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THE TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS OF AN AUTHOR WHO WAS IMPRISONED BY THE  
AUTHOR-CENTRIC READER

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## ABSTRACT

This paper reveals Roland Barthes' concept of author-centric reading and its consequences. Oscar Wilde's novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, anticipates Barthes' theory through portraying the protagonist, Dorian Gray, as a spectator who constantly ties art to an artist, making him author-centric critic. For Barthes, an artist must be disregarded when examining a work of art. In theory, the figurative death of the author leads to the eventual birth of a spectator, allowing the spectator to freely interpret a work without being constrained by an artist's tyrannical hold on a work. In addition to Oscar Wilde's novel, the Queensberry Trial, which is the libel trial that, through the use of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ultimately led to Oscar Wilde's imprisonment for homosexual activity, represents the consequences of author-centric reading.

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## Introduction

“To reveal art and conceal the artist is art’s aim.”

Oscar Wilde seeks to entertain and to instruct as he artfully displays an unresolved debate about the ends of art and art criticism within his novel. In doing so, Wilde anticipates the later, influential literary criticism of Roland Barthes. By denying the ultimate authority of an artist over his work, Wilde suggests that art must not be interpreted as a form of autobiography, but rather, it must be embraced as an entity independent of authorial control. Bringing value and worth to a work is the role of the spectator or the reader – a role that is fulfilled through figuratively freeing the art from the artist’s hold and making the artwork his or her own through critique and disentanglement. In the course of his novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde illustrates this debate about artistic interpretation. Through the use of Wilde’s novel, I will display a snapshot of Barthes’ modern literary criticism and apply it to the dilemmas that arise from author-centric reading, arguing that such reading is detrimental to the figurative liberty of a reader and the literal liberty of an author.

Within the first chapter of his novel, Wilde presents an argument about the role of an artist in an intriguing, paradoxical manner that forces readers to call into question his ideas about literary criticism and who decides on the meaning of a text. Upon revealing the portrait to Lord Henry, Basil admits that he does not want to exhibit the artwork because he has “put too much of himself into it” (*Dorian Gray* 2). Basil states, “...every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion. It is not he

who is revealed by the painter, it is rather the painter who, on the coloured canvas, reveals himself” (4). Here, Basil contradicts Wilde’s original argument within the preface of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* – that art is not meant to reveal, but to conceal an artist – which presents inconsistent perspectives in Wilde’s novel. Only a few pages later, however, Basil even contradicts himself, saying, “An artist should create beautiful things, but should put nothing of his own life into them. We live in an age when men treat art as if it were meant to be a form of autobiography” (9). Basil is at odds with himself – he struggles with the major questions about who is in control of an artwork and where meaning resides: in the artist, in the audience, or in the art itself. In his conflicted perspective, Basil is, therefore, one of the instruments used to illustrate the very questions that readers must consider as they progress throughout the novel’s plot.

In 1968, almost 80 years after the first edition of Wilde’s novel was published, Roland Barthes returns to these central questions in his essay, “The Death of the Author,” arguing against author-centric models of interpretation: “The image of literature to be found in ordinary culture is tyrannically centered on the author...The explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end...the voice of a single person, the author ‘confiding’ in us” (“The Death of the Author” 1322). Barthes’ very language appears to echo Basil, suggesting a hidden affinity in the artistic perspective of Wilde and Barthes. A text, for Barthes, which is “made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation” (1325), is meant to fall into the hands of a reader because it is not about its origin, but rather its destination: “...there is one place where this multiplicity [of text] is focused and that place is the reader” (1325). Because a text enters into, emerges from, and reflects divergent cultural discourses, its “meaning” cannot revolve around a singular source, but must trace the full journey to its destination: the reader. Wilde has already

articulated this suggestion in his preface: “The highest as the lowest form of criticism is a mode of autobiography...It is the spectator...that art really mirrors” (“Preface” 790). As a literary critic, then, Barthes is in implicit, artistic conversation with Wilde and the existence and application of his theory is interwoven in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Likewise, Wilde anticipates these major theoretical questions through the use of his novel, calling into question author-centric criticism. It is also crucial to note that part of the reason Barthes rebels against author-centric criticism is his uneasiness with simple, stable sources of meaning in a text. In a sense, he is uncomfortable with the easiness of explaining away a text’s meaning by simply asking the author.

It is a common misunderstanding that “...when the Author has been found, the text is ‘explained’” (“Death of the Author” 1325). As a result, a sense of satisfaction ensues for it seems that this unveiling of the author is a “victory to the critic” (1325). Barthes does not support this method of reading – reading with the goal to know and understand the author – and states, “In the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be disentangled, nothing deciphered...” (1325). When considering this specific standpoint, a major question rises to the surface: what is at stake when readers tie an author to his or her text? For Oscar Wilde, his freedom. Wilde endured three different trials – most notably, Queensberry’s libel trial. Within this trial, Lord Queensberry’s defense attorney, Edward Carson, called into question *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and used the novel against Wilde. In essence, Carson, as a reader, tied Wilde, as an author, to his writing. Due to this flawed method of reading, Wilde was found guilty and sentenced to prison.

Barthes is seemingly interested in an author’s interpretive, intellectual freedom from the reader, who should ideally be untethered from the tyranny of the author and what Wilde shows us is that Barthes agrees with the implications of Wilde’s novel. In addition, by turning back to

Wilde, it is clear that the stakes are high due to the fact that author-centric criticism is not just about intellectual freedom, it is about literal freedom: a point made painfully obvious when Carson tries to decipher rather than disentangle the text.

