

# From Self-identification to Self-destruction—A Mirror Image Interpretation of Dorian Gray’s Psychic Transformation\*

Yan Zhang  
Nantong University, China

**Abstract**—Oscar Wilde, the representative of Aestheticism, is the most controversial figure in English literary history. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, as his first and only novel, has been the object of study for a long time. The study of the protagonist from the psychoanalytic angle is still new and has potential research value for its in-depth analysis. According to Lacanian mirror theory, the self-construction of an individual is formed under the influence of the other’s mirror image. In the novel, under the influence of all the elements, Dorian experiences the psychic transformation and gradually ends up in self-destruction after alienating his self-identification. The thesis aims to explore the critical mirrors in the process of Dorian’s transformation in the light of Lagan’s theory so that the understanding the protagonist can be expanded.

**Index Terms**—mirror images, psychic transformation, self-identification, self-destruction

## I. INTRODUCTION

Oscar Wilde, a genius in English literature, showed excellent talent in creation of plays, novels and other literary forms. He is also regarded as the chief representative of the aesthetic movement. For a long time, he has been the center of controversy for both critics and readers for the unconventional themes of his works. However, one fact that we can not deny is that he is a writer with wit and keen observation. He was considered by some critics as one of the most successful playwrights and one of the greatest writers in the late Victorian era in Britain. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was his first and only novel. For more than one hundred years, it has brought disputes and controversy to itself as well as to Wilde. “There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all”; “Art never expresses anything but itself” (Wilde, 1994). Wilde’s comments in the preface of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* fully express his ideas on literary creations. Unluckily, since the book was published in Lippincott’s Magazine on 20 June 1890, severe attacks on him and the book have come one after another. However, together with criticism, research on them has never ceased in more than one hundred years.

Researchers have studied the work from the perspective of morals, aestheticism, socialism, history and psychology. Stuart Masons’s literary criticism on Wilde’s works, “Art and morality” and the later bibliography he writes are possibly the most important research in early Wilde’s study. His research sets the keystone for the later scholarship with a moral respective. Then critics paid more attention on Wilde’s private life. R. H. Sherarad’s *Life of Oscar Wilde* is a well-known overview of Wilde’s life, and Arthur Ransome’s *Oscar Wilde: A Critical Study* publicly disclosed that *De Profundis* is the prototype of Alfred Douglas. Later, other critical studies, such as Yeats “The Trembling of the Veil” began to review the novel in a more objective way and clarify some misunderstandings of Wilde. Most of the studies research the aesthetic or the moral themes embodied in the novel while the exploration on the psychological aspect of the novel is inadequate. Perhaps Wilde has no intention of composing the novel in a psychoanalytical way, but what he has achieved in exploring human psyche is ignored a lot.

In psychology, seeing others as a mirror can illustrate our own image and then help us form the conception of selves, which is called mirror effect. Referring to Lacanian Mirror stage theory, there is a period called mirror stage before entering the Oedipus stage. (The Oedipal stage is derived from Freud’s Oedipus complex. It is a period that a child, especially a male child, forms a special feeling for the parent of the opposite sex). At the mirror stage, the only way to realize the existence of self- image and to build self-identity is through the mirror effect. Then at the Oedipus stage, a child can make decisions and develop self-realization by using language to express his needs and demands. Coincidentally the growth and transformation of Dorian in the novel is similar to this mirror theory.

The paper tries to analyze the novel in a psychoanalytical perspective. By Lacanian theory, the growth and transformation of Dorian can be divided in two parts: the mirror stage and the Oedipus stage. The essay will explore how Dorian obtains his self-identification and ends up in his self-destruction under the influence of all kinds of mirror images in the two period of self-awareness development.

---

\* Supported by Social Science Research Program of Nantong Municipal Government (2014CNT0030)

## II. THE INFLUENCE OF TWO MIRRORS AT THE MIRROR STAGE

The essay believes that mirror stage is a period to realize self-image and to identify self. Before encountering with mirror image, Dorian was as pure as a piece of white paper. At the mirror stage, Dorian recognizes himself through two mirrors: the portrait and Sybil. However, in his period of self-identification, Dorian misunderstands the real self under the influence of the portrait and Sybil.

