



OBSESSION WITH PHYSICAL IMMORTALITY IN OSCAR WILDE'S THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY

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Abstract

This study examines the obsession with physical immortality in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* using Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis, specifically the id, ego, and superego. It aims to identify the underlying factors driving this obsession and analyze its detrimental effects on psychological stability, moral integrity, and social relationships. Using a qualitative narrative approach, the novel is the primary data source. The results show the obsession stems from the id's dominance, pursuing pleasure and eternal youth, exacerbated by social pressure internalized through the superego. The negative impact is seen in personality disintegration (anxiety, paranoia), social isolation, and moral decay. The research concludes the obsessive pursuit, driven by uncontrollable desires and social pressures, is self-destructive. These findings are relevant to literary context and contemporary discussions on mental health and beauty standards. The study offers an analytical framework for understanding contemporary obsessions (like material success or popularity) rooted in an imbalance between the id, ego, and superego, often at the expense of psychological well-being and human relationships.

Keywords: obsession, physical immortality, psychoanalysis, id-ego-superego.

1. Introduction

In contemporary life, obsession with physical appearance and the desire to stay young are increasing in line with developments in technology and social media. The desire to maintain physical beauty and immortality is not only a personal phenomenon, but is also constructed by increasingly unrealistic social and cultural standards. Social media, such as Instagram and TikTok, promote an image of perfect beauty through the use of digital filters and augmented reality, creating an illusion of instant perfection that blurs the line between reality and fantasy. According to Garcia (2023), excessive use of beauty filters can lead to 'body dysmorphic disorder,' where individuals lose the ability to accept their real appearance in the real world, a phenomenon that reflects psychological dynamics similar to the character Dorian Gray in Oscar Wilde's novel.

The obsession with physical immortality is not a new phenomenon, but has appeared in various forms throughout history, from mythology to literature. In

Dayak mythology, for example, there is the legend of Kuyang, a woman who sacrificed her humanity by practising black magic in order to maintain her beauty and physical immortality, but instead turned into a cursed monster. This story is a powerful metaphor for how the obsession with physical immortality can destroy the essence of humanity. In the context of Western literature, this theme is explored in depth in Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), which tells the story of a handsome young man who is so afraid of ageing that he is willing to sell his soul to remain young forever. Through the character of Dorian Gray, Wilde not only criticises Victorian society's worship of physical appearance, but also highlights the inner conflict between the desire to maintain eternal beauty and the moral demands that every individual must face.

This study aims to analyse the psychological and social factors that drive the obsession with physical immortality in the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and the negative impact it has on mental stability, moral integrity, and social



relationships. Using Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory, particularly the concept of the id, ego, and superego personality structure, this study seeks to uncover the psychological mechanisms underlying Dorian Gray's obsession and how the imbalance between these three personality components leads to self-disintegration. Furthermore, this study places the novel in a contemporary context by linking it to contemporary social phenomena such as pressure to conform to beauty standards, digital filter culture, and anxiety about ageing in the modern era.

This study uses Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis theory as a tool to understand the obsession with physical immortality. This theory, particularly through the concepts of the id (basic instincts), ego (conscious mind), and superego (conscience), provides a clear framework for analysing the internal conflict between the natural desire to remain young and the moral demands of society. In this context, the ego often fails to be an effective mediator, resulting in destructive behaviour. The novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is the main source of data because its powerful story depicts the inner struggle of its main character between maintaining eternal youth and upholding human values. Through an in-depth analysis of this novel, the study aims not only to reveal the psychological conflict in the literary work, but also to connect it with today's social reality. In the digital age, the pressure to appear perfect and young comes not only from one's immediate environment, but is also massively reinforced by social media, beauty filters, and unrealistic visual standards. Thus, this study seeks to bridge the insights of classical psychoanalysis with contemporary issues, demonstrating that literature remains relevant as a mirror for understanding modern human anxieties about identity, ageing, and self-esteem amid the increasingly powerful tide of visual culture.

