

Study of Male Characters in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* Based on Horney's Conflict Theory

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Abstract: In the late Victorian era, due to the bourgeoisie's profit-oriented material supremacy and the collapse of traditional religious value system, Wilde advocates aestheticism in order to find the meaning of life. At the same time, Wilde advocates a new hedonism in order to fit in with the crowd, expecting the world to liberate itself and to find the enjoyment of beauty. But in the process, Wilde's heart is torn between two sides and his interpersonal relationships are disrupted. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, he creates three characters associated with him. And these three characters are also endowed with Wilde's conflict. They make all kinds of attempts to resolve the conflict of inner opposition. By analyzing the inner conflicts of the three characters and their interpersonal relationships based on Horney's conflict theory, this paper discusses the complexity of Wilde's inner heart as well.

Keywords: *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde, Horney, conflicts, attempts at solution.

1. Introduction

The Picture of Dorian Gray (1890) by Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) was published in the late Victorian era. As the most powerful country in the world at that time, Britain has enjoyed the success of being the first country to complete the Industrial Revolution through which its developed manufacturing industry was called the "world's factory." However, it was in this era that the British tradition was extremely rigid and people were expected to conform to strict social behavior in their speech and behavior. A little deviation from the norm would be regarded as deviant. Even the principles of art and literature were abandoned and social norms had to be adhered to. With the development of capitalism, the gap between rich and poor was widened. The mainstream social class, the middle class, fell into materialistic worship, leading to the consequences of an extreme lack of spiritual life. In this period, people seemed to advocate moral cultivation, rationality and restraint, like a gentleman society, but in fact, people's private lives were chaotic and filthy.

It was in this climate that Wilde was determined to break this shackles as his lifelong ambition. He advocated the idea of aestheticism and did not want art to be polluted by a corrupt society; instead, art should go on to guide life. However, this ambition was impractical. At the same time, Wilde was influenced by his upbringing as well as his environment, and he himself pursued a hedonistic style of action. The two collided with each other, leading to a collision of Wilde's inner conflicts and the disruption of his interpersonal relationships. This is revealed fully in Wilde's only novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which is centered around the experiences of the three main male characters. This paper will analyze the life experiences of them, concerning their inner conflicts and the manifestations of their disordered interpersonal relationships. In this way, this paper will reveal Wilde's own inner conflicts as well as his complicated interpersonal relationships and attitudes.

2. Literature Review

Since the publication of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in 1891, there has been controversy over the ethics of the book. Critics have attacked in official newspapers that the book is "a poisonous book, full of the stench and femininity of moral and spiritual depravity" (Mason, 1908, pp. 12, 41). Wilde is later charged with sodomy by the father of Lord Alfred Douglas that Wilde's gay man. The book is regarded as a strong evidence of Wilde's misconduct. But there are a few people who think "viewed merely as a romance, it is from the opening paragraph down to the tragic and ghastly climax, full of strong and sustained interest; as a study in psychology it is phenomenal; judged even purely as a piece of literary workmanship it is one of the most brilliant and remarkable productions of the year" (1908, p. 10, 41). It is not until more than 50 years after Wilde's death that the evaluation of Wilde in the British literary circle gradually becomes objective.

Wilde died in France in 1900 after a long illness, but his death did not put him out of sight. In the first half of the twentieth century, a number of biographies of Wilde's life appears. Robert Ross, a close friend of Wilde's, publishes *De Profundis*, a long letter written by Wilde to Douglas from prison, in the *St James's Gazette* in 1905, and for the next ten years or so he compiles and publishes a number of works on him. Douglas published *Oscar Wilde and Myself* in 1914, his autobiography in 1929, *Without Apology* in 1938, and *Oscar Wilde: Summing Up* in 1940. Robert H. Sherard and Frank Harris also publishes books on Wilde. In the second half of the twentieth century, studies of Wilde turned to the works themselves and begin to emphasize the transcendent and modern artistic qualities of his art theory. In 1951, the playwright and theatre critic St. John Ervine publishes *Oscar Wilde: A Present Time Appraisal*, which brings a popular perspective to the work. In the meantime, Richard Ellmann's *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde* confirms his literary achievement. From the end of the twentieth century to the present, studies of Wilde have tended

to diversify. Psychology, consumerism, queer culture, feminism and other perspectives have entered the field of study. For instance, Wilde's multiple appeals revealed in the male characters have been discussed in detail (Lian & Zhong, 2021). And some general introductions in book-length to the novel itself also appeared (Baldwin, 2000).