### A. *The Portrait: A Magic Mirror*

In the novel, the portrait plays a role as a carrier combining Dorian's inner world with his outer appearance. It can be regarded as a mirror with magic power on Dorian, through which Dorian forms his self image and loses himself at last. From his ignorance to self-realization and to self-destruction, the portrait is one of the most influential elements. To some degree, Dorian's transformation and his fate is inseparably connected to it, and even determined by it. At the beginning of the story, When Dorian catches a sight of the picture, he realizes his extraordinary beauty and his unique charm of youth, and starts to understand and recognize self for the first time. "There had been things in his boyhood that he had not understood. He understood them now". (Wilde, 1994) Through the image he obtains from the portrait, Dorian acquires an identity and begins to sense and interprets the outer world as an independent individual. "Life suddenly became fiery-colored to him. It seemed to him that he had been walking in fire" (Wilde, 1994). Apparently with passions and curious, Dorian is excited at the change of his life. He enjoys the self image forming through the portrait and he wants to keep his newly-formed perfect image. Thus when he finds the magic power of the portrait reflecting what happens to him and growing old and ugly instead for him, Dorian forms an idea that the picture changes and bears the consequences of his evil behaviors and that he can remain young and beautiful without any retribution. Dorian carefully pays attention to the changes of the portrait and confirms the truth of the magic power of it. He believes in the portrait and regards it as a second self. Considering it faithfully records the trace of transformation of him, Dorian keeps checking it and identifies his self image again and again. However, the portrait is not really Dorian's true self and thus Dorian's self-alienation is inevitable.

Readers may consider that Dorian burdens the portrait with his sins and psychological transformation, but the horrible truth is that the portrait simultaneously shapes Dorian in an invisible way. When Dorian becomes addicted to the portrait, his autonomy is gradually weakened and replaced by the portrait. It interprets Dorian's conceptions and even determines his choices and behaviors. When Dorian tries to be the master of the picture, only to find that he cannot free himself from the control of the picture. In fact, the portrait not only reflects the changes that happen, but also prognosticates what will happen to him. Thus the power that the portrait reveals to Dorian becomes so formidable which threatens him that he attempts to reform himself and desires new changes to save his soul. He looks forward to the sign of approval of the portrait with great hope after he allows a village girl who has fallen in love with him to get away. However, the answer disappoints him and a fact uncovered is that his good deeds cannot change the mirror picture. That is to say, his resolution to be good is denied by the portrait. Thus he begins to doubt himself and even loses the faith in the reformation of the self. At this moment, the portrait seems to reveal the most cruel side to Dorian while he is powerless and hopeless. "His beauty had been to him but a mask, his youth but a mockery." (Wilde, 1994) Therefore, Dorian is doomed to misrecognition and he fails to obtain the true self image, as a result of which, he chooses to destroy the picture to kill himself.

### B. *Sybil: An Idealized Mirror*

Sybil, the first love of Dorian, is connected with Dorian's sins and his moral decline. Her encounter with Dorian not only means the first romance in his life, but also brings changes to the picture, which further affects his life. Her genius for acting and flowing among multiple identities satisfies Dorian's desires. However, what captures Dorian is the illusion she creates, which can not only satisfy Dorian's desire but also pay for what he lacks. Dorian has a lonely and joyless boyhood. Dorian's grandfather had somebody kill Dorian's mother's husband. Dorian's mother, who could not bear the pain of losing her love, died in the same year. Given the background of Dorian's childhood and the environment in which he grows up, it can be argued that Dorian can find a kind of satisfaction from Sybil because of the desires he unconsciously cherishes. On one hand, Sibyl is charming and graceful. Her perfect female image reminds Dorian of the mother he misses so much. On the other hand, her innocent and childlike nature also makes Dorian recall the memory of his childhood life. To Dorian, his meeting with Sibyl has been to him a continuation of the mirror stage that is inspired through the impact the picture creates. As mentioned above, at the mirror stage, the baby begins to gain a sense of the "self" and comes to see the other. As he sees his self image from the portrait and begins to perceive himself differently, Dorian finds his image reflected in Sibyl, while she remains a distinctive "other". Dorian reconstructs the imaginary self and relocates his self-identity through the dual relationship with the mirror image and the romance with the actress. From Sibyl and her representation, Dorian recomposes himself and integrates the fragmented past of his. Sibyl sparks Dorian's imagination, for she not only mirrors him, but also represents for the period of his childhood, which is connected with the mother. Sybil provides Dorian a perfect mother image (Zhang Y, 2010). It can be argued that Dorian's craze for Sibyl includes a narcissistic and a desire like Oedipal Complex.