The significance of this research lies in its contribution to literary and psychological studies, particularly in

understanding the representation of physical obsession in literary works and its relevance to current mental health issues. Amidst the rise of visual culture and pressure to appear perfect on social media, the story of Dorian Gray serves as a reflective mirror that reminds us of the dangers of when the desire for physical immortality neglects spiritual and moral development. Thus, this research is expected to not only enrich the realm of literary analysis, but also provide a critical perspective in interpreting contemporary obsessions with physical appearance and immortality in modern society.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Obsession with physical immortality

Obsession is defined as a recurring thought or urge that is difficult to control, often disrupting daily life. In the context of physical immortality, obsession refers to a strong urge to maintain physical existence indefinitely, avoiding ageing and death. According to the Foundation (2021), physical immortality is understood as humanity's attempt to stay alive biologically through technology that delays death. However, Williams (2020) criticises this desire, arguing that a physically immortal life can lead to boredom and a loss of meaning, as the goals that give life meaning will be exhausted over time.

Psychologically, the obsession with physical immortality does not arise in a vacuum, but is triggered by complex interactions between internal and external factors. Internal factors include existential anxiety about death, fear of losing one's identity tied to youthful appearance, and a narcissistic desire to maintain physical attractiveness permanently. Meanwhile, external factors include social and cultural pressures that glorify youth and physical perfection as symbols of success and moral value. In the modern era, social media and the beauty industry further reinforce this obsession by promoting unrealistic beauty standards and offering instant solutions from digital filters to cosmetic procedures that create the illusion of overcoming the nature of ageing.



In literature, the obsession with physical immortality is often a theme that reflects humanity's fear of death and desire to transcend biological limitations. The novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a perfect example to explore this theme, in which the protagonist sacrifices his morality and humanity in order to maintain eternal youth. Through *Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde not only depicts the destructive consequences of such an obsession, but also criticises a society that places physical appearance above inner integrity.

Furthermore, *Dorian Gray's* story becomes a powerful metaphor for how the desire to defy the laws of nature, in this case the ageing process, ultimately leads to psychological isolation, moral disintegration, and self-destruction.

Furthermore, the obsession with physical immortality is closely related to the concepts of perfection and control. In the context of Freudian psychoanalysis, this obsession can be seen as a form of ego defence against anxiety about death a mechanism called 'denial of mortality'. However, attempts to control one's physical fate absolutely often backfire and become a form of psychological imprisonment, where individuals become slaves to their own self-image. In literature, this pattern is not only found in Wilde's works, but also in characters such as Dr. Faustus, who sold his soul for eternal knowledge, or in modern narratives about transhumanism and the search for digital immortality. Thus, the study of the obsession with physical immortality in literature not only reveals individual psychological conflicts, but also highlights humanity's struggle with its most fundamental existential limits.

2.2 Freud's Psychoanalysis Theory

Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory provides a useful framework for analysing psychological conflicts in literary works. Freud divides the structure of the human personality into three components: the id, the ego, and the superego. The id operates on the pleasure principle, pursuing immediate gratification of desires without

regard for consequences. The ego functions as a mediator between the id and reality, attempting to fulfil the id's desires in a realistic manner. The superego represents the internalised moral voice of social and cultural values.

In the context of obsession, Freud explains that when the id dominates, a person can lose moral judgement and pursue only momentary pleasure. Conversely, an overly rigid superego can create unrealistic demands for perfection, causing anxiety and inner conflict. When the ego fails to perform its function as mediator, psychological imbalance can occur, which in turn triggers obsessive and destructive behaviour.

This study uses Freud's psychoanalytic theory to analyse *Dorian Gray's* obsession with physical immortality. Through this approach, it is possible to understand how primitive drives, social pressures, and failure to adjust contribute to the psychological and moral destruction of the main character.

3. Research Method

This study employs a qualitative method with a narrative approach. The qualitative method was chosen because it allows researchers to gain a deep understanding of human meaning and experience, particularly as reflected in literary works. According to Creswell (2013), qualitative research emphasises interpretation and contextual understanding of social or human phenomena.