3. Overview of Horney's Conflict Theory

3.1. Brief Introduction to Conflict Theory

According to Karen Horney (1885-1952), conflict stems from relationships. Relationships determine an individual's qualities, goals, and values. This, in turn, acts on relationships with others. Disruptions in relationships can lead to neurosis. Neurosis is a psychological disorder caused by fears, by defenses against these fears, by efforts to find compromise in order to ease internal conflicts. This psychological disorder deviates from a common pattern in the same culture. There are four types of attempts to resolve the conflict. Firstly, to move toward people or move against people, that is, suppressing one side of the conflict and fostering the opposing side as the dominant one. Secondly, to move away from people, that is, being withdrawn and keeping emotional distance from people to avoid triggering the conflict. Thirdly, to create the idealized image, that is, whitewashing conflicting parts so that they appear to be free of conflict. Fourthly, externalization, where inner activities are revealed outside the self, which represents a more severe split. The first two are the basic mindset of the neurotic towards others, the latter two are aimed at escaping from the true self, the same in that they are both designed to deal with conflict. All four attempts are present in varying degrees within all patients and significantly alter the personality of the patients.

The root of neurotic conflicts stem from the fact that the patient's desires are completely cut off and he loses the ability to pursue any desire with his whole being. The neurotic conflicts have three characteristics. First, the patient is unable to harmonize his psyche with his behavior. When his weaknesses are stimulated to produce reactions such as fear and anger, he often loses the ability to determine the direction of his behavior on his own, and even these feelings may be repressed. Second, the whole conflict process is unconscious. The conflicting tendencies at work in the conflict process are deeply repressed. Sometimes the conflict comes to the surface, i.e., he can experience it consciously, but the conflict that actually manifests has been distorted or modified and still tears him apart. Third, both sides of the tit-for-tat in the conflict are compulsive. The neurotic in conflict is not free to choose, he is driven by compulsive forces in opposite directions, but equally powerful. He is unable to shed any of the needs that result from his inner constrictions, but none of these needs represent what he himself truly lacks or seeks.

3.2. Attempts at Solution to Conflicts

3.2.1. Moving toward People

The compliant type exhibits a variety of traits that go with moving toward people. At its core is the desire for intimate relationships, arising from the desire to "belong." The compliant type has three characteristics, one of which is that, due to his own compulsive needs, he has an inner sense of helplessness that demands emotional connection and approval from others, and a special need for "partners" who

are expected to fulfill all his expectations in life. At the same time, he will unconditionally meet what he sees as the expectations of others, and will submit to them. Second, he has a tendency to be improperly belittle himself. The patient takes for granted that he overestimates everyone and underestimates himself. Third, he tends to unconsciously self-evaluate by what others say about him. His self-esteem ebbs and flows with the favorable and unfavorable opinions of outsiders.

However, under the surface of various submissiveness as well as dependence, the compliant type has a variety of aggressive tendencies that are severely repressed. In contrast to the superficial excess of concern, he is indifferent to others, contemptuous of them, has an unconscious tendency to attach to them and use them, a desire to control and manipulate them, and always wants to win or succeed in revenge. But the perception and expression of hostility threatens his need to like others and to be liked, destroying the pseudo-unity he has deliberately created. The stronger the destructive desire of the aggressive tendency, the more urgent the need for him to reject it, the more the tendency to obey and please will be strengthened, and the more the conflict will be accentuated.

3.2.2. Moving against People

The aggressive type shows a variety of traits that go with moving against people. His need stems from his fearful belief that the whole world is a colosseum, with a Darwinian understanding that the strong destroy the weak and the fittest survive. The aggressive type takes for granted that everyone is hostile at heart and refuses to acknowledge that this is not the case. His attitude is sometimes obvious, but more often it is hidden under a mask of good manners, fairness in his stance, and positive cooperation in the service of aggressive goals. Within him, the need to use others, to outsmart them, and to serve his own purposes is often very strong. His primary need is to control others. Besides, he craves prominence, success, privilege, or any kind of recognition.

