

The Impact of Psycho-ideological Hero: A Žižekian Study of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines psycho-ideological significance of Dorian Gray, on Wilde's only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Although Wilde's novel has mostly been read as an aesthetic work of 'Art for Art's Sake', the present research intends to criticize Wilde's only novel using Žižek's theories on subjectivity, ideology, and trauma. The brainchild of an indisputable giant literary tradition, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a tactfully designed puzzle that called the Victorian establishment into question. The thick texture of the novel, I argue, lends itself to Žižekian ideological and psychoanalytical theories wherein one can obtain a novel perspective on the issue of subjectivity. The Slovenian philosopher, Slavoj Žižek (b.1949) argues that the subject is divided and always in a transitional process until his death; Dorian is an epitome of such a subjectivity always already in transition.

Key words: Subjectivity, Trauma, Ideology, Oscar Wilde, Slavoj Žižek

INTRODUCTION

Oscar Wilde is an author who is "being read by Europeans more than any English writers except Shakespeare by 1920, and being studied in universities by 1960" ("Oscar Wilde- A Place in History", 2014). He is an innovative politically subversive Irish artist whose works have won him world-wide audiences. As a cultural critic, Žižek has written on a vast array of topics from philosophy and psychoanalysis to theology, film, opera, religion, politics, and literature. The most important influences on Žižek's work have been Hegel in philosophy, Marx in politics, and Lacan in psychoanalysis. Žižek owes much of his political thinking to Marxist analytics, in particular its critique of Ideology. Ideology is considered as false consciousness, as an error in understanding that can be corrected; however, for Žižek this forms the horizon and limit of thought. He, furthermore, provides a model to explain how the ideologies that, according to Marxists, structure social formations find their way into the psyches of the individual subjects. For this he turns to the psychoanalytic thought of Lacan as a means of salvaging the "Cartesian subject". Žižek understands the "cogito" or subject articulated by Descartes, not as the usual substantial, transparent, and fully self-conscious "I", or as an effect of the structure of discourses, but as the empty space left when the rest of the world has been expelled from itself. Descartes famously proclaimed that "Cogito ergo sum," (I think therefore I am). To understand what Žižek sees in this formulation we must refer to Lacan's three psychic orders-the

'Imaginary', the 'Symbolic', and the 'Real'- in which subjectivity is in *dialogue* with the external and internal worlds (Leitch et al., 2010, p.2402-5).

Research Problem

The atmosphere of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* requires that any analysis on it must bear some tones of psychoanalysis. As a result, the researcher has adopted a Žižekian view of Lacanian psychoanalytical approach to read the novel. Moreover, it seems impossible to separate Marxist idea of Žižek from his psychoanalysis. Therefore, a mixture of psychoanalytical, cultural-materialist and Marxist criticism is adopted in the research. The researcher aims to produce comprehensive answers to the following issues: Firstly, the relationship between Žižekian view of Lacanian three psychic orders and the interaction between the Dorian and its picture will be explored. Moreover, it will be explained how the perception of ideology works in Wilde's only novel; finally the consequences of trauma in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* will be clarified.

DISCUSSION

Dorian vs. the Picture

Lord Henry who becomes interested in learning about Dorian Gray's past calls on his uncle, Lord Fermor. The old man who knows about every one's private life, tells Lord Henry

all about Dorian's heritage: "I knew his mother intimately... she was an extraordinarily beautiful girl, Margaret Devereux; and made all the men frantic by running away with a penniless young fellow; a mere nobody" (Wilde, 2001, p.29). Surprisingly Dorian bears so much resemblance in beauty and attraction to his mother, "Margaret *Devereux* was one of the loveliest creatures I ever saw... She could married anybody she chose. Carlington was mad after her" (p.30). The poor Carlington becomes mad after a failure in Margaret's love, in a similar way, poor Sybil Vane commits suicide after failure in Dorian's love. But, what else does Dorian's resemblance to his mother signify? Maya Lang in her PhD thesis, *The Hypochondriac: Bodies in protest from Herman Melville to Toni Morrison* discusses the psychological significations of 'Dorian's past and his repressive relationship to it'.