The primary data for this study was taken from Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Secondary data was obtained from theoretical books, journal articles, and other academic sources relevant to the topics of obsession, physical immortality, and psychoanalytic theory. Data collection was carried out through a thorough reading of the novel and recording quotations related to the research theme.

Data analysis followed the Miles and Huberman (1994) model, which consists of three stages: data collection, data reduction, and data presentation. In the data reduction stage, relevant quotations were grouped



based on the causes and effects of obsession. In the data presentation stage, the findings were analysed narratively using Freud's psychoanalytic theory to explain Dorian Gray's psychological dynamics.

Furthermore, this study ensures validity and reliability through triangulation of data sources and theory. The primary data from the novel are continuously cross-referenced with secondary sources, including foundational texts by Freud and contemporary scholarly interpretations, to strengthen the analytical framework and maintain consistency in interpretation. The narrative approach is applied not only to organize the findings but also to construct a coherent storyline that traces the development of Dorian Gray's obsession from its psychological origins to its moral and social consequences. This methodological design allows the research to present a holistic and layered understanding, connecting literary analysis with psychological theory while remaining accessible and structured for academic discussion.

4. Result and Discussion

This study focuses on a psychological analysis of the character Dorian Gray in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to identify the factors that trigger his obsession with physical immortality and the destructive impact it has. Using Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic framework specifically the concepts of the id, ego, and superego personality structures it is possible to trace how unbalanced psychic dynamics drive Dorian into a spiral of obsession, moral decadence, and ultimately self-destruction. The analysis is conducted through an in-depth textual reading of the narrative, dialogue, and character development in the novel, which is then linked to psychoanalytic concepts to reveal the psychological roots of Dorian's obsessive behaviour.

The findings of the study show that Dorian's obsession did not arise suddenly, but was the result of a complex interaction between the primitive drives of the id, the

internalisation of social pressure through the superego, and the failure of the ego's mediating function. The factors causing this obsession and their effects are described in detail below.

4.1 Factors of Obsession

Dorian Gray's obsession with physical immortality is a psychological phenomenon rooted in structural conflicts within his personality, as explained in Freud's psychoanalysis theory. The first and most fundamental factor is the absolute dominance of the id, which operates according to the pleasure principle. Dorian's id manifests itself in an irrational fear of ageing and an unstoppable desire to maintain his youth and beauty forever. Dorian does not simply want to look young, but has a deep and almost magical desire to transfer the ageing process entirely to his portrait. This is evident in his desperate cry:

"How sad it is! I shall grow old, and horrible, and dreadful... If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old! For that... I would give my soul!" (Wilde, 1890: 27-28).

The sacrifice of his soul that he offers is not just a literary metaphor, but also a psychological symbol of the id's victory over rational and moral considerations. Freud (1920) explains that the id is the dark and inaccessible part of the personality, which constantly demands immediate gratification without regard for reality or consequences. In Dorian's case, his id not only drives him to pursue hedonistic pleasures, but also creates the illusion that he can overcome the most fundamental laws of nature, namely the processes of ageing and death.

The second factor is the role of the superego, which has internalised Victorian society's standards of beauty and moral judgement in a distorted manner. The superego, which should function as the voice of conscience and guardian of social norms, has instead become a tool that reinforces Dorian's obsession. This is



mainly shaped by the influence of Lord Henry Wotton, who acts as both a catalyst and a mouthpiece for the hedonistic and aesthetic values of high society. Lord Henry's view:

To me, beauty is the wonder of wonders. It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances' (Wilde, 1890: 24)

not only influenced Dorian intellectually, but also permeated his superego. As a result, Dorian's moral standards shifted from ethical considerations to the worship of physical beauty and youth. The superego, which should control the id, instead allies with it, creating a vicious circle in which the demand to appear perfect further strengthens the primitive urge to remain young. Freud, in *Civilisation and Its Discontents* (1930), explains how society often creates repressive standards, which are then internalised by individuals and become a source of neurotic conflict. In Dorian, this internalisation occurs perfectly but pathologically: he not only wants to fulfil social expectations, but also makes physical beauty the sole measure of his self-worth.