The aggressive type is fully committed to being a good fighter. He fears defeat and is undeniably eager to win. He is always defending his image as the most powerful, shrewd and sought-after person, and considers himself strong, honest and realistic. By his own standards, his self-evaluation is very critical, because in his view ruthlessness is strength, indifference to the feelings of others is honesty, and ruthless pursuit of his goals is reality. His attitude toward honesty stems in part from his ability to expose the hypocrisy of the present generation. The aggressive type looks like a subtle and unscrupulous person. But in reality, he has no less internal rules and regulations than the compliant type.

3.2.3. Moving away from People

The detached type represents a variety of traits that go with moving away from people. Moving away from people can be divided into being detached from others as well as detached from oneself. Detachment from others is defined as being the need to live alone to avoid others. He is alone because he avoids being in tension with others due to fear. And he loses the ability to enjoy constructive solitude. Detachment from himself means that he observes himself with a certain objective interest in a bystander attitude. In this type, there is a tendency to repress all feelings, or even to deny the existence of these feelings. His inner need to maintain emotional distance from others is the key to everything. All the needs and qualities he has developed revolve around the need for detachment, valuing the need for self-sufficiency and the need for privacy. Both self-sufficiency and privacy serve

their primary need for complete independence.

He resents adherence to accepted norms of behavior or traditional value systems, outwardly obeying to avoid friction, but insisting on rejecting all conventional norms and standards. His need for superiority has some specific features. First, he is averse to competition and believes that because he is worth so much that he should be recognized without having to work hard. Second, he feels unique. But if the loner's inner sense of superiority is temporarily broken, whether by a specific failure or a growing internal conflict, he can't stand being alone and frantically seeks affection and protection from others.

3.2.4. Creating the Idealized Image

The idealized image is an image created by the neurotic patient who holds the belief that he is this way, or that he could or should be this way himself at that time. This image is derived from an extremely realistic internal need, but it deviates to a large extent from reality. He needs no affirmation from others for the qualities he is sure he possesses, but he is extremely sensitive if unrealistic claims are questioned. The idealized image has five functions. First, it replaces the confidence and pride of reality. Second, it forces the patient to overcome others. Third, it replaces the true ideal. Fourth, it has a defensive function that denies the existence of conflict. Fifth, it represents a creation with an artistic flavor in which the opposites appear to have been reconciled or are somehow no longer seen as conflicts by the individual patient.

3.2.5. Other Attempts

Another attempt is externalization, which is to experience inner mental activity as if it were an outer experience and to assume that those external factors are responsible for the difficulties they face. Externalization means abandoning the whole self. One can seek refuge from the basic inner conflict in the idealized image, but when the divergence between the real self and the idealized self becomes so large that the resulting tension becomes unbearable for the patient, he can no longer seek relief from the inner world. The only way out is to escape from the ego and to stay out of the situation forever.

In addition, other less common strategies include: blind tension, whose main effect is to suppress all inner doubts; rigid self-control, which relies entirely on willpower to clench the fragmented personalities together; and cynicism, which doubts all values and thus eliminates all conflicts about the ideal image.

4. Analysis the Male Characters in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* Based on Horney's Conflict Theory

4.1. Basil Hallward's Inner Conflicts and His Attempts at Solution to Them

Basil is a practitioner of the basic principles of aestheticism, and as a painter, he holds the beliefs that he should abandon worldly life to create beautiful works of art. However, his art is integrated into life. On the one hand, he sticks to seek fame among the upper classes, and on the other hand, his artworks are imbued with personal feelings. Just as he says himself, "I did not want any external influence in my life...how independent I am by nature" (Wilde, 2018, p. 7. Hereafter only the page number of this book referred to in parenthetical citations). Basil is an artist with a sense of superiority. He

thinks he is extraordinary, and treats vulgar people with disdain. Therefore, Basil turns to a tendency to be move away from people. This is the reason why he suddenly disappears from the public eye, not informing others of his whereabouts in order to spare them the bother. He does not want to blend in with the crowd, but he is obsessed with fame and wealth, which contradicts his alienated personality. Although Basil is ashamed of the powerful behind his back, he puts on a mask of propriety to deal with them in order to gain recognition and success, "I could not get rid of her. She brought me up to royalties, and people with stars and garters... I believe some picture of mine had made great success at the time...standard of immortality" (p. 7).