In an allegorical novel the reader must of course make note of the names, especially in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* where the names and French phrases are intentionally chosen. Maya Lang explains the signification Dorian's mother's last name- Devereux- thus "The name calls on the mind *véreux*: literally in French, "worm eaten," or figuratively, "spoiled, rotten, decayed, corrupt" (Lang, 2007, p.23). Seemingly, Dorian inherited corruption from his maternal family. Dorian's maternal surname is *Devereux* which reminds us of *véreux*, or corruption. Although a rich man, Dorian is a child of scandal, of an unfulfilled marriage. The motif of *véreux* dominates the entire novel, being an indication of how Dorian's origins lead to his actions: how it shapes the concept of corruption in his mind, and how his pursuit of that novel poisoned all his life.

Perhaps the entire text of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* represents a return of the repressed past history of Dorian. Indeed a central motif of the story is the return of the repressed on several levels. Although Dorian himself never talks about his mother, seemingly he is so dependent on his mother. His beauty reminds every one of his mother's extraordinary beauty, and whatever sin he commits the portrait changes from his inherited beauty of his mother toward his grandfather's nasty face. Not only during his childhood in the attic, but in the haunted house is Dorian Gray constantly imprisoned within his mother's time. Regarding mother-child relationship Žižek in his book, *Jacques Lacan: Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory, Volume 2*, quotes Lacanian idea,

The mother's role is her desire. That is of capital importance. Her desire is not something you can bear easily, as if it were a matter of indifference to you. It always leads to problems. The mother is a big crocodile, and you find yourself in her mouth. You never know what may set her off suddenly, making those jaws clamp down. This is mother's desire. (Žižek, 2003, p.250)

Dorian's mother, whom we never see in the novel, plays an important role during Dorian's life; additionally, the mother-figure, Basil Hallward has a paradoxical position; on the one hand, he adores Dorian so much that he paints his image on the canvas. The picture could be considered as the object of mother's desire to the extend Basil cannot accept to send it for exhibition; he rather prefers to keep it

secure inside the house-he is so protective in this way. When in the opening chapter Lord Henry applauds Basil for his master piece, "It is your best work, Basil, the best thing you have ever done... You must certainly send it next year to the Grosvenor [one of the most prestigious galleries]" (Wilde, 2001, p.5); however, Basil is persistent to keep the portrait; "I know you will laugh at me... but I really can't exhibit it. I have put too much of myself into it" (Wilde, 2001, p.6). He seems to be like a mother who is not able to tolerate being away from his child.

On the other hand, this object of mother's desire happens to be the source of Dorian's destruction. This fatal object that takes the position of third in duality of mother-child relationship is also the object of change which at the end tempts Dorian to kill its own creator, "an uncontrollable feeling of hatred for Basil Hallward came over him, as though it had been suggested to him by the image on the canvas" (p.125). Eventually, the sense of loath rose by the picture, leads Dorian to stab Basil by a knife in a savage way.

However, Dorian takes the stage of the imaginary of mother-child fusion to the symbolic order of society and language when he meets the eloquent speaker, Lord Henry. Nonetheless, this step does not make him abandon maternal intimacy. Dorian is already attracted to Basil Hallward's kindness and feminine manner; He has been painting the image of Dorian Gray, in fact he reminds Dorian of his mother-child union.

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as a traditional Gothic novel, the house stands for a site of oppression or entrapment. The house and more specifically the schoolroom plays a crucial role in the subjectivity of Dorian Gray. In Wilde's novel the reader confronts three indoor spaces; the whole mansion Dorian inherited from his grandfather, the schoolroom where Dorian was jailed and tortured during his childhood by his grandfather- this becomes a safe place for keeping the mysterious picture while doing any evil business in his adulthood, and last but not least, is the country estate where Dorian moves for relief.

The schoolroom can be read as a metaphor for the return of the repressed, a return that becomes complete when the ugly picture is moved there. Half way through the story, when Basil wants to spare the portrait for a month and send it for an exhibition, Dorian who is afraid of his real face on the canvas being exposed, finds the old room the most secure place in the world: a room "which had been specially built by the last Lord Kelso for the use of the little grandson whom, for his strange likeness to his mother, and also for other reasons, he had always hated and desired to keep at a distance" (Wilde, 2001.p.98). After many years of isolation the room constructed by the cruel grandfather for the poor grandson meets again Dorian with his soul morphing into the brutality of his grandfather.

