



The Narcissism of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

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Abstract

As a core concept in modern psychology and psychoanalysis, Freud's theory of narcissism offers a crucial perspective for exploring the complex human mental structure and bears profound connections with the myth of Narcissus in literary contexts. Oscar Wilde's classic novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is regarded as a modern reworking of the Narcissus tradition. Through the psychological alienation of its characters caught between aestheticism and extreme egocentrism, the work vividly reveals the pathological traits and destructive consequences of narcissism. However, this has not attracted enough academic attention. While recent scholarship has extensively examined Wilde's gothic features (Robinson, 2021) and his aesthetic sublimity (Behroo, 2024), the precise application of Freud's developmental model of primary and secondary narcissism to adult character pathology in the novel remains underexplored. Drawing on Freud's theory of narcissism, this paper conducts a systematic analysis of the underlying mental structures and cognitive predicament embedded in the novel.

Subject Areas

Literature

Keywords

Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Narcissism

1. Introduction

The Picture of Dorian Gray (1891) is a Gothic philosophical novel written by Oscar Wilde. Upon its release, it faced fierce criticism and condemnation from British critics and sparked widespread controversy, later serving as incriminating evidence during Wilde's trials. In the 20th century, evolving social values and literary theories brought a radical shift in its academic reception.

Oscar Wilde's life and works show an always haunting obsession with the figure of Narcissus. Narcissus appears in the poems "Désespoir", "Sonnet Written in Holy Week at Genoa", "The Burden of Itys", "Charmides", "Athanasia" and "The Garden of Eros", as well as in letters to Louis Wilkinson and Alfred Douglas. And in the novel, there are at least four occasions where Dorian is arguably likened to Narcissus, most notably when the narrator explicitly describes Dorian acting "in boyish mockery of Narcissus" ([1]: p. 102), and when Lord Henry refers to him as a "brainless, beautiful creature" made for aesthetic contemplation ([1]: p. 7). As Wilde explicitly wrote in a letter to Ralph Payne in 1894: It contains much of me in it. Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry what the world thinks me: Dorian what I would like to be—in other ages, perhaps. This fully demonstrates that the work is far more than literary fiction. It is a spiritual distillation and self-projection of Wilde's aesthetic ideals, repressed desires and identity anxieties.

2. The Theory of Freud's Narcissism

Rooted in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the concept of narcissism derives from the myth of Narcissus. Possessed of peerless beauty yet haughty in disposition, Narcissus spurned all suitors including the nymph Echo, incurring the retribution of Nemesis, goddess of vengeance. Falling in love with his own reflection in a spring, he succumbs to unrequited agony even after realizing his beloved is none other than himself, wasting away until death and transforming into a daffodil. "In sexology and psychoanalysis, the term 'narcissism' was coined by the German psychiatrist Paul Näcke in 1899, as a translation of Havelock Ellis's notion of a 'Narcissuslike tendency', introduced in 1898 to denote a certain form of auto-erotic perversion" [2]. Soon afterwards, Sigmund Freud published a paper on narcissism in 1914 called "On Narcissism: An Introduction". According to Freud's observations, "Narcissism in this sense would not be a perversion, but the libidinal complement to the egoism of the instinct of self-preservation" [3]. Freud further categorized narcissism into primary narcissism and secondary narcissism. Primary narcissism refers to the earliest stage of life, in which infants lack a coherent sense of "self", and all libido is cathected toward instincts for survival and pleasure. As the self matures and the individual grows more capable of perceiving the external world, part of the libido originally invested in the self gradually shifts to external objects. The individual gains instinctual gratification through interactions with other people and things, a process known as object-love. Yet if during this developmental process, factors such as illness, severe setbacks or psychotic regression block the libido directed at external objects and prevent it from being gratified, libido will be withdrawn from the outside world and retreat back into the self, losing its capacity to attach to external objects normally. This gives rise to secondary narcissism.

It is important to clarify how this clinical, developmental model is adapted to adult fictional characters. Although Freud initially conceptualized this framework to describe infantile development and severe clinical pathology, literary psychoa-

analysis adapts these stages to interpret adult character alienation. In this study, Freud's developmental schema is utilized systematically to analyze how adult characters fixate or regress when their libidinal investments in the external world are thwarted.