The third factor is the ego's complete failure to perform its function as a healthy mediator between the overflowing demands of the id and the distorted demands of the superego. The ego, which operates according to the reality principle, should be able to mediate the conflict between primitive desires and the limitations of the real world. However, Dorian's ego is weak, passive, and ultimately completely submissive to the power of the id. He makes no attempt to negotiate his desires with the inevitable reality of ageing. His statement:

"I am too much of an egoist to sacrifice my youth for anyone. My youth is the only thing I have' (Wilde, 1890)

actually shows that his ego has been co-opted by the id. He uses the term 'egoist', which is usually associated with the ego, to justify an obsessive pursuit that is actually driven by the id. This inability of the ego creates a psychological void in which there is no effective self-regulatory

mechanism. Dorian's ego fails to integrate the two realities he lives in: his perfect outward appearance and his decaying soul projected onto the painting. This failure of integration causes him to live in a state of dissociation, where he becomes increasingly alienated from his true self as manifested on the canvas.

4.2 The Negative Impact of Obsession

Dorian's unstoppable obsession with physical immortality not only eroded his personality from within, but also gave rise to devastating consequences in three interrelated areas: moral, psychological, and social. In the moral realm, a gradual process of disintegration took place, beginning with the dulling of his conscience and ending in a complete inversion of values. Initially, Dorian still showed remnants of a functioning superego, such as when he felt guilty after treating Sybil Vane cruelly. However, gradually, through the defence mechanisms of rationalisation and intellectualisation, he constructed a personal philosophical system that transformed sin into aesthetics. Lord Henry's yellow book became his new holy scripture, teaching him that 'sin is merely a colour in the spectrum of human experience' (Wilde, 1890: 94). The peak of his moral decline came when he no longer felt guilty about the murder he had committed, but instead found aesthetic pleasure in it. After killing Basil Hallward, Dorian reflected,

'Killing Basil gave me inexpressible aesthetic pleasure. There was something tragically beautiful about how the blood stained my white hands' (Wilde, 1890: 142).

This statement shows not only the loss of morality, but also the birth of a new, misguided morality, in which evil is seen as the highest form of art. Freud (1920) would call this condition 'the absolute victory of the id', in which the pleasure principle completely engulfs and replaces the moral function of the superego. Dorian is no longer a human being trapped in moral



conflict, but a monster who finds perfection in evil.

In the psychological realm, this obsession causes progressive mental collapse, starting with neurotic symptoms and progressing to the brink of psychosis. His compulsive ritual of checking the painting several times a day is a clear manifestation of unbearable anxiety and the ego's desperate attempt to control unresolved inner conflicts. This anxiety then develops into acute social paranoia. Dorian becomes convinced that every servant and person around him knows his secret, which is reflected in his disturbed perception:

"Every servant who glances my way seems to possess uncanny knowledge... I have dismissed them all, yet new hires develop the same knowing look within days" (Wilde, 1890: 127).

This is a classic projection mechanism, in which internal guilt is transformed into fear of external persecution. The final stage of his psychological collapse is a psychotic experience in which the boundary between reality and hallucination becomes blurred. He begins to hear his painting breathe and smell the stench of rotting flesh emanating from the canvas:

'The portrait no longer merely changes it breathes!... the stench of corruption overwhelms me... the visceral reek of decaying flesh emanating from the canvas' (Wilde, 1890: 195).

Dorian's path of psychological suffering follows the clinical pattern described by Freud, from obsession and compulsion, to paranoia, and finally to psychosis, under the weight of an unbearable conflict.

In the social sphere, Dorian's obsession led to total isolation and the destruction of every relationship he had. Initially the centre of attention in London society, he gradually drove everyone away from his life through betrayal, manipulation, and even murder. He realised this destruction with bitterness:

"Everything I touch becomes corrupted. Harry has abandoned me, Basil I murdered, and Alan took his own life' (Wilde, 1890: 156).