Throughout this analysis, then, I will discuss the philosophies surrounding literature and the relationship between an author and reader in relation to Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Within the novel, Dorian's interactions with Basil Hallward and Sibyl Vane, as well as his critique of the portrait, illustrate and develop the literary theories that Wilde and Barthes agree upon and are in dialogue about. Using the novel to demonstrate the application of these theories will lead to the discussion about Oscar Wilde's trials and how author-centric reading is detrimental to individual freedom. Wilde's character, Dorian Gray, illuminates the notion that solely and continuously linking a work to an artist can be detrimental to the spectator, while Edward Carson represents how it can be detrimental to the author. In essence, an author-centric approach can cause individuals to stray away from viewing literature as a means of intellectual stimulation and pleasure, and compel them to use the works as confining tunnels that lead to the discovery of an artist's morals and intentions.



## Chapter 1

### The Theorists

"The explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the author 'confiding' in us" ("Death of the Author" 1322). Perhaps this phenomenon occurs because an author's name is always so clearly present when reading a work of literature and readers, therefore, inevitably tie each word back to the author. In fact, it is alarmingly common for Oscar Wilde's, rather than Dorian Gray's, portrait to rest on the cover of the novel. As a result, readers act as detectives who attempt to decrypt Wilde through a work of literature. Barthes is skeptical about and is, quite frankly, criticizing this approach to literary criticism. It is a human tendency to set focus upon an author while reading literature or gazing upon a work of art; however, the tendency must be abandoned in order to appreciate the full range of possibilities opened up in a literary text. When considering the important role of a reader, it becomes clear that an author and his or her work of literature must be viewed as separate entities.

In order to view an author and art as separate entities, Barthes distinguishes the term, "text" from the term, "work": "The text is a process, a work is a product. Texts are signifying fields into which one enters" ("Work to Text" 1327). The idea is that "work" is how one becomes accustomed to thinking about art – something an artist labors over and produces – whereas "text" is a process and it includes an equal emphasis on the spectator and the artwork itself as productive agents. By replacing the "work" with "text," different dynamics are revealed

beneath the surface. As a means of fully understanding the role of the author and the reader, it is crucial to understand the role of literature. In simple terms, “The only obligation to which in advance we may hold a novel...is that it be interesting” (James 748). While this idea of literature is valuable, it is rather vague. To expand on this, “text” is a crucial part of literature and it is meant to be “disentangled” rather than deciphered because it is not comprehensive. If a work does not possess text, which is a “multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings blend and clash...a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture” (“Death of the Author” 1325), it cannot be considered literature. Literature, through the use of text, is meant to extend itself and grow through this act of expansion.

The suggested expansion of a text occurs primarily through readership, which is mentioned in Jean-Paul Sartre’s work, *What is Literature?*: “...reading is an exercise in generosity, and what the writer requires of the reader is not the application of an abstract freedom, but the gift of the whole person...thus, the author writes in order to address himself to the freedom of the readers and he requires it in order to make his work exist” (Sartre 1206). The mere fact that literature is described as something that reaches out to human freedom is what makes all literary works an appeal. Therefore, it becomes clear that a writer and a reader are essential to literature’s “appeal”: a writer is meant to be free from his or her work in order to allow the reader to take the literature to greater lengths, within reason, beyond what the author may have meant or intended. In doing so, reading becomes a pleasurable adventure – the reader acts as both the author’s end point and the work’s start point.

Literature cannot exist without a writer and a reader. The roles of these two individuals, though vastly different, are what allow literature to reach its potential and fulfill its duty, which is to appeal to a reader through possessing Barthes’s idea of “text”. The act of writing is meant

“...both to disclose the world and to offer it as a task to the generosity of the reader” (Sartre 1210). To put it simply, an author writes in order to be read. Readers are revealers and creators who impose their mind on a work and without them, writing would merely exist as black marks on a page. For Sartre, “To write is to make an appeal to the reader’s freedom to collaborate in the production of his work” (1203). Therefore, a writer and a reader are both essential to each other’s being – one cannot exist without the other.

While noting that the role of the author and the reader are both critical, it must be made clear that the existence of a reader ultimately eliminates the existence of a writer. In other words, with the birth of the reader comes the death of the author. In order to further explain this argument, it must be considered how continuously linking a work to an author is to “impose a limit on it” and how a “text’s unity lies not in its origin, but in its destination” – the “birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author” (“Death of the Author” 1326). This idea illustrates the reason why a reader must not associate a work with the author nor should he or she hold an author responsible for a misreading. To do so is to limit the work and, therefore, the reader does not fulfill his or her end of the contract between an author and reader, which is to awaken a work. Reading is “the synthesis of perception and creation” (Sartre 1202). If a reader does not, figuratively speaking, put him or herself in a work because he or she is preoccupied with considering what the author is trying to convey, the work of literature does not meet its purpose of appeal.

As suggested, literature is meant to create interest – an interest that stems from the pleasure that literature evokes. Furthermore, the pleasure that literature conjures from a reader originates from the subliminal “agreement” that a reader and writer have. For Sartre, this agreement becomes apparent when an author entrusts “to another the job of carrying out what he

has begun, since it is only through the consciousness of the reader that he can regard himself as essential to his work” (Sartre 1203). A reader existing as a necessary entity is what makes literature an appeal, as well as a means of interest and pleasure – for a reader to know that he or she is needed by the author’s work is pleasing. Therefore, if an individual forfeits his or her responsibility as a reader and does not acknowledge the fact that an author writes for the reader to be able to bring the work to life through personal interpretation and criticism, he or she will not be able to fully enjoy literature as a pleasurable experience. This can be connected to Barthes’ original argument that an author and his or her work must be seen as separate entities. Once a work of literature rests in the hands of a reader, the author becomes irrelevant.