As the mirror functions in the process of Dorian's transformation, Sibyl's acting is what mirrors and supports Dorian's desire. We may state certainly that Dorian only loves Sibyl's perfectly assumed images, so she is only a

medium target of his love and her charm and attraction is fading away. Dorian constructs and deconstructs the imaginary self image, ending up with Sibyl's suicide. To Dorian, Sibyl is so excellent and can transform freely among various images, and she "is all great heroines of the world in one" (Wilde, 1994). Actually, Dorian mistakes the real Sibyl for his imaginary image. Therefore, what he loves seems to be always more than Sibyl herself. Without the idealized image, she means nothing to him. When she is too self-conscious to perform well, Dorian abandons her. And cruelly Dorian destroys both the actress and her acting career. Later in the story, Dorian suddenly shows curiosity about jewel, music, perfume, and even embroideries, which can all be considered as the endless journey in which he endlessly and blindly transfers his desired object, only to find it is in vain. The more he experiences, the more he desires to own. However, he could not love what he is really in love with, which can only be obtained in his narcissistic relation with the self. Thus he has to transfer his target frequently and loses himself in deep despair when his illusion is broken each time. There is no doubt that Sibyl plays a critical role among Dorian's imaginary images. And it is widely accepted that the appearance of Sibyl has immensely affected Dorian and her death also frightens him. However, after this crucial incident and short sadness, Dorian regards Sibyl's death as "a wonderful ending to a wonderful play" (Wilde, 1994) and keeps remaining exploring in his own world. It is not hard to regard Sibyl as a wonderful side of Dorian and the death of Sibyl indicates that Dorian loses some valuable characters. Apparently, Dorian fails to realize the importance of Sibyl and misses the chance to achieve right self-realization (Mu, 2007).

### III. THE MIRROR IMAGES FUNCTION AT THE OEDIPAL STAGE

Oedipal stage is a period that a child can express desires and demands by language to develop self-realization (Mason, 1971). When Dorian enters the Oedipal stage, he still recognizes self in the light of others and goes further on the way of self-alienation. During this period, a concept of the name of "Father" is proposed to function as a power to shatter imaginary self. The influence mainly comes from Oedipal "mother" Basil and Two "fathers", Lord Henry and James Vane.

#### A. *A Failed Oedipal Mother: Basil*

Many critics ignore Basil who seems to be a insignificant person in the novel. However, Mahaffer proposes that Basil is "not only as a man who secretly desires Dorian but also as his "mother, the creator of his physical image: the portrait that Basil has painted and labeled his masterpiece". (Mahaffer, 1994) Basil poses an Oedipal Mother in Dorian's transformation and growth. And his influence on Dorian cannot be ignored.

Basil is a talented painter, devoting himself to the art of painting. He is kind, warm-hearted and gentle, and he obeys all the social rules. "He has nothing left but his prejudices, his principles and his common sense" (Wilde, 1994) are the most accurate words to describe him. Basil believes that artists can penetrate the truth of life, and then they can reveal the truth in art as much as possible and as transparently as possible. Basil creates the portrait in a free way as he likes, through which Dorian gets a mistaken self-image. The fact is that Basil idolizes Dorian and gives the life of the portrait but he cannot shape the real Dorian as he likes. Unlike Henry, Basil's aesthetic is moral and positive. It can be said that he enlightens Dorian's mind and opens his eyes. And what he taught Dorian arouses his consciousness of self and influences his life in different ways. Dorian begins to perceive himself in a new way and with a new mind.

Basil regards beauty as the supremacy of art and peruses beauty and art for his life. He advocates the beauty and charm of the portrait with great passion, desires to dominate and mould Dorian in his own way and wants to keep Dorian away from the influence of Henry. He urges Dorian to obey social norms and expects Dorian to be as fine as before. From beginning to end, he is unwilling to give up his attempt to reform Dorian to be a good person. Basil's affection to Dorian is the same as mother's devotion towards the children. He wants to protect Dorian and free him from the control of Henry's poisonous theory. But what Basil does to amend Dorian has bothered and annoyed Dorian and it drives him to commit a murder to escape his preaching. Murdered by Dorian with a knife, Basil dies a martyr's death. Only in this way, can Dorian be free from all the fetters on him, can he degenerate completely. Then Dorian lives a double life and he becomes a kind of person as described by his own words "Each of us has heaven and hell in him" (Wilde, 1994). Dorian speeds up the alienation of his self-awareness after Basil's death.

#### B. *An Incompetent Father: Henry*

Lord Henry Wotton is still the most influential mirror in the transformation of Dorian. In the light of Lacan's theory, the child produces Oedipus complex only after the intervention of the father (Lacan, 1997). Compared with James Vane, Henry, who shapes Dorian with his powerful language, is an incompetent father for his negative influence on Dorian. As Henry's own words reveals that "all influence is immoral", he influences and molds Dorian according to his own theory about hedonism and aesthetic, bringing Dorian no good things. In other words, after Basil, he remolds Dorian following his own desire that he cannot achieve by himself. Before encountering Henry, Dorian is as clean as a piece of white paper. Henry successfully conveys his ideas to Dorian with beautiful language and guides him to pursue a kind of life which exacerbate his alienation and destruction.