3. The Primary Narcissism in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

3.1. The Primary Narcissism of Dorian Gray

Dorian Gray's primary narcissism is reflected in his pathological obsession with his own extraordinary beauty. At the beginning of the novel, Dorian is unaware of his striking beauty. However, this condition is shattered the moment Dorian beholds his portrait painted by Basil and hears Lord Henry's remarks about the transience of youth. Stepping forward, he sees his own portrait. "When he saw it he drew back, and his cheeks flushed for a moment with pleasure. A look of joy came into his eyes, as if he had recognized himself for the first time. He stood there motionless and in wonder, dimly conscious that Hallward was speaking to him, but not catching the meaning of his words. The sense of his own beauty came on him like a revelation. He had never felt it before" ([1]: p. 27). As Dorian gazes at his depiction in the portrait, he perceives his supreme beauty fully and clearly for the first time, marking the awakening of his primary narcissism. Influenced by Lord Henry's praises of youth and his grim warning that beauty fades swiftly, Dorian realizes his charm is transient. This fear of losing his omnipotent self drives him to make that diabolical vow: "'How sad it is!' murmured Dorian Gray, with his eyes still fixed upon his own portrait. 'How sad it is! I shall grow old, and horrible, and dreadful. 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!'" ([1]: p. 28). By offering to "give his soul", Dorian demonstrates the ultimate mechanism of primary narcissism: the absolute prioritization of the physical self-image over any spiritual or external connection. Dorian's primary narcissism never fades with the passage of time; on the contrary, it swells increasingly under Lord Henry's influence. He constantly instills in Dorian his philosophy of hedonism and sensualism: "Let nothing be lost upon you. Be always searching for new sensations. Be afraid of nothing... A new Hedonism-that is what our century wants" ([1]: p. 25); "that is one of the great secrets of life-to cure the soul by means of the senses, and the senses by means of the soul" ([1]: p. 23). These philosophies exert a profound influence on Dorian, driving him to explore, experience and venture into uncharted territory. He grows intensely curious about the world around him and even observes others obsessively in an attempt to comprehend their lives. He is not only captivated by his eternal beauty, but also relentlessly pursues novel sensual experiences, hoping to fill the indefinable emptiness deep within his heart. Yet this growing self-absorption eventually erodes Dorian's personality. He turns cold and selfish, no longer caring about others' feelings or moral constraints. His

actions recapitulate the core mechanism of Narcissus' tragedy.

3.2. The Primary Narcissism of Basil

Basil's primary narcissism is expressed in his projection of the ideal self onto Dorian, whom he ultimately identifies with himself. Basil never regards Dorian as a stranger with an independent life. Instead, he sees him as the incarnation of the ultimate aesthetic perfection, pure personality and unfettered artistic ideals that he has spent his whole life pursuing. Basil spoke highly of Dorian: "He is all my art to me now" ([1]: p. 13). He made it clear: "But in some curious way, his personality has suggested to me an entirely new manner in art, an entirely new mode of style. I see things differently, I think of them differently. I can now recreate life in a way that was hidden from me before" ([1]: p. 13). Under Dorian's influence, Basil created the finest works of his career, above all the portrait he painted of Dorian. Lord Henry even hailed it as "one of the greatest things in modern art" ([1]: p. 27). However, when Lord Henry suggested putting the portrait on public display, Basil unconsciously revealed his secret: "I have put too much of myself into it" ([1]: p. 6). By stating he has put "too much of himself" into the canvas, Basil literally articulates the Freudian concept of ego-libido cathexis. The artwork is not an independent entity, but a reservoir of his own narcissistic energy. He projects all his unfulfilled romantic longings and ultimate pursuit of beauty onto this youthful figure, thus achieving an aesthetic transcendence over the mundane reality on a spiritual level. When Dorian became intrigued by Lord Henry's cynical theories or began to reveal the worldly desires typical of young people in reality, Basil felt not ordinary worry, but a panic stemming from the fragmentation of the self. He repeatedly tried to correct Dorian's conduct through moral preaching, attempting to force him back into that "pure shell". The reason is that Basil seeks to preserve the image of Dorian's ideal self.

3.3. The Primary Narcissism of Henry

Lord Henry's primary narcissism resides in his unbounded intellectual arrogance, linguistic narcissism, and a sense of omnipotence that places him above worldly morality. While Henry's behavior is often categorized simply as cynicism, from a Freudian perspective, this cynicism is merely a defensive facade masking his deep-seated linguistic narcissism. Henry holds the conviction that neither the general public nor his acquaintances can reach his spiritual stature. Alone, he believes, he sees through the hypocrisy of conventional morality and discerns that the essence of life lies in desire and pleasure. Henry is convinced that his intellect alone embodies lucid and profound wisdom. He further turns language, especially paradoxes and epigrams, into an "acoustic mirror" that affirms his own existence. In the numerous dinner parties and salons depicted in the novel, Lord Henry always dominates the conversation. He constantly voices amoral and iconoclastic remarks at social gatherings, not to persuade others or reach consensus, but to repeatedly validate the transcendence of his own thinking through the originality