## Chapter 2

### **An Analysis of *The Picture of Dorian Gray***

Dorian Gray is Wilde's vessel for making literary criticism, which leads to the writing of Barthes' essay years later. As a result, both Barthes and Wilde caution readers to avoid author-centric reading. Through the use of the novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, I propose that Dorian Gray's character represents the flawed way to read literature – a method that imprisons an author and robs the work's ability to stimulate pleasure for the reader. With this in mind, it is critical to acknowledge how the “death,” or concealment of the author, results in the birth of the reader's ability to detangle a work on his or her own terms. This becomes possible because a work is unhinged when the author and his or her piece are viewed as separate entities. Throughout the novel, a slew of horrific events occur, including the dreadful alterations that take place on Dorian's portrait, but a pressing question remains: who is responsible? Considering Wilde to be an author who seeks to instruct while entertaining his readers, I argue that the tragedies that ensue within the novel are artful occurrences that are meant to display the dilemmas that author-centric criticism create. Dorian, as a spectator, is responsible for the portrait's transformation because he fails to make necessary distinctions between artists, such as Basil and Sybil, and their artworks. While I point out a flawed way of interpreting art, I will also redeem Dorian and demonstrate his singular instance of what Wilde and Barthes would consider to be a good critic.

Dorian's interactions with Basil Hallward throughout Wilde's novel demonstrate his failure to view an artist and his work as separate entities. Barthes conveys the idea that the “true locus of writing is reading” (“Death of the Author” 1325), which suggests that a written piece is

not complete without the presence of the reader. This theory can also be applied to a work of art and a spectator, making the relationship between an artist and spectator to be synonymous with the relationship between an author and reader. With this suggestion in mind, the first, and most obvious, factor to recognize is how Basil physically separated himself from his painting through giving it to Dorian Gray. If Basil had held on to his artwork and refused to give the painting to Dorian, the entire novel would be considerably different. The act of giving the work to Dorian symbolizes the metaphorical death of the author and the metaphorical birth of the reader. For Basil, “As long as [he lives], the personality of Dorian Gray will complete [him]” (*Dorian Gray* 15) – Basil and his artwork depend on the spectator, for a work is not finalized until it is placed into the hands and examined by the mind of the spectator. Dorian Gray completes Basil as a painter, making the relationship symbiotic.

Throughout the novel, the portrait changes to the extent where “through some strange quickening of inner life the leprosies of sin were slowly eating the thing away” (*Dorian Gray* 122). Dorian comes to the astonishing realization that “his own beauty might be untarnished, and the face on the canvas bear the burden of his passions and his sins...” (88). The very fact that the painting morphs is a mere validation of the point that Dorian, as the spectator, is responsible for the painting. As it is seen throughout the novel, Dorian fails to make this distinction, which becomes clear when it is stated, “It was the living death of his own soul that troubled him. Basil had painted the portrait that had marred his life. He could not forgive him for that. It was the portrait that had done everything” (173). Despite the fact that Basil admits to Lord Henry that he cannot give him the painting when he clearly says, “It is not my property, Harry...[It is] Dorian’s, of course” (20), Dorian still insists on wrongfully tying the painting to Basil. In congruence with this idea, Barthes claims, “...a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its

destination” (“Death of the Author” 1325). Therefore, it is imperative that one considers how, even though Basil did paint the portrait, he is not responsible for its change. Dorian is, as the portrait’s primary spectator.

Despite the fact that Dorian, as a spectator, is ultimately responsible for the artwork, Dorian blames Basil, the artist, for the way that the painting has morphed and affected his sanity. Instead of attributing the painting to Basil, he must attribute the “touch of cruelty in the mouth” (*Dorian Gray* 70) to himself. In a fit of irrational rage about the painting’s hideous transformation, Dorian murders Basil, saying to him, “You have more to do with my life than you think” (120). However, although Basil painted the actual portrait, he does not recognize his work after it has been in Dorian’s possession: “Yes, it was Dorian himself. But who had done it? [Basil] seemed to recognize his own brush-work, and the frame was his own design” (121). Basil’s inability to recognize the painting beyond its brushwork and frame illustrates the fact that Basil, as the artist, cannot be held responsible for the painting’s transformation. “All art is at once surface and symbol. Those who read the symbol do so at their peril” (“Preface” 790) and without a spectator’s perspective, a painting is merely a colored canvas.

Dorian brought life, quite literally, to the painting. At first, the matter is troubling to Basil and he tries to provide explanation. He exclaims, “No! the thing is impossible. The room is damp. Mildew has got into the canvas. The paints I used had some wretched mineral poison in them. I tell you the thing is impossible” (*Dorian Gray* 122). In response, Dorian declares, “It has destroyed me...Can’t you see your ideal in it?” (122). On the contrary, for “It is the spectator...that art really mirrors” (“Preface” 790). Therefore, to blame Basil and associate him with the painting’s transformation is absurd, irrational, and irresponsible – the painting, had it not been in Dorian’s possession, would have remained unchanged and the entire novel would

have progressed in an entirely different manner. In fact, when Dorian stabs the painting, he demonstrates his ultimate ownership of the portrait. Dorian's servants found an unchanged painting, "a splendid portrait of their master as they had last seen him, in all the wonder of his exquisite youth and beauty" and a "dead man, in evening dress, with a knife in his heart" (*Dorian Gray* 175). The painting continued to morph after Basil's murder, however, when Dorian dies, the painting returns to its original form. Therefore, a work is not an author or artist's responsibility once a reader or spectator is introduced to the work. The final moments of the novel illustrate how the existence of the artwork, just as a "text," is contingent upon and in sync with Dorian's existence as a spectator. Once he dies, the painting becomes a "work" again, which is a static representation as originally intended by the author. Instead of recognizing his powerful influence as a reader, Dorian does not abandon his author-centric criticism of his portrait and blames Basil for the painting's horrific appearance.