Additionally, regarding Marxist ideas on 'class consciousness', which gives a sense of belonging to a class and lets the members of a specific class to comprehend the world merely through their class position and its historical role (Booker, 1995, p.74), seemingly, the mansion and that specific room is built by a class conscious society in which

the master and the working class are clearly distinguished. The “other reasons” mentioned in the novel could be interpreted as Dorian’s social class and his father’s poverty. His grandfather, the master, wanted him to grow up like an illegal subject not as the heir of a Lord but an outcast who lacks the protection and the paternal power at his side. Therefore, the house could also be seen as the representation of the economic master structure.

Dorian is the son of a ‘penniless’ man, so he is ideologically supposed to be kept apart without getting close to the center of the house. However, with the death of his grandfather, Dorian finds the freedom to enter the entire house. Actually, the freedom enables him to enter the master’s reign. He gains the power and experiences whatever pleasure he desires; nevertheless, at the end of the novel, he is excluded from the realm of the upper class, the house, and is exiled to the attic again. In fact, Dorian who has violated the master-slave ideological structure is to be punished by destroying the picture, committing suicide, that is.

It would not be appropriate to interpret Lord Kelso’s torture of his grandson in the schoolroom as the mere ordinary act of simple punishment. Lord Kelso may represent not only an individual but also the source of masculine authority for Dorian. Dorian reminds us that this power belongs to Victorian upper class. Dorian is thus excluded from the Symbolic Order by class. Apparently, Dorian experiences the process of castration through which a young child becomes a human subject in the attic. Žižek in his *How to Read Lacan* argues that castration is the gap between what I immediately am and the symbolic title that confers on me a certain status and authority. In this precise sense, far from being the opposite of power, phallus is synonymous with power; it is what gives power; it is what gives power to me. One has to think of the phallus then not as the organ that immediately expresses the vital force of my being, but as a kind of insignia, a mask that I put on in the same way that a king or judge puts on his insignia. (Žižek, 2007, p. 34)

Dorian’s incomplete castration is vivid in a social system. As Maya Lang discusses Dorian prefers to put the picture in the attic “for the attic to his mind, is the designated place for what is abject and ruinous” (Lang, 2007, p. 24). Thus, the place deals with violence in Dorian’s childhood, and death in his adulthood. Being reminiscent of human mortality, the attic had been repressed in his mind for long time.

Dorian’s metaphorical move and staying alone in an inn in a village far from the civilization and his falling in love with a young innocent beautiful girl could be interpreted as a flashback to his innocent good days he had with Sybil Vane. In fact, it is the beginning of his internal reformation and change towards his past purity. In closing chapters, Dorian Gray pretends to be a poor young country man with shabby clothes. According to Žižek, by “pretending to be something,” and by “acting as if we were something,” we presume a specific place in the intersubjective symbolic network, and it is this external place that defines our true position (Žižek, 2000, p. 60).

The picture is of importance in the subjectivity of Dorian Gray. The canvas is the border line between two different

worlds; in other words, the canvas of the portrait appears to be a boarder against the outside world of the real. According to Wood, Žižek explains that “although the Real is the inherent limit of the symbolic register, it also indicates what lies “beyond” the symbolic” (Wood, 2012, p.24). Thus the canvas signifies the border between the Žižekian symbolic and the Real. Diken argues that according to Žižek, “The difference between ‘reality’ and the ‘Real’ is that the former is constructed by the symbolic order (language), whereas the latter connotes what cannot be said in language, or symbolized” (Diken, 2009, p.68). Therefore, the portrait plays the role of a border between the reality depicted by the picture and the reality depicted by society.

Dorian, who adores the beauty and youth in the picture and is afraid of losing these two crucial characteristics, pledges that if only he always had them, he would give his soul in return. However, surprisingly Dorian has already exchanged his soul with the eternal beauty and youth in a destructive way. Therefore, the portrait starts a life-like existence carrying the burden of Dorian’s sins and immorality. As Žižek points out, “When I look at an object, the object is always already gazing at me”, (Žižek, 2000, p.109). In fact the gaze is dramatized in Wilde’s novel,