"Words, Mere words! How terrible they were! How clear, and vivid, and cruel. One could not escape them" (Wilde, 1994). To some extent, Henry's comments strongly confirm one point that his language is power and Dorian cannot escape from them at all. His theory of aesthetic hedonism is poisonous but delightful, which persuades Dorian into

becoming hedonistic to pursue sensual pleasures. Aiming to be free from “the terror of God and society” (Wilde, 1994) and gain self-development, he tells Dorian to “Live! Live the wonderful life that is in you!” (Wilde, 1994) With natural marvelous beauty, Dorian is chosen by him to materialize his desire. Dorian realizes the fact that his perfect beauty and youth is temporary and his life goal is to keep beauty. According to Henry, Dorian begins to explore all kinds of sensational experience, which makes him lost in hedonism. However, Henry himself lives a normal life quiet different from both Dorian’s pursuit of sensual enjoyment and Basil’s discipline and morality. And his theories also seem to be paradoxical. For example, his new hedonism seems to combine aesthetic ideas with hedonism and form a wonderful picture about this kind of life. Besides, though he reveals that “all influence is immoral”, he has the attempts to educate Dorian with “revealing himself for himself” (Wilde, 1994). Therefore, Dorian cannot find the right way of life and becomes confused gradually. The negative influence of Henry serves as a barrier to interfere Dorian. Dorian’s real need to become an independent individual is shifted by Henry’s Desire. Thus in the interaction of Henry, Dorian is always self-misrecognized, failing to get right self-identity and keeping alienating himself.

### C. *A True Father: James Vane*

Compared with other characters, James can be easily ignored by critics and readers. This thesis puts emphasis on his alarming function by regarding him as a father that helps Dorian leave the mirror stage. It is hard for Dorian to give up imaginary self-identity until James breaks the up the relationship between Dorian and other mirrors. As we know, Dorian becomes a lost lamb in morality under the influence of all kinds of mirror images and he cannot abandon the control of them. He has to proceed to his sensual explorations and evade morality since he has fallen deep in self-alienation. It is James who helps him break the relationship with other mirror images and starts to realize self for a second time. Or it may be more accurate to say that his death is of critical effect in Dorian’s transformation.

In the light of the plots of the novel, without a father, James plays a role of protector for his sister, Sybil. To revenge for Sybil’s death, he invades into Dorian’s world. Once James and Dorian are in the same room and he has a chance to kill Dorian but Dorian deceives him. After eight years, he comes back to kill Dorian again. But accidentally he is shot by one of the hunter in a hunting game. Looking at his dead body, Dorian’s eyes are full of tears because of a feel of relief. Though James attempt ends up in failure, he inspires Dorian’s resolution in self-reformation. Meanwhile, his corpse makes Dorian notice the punishment of his sins and evil doings. According to Lawler, “All excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its own punishment”(1988).

Frightened by James’s death, Dorian decides on changing his life style, with great hope to transform and save himself. Hoping to gain peace and uncover a new beginning, Dorian tries to change himself with sparing a pure girl as the first good deed. However, “He could see no change, save that in the eyes there was a look of cunning, and in the mouth the curved wrinkle of the hypocrite”.(Wilde, 1994)The picture remains unchanged, which makes Dorian cry with pain and indignation. Dorian eventually loses faith and realizes that his reformation ends up in failure. In the end, he attempts to stab the picture with the aim to “kill the past...the monstrous soul-life” (Wilde, 1994). But the result is that the portrait becomes as beautiful as before while Dorian becomes an ugly old man with a knife in his heart. Failing to ruin the picture, Dorian demolishes himself. Through the way of destroy the picture, he consequently destroy himself. From self-identification to self-destruction, Dorian’s exploration in his inner world ends up in failure. The worse is that he cannot have right self-identity and enters the error of self-alienation.

## IV. CONCLUSION

Like a child who finds his image in a mirror, an individual comes to recognize ego only through the mirror reflection. Through the mirror images, one comes to gain a sense of self. According to Lacanian Mirror Stage theory, “the psychic process of achieving the subject is based on the harmonious relationship between the inner world of the individual and the other. It is through the self-image reflected in others that each individual integrates himself and grows the identification” (1997). In the novel, Dorian begins to recognize himself through the mirror portrait and other images. Then he is aware of himself as an independent one, trying to develop himself fully. However, under the influence of the mirror images, Dorian misrecognizes himself and finally turns into a devil because he gets confused between “others” and “himself”. At the mirror stage, Dorian forms his self image through the picture and actress Sybil. Unfortunately, the image he gets from reflection is an imaginary, visional and mistaken identification. When Dorian enters the period of Oedipus, by the intervention of the Name of the Father, he realizes the image he got before was mistaken and decides to tear down the illusion.