Dorian Gray's interaction with his love interest, Sibyl Vane, is another key example that demonstrates the idea that Dorian represents the unfitting way to read literature. Dorian constantly ties Sibyl to her artwork, which is her acting, and fails to make the distinction between Sibyl Vane, the actress, and Sibyl Vane, the individual. When declining Lord Henry's invitation to dinner, Dorian states, "To-night she is Imogen...and to-morrow night she will be Juliet." Lord Henry asks, "When is she Sibyl Vane?" and Dorian responds, "Never" (*Dorian Gray* 42). This short exchange demonstrates how Dorian fails to separate Sibyl from her work. This idea is very apparent, especially when Sibyl's brother, Jim Vane, states, "[Dorian] wants to enslave you" (53). When it comes to Sibyl, Dorian is not interested in her as a separate entity from her acting, which is made clear when Dorian admits, "Without your art, you are nothing" (68). In fact, when Sibyl does not perform well, Dorian is, in an overall sense, disgusted with her, as a person, not



just the performance. When Sibyl performed in *Romeo and Juliet*, it is stated, “She looked charming as she came out in the moonlight...But the staginess of her acting was unbearable, and grew worse as she went on. Her gestures became absurdly artificial...It was simply bad art. She was a complete failure” (65). Admittedly, Sibyl performed in an ill manner on purpose because she was under the impression that Dorian had “freed [her] soul from prison” and had shown her “what reality really is” (67). After meeting Dorian, Sibyl “saw through the hollowness, the sham, the silliness of the empty pageant in which [she] had always played” (67). When referring to the initial argument that an artist must be freed from his or her own work, it is clear that Sibyl, as the artist, expected Dorian, as the spectator, to free her. Instead, Dorian ties Sibyl to her work.

Due to the fact that Dorian refuses to free Sibyl from her work, Sibyl must free herself. Upon receiving the news that Sibyl Vane has killed herself, Lord Henry says to Dorian, “Someone has killed herself for the love of you” (*Dorian Gray* 79). In other words, Dorian has failed to fulfill his role as a spectator of art, so the artist, Sibyl, completed the task for him. Similar to Dorian, Lord Henry demonstrates irresponsibility as a spectator because he does not recognize that Dorian has any responsibility for Sibyl’s death. For Dorian, Sibyl was merely “a phantom that flitted through Shakespeare’s plays” and Lord Henry advises him to “Mourn for Ophelia...Put ashes on [his] head because Cordelia was strangled...Cry out against Heaven because the daughter of Brabantio died...But don’t waste [his] tears over Sibyl Vane” (81). In a sense, Sibyl’s death was a tragedy that possessed an “artistic element of beauty” (79) because she was living up to the expectation that an artist must be viewed as a separate entity from his or her own work. As Lord Henry artfully states, “To have ruined one’s self over poetry is an honour” (41). Unfortunately, Dorian did not live up to his end of the interdependent relationship between an artist and spectator – an author and a reader.

Dorian's interactions with Basil and Sybil are key aspects of the novel to consider when arguing that the artist must be concealed or removed in order to fully appreciate a work. Dorian fails to recognize that it is he who is responsible for the painting's horrifying metamorphosis, along with Sibyl's bad acting and ultimate suicide. Instead, he blames the artists. His approach to interpreting art is erroneous, causing him to obtain no pleasure from the art and ultimately fall into a whirlwind of madness. With the relationship between Dorian and Basil and Dorian and Sybil in mind, it is crucial to consider the mere fact that neither portrait nor acting bring the spectator, Dorian, pleasure. Considering the assertion that art's primary obligation is to be interesting, it becomes rather clear that Dorian's preoccupation with the artist leads to his disinterest and eventual repulsion toward the artwork. In addition, Basil is eventually murdered and Sybil commits suicide. While these occurrences are an exaggeration of the consequences that stem from author-centric reading, they raise the question: what is at stake for both the author and the reader when an author is tied to his or her artwork? In other words, why does Wilde's novel demonstrate author-centric reading if it is a flawed way to read literature? It can be suggested that the novel is meant to shed light upon flawed reading and interpretation – perhaps to caution, or more dramatically, scare readers.

As suggested, Dorian Gray represents the flawed method to interpreting artwork, specifically literature. Due to the fact that Dorian ties artwork to an author, he fails to gain pleasure from the art itself, as seen through his interactions with Basil and Sibyl. In addition to these facts, Dorian, under Wilde's terms and conditions, represents a bad critic. In order to fully understand this suggestion, it is crucial to refer to the beginning of the novel, which is when Dorian is first introduced to the painting that Basil has created. Dorian states:

How sad it is! I shall grow old, and horrible, and dreadful. But this picture will remain always young. It will never be older than this particular day of June... If it were only the other way! If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old! For that – for that – I would give everything! Yes, there is nothing in the whole world I would not give! I would give my soul for that!

*(Dorian Gray 20)*

For Wilde, “The only beautiful things are the things that do not concern us” (*Decay of Lying* 793). This statement is particularly important because it illustrates the notion that Dorian shallowly becomes consumed by his portrait’s youthful and beautiful nature and nothing else. As a result, the painting loses its value and beauty because of Dorian’s inability to be a good critic of the artwork. This can be further explained through considering the following assertion: “The highest Criticism, then, is more creative than creation, and the primary aim of the critic is to see the object as in itself it really is not...” (*Critic as Artist* 802). In a sense, the highest form of criticism “criticizes not merely the individual work of art, but Beauty itself, and it fills with wonder a form which the artist may have left void, or not understood, or understood completely” (802). Plainly, Dorian is jealous of the painting’s beauty and youth – that is all. He does not seek to uncover the beauty and value of the brushwork, the colors, or the texture, which inhibits his ability to be more “creative than the creation”. Within the novel, the portrait is described as being extraordinary, “one of the best things [Basil has] ever done” (*Dorian Gray* 8). However, Dorian, who is merely concerned with the portrait’s youth, validates Basil’s initial impression of him, which is that he is “horribly thoughtless... someone who treats [Basil’s work] as if it were a flower to put in his coat, a bit of decoration to charm his vanity... (9). It should be reinforced that Dorian, as the spectator, has an obligation to fulfill. The relationship between the author and

the reader, or the painter and the spectator, is symbiotic. Dorian, who is obsessed with the youth of the painting, fails to recognize the portrait's real value – this leads to the painting's decay. In a sense, the painting becomes horrifying because Dorian was merely concerned with the portrait's beauty. If the painting is stripped of the beauty, Dorian must be forced to value the painting in a new way.