and subversiveness of his words. He speaks not for communication, but to hear his own thoughts reverberate in language. When he utters provocative remarks such as “to get back one’s youth, one has merely to repeat one’s follies” ([1]: p. 42), he takes delight not in the pursuit of truth, but in the sense of validation that reinforces his intellectual superiority as his ideas echo back through speech. The structural neatness of this paradox demonstrates how Henry’s libido is invested solely in his own intellect rather than in human connection. His words serve as a closed loop of self-gratification. He exercises an absolute intellectual hegemony, stripping others of their status as independent interlocutors and reducing them to mere resonators for his intellectual experiments. He never seeks genuine understanding of his philosophy from others, only to awe and subdue them with his rhetoric. As such, his linguistic narcissism largely shields him from setbacks in reality, for he reigns supreme in the realm of language. Ultimately, Lord Henry’s linguistic narcissism and intellectual arrogance breed a sense of omnipotence that transcends worldly morality. He not only scorns the rigid, hypocritical moral dogmas of the Victorian era, but also seeks to negate the very legitimacy of morality as a concept. He proclaims: “All influence is immoral” ([1]: p. 20), and extends this assertion to every sphere of life.

4. The Secondary Narcissism in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

4.1. The Secondary Narcissism of Dorian Gray

Dorian Gray’s secondary narcissism lies in his morbid self-obsession, whereby he regards the corruption of his soul as an object of aesthetic appreciation. After Dorian fully withdraws his libido from genuine external object relations, such psychic energy does not dissipate, but instead becomes entirely fixated upon the portrait that bears the ravages of time on his behalf. He grows fascinated by observing the portrait’s transformations, believing it lays bare the true state of his soul. The first alteration takes place when he resolves to abandon Sibyl: “there was a touch of cruelty in the mouth” ([1]: p. 87). The second change occurs after Sibyl takes poison: “The vicious cruelty that marred the fine lines of the mouth had appeared” ([1]: p. 101). After that, Dorian’s attitude toward the portrait underwent a shift from fear to voyeurism, and finally to obsession. He eventually fell into morbid self-infatuation. “Once, in boyish mockery of Narcissus, he had kissed, or feigned to kiss, those painted lips that now smiled so cruelly at him. Morning after morning, he had sat before the portrait wondering at its beauty, almost enamoured of it, as it seemed to him at times” ([1]: p. 102). Here, the text explicitly invokes the Narcissus myth but adapts it into secondary narcissism. Dorian’s libido, having retreated from the external world following his rejection of Sibyl, fixates not on his living body, but on the corrupted reflection of his ego. The act of “feigning to kiss” the cruel lips turns moral decay into a source of auto-erotic pleasure. Stripped of all moral guilt, the degradation and corruption of his soul are fully transformed into an aesthetic object for his solitary contemplation. Fueled by the yellow book Lord Henry gave him, this form of secondary narcissism becomes

fully institutionalized and pathological. He frequented opium dens in London's East End, chasing sensual thrills amid the murky haze. He delighted in instilling the ideas of reckless hedonism in talented young men and took pleasure in leading them astray. For instance, he reduced the once innocent Adrian Singleton to a degenerate addict, forced the promising Sir Henry Ashton to flee Britain amid scandal, and even ruined the reputation of Lord Henry's sister, Lady Gwendolen. After each crime and every act of corruption, he would slip up to the attic. In the dim light, he gazed alternately at his own youthful, handsome face in the mirror and the hideous, aged visage in the portrait, deriving immense pleasure from the stark contrast.

