing for which one can render formal thanks in formal words. I store it in the treasure-house of my heart. [...] When wisdom has been profitless to me, philosophy barren, and the proverbs and phrases of those who have sought to give me consolation as dust and ashes in my mouth, the memory of that little, lovely, silent act of love has unsealed for me all the wells of pity: made the desert blossom like a rose, and brought me out of the bitterness of lonely exile into harmony with the wounded, broken, and great heart of the world (“De Profundis”, 2).

Robert Ross, with a small action, showed Wilde that people still loved him for who he was, and thus gave Wilde his individuality back. The public had disowned him, as had many of his friends, and he lost faith in himself. When one is suffering, action, not Thought, alleviates one; Thought in pain when one has only one’s pain to contemplate only exacerbates suffering. In terms of pleasure and pain, Wilde was
living in one extreme, and then the other, and this small act was somewhere in
between.

Ellmann writes of a great change in Wilde’s views on pity, and the following
anecdote epitomizes the change: In the last few days before his release from
Reading, three small children were imprisoned for snaring some rabbits and not
being able to pay their fine. “Wilde saw them as they were waiting to be assigned to
cells. He knew only too well the terror they were feeling, and the hunger they would
feel. He wrote to [the warder] on 17 May with something like desperation: ‘Please
find out for me [...] the names of the children who are in for the rabbits, and the
amount of the fine. [...] I must get them out”’ (Ellmann, 523). By his last few days in
prison, he had learned that there was a difference between pity and sacrificing
oneself. He had not become a better person or a worse person, but had simply
changed from being exposed to fresh impressions. He saw beauty in Life and in
actions where he had thought there was only vulgarity and banality; the most
beautiful thing to him in that moment was saving those children from suffering a
punishment far worse than their crime. He wanted to save them from a system that
society had created.

His views on society, if they changed at all, changed for the worse. After his
release from prison, he was a raw wound, and public opinion was salt. Vincent
O’Sullivan, a friend of Wilde’s, visited him in Naples in late 1897. As they were
sitting in a restaurant, some people noisily pointed out Wilde to their companions.
“‘He seemed to strangle,’ O’Sullivan remembered, ‘and then said in a thick voice, ‘Let
us go.’ They went some way in silence; then a beggar came up. Wilde gave him
money, and murmured in English, ‘You wretched man, why do you beg when pity is dead?’” (Ellmann, 557). When he went to prison, he interacted with the poor, an entire sector of society he had spent his life observing from a distance. He had likely never spoken more than a few words to a beggar before his two years spent in close quarters with people such as the three children who stole for food. His conception of the poor, society, and the individual was much more sharply defined:

The poor are wise, more charitable, more kind, more sensitive than we are. In their eyes prison is a tragedy in a man’s life, a misfortune, a casualty, something that calls for sympathy in others. They speak of one who is in prison as of one who is ‘in trouble’ simply. It is the phrase they always use, and the expression has the perfect wisdom of love in it. With people of our own rank it is different. With us, prison makes a man a pariah (“De Profundis”, 2).

He gave money to the beggar in Italy, something he never would have done before prison. In “The Soul of Man”, he places society and the individual at odds with each other, and writes idealistically about a society that was a community of individuals; he did not understand that charity does not suppress one’s individuality, but rather, allows one who cannot afford it to eat for another day. In the poor, there is community; it is not just in suffering, but also in mutual support. One can express oneself very effectively through more than Art: by showing and demonstrating kindness to others.

Wilde rarely writes about family, except to mock the concept of marriage, something he does in The Picture of Dorian Gray as well as The Importance of being Earnest. As a man with children, he does not once mention Individualism in terms of family until about the time in his life when he is writing “De Profundis”. While in Reading Prison, in May 1896, Wilde wrote to Ross, “In case I die here, you will
destroy [my love letters to Douglas]. In case I survive I will destroy them myself. They must not be in existence. The thought that they are in his hands is horrible to me, and though my unfortunate children will never of course bear my name, still the know whose sons they are and I must try and shield them from the possibility of any further revolting disclosure or scandal” (Ellmann, 501). Actions are powerful, and Wilde had not considered the power of his. He had thought little outside of himself, which is why he had not extensively interacted with the poor previously, and why he was traveling so frequently with Douglas while his wife and two children grew as a family without him. He writes in his long reflection:

I grew careless of the lives of others. I took pleasure where it pleased me, and passed on. I forgot that every little action of the common day makes or unmakes character, and that therefore what one has done in the secret chamber one has some day to cry aloud on the housetop. I ceased to be lord over myself. I was no longer the captain of my soul, and did not know it. I allowed pleasure to dominate me. I ended in horrible disgrace. There is only one thing for me now, absolute humility (“De Profundis”, 3).