This pattern reflects what Freud called 'repetition compulsion', whereby Dorian unconsciously recreates the same destructive dynamics in every relationship. His loneliness is no longer merely physical, but existential. He lives amid parties and luxury, but feels lonelier than the beggars in the streets:

'Surrounded by parties and luxury, I find myself lonelier than the beggars in the streets' (Wilde, 1890).

His capacity for authentic emotional experience has died. He admits:

'I can perform love but cannot feel it, my laughter echoes hollow, and my smiles are but clever counterfeits of joy' (Wilde, 1890).

This describes the 'affective poverty' that characterises severe psychological pathology. His obsession with physical immortality has sacrificed his ability to connect humanly; he has become a perfectly preserved work of art, yet completely empty inside. Finally, his attempts to destroy the painting, which was a projection of his soul and conscience, and his tragic death, prove Freud's theory that the death drive can become inevitable when an individual refuses to integrate all aspects of himself. Dorian Gray did not die as a human being, but as an allegorical warning about the price that must be paid when the desire to transcend human nature is driven by an uncontrollable obsession.

5. Conclusion

Based on an analysis of the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* through the lens of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory, it can be concluded that the main character's obsession with physical immortality is not merely an aesthetic or fleeting desire, but rather a psychopathological symptom rooted in a structural imbalance in his personality. Dorian Gray's obsession stems from the



absolute dominance of the id, which constantly pursues the pleasure principle and rejects the reality of ageing, reinforced by a superego that has pathologically internalised Victorian society's standards of beauty and social judgement, and exacerbated by the ego's total failure to mediate between primitive drives and the demands of reality. These three factors interact in a destructive cycle, where the desire to remain young is not only a goal but becomes a psychological prison that systematically destroys Dorian's humanity.

The impact of this obsession is multidimensional and destructive. Morally, Dorian experiences progressive disintegration of values, from the dulling of his conscience to moral inversion, where evil is seen as the highest form of art. Psychologically, he experiences a gradual decompensation, beginning with neurotic anxiety and compulsive rituals, developing into social paranoia, and ending with psychotic episodes that blur the line between reality and hallucination. Socially, his obsession results in total isolation, the destruction of all interpersonal relationships, and existential alienation amid the luxury and adulation of the outside world. Ultimately, his quest to transcend human nature revealed a paradoxical truth: that the attempt to achieve physical immortality at the expense of the soul only resulted in death morally, psychologically, and ultimately, physically.

This Wilde novel, therefore, is not merely a moral tale about the dangers of vanity and hedonism, but also a profound psychological exploration of ego defence mechanisms, repression, and the consequences of a life that is not integrated. Through the tragedy of Dorian Gray, Wilde offers a warning that transcends the Victorian era: that obsession with physical appearance, rejection of the natural ageing process, and separation between public and private selves will always lead to identity fragmentation and self-destruction. In the contemporary context, where social media and beauty technology offer new 'digital paintings' in the form of filters and facial

engineering, the story of Dorian Gray is more relevant than ever. It serves as a critical mirror to modern culture, which often prioritises surface perfection, virtual immortality, and external validation at the expense of mental health, moral growth, and the depth of human relationships.

This study contributes to psychoanalytic literary studies by demonstrating the comprehensive application of Freud's theory in analysing the psychological conflicts of characters. Furthermore, this study opens up space for interdisciplinary discussion between literature, psychology, and cultural studies on how classic themes such as obsession, immortality, and identity continue to resonate in today's social reality. For further research, comparative analyses could be conducted with other literary works that explore similar themes, such as Dr. Faustus or Frankenstein, or approaches from other theoretical perspectives such as narcissism theory or ecocriticism to enrich our understanding of the relationship between humans and the body, time, and nature. Thus, the study of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* remains a vital source of insight not only into humans in the Victorian era, but also into the human condition that continually struggles with its fear of mortality and its desire to transcend its natural limits.

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