If Dorian is a bad critic of the painting, what characteristics can be attributed to a good critic? In the tenth chapter of Wilde's novel, "[Dorian's] eyes fell on the yellow book that Lord Henry had sent him...After a few minutes he became absorbed. It was the strangest book that he had ever read" (*Dorian Gray* 97). What is interesting about this chapter is the dense prose and the idea that "For years, Dorian Gray could not free himself from the influence of this book" (99). Wilde writes:

It was a novel without a plot, and with only one character, being, indeed, simply a psychological study of a certain young Parisian, who spent his life trying to realize in the nineteenth century all the passions and modes of thought that belonged to every century except his own, and to sum up, as it were, in himself the various moods through which the world-spirit had ever passed, loving for their mere artificiality those renunciations that men have unwisely called virtue, as much as those natural rebellions that wise men still call sin. The style in which it was written was archaisms, of technical expressions and of elaborate paraphrases, that of Symbolites. There were in it metaphors as monstrous as orchids, and as subtle in colour. The life of the sense was described in the terms of mystical philosophy. One hardly knew at times whether one was reading the spiritual ecstasies of some mediaeval saint or the morbid confessions of a modern

sinner...The mere cadence of the sentences, the subtle monotony of their music, so full as it was of complex refrains and movements elaborately repeated, produced in the mind of the lad, as he passed from chapter to chapter, a form of reverie, a malady of dreaming, that made him unconscious of the falling day and creeping shadows. (*Dorian Gray* 98)

This book has a profound effect on Dorian, which is much different than the effect that the portrait has – the book fascinates him. In comparison, when referring to Dorian’s reaction to the painting, Dorian, after seeing the painting for the first time, states:

I am less to you than your ivory Hermes or your silver Faun. You will like them always. How long will you like me? Till I have my first wrinkle, I suppose. I know, now, that when one loses one’s good looks, whatever they may be, one loses everything. Your picture has taught me that. Lord Henry Wotton is perfectly right. Youth is the only thing worth having. When I find that I am growing old, I shall kill myself. (*Dorian Gray* 21)

In this instance, Dorian is using the painting to unmask Basil’s hidden agenda as an artist. Instead, the critic, who “will certainly be an interpreter,” will not “treat Art as a riddling Sphinx, whose shallow secret may be guessed...” (*Critic as Artist* 802). When considering Dorian’s relationship with his portrait, it is clear that he is “...jealous of everything whose beauty does not die” (*Dorian Gray* 21), which suggests that he is treating the artwork like a “riddling sphinx” as he tries to unravel the messages Basil is trying to convey. When referring to the book, however, an author is not even mentioned, allowing Dorian to be a better critic<sup>1</sup>. As a result, Dorian takes note of style, metaphors, and other characteristics of this novel, which causes him to say to Lord

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<sup>1</sup> Although he chose not to name the book within his novel, Oscar Wilde admitted during his first trial that the book was *A Rebours* by J. K. Huysmans.

Henry, “I didn’t say I liked it, Harry. I said it fascinated me. There is a great difference” (*Dorian Gray* 98). Dorian experiences “Mysticism, with its marvelous power of making common things strange to us...” (104) – he has become a good critic and has allowed the work to have “an independent life of its own...” In addition, Dorian, as the critic, “treats the work of art simply as a starting-point for a new creation...” (*Critic as Artist* 802), which becomes clear when it is written that the book “moved him for a season; and for a season he inclined to the materialistic doctrines of the Darwinismus movement in Germany...” (*Dorian Gray* 104). Dorian was inspired by the authorless book, causing him to “[procure] from Paris no less than nine large-paper copies of the first edition, and had them bound in different colours, so that they might suit his various moods and the changing fantasies...” (99). The painting, however, was concealed by a curtain and tucked away in his attic. The dynamic is clear – through being a good critic and disregarding the author, Dorian experiences pleasure from the book.

“The task of criticism is not to reestablish the ties between an author and his work or to reconstitute an author’s thought and experience through his works and, further, that criticism should concern itself with the structures of a work, its architectonic forms...” (Foucault 1478). Within the novel, Dorian was introduced to and given the portrait, painted by Basil Hallward. Gazing upon the painting, Dorian felt angered and eventually suffered from a self-inflicted sense of irrational jealousy of the painting’s youthful nature. As the novel’s plot continues, Dorian finds that the man in the painting has aged and his expression has morphed. Barely able to recognize his work, Basil is stunned upon viewing the alterations and is ultimately made a victim because of Dorian’s decision to blame Basil for the painting’s change. In addition, Sybil falls victim to Dorian’s author-centric tendencies and eventually seeks to free herself from his figurative chains through committing suicide. In essence, Dorian is a poor critic of art due to his

constant preoccupation with the artist – he is unable to take an artwork to greater lengths. However, when introduced to the unnamed and, more remarkably, authorless novel, Dorian demonstrates a form of criticism that is in line with Wilde and Barthes' theories. The novel fascinates Dorian and brings him pleasure, but the portrait and Sybil's acting do not. Instead, these aspects of the plot lead to the characters' downfall. Through the use of a dark plot, Wilde sought to artfully instruct and advise readers against author-centric reading. Unfortunately, his readership ends up working against him and his freedom as an artist when he faces trial.

### Chapter 3

#### The Trial

“There is a tendency in some recent scholarship to forget that Wilde was by profession a literary man, and that it was his writing as much as his conduct that got him into trouble,” writes William A. Cohen, author of *Sex Scandal: The Private Parts of Victorian Fiction*. During the Queensberry libel trial, Wilde was prosecuted for homosexual activity. Interestingly enough, Wilde’s very own novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, acted as the main source of evidence against him. Anticipated by Wilde, Barthes’ literary theory cautions against readers tying an author to his or her work. Through examining this trial, it becomes clear how Wilde was figuratively trapped by Edward Carson’s author-centric reading and, as a result, was sentenced to be trapped behind bars. As opposed to reading the novel, Carson used the novel to read Wilde.