Wilde did not become a religious man in prison, but his relationship with Christ as an individual did strengthen. Christ became to him the symbol of the ideal romantic individual. He writes,

Nor is it merely that we can discern in Christ that close union of personality with perfection which forms the real distinction between the classical and romantic movement in life, but the very basis of his nature was the same as that of the nature of the artist - an intense and flamelike imagination. He realised in the entire sphere of human relations that imaginative sympathy which in the sphere of Art is the sole secret of creation. He understood the leprosy of the leper, the darkness of the blind, the fierce misery of those who live for pleasure, the strange poverty of the rich. Some one wrote to me in trouble, 'When you are not on your pedestal you are not interesting.' How remote was the writer from what Matthew Arnold calls 'the Secret of Jesus.' Either would have taught him that whatever happens to another happens to oneself (“De Profundis”, 9).

When he mentions to “some one”, he is referring to Douglas, who wrote him a letter
telling him this on Wilde’s fortieth birthday (Ellmann, 427). This hurt him enough to remember the comment several years later. In mentioning it next to his thoughts about Christ, Wilde is saying that Douglas lacks imagination; in giving Christ individuality, Wilde is taking it from Douglas. He understood Christ to achieve and express his Individualism through love, which encompasses both “flamelike imagination” and “imaginative sympathy.” Wilde lived much of his life like a character in one of his works, and thus understood much about Art; Christ became his model for being an Individual that came from Life and so sees Beauty in suffering, sympathy, Art, companionship, and forgiveness. Christ is an enduring concept and identity thousands of years after his lifetime because he became the mouthpiece for everyone; everyone suffers. Wilde reflects, “He saw that love was the first secret of the world for which the wise men had been looking, and that it was only through love that one could approach either the heart of the leper or the feet of God. And above all, Christ is the most supreme of individualists. Humility, like the artistic acceptance of all experiences, is merely a mode of manifestation. It is man’s soul that Christ is always looking for” (“De Profundis”, 11). Wilde saw that Christ gave others their Individuality by loving them and speaking for those who would not otherwise be heard. Wilde wrote in “The Soul of Man Under Individualism” that the poor could not express themselves as individuals because they were doing the work of “beasts of burden” and thus suffering and being suppressed as individuals (2-3); it is precisely for that reason that Christ can help them express themselves.

Three weeks before Wilde died, he said to a correspondent at the Daily
“Much of my moral obliquity is due to the fact that my father would not allow me to become a Catholic. The artistic side of the Church and the fragrance of its teaching would have cured my degeneracies. I intend to be received before long” (Ellmann, 583). He definitely favored Catholicism over the Church of England, for after his release from prison, he said, “The Catholic Church is for saints and sinners alone. For respectable people the Anglican Church will do” (ibid). This makes sense, since the Church of England keeps church and state much more intertwined, and Wilde increasingly wanted nothing to do with the “state” side of England. A priest baptized Wilde as a Catholic when Wilde was on his deathbed (Ellmann, 584).

By learning that Individualism does not mean a complete avoidance of pain, Wilde discovered new means of intensifying his personality, new forms of self-expression, and who his friends truly were. He was popular in his time as an artist, and he is still relevant now, because Beauty is a crucial aspect of Individualism. What he learned in prison is that “[T]he artistic life is simply self-development. Humility in the artist is his frank acceptance of all experiences, just as love in the artist is simply the sense of beauty that reveals to the world its body and its soul” (“De Profundis”, 9). To look away from one’s suffering is to deny oneself, and to look away from pain and sadness is, as Dorian experiences, to grow numb to pleasure and happiness. He grew as an artist and as a man. From prison, he writes with great optimism:

There is before me so much to do, that I would regard it as a terrible tragedy if I died before I was allowed to complete at any rate a little of it. I see new developments in art and life, each one of which is a fresh mode of perfection. I long to live so that I can explore what is no less than a new world to me. Do you want to know what this new world is? I think you can guess what it is. It is the world in which I have been living (“De Profundis”, 6).
Works Cited