Basil also possesses the characteristic of moving toward people. As Basil says, "You became to me the visible incarnation of that unseen ideal whose memory haunts us artists like an exquisite dream. I worshipped you" (p. 124). Basil expects that Gray can satisfy his emotional needs, and he hopes that Gray's only best friend is him. But when Gray is tempted by Lord Henry to start looking for a new life, Basil is disillusioned because the Gray who is simply his own model no longer exists. Beyond that, however, is Basil's unconscious control, his desire for Gray to remain innocent forever, as a source of inspiration for his art. But this compulsive need to exploit Gray contradicts Basil's need to love Gray and his desire for Gray to be close to him as well. He accuses Gray of being indifferent to Sybil's death and questions those others' accusations. But eventually, Basil becomes ingratiated with Gray, forgiving him again and again. Even when he learns that Gray has killed others, taken drugs, and become corrupt, he thinks "it is never too late" (p. 172).

4.2. Henry Wharton's Inner Conflicts and His Attempts at Solution to Them

Lord Henry's words and actions jump out of the shackles of the society and culture of his time. He is a debauchee, but also a gentleman. He spreads "poisonous" speech, but does not do anything harmful. Lord Henry is typically the aggressive type to human dominance. In Lord Henry's case, the basic anxiety is clearly displayed, "I consider that for any man of culture to accept the standard of his age is a form of the grossest immorality" (p. 84). He considers the age immoral and hypocritical. He manages to fight against this hostile world. Everything he does is from his ego, as Lord Henry's self-evaluation "I choose my friends for their good looks, my acquaintances for their good characters, and my enemies for their good intellects" (p. 9). All his words and actions are based on what is good for him. Lord Henry, unlike the men of his time, is bold enough to speak out of the box, seemingly without inhibitions or shackles. He considers himself honest because he pierces the hypocrisy of the people around him. Lord Henry has a deep sense of reality, and he holds a realism that is consistent with his need to confront a hostile world. For example, Lord Henry satirizes society: "Each class will preach the importance of those virtues which it is not necessary to practice in their own lives. The rich will talk of the value of thrift, and the idle will talk at length of the dignity of labor" (p. 14); "We think that we are generous because we credit our neighbour with the possession of those virtues that are likely to be a benefit to us. We praise..." (p. 80). He does everything he can to compel Gray to squander the years of his youth and indulge in sensual pleasures, and not to bother with the false ideals of the age. Behind his seemingly dashing fight against the corrupting rules and

regulations of this society and manipulating Gray, is insecurity.

At the same time, Lord Henry possesses the characteristics of moving toward people and moving away from people. Lord Henry rejects true sympathy and friendliness, and he often struggles with his tenderness, as he says, "I can sympathize with everything except suffering... It is too ugly, too horrible, too distressing" (p. 42). In fact, he is sympathetic to suffering, but this emotion of pity implies the need for a submissive personality. And for Lord Henry, his greatest need is to push it all away, so not only does he not sympathize with suffering, but he also claims to sympathize with joy. Lord Henry does not have an intimate relationship with others, whether they are lovers, relatives, or friends. He needs to maintain an emotional distance from others. Henry observes himself with an objective interest, he understands his own desires and indulges himself in them.