He went into his own room, looking somewhat puzzled... Finally he came back, went over to the picture, and examined it. In the dim arrested light that struggled through the cream-coloured silk blinds, the face appeared to him to be a little changed. The expression looked different. One would have said that there was a touch of cruelty in the mouth. It was strange..., he remembered it perfectly. He had uttered a mad wish that he himself might remain young, and the portrait grow old. (Wilde, 2001, p.73)

Seemingly, Dorian Gray’s identity formation reaches into a new realm. Dorian attains his identity through the gaze of the other, in this way; an uncanny idea appears in Wilde’s novel. Dorian and his portrait had already exchanged their places: the hero gains the identity of a piece of art that never changes and does not age. Dorian could never be sure when he was being looked at, and he was under the influence of an unknown power, he was actually within view. Consequently, Dorian has been subject to the gaze of observation of the picture that shapes his new identity. In *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture* Žižek notes that “the eye viewing the object is on the side of the subject, while the gaze is on the side of the object” (Žižek, 2000, p.109). The presence of the object which takes hold of the gaze is essential at the center of inter-subjective relationship.

Subject of Ideology

Žižek in his *Cultural Theory: An Anthology*, argues the definition of ideology based on Lacanian lack,

Ideology is the exact opposite of internalization of the external contingency: it resides in externalization of the result of an inner necessity, and the task of the critique of ideology here is precisely to discern the hidden necessity in what appears as mere contingency. (Žižek, 2011, p.230)

Dorian, therefore, acquires an inner necessity that may appear as mere contingency. In his case, the main hidden necessity is his unconscious lack. In fact, the traces of some kinds of lack in Dorian results in the grasping of the hidden ideology of his society. And consequently, the hidden ideologies are the cause of his traumatic experiences. Dorian Gray as the only grandson of a Lord may have had some fantasies acquired from his society and family; however, through the process of subjectivity, he comes across the 'kernel of the real'. During his childhood he loses his parents and the protection and paternal care of his grandfather in his side. He may also lack love, the lack that influences his entire of his life.

Having come across the issue of new Hedonism, Dorian Gray changes to a follower of ideology. So, one may claim that Dorian Gray is the outcome of the media and Lord Henry's manipulations. Therefore, the influence is so great that Dorian is haunted by the idea and is going after it.

This pursuit of pleasure might be best analyzed through Lacanian form of *jouissance* or enjoyment that moves the subject away from the accepted norms of the society. From this perspective, the way one should live a life in a society must exactly match with the 'dialectics of enjoyment' that form the society. Nonetheless, in the case of Dorian, his release from the accepted morality and norms of the society as well as his eternal youth and beauty gives him a more satisfying pleasure with physical enjoyment.

However, Chris McMillan in his book *Žižek and Communist Strategy: On the Disavowed Foundations of Global Capitalism*, elaborates on the concept of *jouissance*,

Jouissance goes beyond enjoyment or pleasure into a kind of troubling, excessive rapture that includes elements of transgression and suffering; jouissance is excessive because it serves no purpose, relating more to the death drive than any sense of 'biological instinct'. (Mc Millan, 2012, p. 52)

Consequently, regarding the concept of *jouissance* with its two binds, it appeared to be predictable that Dorian not only enjoys the 'excess rapture' of capital but also feels the suffering. Additionally, this class struggle and gap leads to inequality inside the society; under such a circumstance, people like Dorian or Lord Henry enjoy the place given to them in the system which forms the pain and suffering of the other subjects including Sybil and her brother. Seemingly, there is pain in pleasure and pleasure in pain.

Žižek points out that the doctrine of ideology is "destined to convince us for its 'truth', yet serving some unavowed particular power interest" (Žižek, 1995, p.7). The ideological doctrine of new Hedonism despite its mask of pleasure and enjoyment, serves the interests of power institutions and subjects, including Anti-Victorian theorists like Lord Henry.

Lord Henry is a medium for the ideology of new hedonism, yet where does Victorian hedonism originate from? "Hedonism means hunt for the self-indulgent pleasure that occurred when the Victorian morality, social order and Puritanism were being firmly established" ("Communication Theory, (n.d)"). The essay argues that Queen Victoria's strict attitude towards morality and sexual restrains brought about

a kind of Anti-Victorianism embedded on the evolution of erotic forms of art, rejection of capitalism, and emergence of individualism.