During the process of Dorian’s transformation, the elements functions as mirror images are influential. The influential mirrors show respective influence in the process from Self-identification to self-destruction. Henry is of view that “All influence is immoral”, (Wilde, 1994) which is right to the point. The picture, which represents the artist’s desire, is the signifier of Dorian and the real Dorian is substituted. Dorian is molded by the picture. The picture reflects the change of Dorian’s inner world and guides his behaviors, and gradually, even decides him. At last, Dorian cannot go back and he decides to destroy the portrait, and kill himself. Maybe death is the only way for Dorian to free himself from evil. And it is the only way for Dorian to shatter his self-misrecognition. Sybil represents a kind of maternal charm and beauty, which builds up an idol image of mother for Dorian. But when Dorian realizes the differences between his imaginary figure and the real Sybil, he rejects her attraction and abandons her. Basil appreciates Dorian’s beauty and

helps him aware of his beauty. His desire functions on Dorian through his picture. Henry is an incompetent father and has no positive influence on Dorian. Henry guides Dorian through his talk about his own theories of aesthetic Hedonism. Dorian is addicted to glorious things and indulges in sensual pleasure. James, after his death, like a real father, help Dorian break the relationship with others, and thus finish his final transformation.

Under the influence of all the mirrors, Dorian starts to put theories he receives into practice and explore his inner world. He learns to identify himself and becomes an independent individual, trying to shake off the influence from others. Unfortunately, he fails to be aware of the true self and has to terminate himself. His destruction is doomed since he has been long on the way of immoral self-alienation. In a word, the effects of the different mirrors are decisive factors in the process of Dorian's self-identification to self-destruction.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Lacan, J. (1997). *The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience*, (pp.57-126) New York: Norton press.
- [2] Lawler, D. (1988). *The Picture of Dorian Gray: Authoritative Texts, Backgrounds, Reviews and Reactions, Criticism*, (pp.1-23) New York: Norton.
- [3] Mahaffey, V. (1994). "Pere-version and Im-mer-e-sion: Idealized Corruption in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*", (pp.189-206) Michigan: University of Michigan Press.
- [4] Mason, S. (1971). *Art and Morality*, (pp. 44-46) New York: Haskell House.
- [5] Mu, Yan. (2007). *The Aesthetic "Les Fleurs du Mal"—The Expression of Wilde's Aesthetic Conception*. Master thesis, Jilin University 11-15.
- [6] Raby, Peter. (2001). *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, (pp. 55-64.) Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Education Press.
- [7] Ransome, Arthur. (2009) *Oscar Wilde: A Critical Study*, (pp. 89-99) South Carolina: Createspace.
- [8] Roden, Frederick. (2004) *Plagave Advances in Oscar Wilde Studies*, (pp.11-34) New York: Plagave Macmillan.
- [9] Sherard, R. H. (2013) *The Life of Oscar Wilde*,(pp. 90-100) New York: The Classics.
- [10] Wilde, O. (1994). *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. London: Penguin Books.
- [11] Wilde, O. (1962). *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*. London: Rupert Hart-Davis.
- [12] Yeats, William Butler. (1998). *The Trembling of the Veil William Butler Yeats, Autobiographies* (pp. 156-158) New Jersey: Prentice Hall & IBD.
- [13] Zhang, Jieming. (2000). *Wilde's Aestheticism in The Picture of Dorian Gray* *Foreign Literature Studies*, (4) 32-39.
- [14] Zhang, Taibing. (2010). *Aestheticism Entangled in Morality On Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Master thesis, Chongqing University 9-21.
- [15] Zhang, Yuan. (2010). *Mirror Image and Self-identification—A Lacanian Interpretation of the The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Master thesis, Shangdong Normal University 33-40.
- [16] Zhou, Xiaoyi. (1994). *Aestheticism and Consumerz Culture: Contradictoriness in Wilde and its Social Significance*. *Foreign Literature Review* (03) 95-100.

**Yan Zhang** was born in Nantong, China in 1980. She received her Master degree in foreign literature from Shanghai University of Foreign Trade, China in 2009.

She is currently a teacher in the School of Foreign Languages, Nantong University, Nantong, China. Her research interests include British and American literature.