Oscar Wilde’s first trial took place on Wednesday, April 3, 1895, within the Central Criminal Court in Old Bailey, London under the supervision of The Honorable Mr. Justice Collins. According to the transcripts of Wilde’s trial, John Sholto Douglas, Marquess of Queensberry, “maliciously did write and publish and cause to be written and published of him the said Oscar Fingal O’Flahertie Wills Wilde a false scandalous malicious and defamatory libel in the form of a card directed to the said Oscar Fingal O’Flahertie Wills Wilde according to the tenor and effect following that is to say ‘For Oscar Wilde posing as a sodomite’” (Hyde 107). As a result, Douglas was charged for “contriving and maliciously intending to injure Oscar Fingal O’Flahertie Wills Wilde and to excite him to commit a breach of the peace and to bring him into public contempt scandal and disgrace” (107). Pleading not guilty, Douglas insisted that



the libel was, in fact, truthful, as well as beneficial, because it was crucial for the public to know.

Lord John Douglas, Marquess of Queensberry, was the father of Lord Alfred Douglas, the individual whom Wilde was accused of having homosexual relations with. In his book, *Oscar Wilde and Myself*, Lord Alfred Douglas writes about his relationship with his father:

Some years before I met Wilde my mother had found it desirable to divorce my father, and at the time to which I am now referring the family relationships were not exactly running smooth. To be quite frank, I had conceived feelings of resentment against my father on account of his treatment of my mother which I am afraid were far from filial. You may judge, then, of my anger when Wilde one day told me that Lord Queensberry had sent him a letter in which he requested Wilde to terminate his friendship with me at once, inasmuch as he did not think it would be beneficial to me. Wilde asked me what he should do, and I told him to take no notice of the letter. Later, my father sent me a letter in which he told me what he had said to Wilde, and threatened to cut off my allowance if I did not at once terminate the acquaintance. (Douglas 75)

Lord Alfred Douglas “did not sit down to the abuse of [his] father in the manner of a person without spirit...” (Douglas 76), which resulted in the following actions from his father:

The defendant was writing letters that affected his character and contained suggestions injurious to him...Last February another play by Mr. Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, was about to be produced at the St. James's Theatre...Lord Queensberry booked a seat at the St. James's Theatre, but his money was returned to him and the police were warned about him. Lord Queensberry made his appearance in the course of the evening and brought with

him a large bouquet made of vegetables. (Hyde 113-114)

In congruence with the transcripts from the trial, Douglas expands upon his father's actions: "At a theatre where one of Wilde's plays was running he caused a bouquet of carrots to be handed up to Wilde over the footlights, and he left his card on him at his club with certain odious remarks written on the back of it. I need scarcely say that Wilde was very much distressed...he would have no alternative but to prosecute Lord Queensberry for criminal libel" (Douglas 81). As a result of receiving the hateful card with horrible remarks, Wilde took action, which led to Lord Queensberry's arrest.

Throughout the trial, Wilde's sexuality and homosexual relations with Lord Alfred Douglas were called into question. Like most trials, multiple witnesses were called to the stands by both the prosecution and defense. Strangely, Wilde's novel was one of them. As stated by the prosecutor, Sir Edward Clarke, within his opening remarks, "There are two counts at the end of the plea which are extremely curious. It is said that in the month of July, 1890, Mr. Wilde published, or caused to be published, with his name on the titlepage, a certain immoral and indecent work with the title of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which book was intended to be understood by the readers to describe the relations, intimacies, and passions of certain persons guilty of unnatural practices" (Hyde 114). Taking into account the statement, "intended to be understood by the readers to describe the relations, intimacies, and passions of certain persons guilty of unnatural practices," it becomes clear that, from the very beginning of the trial, Wilde's novel was used to illuminate autobiographical details of his life: incorrectly relying on an author-centric methodology of reading, the defense hopelessly muddled artist and artwork. In defense of this, Clarke made the following claim:

The volume called *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is one which can be bought at any

bookstall in London. It has Mr. Wilde's name on the title page and has been published five years. The story of the book is that of a young man of good birth, great wealth and great personal beauty, whose friend paints a picture of him. Dorian Gray expresses the wish that he could remain as in the picture, while the picture aged with the years. His wish is granted, and he soon knows that upon the picture, and not upon his own face, the scars of trouble and bad conduct are falling. In the end he stabs the picture and falls dead, and the picture is restored to its pristine beauty, while his friends find on the floor the body of a hideous old man. I shall be surprised if my learned friend can pitch upon any passage in that book which does more than describe as novelists and dramatists may-nay, must-describe the passions and fashions of life. (Hyde 115)

Clarke, in Wilde's defense, ventures to make the argument that the novel is merely a work of art and, in no way, a reflection of Wilde and his "relations, intimacies, and passions of certain persons". Needless to say, Clark argues what Barthes proposes decades later: "The image of literature to be found in ordinary culture is tyrannically centered on the author, his person, his life, his tastes, his passions..." ("Death of the Author" 1322).

Perhaps the epitome of an author-centric reader is Lord Queensberry's defense attorney, Edward Carson. Throughout the trial, Wilde's "attention [was] called to the statements which are made in the [novel] referring to different persons and impugning your conduct with them" (Hyde 120). In order to fully capture Carson's shallow reading of literature, it is useful to consider the dialogues from Wilde's cross-examination by the defense. Carson primarily focused his questions on three long passages, which described "the impact on the painter Basil Hallward of his first glimpse of the young hero; Basil's later confession of his feelings; and the impression

made on Dorian by his reading of the yellow book sent him by his sophisticated friend Sir Henry Wotton” (Kaplan 123). The following section consists of the dialogue between Wilde and Carson at the beginning of Wilde’s cross-examination. In this following interaction, Wilde is commenting on his readership:

Carson—This is in your introduction to *Dorian Gray*: "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written." That expresses your view?

Wilde—My view on art, yes.