The famous phrase from Marx's *Capital*, "They do not know it, but they are doing it" forms the very rudimentary definition of ideology which leads to our false consciousness of the social reality. However, the Žižekian definition, however, emphasizes that "they know very well what they are doing, yet they are doing it" (Žižek, 2011, p.232). Accordingly, Lord Henry's actions are based on what he knows, but he does not know he knows. He tries his best to propagate his beliefs by his didactic words, the book he gives to Dorian, and ideas on marriage and love affairs.

Trauma

Trauma occurs in literature in the narration or literary devices such as images. For instance, there are some medical signs that imply the medical problems of Dorian Gray including his 'blue-veined hands' and 'the foolish or gross' gape of his mouth that arouse the sympathy of the readers.

As can be seen in this analysis, abjection and traumatic travel metaphors both exist in this novel; in fact, this work of aesthetic movement with ant-Victorian roots calls for action after many years of oppression of the artists. Obviously a piece of art from aesthetic movement was a call for change within society and for a reconstruction of social and economic power. The urge to flee is the result of historical trauma that manifested itself with traumatic incidents that could have happened for Dorian, traumas that led to raping and killing.

This study has also attempted to reevaluate literary trauma theory in order to examine Wilde's only novel. Most significantly, this study finds the importance that engaging historic trauma has with encouraging empowerment among those who have been repressed. Historical trauma is the result from a catastrophic event of the past. Also, the main motifs that are connected on this study are abjection and isolation. The feeling of abjection is quite evident from the movement of the speaker during the nights and from one place to another. But, where is Dorian's home? Because he is in constant motion, his location is ever changing; this movement is a search for an identity.

In order to investigate the traces of historic trauma on Oscar Wilde's text, one should explore the context where Oscar Wilde was living in. Having arrived in London, Oscar Wilde confronts the beginning of the Great Depression in the 1880s which shook the pillars of the state power and economy; however, Oscar Wilde's view on socialism was not economic; they were rather an artist's observations on social problems and problems of the artists in society. In his essay, for instance, Wilde describes socialism as a utopia in which artists can follow their artistic objects freely without the fear of tyrannies.

The text shows the reader the immense pain associated with being separated from loved ones; however, the main reasons for unrequited love, murders, and deconstruction of soul, remain unsaid. Thus, as trauma is not representative, the text leaves out the reasons for pain. The reader is only

given a perspective to focus on the isolation at the end of the novel. In fact, the hero finds himself in a situation where the impacts of his bitter memories have isolated him from the rest of the world.

The significant aspect of the text is the idea of abjection and dehumanization. The dehumanization begins when Dorian's wish comes true; he becomes a live portrait with constant beauty and youth. Entering such a world provokes a feeling of isolation. More painful is the fact that, Dorian, the prisoner in his frightening world is regarded as an idle by his acquaintances.

CONCLUSION

In order to investigate the traces of subjectivity in Wilde's novel, the researcher conducted a survey of the traces of three psychic orders, trauma and ideology and their impacts on subject formation of the characters and most specifically on Dorian Gray. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was regarded as a novel of portrait in which the picture, its artist and model were involved in a romantic triangle. The image changes constantly as a result of its owners' loss of identity. The portrait is basically the same as the Real Thing and the identity void, which remain incapable of being provided by the realm of language and signification. The empty subject is aspiring to gain his identity in the symbolic order, an attempt that fails. In fact, it is marked with the negativity of the death drive in the subject's failures to regain a lost past. The death drive represents the role of *jouissance*. Additionally, Žižekian view of ideology was applied on *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The characters are automatically acting up on the demands of their power structure. As Žižek argues, whenever one of the subjects makes an attempt to separate himself or herself from the power structure, ironically, excessive burden and pressure falls upon him or her. The ideology is totally internalized into the mind of Dorian. He becomes a tool at the hands of power when he is absorbed into Lord Henry's world of New-Hedonism and returns to *verux* or corrupted background of his maternal family. The concept of trauma was discussed in regard to Dorian, including the traumatic marriage of his mother, brutal attitude of

his grandfather, inferiority complex due to his paternal lower class background, and unhappy memory of Sybil's suicide; consequently, as a post-traumatic subject, he experienced symbolic death. Thus, a reading of Oscar Wilde's only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in light of Žižekian theories was unavoidable, and theories on the subject formation, ideology and trauma were applied to the novel.

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