4.2. The Secondary Narcissism of Basil

Basil's secondary narcissism is also expressed in his attempt to salvage his crumbling belief system by redeeming his degraded object. Dorian's degeneration and alienation directly dismantle the core of Basil's beliefs, triggering intense narcissistic existential anxiety. When Dorian dismisses Sibyl's suicide as a romantic tragedy, Basil is utterly appalled and strives to bring back the morally uncorrupted Dorian of the past. Nevertheless, "Basil attempts to assert his own moral perspective but fails to sway Dorian and ultimately yields to him, thus tacitly acknowledging his own dependence on Dorian's identity" [4]. As rumors of Dorian's moral corruption and dissolute lifestyle spread across London's high society, Basil fell into a severe spiritual crisis. To prevent the total collapse of his belief system and sense of self-worth, Basil resorted to extreme defense mechanisms. He refused to acknowledge the evident facts and tried to disassociate Dorian from those scandals. After meeting Dorian, his convictions were only reinforced. "Sin is a thing that writes itself across a man's face. It cannot be concealed. People talk sometimes of secret vices. There are no such things. If a wretched man has a vice, it shows itself in the lines of his mouth, the droop of his eyelids, the moulding of his hands even" ([1]: p. 143). Basil's psychological defenses compelled him to block out all negative news about Dorian. Yet reality proved his assumptions about human nature wrong. He uncovered the portrait. "An exclamation of horror broke from the painter's lips as he saw in the dim light the hideous face on the canvas grinning at him. There was something in its expression that filled him with disgust and loathing" ([1]: p. 149). This desperate assertion reveals Basil's mechanism of denial. His attempt to save Dorian is not an act of genuine altruism; rather, because Dorian is an extension of Basil's own ego, Dorian's corruption threatens Basil with narcissistic fragmentation. Saving the "root of this degeneration" is fundamentally an act of self-preservation. To keep himself from utter ruin, he had to find a way to salvage his crumbling belief system, and the only solution lay in saving the root of this degeneration—Dorian Gray. He urged Dorian to kneel and pray, hoping to reverse the irreversible path of moral decline through religious power, so as to restore his faith in Dorian, in art, and in the moral order. Superficially, this appears to be a grief-stricken friend striving to redeem the soul of a lost youth. Be-

neath the surface, however, it is the final struggle of a person with secondary narcissism when their self teeters on disintegration.

4.3. The Secondary Narcissism of Henry

Lord Henry's secondary narcissism manifests as a self-protective mechanism that masks inner fear through emotional detachment and escapism. He deliberately divests himself of authentic emotional obligations as a husband, friend or active participant in life. His marriage serves as the most telling example. Throughout the novel's social gatherings, he repeatedly undermines the solemnity of marriage with paradoxical remarks, claiming that "Men marry because they are tired; women, because they are curious: both are disappointed" ([1]: p. 47). On the surface, such remarks are witty satires on the institution of marriage, yet they lay bare his profound fear of enduring emotional bonds. Lord Henry and his wife Victoria shared no genuine emotional connection, their relationship confined merely to superficial, non-intrusive social formalities. When Victoria eventually left him for another man, Lord Henry showed none of the grief or anger a typical husband would feel. Instead, he brushed the matter aside with flippant paradox: "Of course married life is merely a habit, a bad habit. But then one regrets the loss even of one's worst habits" ([1]: p. 202). Henry's flippancy here should be strictly distinguished from emotional resilience; it is a profound narcissistic withdrawal. By reducing a marital breach to the loss of a "bad habit", he employs intellectual rationalization to shield his ego. His refusal to acknowledge hurt implies that admitting an external other possesses the power to break his defenses is intolerable. His detachment stems not from true magnanimity, but from the intense fear of emotional trauma typical of those with secondary narcissism. Furthermore, Lord Henry's escapism is also evident in his fervent advocacy of the stance: "To become the spectator of one's own life is to escape the suffering of life" ([1]: p. 107). He urges Dorian to indulge in all manner of wild sensual thrills, yet he never truly partakes in those dangerous pursuits himself. As Basil once remarked of Lord Henry, "You never say a moral thing, and you never do a wrong thing. Your cynicism is simply a pose" ([1]: p. 8). Henry dreads the moral repercussions, physical decline and social repercussions that real actions may bring. Well aware that plunging into depravity as Dorian does would invite the backlash of real causality, he shrewdly yet cowardly redirects his libido into nothing but observation. By watching others suffer and degenerate, he reassures himself that he remains safely on the shore.

5. Summary and Conclusion

In conclusion, drawing upon Freud's psychoanalytic theory, this paper systematically reveals the profound cognitive predicaments and psychological alienation embedded in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The novel serves as a brilliant modern reconstruction of the Narcissus myth, intricately mapping the destructive progression from primary to secondary narcissism across its three

central figures. Dorian Gray's tragic trajectory illustrates a fatal shift from an initial obsession with his physical beauty to a morbid, institutionalized infatuation with his own moral corruption. Basil Hallward's narcissism, rooted in the projection of his ultimate aesthetic ideals onto Dorian, ultimately collapses into a severe existential crisis when his idealized object degenerates. Meanwhile, Lord Henry Wotton constructs an invincible facade through linguistic narcissism and intellectual arrogance, eventually resorting to emotional detachment and escapism as self-protective mechanisms against real-world trauma. Together, these three characters not only embody the catastrophic consequences of extreme egocentrism and unchecked aestheticism, but they also reflect Oscar Wilde's internal spiritual distillation and identity anxieties. By dissecting these pathological mental structures, the novel transcends mere Gothic fiction, offering a timeless critique of the human psyche when libido is dangerously withdrawn from the external world and trapped within the self.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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