4.3. Dorian Gray's Inner Conflicts and His Attempts at Solution to Them

Compared to the other two characters, Gray is the only one whose personality changes. He changes from a simple and headstrong young man into a selfish and hypocritical executioner. Gray's downfall is not simply the result of Lord Henry's manipulation, but also of his greed for beauty. He wants to manipulate his appearance. His desire for eternal youth, a happy life, the enjoyment of beauty, stood against his fear that the portrait would be discovered at any moment. He uses his appearance to create a perfect character. He is always maintaining his image in high society, and he makes others think of him as a man who "make themselves perfect by the worship of beauty," combining "a type that was to combine something of the real culture of the scholar with all the grace and distinction and perfect manner of a citizen of the world." He regards himself an innovator, wanting to teach people "some new scheme of life that would have its reasoned philosophy and its ordered principles, and find in the spiritualizing of the senses its highest realization" (p. 142). Behind this idealized image, there is his tendency to control others. He believes that he is a savior who holds that "a new Hedonism that was to recreate life and to save it from that harsh uncomely puritanism that is having" (p. 142). He looks down from above on the people of his time, whom he considers to be too hypocritical and in need of his salvation. He wants to teach them to indulge in sensual pleasures and to feel beauty. But the existence of the portrait shatters the idealized image he has created for himself, and he is in a constant state of fear. He is afraid of exposure, and the fear of having his idealized image punctured follows him to the point of personality fragmentation.

In the early part of the novel, Lord Henry has the greatest influence on Gray, and in the later part is a Yellow Book. He rejects these sinful acts because he sees himself as a savior. But he could not control himself to indulge in those sinful things which could give him a brief moment of pleasure. And after that, there is endless panic. Gray walks a fine line between a life of luxury and ease and a life of depravity and adventure. He is sometimes addicted to perfume, sometimes to music, sometimes to jewelry, and he uses these fantasy objects to allow him to escape for a while from the fear that sometimes borders on the unbearable. But he could no longer simply pursue the happy life he longs for. He has to indulge himself in a monotonous, futile debauchery. These fears also

threaten Gray's aestheticism. He used to hate ugliness, and now he mixes it with ugliness. He finds his true self despicable, and his feelings of inferiority turn him to attack others. He laughs at the eerie shadow on the canvas that has to suffer for him and accuses the portrait of forcing him to degenerate. He indulges in his own sins, imagining himself to be a mythical, historically immoral figure. And in reality, he hates Basil, who paints his portrait, and kills him with his own hands. Even though killing Basil with his own hands brings him a strange pleasure, his inner self despise becomes more serious to the point of despair.

4.4. Oscar Wilde's Inner Conflicts

Wilde himself is a very contradictory person, and the epitome of his interpersonal disorder can be seen in several of his paradoxes. Firstly, Wilde has a conflict in his identity. Although the Wilde family has served the British King, both his parents are staunch supporters of the Irish independence movement against British colonial rule. The Irish are lowly and barbaric in the eyes of the English. In such circumstances, Wilde makes it clear more than once that he is Irish and not English. But again, in an interview in America, he states that he wants Ireland to be free rather than the disintegration of the Empire.

Secondly, Wilde has a conflict in religious affiliation. Religion is the foundation and the basis of life for civilization in the Western world. Christianity is one of the spiritual cores of Western civilization, and in Wilde's work there is both the promotion of Christian doctrine and the desecration of it. His family is Protestant, but Wilde's Greek cultural influences causes him to vacillate between Protestantism and Catholicism.

Thirdly, Wilde has a conflict in his sexual orientation. Wilde is a bisexual. Wilde falls in love with his wife at first sight, and then marry with her and has two children. But Wilde soon loses interest in his wife because she has lost her figure due to childbirth. And that's when Alfred Douglas' handsome appearance attracts Wilde. At a time when the word homosexual does not exist and the relationship is referred to as sodomy, Wilde remains committed to his relationship with Douglas. After Wilde is imprisoned for sodomy, he accuses Douglas of being ignorant, short-tempered, and unthrifty, believing that there was a complete lack of artistic creativity with Douglas, in *De Profundis*. But he still chooses to stay with Douglas after his release from prison.