Carson—Then, I take it, that no matter how immoral a book may be, if it is well written, it is, in your opinion, a good book?

Wilde—Yes, if it were well written so as to produce a sense of beauty, which is the highest sense of which a human being can be capable. If it were badly written, it would produce a sense of disgust.

Carson—Then a well-written book putting forward perverted moral views may be a good book?

Wilde—No work of art ever puts forward views. Views belong to people who are not artists.

Carson—A perverted novel might be a good book?

Wilde—I don't know what you mean by a "perverted" novel.

Carson—Then I will suggest *Dorian Gray* as open to the interpretation of being such a novel?

Wilde—That could only be to brutes and illiterates. The views of Philistines on art are incalculably stupid.

Carson—An illiterate person reading *Dorian Gray* might consider it such a novel?

Wilde—The views of illiterates on art are unaccountable. I am concerned only with my view of art. I don't care twopence what other people think of it.

Carson—The majority of persons would come under your definition of Philistines and illiterates?

Wilde—I have found wonderful exceptions.

Carson—Do you think that the majority of people live up to the position you are giving us?

Wilde—I am afraid they are not cultivated enough.

Carson—Not cultivated enough to draw the distinction between a good book and a bad book?

Wilde—Certainly not.

(Hyde 124)

Within this exchange, Carson is projecting the idea that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a “perverted” novel – a novel that projects “perverted moral views”. Wilde believes this suggestion to be one that belongs to “Philistines,” who are described as “brutes and illiterates”. Within *De Profundis*, his lengthy letter written to Lord Alfred Douglas from prison, Wilde provides insight about the “Philistines”:

Like all poetical natures [Jesus] loved ignorant people. He knew that in the soul of one who is ignorant there is always room for a great idea. But he could not stand stupid people, especially those who are made stupid by education: people who are full of opinions not one of which they even understand, a peculiarly

modern type, summed up by Christ when he describes it as the type of one who has the key of knowledge, cannot use it himself, and does not allow other people to use it, though it may be made to open the gate of God's Kingdom. His chief war was against the Philistines. That is the war every child of light has to wage. Philistinism was the note of the age and community in which he lived. In their heavy inaccessibility to ideas, their dull respectability, their tedious orthodoxy, their worship of vulgar success, their entire preoccupation with the gross materialistic side of life, and their ridiculous estimate of themselves and their importance. (*De Profundis*)

Referring to the readers who view his novel to be “perverted” as “Philistines,” Wilde is suggesting that these readers have the “key to knowledge,” meaning that they are highly capable individuals, but they are individuals who consciously choose to view his novel as a shallow surface – a surface that is glossed with inferred, not implied, homosexual innuendos and conceals the truly beautiful and artistic elements of the novel. These readers, including Carson, are the individuals who not only read *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as grossly indecent, but also suggest that Wilde is grossly indecent, as the novel's author. It is impossible to make assumptions about an author based on a work of fiction and it is crucial to remember that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is not an autobiography – it is merely a work of art that is primarily narrated in the third-person, not in the first person. Regardless of the point of view that a work is written in, a narrator is not the “second self” and it would be “false to seek the author in relation to the actual writer as to the fictional narrator; the ‘author-function’ arises out of their scission – in the division and distance of the two” (Foucault 1484). At a later point in the cross-examination, Wilde's following response in the given dialogue after Carson reads a lengthy passage from the novel

illustrates this idea:

Carson—May I take it that you, as an artist, have never known the feeling described here?

Wilde—I have never allowed any personality to dominate my art.

Carson—Then you have never known the feeling you described?

Wilde—No. It is a work of fiction.

(Hyde 129)

Carson relentlessly questioned Wilde and implied that the writer's art condoned immorality. As William A. Cohen observes: “In the legal battle over interpretation, Wilde avers that all his writing is literary, even when it appears explicitly erotic; the opposing counsel portrays it all as sexually coded, even when it seems legitimately literary” (Kaplan 119).

To make this implication about an author and his or her character because he or she wrote the given “immoral” novel is detrimental to both the author and the reader. Oscar Wilde, as the author, was being defined by his artwork and, as a result, Wilde’s reputation and character were tarnished. In fact, “most of the press eagerly followed, depicting the writer as a symbol of cultural decadence, sexual exploitation, and dangerous deviance” (Kaplan 116). In response to this suggestion, one may argue that Wilde tarnished his own life through having a relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas. Such an argument is valid, however, I argue that Carson’s use of a novel as a primary tool to prove Wilde’s homosexuality is an improper and irrational use of literature. In this case, literature was being used as a tool to discover an author and Carson, as a flawed reader, was the primary detective.

In addition to the author, reading in a limiting way is detrimental for the reader because the individual is not experiencing the pleasure that readership has to offer. Instead, he or she is

too concerned, or rather, preoccupied with trying to discern, through the use of his novel, whether Wilde is moral or immoral – a homosexual or heterosexual human being. In fact, with author-centric tactics, one could venture to claim that Oscar Wilde was a murderer or supports murder because there is murder within his novel. It seems irrational to do so, but this is the nature of reading that Carson and other readers are engaging in. Walter Pater touches upon the role of a reader and sheds light upon how Carson, along with those who choose to merely view the novel as moral or immoral, should be reading:

What we have to do is to be for ever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions, never acquiescing in a facile orthodoxy of Comte, or of Hegel, or of our own. Philosophical theories or ideas, as points of view, instruments of criticism, may help us to gather up what might otherwise pass unregarded by us. "Philosophy is the microscope of thought." The theory or idea or system which requires of us the sacrifice of any part of this experience, in consideration of some interest into which we cannot enter, or some abstract theory we have not identified with ourselves, or of what is only conventional, has no real claim upon us. (Pater 729)

Pater suggests that readers are meant to be critics of art – not of an author's morality. In addition, reading is meant to expand horizons and introduce readers to something unknown – it is a "key of knowledge". The "ignorant" and "unfortunate" people who "have not the high understanding" (Hyde 130), including Carson, have the upper hand in this trial. Unfortunately, for Wilde, who was "not concerned with the ignorance of others" (Hyde 130), and his "ignorant" readers, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was used as a mere means of judgment and eventual prosecution.