Lastly, he also has contradictions in the theory of aestheticism that he advocates. The highly developed capitalist economy in the 19th century brings not only great economic prosperity, but also social corruption. The vulgar values of bourgeois mercenary and the collapse of the traditional religious value system caused by the decline of Western Christianity make people with vision think about using aestheticism to make people's existence meaningful. Wilde becomes one of them. He is deeply influenced by German Romanticism and ancient Greek culture. Wilde does not agree with artistic imitation that literary works are completely determined by the background and spirit of the times, and the development of art is determined by mass ideology and social atmosphere. He advocates the supremacy of art, that life cannot guide art, but art can guide life. There is no need to consider the public in artistic creation. Art is the expression of individuality, and art does not need to bear moral responsibility. Just as Yang Ni writes in "A Study of

Oscar Wilde's 'mask art'" (2017, p. 148): "Art is infinitely creative and can help an individual avoid the ugly reality, create a new world for him, and achieve the perfect personality he wants". Wilde puts aestheticism into practice in his life to construct meaning for his life. The philosophy he advocates is aimed at realistic concern. Art is independent of life, and the decaying life should be imitated by the perfect art as a copy which represent Wilde wants to get social salvation through aestheticism. However, Wilde, who seems to wear the mask of a professor of aesthetics, sells the ideas he advocates to collect money and fame for him.

Just as Wilde (2010) said: "Basil Hallward is what I think I am; Lord Henry what the world thinks of me; Dorian what I would like to be — in other ages, perhaps" (p. 6). The three characters in the novel are all Wilde himself in a way. The conflicts between the various oppositions of these three characters represents the depth of Wilde's inner tear. The conflicts arise from Wilde's disagreement with the rotten standards of the Victorian era. Wilde wants to find the meaning of life through aestheticism, but he is deeply trapped in the prison of hedonism, pursuing fame and fortune, and searching for a sense of identity as well as sexual identity. Although, like Lord Henry in the novel, he promotes the importance of beauty through exaggerated language. But the conflicts between aestheticism and hedonism still collides. Because for Wilde, who is rigidly internalized, it is impossible for these two conflicting mindsets to coexist. Gray is instilled with both hedonism and aestheticism, but at the end of the novel, Gray kills Basil. And Gray takes the knife that kills Basil and stabs the portrait, yet the knife eventually stabs Gray. This reveals the deep gulf between Wilde's aestheticism and hedonism, and the failure of his aestheticism philosophy advocacy. Wilde believes that Basil is the real him because Wilde's original intention is to implement aestheticism. However, under the influence of the general environment, Wilde loses the ability to pursue aestheticism wholeheartedly. He believes that Basil is who he is, and Basil is the idealized image Wilde set up. He believes that Lord Henry is what the world sees him to be, and is not really himself. This shows Wilde's inner vulnerability as well as his lack of confidence. And Gray is another world of him in Wilde's mind, which reveals Wilde's inner pessimism. And the various attempts made by the three characters when facing conflicts also reflect Wilde's interpersonal relationships and attitudes.

5. Conclusion

The creation of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a process by which Wilde looks inside himself. None of the three characters he portrays, taken in isolation, fully reflect Wilde's heart. He puts his qualities as an aesthete into Basil and his

qualities as a hedonist into Lord Henry. Gray, on the other hand, is more of an experiment that knows its tragic end. In the first half of the novel, he is influenced by Basil and Lord Henry, while in the second half he indulges in the excitement brought to him by the Yellow Book. In Wilde's writing, Gray's fate is predetermined, and he does not give him any chance to go to the light, but instead pushes Gray to slowly fall. From the moment Gray makes his wish, the existence of the portrait is like a driving force behind the scenes, which plunges Gray into endless panic and the infinite excitement of seeking panic.

By analyzing the inner conflict of the three characters and the manifestation of their interpersonal disorder through Horney's conflict theory, it reflects Wilde's inner conflict and his interpersonal relationship. The contradictions of Wilde as an aestheticist are reflected in Basil. He should have held art as the highest standard, but he is greedy for fame and fortune. And although he detests the upper class, he longs for their approval. The contradictions of Wilde as a hedonist are reflected in Lord Henry. Although he acts like a prodigal, he has the ambition to become a master. He has the desire to control others, but the expectation to redeem them. From Gray, Wilde's inner vulnerability is reflected. He treats Basil as his idealized self, but in his writing, Gray who he portrays is influenced by both Basil and Lord Henry and Basil toward an absurd and pathetic end. Overall, the three characters reflect the chaos of Wilde's inner conflicts and the disorder of his relationships.

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