Oscar Wilde's trials called into question his sexuality, along with his works of literature.



Needless to say, it is rather alarming how “the bulk of [Wilde’s] testimony pertained to literary matters” (Kaplan 119) and how Carson “blurred the boundaries between literature and life” (116). Through using the novel as a primary tool for framing Wilde, one may argue that Carson, as a reader with the utmost freedom, was merely interpreting Wilde’s work in a way that he wanted to. In fact, open interpretation is strongly encouraged by both Wilde and Barthes: “the writer’s aesthetic commitment to open-ended interpretive possibilities left [Wilde] vulnerable to the accusation that some among his readers, including those most impressionable, might well take him to advocate prohibited desires and conduct” (114). However, I argue that there is a distinct difference between open interpretation and author-centric reading. To decipher an author’s “desires and conduct” through the use of literature is not considered open-interpretation – it is close-minded. In congruence with this statement, Barthes conveys the idea that a work must be freed from the author as a source, which will then open a text up to multiple interpretation and disentanglement. Unfortunately, throughout the Queensberry trial, Wilde was constantly being tied to his work and was figuratively denied freedom, which led to his imprisonment for sexual misconduct – a literal denial of freedom.

## Chapter 4

### Conclusion

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* is meant to interest and instruct. Through the use of his novel and its fear-provoking, yet enlightening plot, Oscar Wilde artfully condemns author-centric reading. Further examined and expanded upon by Roland Barthes, this theory suggests that, in order to fully capture and experience literature's appeal, an author must be disregarded. Instead, readers are encouraged to "reexamine the empty space left by the author's disappearance" and to "attentively observe, along its gaps and fault lines, its new demarcations and the reapportionment of this void... await the fluid functions released by this disappearance" (Foucault 1479). Considering the novel's plot, along with the Queensberry Trial, it becomes clear how author-centric reading is detrimental to both an author and a reader. When a reader, such as Edward Carson, becomes preoccupied with using literature to read an author, he or she is unable to experience literature's pleasing and aesthetic value. As a result, an author is not complimented nor completed by, but rather destroyed by his reader.

Throughout his trial, Wilde was relentlessly questioned about and wrongfully tied to the moral implications of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Carson proposed that Wilde's novel was a testament of his "immoral relations" (Hyde 135) with Lord Alfred Douglass, but Wilde defends himself against this irresponsible reading through pointing out that his work is merely fiction. Contemplating the questions regarding the ends of art and who is ultimately responsible for its interpretation and value – must Wilde, in a sense, apologize for Carson's misreading? As an author within the aforementioned symbiotic relationship, Wilde simply wrote about something

that exists in the world. Barthes writes, “Linguistically, the author is never more than the instance of writing...language knows no ‘subject’, not a ‘person’, and this subject, empty outside of the very enunciation which defines it, suffices to make language ‘hold together’, suffices, that is to say, to exhaust it...The removal of the Author...utterly transforms the modern text” (“Death of the Author” 1323-1324). Considering this, it becomes apparent that the reader, who has the ultimate authority of a work must be held responsible, not the author. Therefore, I would venture to suggest that Carson, as the reader, should have been put on trial for gross indecency and immoral thinking. He transformed Wilde’s work into something that Wilde could not recognize, just as Basil could not recognize his own painting within *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Although Carson and readers, in general, have the authority to alter a work – an author must be disregarded, for he or she is not responsible for a reader’s poor readership.

There is an implicit trust between an author and a reader – both have separate roles, but rely on each other. The author relies on and trusts that the reader will take his or her work to greater lengths through constructive criticism and assessment of aesthetic value, while obtaining a sense of pleasure throughout the process. What I find so captivating about theorists, such as Barthes and Sartre, is how they shed light upon the consequent role and responsibility that ensues once a reader encounters written language. Reading is not mindless and it is not a tool that is meant to unveil subliminal messages tossed in by the author. Rather, reading is hard work, just as writing is hard work. An author writes in order to be read, and as Sartre suggests, in order to appeal to a reader. Some readers will enrich a work and renovate it. Others, such as Carson, will become preoccupied with the author and fail to live up to their responsibilities.

What is most disturbing about this trial is how witty and imaginative Wilde truly was and how his artistic persona did not translate at all into the literal minded-ness of the court room.

Although brilliant, Wilde was trapped by Carson's austerity and literal mindedness. When considering Wilde's audacious, sharp, and clever remarks within the courtroom, one may wonder: did he know what was at stake in those very moments? In other words, did he know that he was about to fall victim to Carson and be imprisoned? The trial reveals the mere fact that until a reader is willing to free an author, an author will be forever trapped by poor readership. Wilde knew that he could not compete with ignorance and therefore, acted playfully and seemingly unafraid. In doing so, he cleverly treated his trial as a means for criticizing a society that he could not protect himself from. Wilde knew that he would be misunderstood and accepted his place as an artist – a transcendent figure who was at odds with author-centric readers.

More often than not, readers will “tie [a work] to a chair with rope and torture a confession out of it... they begin beating it with a hose to find out what it really means” (Collins 58), but readers should be “waterski[ing] across the surface of a [work] waving at the author's name on the shore” (58). Unfortunate for both the author and the reader, author-centric readers fail to recognize a text's very nature – one that is continuously denying the ability to be deciphered, or rather, figured out by a reader. I had not realized this method of reading until I was introduced to Roland Barthes' “The Death of the Author”. Through reading Barthes, I learned how to be a reader and how to live up to my responsibilities. Before reading Barthes, I had been trained to be the reader with tunnel vision who looked forward to the last page of a novel – the light at the end of the tunnel – with the hope of being able to say, “I know something about the author”. I was myself as a detective of literature, rather than a critic – I was Edward Carson.

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